

Looking Shame in the Face

Towards the beginning of Parshat Vayigash, we are met with one of the most dramatic scenes in all of Tanach — the climax of the Yosef saga, where Yosef finally reveals his identity to his brothers:

וַיֹּסֶף יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפָּנָיו:

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still well?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dumbfounded were they on account of him. (Breishit 45:3)

On the one hand, the brother’s reaction to Yosef’s revelation makes perfect sense. Finding out their long-lost brother, who they had assumed was dead for decades, was, in fact, alive, and moreover in a position of tremendous power, is surely world-shattering news in any circumstance. However, the brothers were not merely neutral observers to unexpected news, but bore responsibility for these circumstances, having been guilty of selling Yosef, and until now thinking they caused his death. Many Meforshim therefore understand the brother’s dumbstruck silence as arising out of fear for their own safety, worrying that Yosef might seek revenge.¹ Rashi (and others) however claim that their dumbstruck silence arose from embarrassment or shame rather than fear, which the Maharal notes fits better with the wording of “מִפָּנָיו”, literally “from his presence”. In other words, if they were afraid, it would be more natural to say they were afraid of what Yosef might do to them. But embarrassment and shame are a natural response to being in the presence of someone they had wronged.

As an experiential reality, this is perhaps obvious, but also profound. Note that the brothers were already well aware they had wronged Yosef. They had already publicly done *Teshuvah*, as we read in last week’s parsha that they declared “אֲשָׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל אֶחָיו”, “we have transgressed against our brother”, in Yosef’s presence (unknownst to them). And it was Yehudah’s forceful refusal to allow Binyamin to share Yosef’s fate that was the ultimate proof that the brothers had changed their ways, and which led Yosef to finally make his revelation. Therefore, it does not make sense to say that Yosef’s revelation led to the brothers realizing that they had sinned. Rather, this verse teaches us that even when we know with perfect clarity that we have wronged someone, there is still something missing from this knowledge as long as it remains merely abstract and theoretical. It is impossible to fully internalize the regret one should feel in the absence of literally facing the person or people one has wronged.

¹ E.g. Chizkuni Bereishit 45:3.

This lesson is further borne out by a discussion in Masekhet Chagigah 4b, where this verse is quoted in the following context:

רבי אלעזר כי מטי להאי קרא, בכי: "ולא יכלו אחיו לענות אתו כי נבדלו מפניו", ומה תוכחה של בשר ודם כך, תוכחה של הקדוש ברוך הוא — על אחת כמה וכמה

When Rabbi Elazar reached this verse, he cried: “And his brethren could not answer him, for they were affrighted at his presence” (Genesis 45:3). He said, in explanation of his emotional reaction: If the rebuke of a man of flesh and blood was such that the brothers were unable to respond, when it comes to the rebuke of the Holy One, Blessed be He, all the more so.

This verse seems like a peculiar choice to demonstrate the power of rebuke, as after all, Yosef does not explicitly rebuke his brothers in this verse! Rashi comments on the word “תוכחה”, rebuke, “שמוכיח פשעו”, “that he reprimands him for his sins to his face.” Perhaps this is best understood as saying it is the very presence of the person one has wronged, the face-to-face, interpersonal nature of that encounter, which serves as the rebuke itself. It is this encounter with the one who is wronged that is so overwhelming it provides us with a hint of what it would be like to be rebuked by Hashem.

There are several practical ramifications of this lesson. Perhaps especially when dealing with injustices that take place on a national or global scale, such as Israel’s destruction of Gaza and its decades-long human rights abuses against Palestinians, it is easy to consider these injustices in the abstract. While it is important to recognize these wrongs, and to the extent one is complicit in them, be ashamed of them, this is no replacement for encountering, face-to-face the very concrete harms being done.

This dynamic has played out before. In a fascinating article, Eve Fairbanks discusses the surprising feelings of shame and disillusionment felt by white liberals in South Africa after the end of Apartheid.

White people rarely articulated these feelings publicly. But in private, with friends and acquaintances, I encountered them over and over. One white friend and former anti-apartheid...told me that after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission publicized much of what Black South Africans had faced under apartheid, she felt humiliated to recall what she and her friends had once considered resistance: gestures like having a warm exchange with a Black maid or skipping class to join an anti-apartheid march. She said that sense of embarrassment made her shy away from politics, as did the slow-dawning recognition that Black people—many of whom had worked in white people’s houses under apartheid—knew much more about the lives of white people than white people knew about Black lives. My friend had never even seen the inside of a Black person’s home.²

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/south-africa-apartheid-white-afrikaners-the-inheritors/670554/>

Even those who thought they recognized how terrible Apartheid was, and had even fought against it, felt shame upon encountering the Black people who had suffered under Apartheid and hearing them describe what their lives had actually been like.

To the extent possible, it is essential to bear witness, and to speak to those who have and continue to suffer, or one has at best only understood part of the story. And *kal vachomer*, all the more so, for those who have not yet grasped the awful crimes being committed even at a theoretical level, it may be the “rebuke” of a face-to-face encounter, and actually bearing witness, which is necessary to pierce through the callousness. Of course, shame and embarrassment alone do not help anyone. But hopefully, by properly grasping the severity of the suffering being caused, often in our name and with the support of our communities, families, and friends, we will feel motivated to do what we can to end it.