

"And he said to his brother, my money has been returned... and they turned trembling one to another, saying, 'What is it that Hashem has done to us?'" (42:28)

If we were to analyze the brothers' response to this occurrence, we might be tempted to say, "What did you expect?" They had sold their brother into slavery, and Hashem was delivering their retribution. Why are they complaining?" Indeed, in the *Talmud Tannis 9a Chazal* allude to this. They cite the pasuk in *Mishlei 19:3* iuveles adam tesalef darko v'al hashem yezaef leebo. "*The foolishness of man perverts his way; and his heart frets against Hashem.*" A fool makes a mistake and then complains about the punishment he receives from the Almighty. Likewise, the brothers had sold Yosef and now they were unwilling to accept the consequences of their actions. After all is said and done, the brothers should not have sold Yosef. Therefore, they should have been prepared to accept their due retribution. The question remains: Why does the *Talmud* refer to them as "ive'le's," foolish? What did they do that was foolish?

Horav Avigdor Ha'Levi Nebentzhal, Shlita, addresses this question, deducing an important principle in human nature. He first cites **Horav Chaim Ze'ev Finkel, zl**, who attributes the "foolishness" to the brothers' timing. Why did they wait so long to question, "What is it that Hashem has done to us?" Why did they not open their bags immediately upon their receipt? How does an intelligent person purchase grain in a strange land in a sealed bag? Perhaps the Egyptians were filling the bags with inferior grain or grain which was hardly edible. During a famine, one is particularly cautious in spending his hard-earned money. The second time they went to Egypt, they again neglected to check their bags. Perhaps, had they found Yosef's silver goblet on their own, the outcome might have been different. Undoubtedly, the *Shivtei Kah* were engrossed in profound spiritual matters, not geared to the mundane. Yet, *Chazal* criticize them for not exhibiting greater perception in this matter.

Horav Nebentzhal claims that *Chazal's* criticism is directed at the brothers' behavior throughout their entire encounter in Egypt. If one rationally reflects upon the manner in which the brothers acted from the time they entered Egypt, one wonders at their innocence. How did they permit one ambiguity after another without questioning the circumstances? After all, they were aware that Yosef might still have been alive. The first question they should have asked themselves was, "How did the Egyptians detect us?" They each entered through a different gate. It was obvious that the Egyptian officials were directed to look for a specific individual. Indeed, *Chazal* tell us that each person who entered Egypt was to produce the name of his father and grandfather. All this just to purchase grain!

Second, does everyone who is suspected of spying come before the viceroy of the country immediately? One only has to study the *Midrashic* account of their conversation to wonder how the brothers accepted everything that was occurring as if it were the expected order of events. Third, why did they bow down to Yosef? Why didn't anyone remember the dreams and wonder? Fourth,

this ruler who was charging them with spying seemed to be an enigma in his own right. He was prepared to free a group of spies simply out of concern for their father. He invited them to eat, his chef showing them that the meat was slaughtered and prepared according to the strictest standard of Jewish law. Still, no one seemed to have questioned the events. Is that not amazing?

The next day they left, only to be immediately summoned by the royal guard. The viceroy's silver goblet was missing. Lo and behold, it was found in Binyamin's sack. What was their reaction to all this? The *Midrash* tells us that they truly suspected Binyamin of stealing. After all, he took after his mother who had stolen Lavan's idols. Still, they did not have a clue as to what was actually happening. Could they truly have believed that all these occurrences were merely coincidental?

Yes! One who is an "*avil*," blinded by doubt, sees nothing clearly. The Hebrew word, *avil*, has its origin in the word *ulai*, "if/maybe". This person always has doubts. Indecisiveness and skepticism are the more conspicuous features of this individual's personality. He never accepts a response, however logical, without questioning its validity. "Who says so? Why? Maybe." These are the most common words in his vocabulary. He can transform the most clear truth into an ambiguity.

Conversely, this person has another interesting trait in his personality. He can believe in the greatest paradox with the utmost conviction, regardless of how many contradictions challenge his belief. The brothers must have been confronted by a number of striking questions - all of which challenged their belief that the man before them was nothing more than an Egyptian. The evidence proved them wrong - yet they continued to naively believe that this man could not be Yosef.

What blinded them? What clouded their vision, so that they did not see that which was so simple to comprehend? One did not need a detective to see that none other than their lost brother, Yosef, stood before them.

The answer is simple, claims *Horav Nebentzhal*. They had rendered a *halachic* decision that Yosef was a *rasha*, an evil *rodef*, who was bent on destroying them. They had found him guilty! Yosef's dreams did not retain any validity. They were certain about the accuracy of their *psak halachah*; nothing they witnessed stimulated questions that could impeach their perception. They found every *teretz*, excuse, to uphold their conviction. They could not fathom that they had sold an innocent man, that they had ruined the life of a righteous and moral person who had only wanted to help them.

Are we any different? If our mind is made up, are we willing to listen to anyone who proves us clearly wrong? Do we at times remain committed to our foolishness with such resolution that it underscores our folly? Can we read through this entire thesis and remark with our usual self-serving smugness, "This does not apply to me anyway, because I know that I am right."