

A Thought on Parashat Vayigash 'The Scratch was Good!'

By Jeremy Richards

In Memory of my Dear Parents, a"h

L'ilui Nishmos Yitzchok Ben Nachman Halevi a"h and Yenta Bas Yisroel a"h

לעלוי נשמת יצחק בן נחמן הלוי ע"ה ולעלוי נשמת יענטע בת ישראל ע"ה



וְעַתָּה | אֵל תַּעֲצֹבוּ וְאֵל יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הֲנֵה כִּי לְמַחֲיָה שָׁלַחֲנִי אֱלֹקִים
לְפָנֵיכֶם... וְעַתָּה לֹא אַתֶּם שָׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הֲנֵה כִּי הָאֱלֹקִים... (בראשית מה:ח)

"But now do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me before you...And now, you did not send me here, but G-d..." (Bereishit 45:5,8)

As soon as he reveals himself to his brothers, Yosef communicates to them his firm belief that their having sold him into Egypt was all part of Hashem's great plan. He knows how guilty his brothers will feel for what they did to him, and wishes to reassure them immediately that all the events they had initiated ultimately represented the fulfilment of Hashem's will. It is absolutely clear in Yosef's mind that his sale into Egypt was for the purpose of saving the people of Egypt as well as his own family from starvation.

Rashbam (Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1085-1174) puts this succinctly:

"כי למחיה שלחני: הקב"ה עשה כל זאת לטובתכם"
"Hashem has done all this for your own good."

Rabbi Yaakov of Dubno (or, the Dubno Maggid) uses these pesukim to explain that there is good even in events that seem to be undesirable, even disastrous. He teaches his lesson with a mashal - a parable:

There was once a king who owned a precious and unique ring, no other quite like it existed anywhere in the world. One day, the king became very upset to discover that there was an ugly scratch on the smooth surface of the jewel set into the gold band. The king summoned all the jewellery experts in his kingdom, but none of them knew how to remove the scratch without ruining the beautiful stone. Someone then told the king about a jeweller who lived in a far-off land who was known for his unusual expertise. The king sent for this man, hoping that, at last, the scratch would be removed and the ring returned to its former beauty.

When this jeweller saw the ring, he exclaimed, "What a shame such a beautiful ring should not be perfect!" The king and courtiers were certain that the jeweller was referring to the scratch, but he then continued: "Something important is missing in this fine treasure - it should bear the coat of arms of its owner! Then it will truly be complete!" The master jeweller looked at the blemish in the stone more closely, then announced with excitement: "Your Majesty, this scratch is a perfect beginning for the royal emblem! I shall develop it into your coat of arms, and then the ring will truly be perfect in every way!"

Thus, explained the Dubno Maggid, misfortune is simply a scratch in the ring of life, from which goodness and even perfection can be drawn. We do not understand Hashem's ways, but we know that the difficulties He sends us carry good with them. We just need to put our trust in His infinite wisdom.

(Adapted from: The Maggid of Dubno and his Parables, Benno Heinemann)

This interesting mashal indicates that what we at first think is bad will, in fact, turn out for the good. The Dubno Maggid employs this mashal to explain our first possuk: "But now do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me before you." (Bereishit 45:5) However, we might nevertheless ask, how reassuring was this for the brothers?

In the above story the scratch was indeed initially an unwanted blemish on the gem, but the master jeweller managed to apply his skill to develop it into something meaningful and impressive. Similarly, the brothers did, after all, sell Yosef down to Mitzrayim, and this was the 'scratch,' the event that, in and of itself, was not desirable. However, although Yosef ultimately rose to greatness and high rank, was it obviously thanks to his brothers' actions? The analogy in the above parable would characterise the brothers' actions as essentially negative, at least on initial examination, much as the scratch in the ring was unwanted. The ability of the master jeweller to turn the scratch into a royal emblem did not take away from the fact that the scratch was a blemish in the stone. Did Yosef's elevation to grandeur take away from the negative aspect of his brothers' actions? The mashal, at least, does not seem to imply this.

