

They said to one another, "Indeed we are guilty concerning our brother inasmuch as we saw his heartfelt anguish when he pleaded with us... Reuven spoke up...Did I not speak to you saying, "Do not sin against the boy." (42:21,22)

Realizing that things were not going well for them, the brothers became introspective. They recognized that Yosef's ill treatment of them was Divine retribution for their part in the *mechiras* Yosef, sale of Yosef. They did not, however, acknowledge any wrongdoing with regard to the actual sale, only in their lack of compassion towards him as he begged them to let him go. Reuven seems to be saying, "I told you so." He had attempted to thwart their plan and save Yosef. He claims to have said, "*Do not sin against the boy.*" The *Ramban* questions this statement, maintaining that it is to be found nowhere in the *Torah*. It is true, indeed, that Reuven objected to the sale, but he never actually confronted them, saying "Do not sin against the boy."

Horav Tzvi Hirsh Ferber, zl, attributes Reuven's reaction to the fact that he had heard his brothers regretting only their lack of compassion as he pleaded with them. They did not regret their decision to sell him. He cites the *Kesav Sofer* who attributes another meaning to "*tzaras nafsho*" (which is commonly translated as "his heartfelt anguish"). Yosef was concerned about "*nafsho*," his soul, his spiritual well-being, if he were to be sold into an alien culture. He feared the spiritual contamination that would result from his living among pagans. They did not care; they felt his pleas were nothing more than a ruse. They decided that he only cared about his physical sustenance, not his spiritual welfare.

When the brothers saw Shimon being led away to be a captive in an Egyptian jail, thrown together with immoral degenerates and other undesirables, they realized that Hashem was giving them a message. Maybe Yosef had not been pretending. Perhaps he really did care about "*nafsho*," spiritual dimension. Perhaps Hashem was telling them to note what was happening to Shimon and to deliberate about what probably had occurred with Yosef as well. Regarding this, Reuven said, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy?" He was opposed to selling Yosef, because selling him to an alien culture would be worse than killing him! They were causing him to sin, to destroy "*nafsho*," his soul, which --- as *Chazal* teach us -- is worse than physical harm.

Perhaps we should stop and think about the consequences of our actions. When we act in a manner that is disdainful -- or even indifferent -- to someone whose spiritual affiliation is precarious, we literally distance them. We are responsible for their downfall or lack of growth. One can easily harm someone whose spiritual conviction is faltering. Our action or inaction can cause irreparable damage. "*Do not sin against the boy*" has long been the cry of those who have devoted their lives to making sure that every Jewish child receives the education he or she deserves. When parents place their personal vested interests before their child; when teachers disregard the emotional/social/religious background of a child; when communal leaders render

decisions regarding *Torah* institutions based upon financial, rather than spiritual, need, then they transgress the parameters of "*al techetu b'yeled*," "Do not sin against the boy." The decisions we make today can continue to impact us tomorrow.