

A Midrash

Rabbi Sholom Gold

The Midrash says [Tanchuma, Vayeshev] that after the brothers sold Yoseph "they said let us make a ban of excommunication between us that no one of us should tell our father Yaakov. Yehuda said to them, 'Reuven is not here and the ban can only be in effect with (a minyan of) ten.' What did they do? They included the Holy One Blessed Be He in that ban that He should not tell their father. That night, when Reuven went down to the pit and did not find Yoseph, he rent his garments and cried. (Breishis 37:29). He returned to his brothers and told them, "The boy is gone, and I, where can I go?" They told him the deed and the ban and he remained silent. Even Hakodosh Boruch Hu though it says about him He related His words to Yaakov (Tehillim 147:19) this thing He did not tell him because of the ban. Therefore Yaakov said Yoseph has surely been torn to bits (Breishis 37:33).

The Midrash presents us with a number of serious difficulties. The ban seems to be an attempt to cover up a detestable crime. The brothers have entered into a sinful conspiracy of silence. They should be condemned in the harshest of terms. The G-d of Israel should thunder against the perpetrators of such an act of betrayal of their own flesh and blood. How does Hashem join in this unholy alliance? Even more, why does He agree to complete the necessary quorum of ten? Why does He comply with the terms of the ban and not reveal it to Yaakov? Why does Reuven, the only one of the brothers who is innocent, comply with the condition of the ban and remain silent. Should he not raise the cry of protest?

Furthermore, why indeed is a quorum of ten necessary to make the ban effective? This is not "a matter of sanctity" such as prayer, Kaddish, the Torah readings, which require a minyan. On the contrary, this is a shameful act that calls for revulsion and recoil, not acquiescence and passivity.

I believe that it is not an overstatement or exaggeration to say that the cherem (ban) saved the brothers and the Jewish people and made possible the process of teshuva. What would conceivably have happened had there not been a cherem? It is safe to say that as the brothers watched their father, inconsolable in his mourning, day after day, the atmosphere in the home becoming more and more stifling, one or more of the brothers would have considered revealing the whole ugly secret and purging themselves in the catharsis that would inevitably come.

Now who would be most likely to break first and how would he tell Yaakov? The brothers had great respect, awe and fear of their father.

The most likely scenario is that one of the brothers who did not feel as guilty as the others would tell their father Yaakov: "Abba, do you know what they did?" He would try to deflect the father's anger onto the others while portraying himself as relatively innocent.

That would have opened the floodgates of blame and counter-blame that would tear the family apart in a way that it could never be put together again. The infighting would eat away at the fabric of the family unit that would leave no possibility of healing. It would put brother against brother and leave a father who thought he had lost only one child now bereft of all of his children. Klal Yisroel could never come into being. The ultimate tragedy is that there would never be a minyan to say a proclamation of holiness. No tefilla, no kiddush, no brocho, no Krias HaTorah, no sanctification of G-d's name.

Furthermore, if they could blame one another, no teshuva is possible. Only when one can see clearly his own guilt can teshuva begin. Pointing the finger of blame at others absolves one of his own feelings of guilt.

Now the brothers know that they are all equally guilty of the sale of Yoseph. Those who were active and those who were passive. Those who committed the sin of commission and those who were guilty of omission. Those who remained silent and allowed to happen must carry the burden of guilt equally. They cannot say with a clear conscience: "Our hands did not spill this blood."

Why does Hashem complete the minyan? Because creating the conditions for complete teshuva of the brothers that would rebuild the family of Israel is the significant act of sanctity. If there is no ban the Jewish people will not come into being. Then there will never be a minyan for anything.

There is yet another reason why Hashem joined them. Because He knows that when tragedy befalls the Jewish people and the blaming and recriminations begin, there will always be those who will point the finger of blame at Hashem and say: "And where was G-d....?"

Is there a greater desecration of G-d's name than that? To ward off that ugly accusation is, therefore, an act of the sanctification of Hashem's name and that needs a minyan.

Reuven who, more than all the others, would have wanted to cry out his condemnation and revulsion, understands that the higher good now calls for silence. And he remains silent until ... twenty two years later as the brothers stand before the ??? of Egypt and are accused of being spies does he hear the profound cry for the depths of their souls. They then 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 paid no heed; that is why this anguish has come upon us."

This noble admission of guilt by all the brothers was only possible because of the ban. They all accept equal responsibility. It means that for twenty two years this sin has been weighing heavily on their minds and hearts.

At this moment Reuven feels freed from the need to remain silent and he says what has caused him great pain all of these years: "Did I not speak to you saying, 'Do not sin against the boy' but you would not listen! And his blood as well -- behold -- is being avenged."

Epilogue

For sixty years now we have been blaming one another for the Shoah.

Unfortunately there is more than enough blame to go around. No one is blameless. In all of the segments of the Jewish community there were those who acted with great self-sacrifice and those who remained silent and did nothing. Each of us in our own way must attempt to see the Shoah without the luxury of blaming someone else.

Did we do enough? We have to ask ourselves, why indeed wasn't there a mass movement of religious Jews to Eretz Yisroel during the first half of the twentieth century. Why didn't we follow the lead of secular Zionists and build our own communities here?

The fact is that they came and we didn't; they built and we didn't; so they became the dominant force from which we suffer until the present day. I shudder to think what would have happened if the distribution of certificates for aliyah would have been in our hands. Let's be honest with ourselves. Has there been a mass movement for aliyah in the last sixty years since the Shoah? The answer to that question makes hollow our claim that we were also for aliyah then. It's a miracle that we have such a large number of yeshiva students living here today. I never heard a mussar shmuez in Yeshiva about aliyah, nor did I hear of a rebbeh (except for a few) who called on his chassidim to move to Eretz Yisroel. We can't fool ourselves forever, so let us begin to do teshuva.

I begged a great Rav in America to write a letter calling on all religious Jews to consider fulfilling the mitzvah of Yishuv Ha'aretz. He turned me down flat. He doesn't get involved in political issues, he said.

I was profoundly saddened.