The K'tav Sofer explains that Yosef wanted to reassure and comfort his brothers by conveying to them that their act of selling him down to Egypt was, in truth, and in essence, a good one for him, since it led to his rising to greatness. For this reason, he had no bad feelings towards them in his heart. This is why Yosef says, "I am Yosef, your brother, whom you sold to Egypt." (Bereishit 45:4)

Remarkably, the K'tav Sofer explains that Yosef was saying: "For the very reason that you sold me to Mitzrayim do I love you and only have feelings of brotherly love towards you. Therefore, do not be upset about the fact that you sold me down to Egypt, for your actions are considered as good ones since I rose to greatness as a result of them." Beyond even this, writes the K'tav Sofer, Yosef adds (45:8), "It was not you that sent me here but it was Hashem, and you have no burden of guilt whatsoever since Hashem put it into your hearts to sell me."

This, then, is surely the intention of the Dubno Maggid in delivering his attractive parable. His point is that our perception of the scratch in the gem as undesirable is, with the benefit of hindsight, proven wrong. When faced with events that appear to us to be undesirable we are unable to see the good in them. Later, when the scratches become impressive designs, we permit ourselves to alter our view in part, now believing that what was bad has turned to good

– even that the ultimate purpose of the bad was for the good that was to emerge from it. But this is still wrong. From both the Dubno Maggid and the K'tav Sofer we see that the scratches we encounter in our lives are goodness in their very essence: a setback that leads to success is proven, in time and in retrospect, to be the very foundation and cause of the ultimate success. Indeed, we can say that without the apparent impediment the eventual positive outcome may never have emerged. Put simply, the scratch in the jewel *was good*.

Perhaps this explains the following declaration in the Mishnah:

"סַיֵּב אָדָם לְכַרְךָ עַל הַרְעָה כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהוּא מְכַרְךָ עַל הַטּוֹבָה" (ברכות ט:ה)

"A person is obligated to bless upon the bad just as he blesses upon the good..." (Berachot 9:5)

An additional insight is offered by Rabbi Yeruchem Levovitz, explained here by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin:

"...when someone wrongs another person, there is a tendency for that person to want him to feel guilty for ever after. This gives the wronged person a feeling of being "one-up" and the other person of being "one-down." There is an elevated level of forgiving someone even though you know that he is not entirely sincere when he asks you for forgiveness. Just by the fact of his asking forgiveness you can allow him to feel the pleasure of thinking that you believe he is sincere. This is an act of kindness on your part towards that person.

We see this principle with Yosef and his brothers. Yosef wanted to do an act of kindness so that they should not feel guilty for what they had done to him. Therefore Yosef said to them that they were not the ones who sent him to Egypt. Rather, it was the Almighty who sent him to become a leader over all of Egypt. They should not think that what they did was harmful. They did him the greatest kindness possible. He was saying to them that he was even grateful to them for all the good that he gained from their selling him."

(Daas Torah: Bereishis pp.259,260, Growth Through Torah pp.124,125)

On top of their shock to find themselves face to face with the sibling they had sold into slavery, how surprised must Yosef's brothers have been to hear him thanking them for that very act!? Indeed, how could Yosef have related to his brothers with such generosity of spirit?

When something happens that seems bad to us, we try to muster the courage to say 'גַּם זֶה לְטוֹבָה', 'this is also for the good;' but this clearly implies that we are hoping some positive will come out of something that initially appears undesirable. From what we have said, Yosef's perspective was not 'גַּם זֶה לְטוֹבָה' but just 'זֶה לְטוֹבָה' - not, 'this is *also* for the good,' but simply, 'this *is* for the good.' Yosef could genuinely discern the Divine plan in everything, so he had no reason to harbour bad feelings towards his brothers. Instead, he was pleased to have the opportunity to thank them, and to make clear to them that, in Rabbi Akiva's words, 'כָּל דְּעֵבִיד כָּל דְּעֵבִיד - 'Whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good.' (Berachot 60b)



Wishing everyone a Good Shabbos,
Jeremy