

## They said to one another, “Indeed, we are guilty concerning our brother inasmuch as we saw his heartfelt anguish when he pleaded with us and we did not listen.” (42:21)

The saga of Yosef *HaTzaddik* and his brothers slowly came to a positive conclusion. The brothers, having descended to Egypt for the purpose of purchasing grain, confronted the Egyptian viceroy, who was really their long-lost brother, Yosef. They were unaware of his true identity, and after accusation and counter-diplomacy, they returned home to bring Binyamin to Egypt. Otherwise, Shimon would have been compelled to establish permanent residence in Egyptian captivity. This would have ultimately catalyzed Yaakov *Avinu's* descent to Egypt and the commencement of *galus Mitzrayim*, the Egyptian exile. As we read the narrative, the discerning mind notes Hashem's "handprint" on the ensuing events. Veritably, the entire course of events was orchestrated by the Almighty, so that *Klal Yisrael* would end up in Egypt.

A basic question begs elucidation. This question invariably applies to a number of episodes in the Torah: How is it that individuals who play a role in events that have been foretold and are apparently predestined to occur, must take responsibility for their actions? After all, it was supposed to happen. Is this not what Hashem wanted?

In his commentary to *Bereishis* 37:14, *Rashi* quotes *Chazal* who say that when Yaakov sent Yosef to visit his brothers, this action was meant to fulfill the prophecy which Avraham *Avinu* received: *Ki ger yi'he'yeh zaracha*, "Your offspring will be sojourners [in a strange land]" (Ibid. 15:13). This comment implies that the entire Yosef ordeal was preordained by Hashem. Yet, we read in the *Haftorah* of *Parashas Vayeishev* that *Klal Yisrael* will be punished for "selling a righteous man for money, and a poor man for a pair of shoes" (*Amos* 2:6), and *Chazal* say that this *pasuk* refers to the sale of Yosef by his brothers. So why are they blamed if, in fact, the entire situation was preordained? This is a *hashkafah*, philosophical, question which appears a number of times whenever calamities occur. On the one hand, *Chazal* say (*Berachos* 35b), "All is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven." In other words, man has free will. He decides how he wants to live. His religious life reflects his personal preference. On the other hand, we certainly believe that Hashem controls the world. How should we reconcile calamities which are the result of people's actions against the backdrop of Divine guidance? Free will and Divine Providence appear to be two contradictory concepts. Do they work collaboratively or exclusively of one another?

*Horav Aharon Soloveitchik, zl*, cites a principle from the *Baal Nesivos HaMishpat*, *Horav Yaakov, zl, m'Lissa*, in his commentary to *Sefer Eichah*, entitled *Palgei Mayim*. Commenting on the *pasuk* in *Eichah* 3:38, *Mi'pi Elyon lo seitzei ha'raos v'ha'tov*, "From Above neither evil or good emanates." This *pasuk*, which addresses Divine Providence, has a noticeable anomaly in its text. The word used for evil, *ha'raos*, is written in the plural, while *ha'tov*, which refers to good, is written in the singular. Does more evil exist than good? He explains that, actually, we can distinguish two forms of evil and, likewise, two forms of good. There is ethical good and ethical evil, and physical good

and physical evil. A man who acts kindly towards others is ethically good. This ethical good is a human action. It is not performed by G-d. Likewise, a person who steals, plunders, or murders is performing ethical evil. This is not G-d acting; it is man. A person who is in good health, who enjoys good experiences, who is wealthy, is experiencing physical good. A person who is in poor health, victimized by poverty and misery, is experiencing physical evil.

When it comes to physical evil, however, the *Palgei Mayim* draws a distinction. While Hashem does not cause physical evil, He **does** directly cause physical good. A person who acquires wealth is the direct beneficiary of Hashem's Providence. One who becomes impoverished, however, is not the "victim" of a Divine decree. *To recap: Ethical evil and physical evil are consequences of man's actions. Ethical good is the result of man's actions, while physical good results directly from Hashem's decree.*

In elaborating further on the difference between physical good and physical evil, the *Palgei Mayim* explains that, at times, when a person acts inappropriately and performs an ethical evil, Hashem temporarily removes His *Hashgachah*, protection, from that person. The individual then becomes subject to the destructive forces that are within him and nature in general. An earthquake may strike, causing immense destruction. This is because Hashem has removed His *Hashgachah* from that location for a split second, allowing the forces of nature to run their course. In other words, without constant Divine Providence over the world, there would be no control over the world; there would be no control over the natural catastrophes. They would occur continually. This might give us some insight into many of the "natural" events that occur which seem "inexplicable."

In the area of human nature, a similar concept applies concerning Hashem's *Hashgachah*. He prevents the multitude of nefarious forces from executing their evil intentions. We are only aware of the evildoers who have perpetrated their malevolence against other people. Numerous others – whose potential to harm is hanging in the balance

– are kept in check by Hashem's *Hashgachah*. However, when the Almighty removes His protection and allows nature to run its course, this particular act of destruction is **not** a Divine decree. It is merely Hashem allowing events in nature to act "naturally." Thus, it is quite correct for the *pasuk* to use the plural in addressing evils, since neither ethical nor physical evil emanates from Divine decree. Concerning good, however, while ethical good is not decreed by Hashem; physical reward/good is a direct decree from the Almighty. This is why the word "good," which appears in the *pasuk* in *Eichah* is written in the singular.

The question that remains is: What about human beings – those who cause harm or destruction to others – are they held responsible for their actions? The *Rosh Yeshivah* says that they are certainly accountable for their evil. Nevuchadnezer and his minions, and all the evil incarnates of history, are held in contempt for the harm which they wrought upon us. They **chose** to act maliciously. They will pay for their evil.

We now understand why the brothers were held accountable for selling Yosef – even though their actions were part of a Divine Plan to fulfill Hashem’s prophecy to Avraham *Avinu*. No Divine decree pre-destined Yosef to be sold by his brothers. It was an action which the brothers initiated of their own accord, motivated by their malignant relationship with him. They felt that he had sinned, a behavior that helped cause their jealousy towards him. When Yaakov *Avinu* showed favoritism to Yosef by giving him the *kesones passim*, he acted in a manner that was considered demeaning because of his lofty spiritual plateau. Hashem is very exacting with the righteous, such as Yaakov and Yosef. Thus, He metes out retribution even for the slightest infraction. As a result of their actions, Hashem removed His *Hashgachah* from them, thereby allowing Yosef’s brothers to sell him, creating the ordeal which brought tremendous grief to our Patriarch. However, concerning the brothers, they were held accountable because their actions were not part of a Divine decree.