

Their hearts sank, and they turned trembling to one another, saying, “What is this that G-d has done to us?” (42:28)

Any intelligent, observant Jew knows that life is neither lived randomly, nor lived in a vacuum. Life is filled with meaning and purpose, much like a roadway with signs warning the driver to slow down for a construction site, a children’s crossing, traffic jam, bad weather. The intelligent driver takes heed and makes the necessary changes in accordance with the messages that he sees. The driver who ignores the messages and is too preoccupied to take notice – or cannot read the language – will either luckily avoid an accident or fail to negotiate a problem area properly and hurt himself or – even worse- injure others.

On the road of life, we are provided with a powerful message machine, compliments of Hashem, Who wants us to have a smooth, uneventful and successful sojourn. Often the messages that He sends us do not reach our cognitive control center until after it is too late. We failed to negotiate the speed bump placed for our protection and, not only were we hurt, but our error also ruined the trip for others.

Let us take a point in question. The *Shivtei Kah*, tribes/sons of Yaakov *Avinu*, the progenitors of our nation, were confronted with a series of messages concerning their relationship *vis-à-vis* Yosef, their sale of him, and their past and present attitude concerning their ignominious opinion of his moral and ethical character. Yet, message after message seemed to have fallen on deaf ears, myopic vision, closed minds. Why? These individuals stood at the summit of spiritual leadership of our future people. They comprised the link between the Patriarchs and the future generations. How did these messages seem to just go over their collective heads? How did they not see that everything which was taking place in Egypt was a blatant message to “wake up and smell the roses”; something was wrong.

Indeed, they did interpret the messages they received, but they always seemed to err in their interpretations. We find that Yehudah was demoted from his exalted leadership position when the brothers saw their father’s pain. They said to Yehudah, “You told us to sell him (Yosef). Had you told us to return him, we would have listened.” They ignored the fact that selling Yosef was in and of itself wrong. Their concern was only over the fact that they had caused their father pain. *Rashi* teaches that when the brothers went down to Egypt to purchase food, they had also intended to ransom Yosef – if they could locate him. They figured that the pain they had caused was too great, and now they wanted to correct their misdeed. It was not about Yosef; it was about the pain that his absence had catalyzed.

When the brothers were subjected to a three-day prison stay in Egypt they introspected, realizing that this punishment was the result of their lack of compassion for Yosef when he begged them to release him. Once again, they saw nothing wrong with the actual sale, just the lack of compassion. Even when they discovered money in their sacks, they wondered, “What is this that G-d has done

to us?” They were in a state of fear; they knew that something was amiss; yet, they were clueless to the fact that it was all about the sale of Yosef.

What was it about the *Shivtei Kah* that impeded their ability to “get” the message? Here were ten great men, the greatest men outside of the Patriarch himself; yet, they did not pick up on Hashem’s messages to them. Obviously, the same force that hindered their cognitive ability to see through the maze before them will certainly leave us fettered and handicapped when we must discern Hashem’s messages to us. **Horav Noach Weinberg, zl**, cited in *Wisdom for Living*, a collection of his Torah thoughts, explains that had the brothers just asked themselves this question [could they have been wrong about Yosef?], they would have deduced that, if the dreams had been prophetic and they were destined to bow down to Yosef – could it be possible that the Egyptian viceroy was indeed Yosef?! All the pieces would have suddenly fit together; all of the questions that kept gnawing at them would have found perfect answers! They would have understood why Shimon, out of all the brothers, had been incarcerated. It was because of his starring role in casting Yosef into the pit. All the false accusations leveled at Yosef would now be clarified as blatantly false – even ludicrous. He was not evil – he was a *tzaddik*, righteous!

Had they only reconsidered their opinion of Yosef. Had they not been obstinate, and had they reviewed the facts entertaining the possibility that Yosef was not an usurper, but actually an innocent young man who truly wanted what was best for them. “We woulda; shoulda; coulda” – but we did not! Their core mistake can be attributed to reluctance on their part to reevaluate their original hypothesis. They rendered judgment and refused to change their position. Their appraisal of the situation became their downfall. They had established an immovable, impenetrable edifice that blocked their view and stunted their ability to think rationally. Regrettably, their cognitive inflexibility resulted in a myopia that left them blind to Yosef’s true character.