

You are spies! To see the land's nakedness you have come. (42:9)

Why did Yosef choose to accuse them of spying, rather than any other trumped-up charge? Ten men appearing and dressed in a like-manner all arriving in Egypt at exactly the same time do not quite present the modus operandi of spies. A spy attempts to blend into the community. He certainly does not call attention to himself. When ten men who have similar appearances and manner of dress enter a country from different points of entry, they are declaring, "Look at me!" This is certainly not the handiwork of spies who live by stealth. The brothers were certainly not acting surreptitiously.

Horav Tzvi Hirsch Ferber, zl, offers a novel insight into the dialogue that ensued between Yosef and his brothers. Indeed, their conversation was much more profound than what appears on the surface. The brothers saw *b'Ruach haKodesh*, through Divine Inspiration, that the wicked Yeravam ben N'vat, who was the catalyst for splitting the Davidic monarchy and for spurring the nation to sin, descended from Yosef (through the tribe of Efraim). The brothers sought to kill Yosef, so that the seed that would produce Yeravam would never have the opportunity to germinate. Yosef countered that a person is not judged by what may occur in the future, but by what takes place in the present. At this point in time, Yosef was a *tzaddik*, righteous man. Furthermore, if they were interpreting *halachah* to suit their own purposes, Yosef responded with his own accusation. Since we are judging in accordance with the future, they were the forebears of the *meraglim*, spies. One day, Moshe *Rabbeinu* would send representatives from each tribe to reconnoiter *Eretz Yisrael*. We all know the tragic results of that mission. The spies (except for Yehoshua and Calev) returned with a slanderous report, which riled up the nation to disparage their leadership and despair of conquering the land. As a result, that entire generation was banned from the land and, instead, died in the wilderness.

Rav Ferber adds a caveat to this exposition. The *Navi Amos* commences his prophecies with explanations for the downfall of all the kingdoms surrounding *Eretz Yisrael*. He then comes to *Klal Yisrael* and admonishes them for their errant behavior. In each case, the *Navi* declares that Hashem is willing to overlook three sins – at least for the present. A fourth sin, however, was to be the last straw that brought their sins beyond the point of forbearance. Concerning *Klal Yisrael's* behavior, the *Navi* says that Hashem would restrain from punishing them, despite their having committed the three cardinal sins of idol worship, murder and adultery. The fourth sin – the persecution of the poor and unfortunate, with the accompanied greed that granted self-imposed license for the rich and powerful to do whatever they pleased – would be more than Hashem cared to bear. This fourth sin would bring about the downfall of the nation.

Rav Ferber presented the background to the *Navi's* exhortation *Al shloshah pishei Yisrael v'al arbaah lo ashiveinu*, "For three rebellious sins of *Yisrael* – but should I not exact retribution for the fourth?" He went on to explain that the *Navi* then continues to relate that the people were so

obsessed with material greed and had such little regard for the troubles already experienced by the poor that they would sell the legal rights for the poor for a few pieces of silver, just as the brothers sold Yosef for a few silver coins.

Rav Ferber asserts that if punishment would be meted for future incursions, then it would be necessary to judge the brothers for the three future sins catalyzed by their descendants: First, Shimon's tribe was to play a leading role in the sin of *Shittim*, during which its members cohabited with the women of Midyan; second, Binyamin's tribe was to be the one which catalyzed the tragic sin of *pilegesh b'givaah*, that cost the lives of thousands of Jews; last, the tribe of Dan was to be responsible for the *pesel Michah*. Thus, the fourth sin of selling Yosef was too much. It was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. We are now the beneficiaries of a new approach to Yosef and his brother's dialogue – one which illuminates for us the depth of their conversation and the underlying, although misplaced, accusations which the brothers leveled at Yosef, and his response.