

Don't Kill the Messenger!

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VAYAISHEV (5759)

PEOPLE ON THEIR WAY TO DO MITZVOS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE PROTECTED!

Today we will look into a *halachic* [legal] issue that occasionally comes our way. Why was Yaacov allowed to dispatch Yosef to check on his brothers (37:13-14)? Did Yaacov not know of the animosity they felt toward Yosef? Can one claim that this wise patriarch had no idea that Yosef's brothers considered him a lethal threat to them and to the destiny of *Klal Yisroel* [the Jewish people]? Indeed, they came awfully close to executing him! Yosef's brush with death proves that his mission to "see how his brothers were doing" was ill-fated. What *halachic* basis did Yaacov have for sending his son to disaster? Furthermore, why would a loving father put his son in unnecessary danger?

Let us investigate the words of the holy *Or Hachaim* on 37:13. Yaacov had said to Yosef, "Aren't your brothers tending (the sheep) in Shchem? Come, AND I WILL SEND YOU TO THEM." In the very next *pasuk* [verse], Yaacov seems to repeat himself: "Go now, see the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the sheep, and bring me back a report." The *Or Hachaim* explains that the original phrase "I will send you to them" is a sort of official pronouncement. Yaacov's message was that the father desired to know how his other sons were doing. In case Yosef would be concerned about the resentment they felt toward him, Yaacov was reassuring his son, "I will escort you (part of the way) AND SEND YOU ON MITZVAH [commandment/good deed] BUSINESS - you will go as my agent." Since *Chazal* [our Sages] tell us (*Gemara Pesachim* 8B) that messengers sent to do a mitzvah are not harmed, Yaacov designated his son as a formal *mitzvah* agent. He told him of this strategy, informing him that as a result, there was nothing to fear.

This shows that the next verse is not repetitive. In 13, Yaacov named Yosef his "*shliach mitzvah*" [agent for a *mitzvah*]. (Incidentally, the *mitzvah* was honoring his father by fulfilling his request.) Afterward, in 14, Yaacov needed to SPECIFY what the assignment was. Notice that in verse 13, Yaacov merely introduced the plan by reminding Yosef that the brothers were in Shchem, AND THAT YAACOV WAS APPOINTING YOSEF TO BE HIS MITZVAH EMISSARY. Only in the next *pasuk*, the parent spelled out the mission.

Why did Yaacov tell Yosef to "bring back a report"? The *Or Hachaim* interprets this as part of Yosef's designation as a *mitzvah* messenger. There is a possibility, based on the above-mentioned *Gemara Pesachim*, that agents for *mitzvah* business are guaranteed Divine protection only ON THE WAY TO DO THE MITZVAH. On the return trip, however, there is no such promise. To cover all bases, Yaacov labeled his son a "*shliach mitzvah*" on his return trip as well. He was being commanded by his father to BRING BACK news regarding the welfare of his brothers. By obeying even this directive of his parent, he would be protected from evil on the way back from Shchem also.

A question arises, though. The *Or Hachaim* notes something else from *Pesachim* 8B. The rule that "*mitzvah* agents are not harmed" does not apply if the danger is clear and present. One is not allowed to put himself at risk, EVEN WHEN HIS MISSION IS FOR A MITZVAH, if harmful forces are very visible. The guarantee does not apply in such a case. If so, how could Yaacov send Yosef to his brothers? Didn't Yaacov realize that their hatred was a true threat to Yosef's well being? The assurance that a *mitzvah* emissary is safe does not apply in such perilous circumstances!

We will study one solution of the *Or Hachaim*. Yaacov did not believe that the danger to Yosef was imminent and inevitable. It was not to be termed "clear and present danger" in Yaacov's opinion. As a result, as long as Yosef was properly designated a *shliach mitzvah*, no harm would befall him, based on the rule stated before.

Everything seems perfect now. But wait...Yosef's trip turned into calamity! He was seized, thrown into a pit, and then sold as a slave to a caravan of gentiles! We all know the *psukim* [verses] from 18 to the end of the chapter. How can we say that Yosef was protected from danger because of his status as a *mitzvah* agent, doing his father's bidding? He WAS harmed! **In addition, don't some people suffer tragedy, G-d forbid, on the way to doing mitzvos [commandments/good deeds]? How do we come to terms with this?**

The *Or Hachaim* answers that the misfortune Yosef suffered was only a TEMPORARY disaster. True, his special colored garment was ripped from him (37:23). True, he was cast into a pit of snakes and scorpions (37:24). True, he was sold and forced to exist in the hostile, decadent society of Egypt (37:28). However, all this led to absolute glory, grandeur, and triumph. He eventually resisted the seductive behavior of his master's wife, interpreted Paroh's dreams successfully, became the viceroy of Egypt, sustained the entire region through the famine, and laid the religious foundations for *Bnai Yisroel's* [the Children of Israel's] survival in the Egyptian bondage. Says the *Or Hachaim*, "Harm whose end is benevolence and great splendor is not considered harm." Consequently, his title of "*mitzvah* agent" DID protect him from all genuine injury. The difficulties he underwent as a result of Yaacov sending him to check on his brothers led to magnificent events. He did NOT actually suffer any harm, when all things are considered. When catastrophe strikes someone on the way to do a *mitzvah*, *chas v'shalom* [heaven forbid], we are often in no shape to view it this way. But let us keep the striking lesson in mind: The end results, perhaps years from now, will be fantastic.

Another approach is also found in the *Or Hachaim*. Why did Yosef suffer any harm if his father had designated him a *mitzvah* emissary? When Yaacov sent Yosef to his brothers, he was quite specific in his orders. "Aren't your brothers tending the sheep in Shchem? Come, and I will send you to them" (37:13). Yaacov was stating clearly that the mission was to go to SHCHEM, nowhere else, to check on the welfare of his other sons. When Yosef traveled to Shchem and failed to locate them there, he went to a different place called Dosan (37:17). The *Or Hachaim* declares that on this leg of the journey, Yosef was no longer a *shliach mitzvah*, an agent of his father to do *kibud av v'aim* [honor your father and mother]. He actually became his own messenger when he left Shchem for Dosan. His father had not dispatched him anywhere except to Shchem! Thus, there was no more "*mitzvah* business" in his mission. As a result, he became vulnerable to the dangers resulting from his brothers' hostility.

If so, why did Yaacov feel it necessary to be so precise in his directions? For what reason did Yaacov send Yosef exclusively to Shchem? Or Hachaim explains that Yaacov foresaw, with Divine intuition, that calamity would befall Yosef in another place (namely Dosan). In fact, it did come about. Because of this, he was careful to direct his beloved son ONLY to Shchem, where he would be safe. What was the lack of communication between father and son? Why did Yosef take the initiative to digress from his father's command? Who authorized him to search for his brothers in Dosan? *Or Hachaim* remarks that Yosef apparently thought his father's mention of Shchem was merely to guide him in the proper direction. Surely, thought Yosef, if the brothers were not found in Shchem, his father would want him to look elsewhere. He assumed that in such a case, he would STILL be a *mitzvah* messenger, and this would protect him from injury.

Why did Hashem allow all this to occur? The *Or Hachaim* concludes that Hashem causes such misunderstandings and confusions so that His master plan will unfold in the proper times and places. Yosef NEEDED to "fall into unfriendly hands" and get sold to Egypt so that he would eventually prepare the nation of Yisroel for the Egyptian exile. As a people, we were required to undergo this incredible hardship. It was crucial for our atonement and development as Hashem's nation. Furthermore, it was essential for Yosef himself, for the refinement of his soul, to suffer all that he did.

This shows that we have VERY LIMITED ABILITY to comprehend Hashem's purpose and design in all that He does. Let us stick to our faith and trust. This will keep us firm in our fulfillment of Torah and *mitzvos*.

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