

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## LEADERSHIP IN THE AFTERMATH OF MORAL DISASTER Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

It might be argued—indeed Yoseph argues—that his brothers furthered a vast Eternal plan by selling him into slavery, as Pharaoh later would by refusing to let their descendant people go. The brothers nevertheless must recognize their moral error. Reuven even named their guilt. What happens next?

Yoseph sends his brothers back to their father with presents and commands. One of those commands is enigmatic and apparently process-oriented: *Al tirgezu baderekeh* = do not RGZ on the way. Purely via context, one expects this to be an admonition against delay, but this is not an attested direct meaning of RGZ.

RGZ can mean fear, so Rashbam and many others suggest that Yoseph tells the brothers they need not fear molestation on the way, as his power will be sufficient to protect them. The problem with this reading is that the brothers showed no fear on their way to Egypt, so Yoseph's reassurance seems superfluous.

RGZ can also mean anger, and so Rashi among others suggests that Yoseph cautions the brothers against pointing fingers at each other about the sale. The apparent problem with this reading is that Yoseph's admonition is limited to their time on the way. But perhaps Yoseph only tried to ensure that they delay the inevitable, and likely ugly, round of mutual recrimination until they were safely home. He may have done this to prevent any delay in bringing the news of his being alive to Yaakov because he feared that internal dissension would make them attractive targets for brigands or because he feared that it would become known that they had

deliberately sold him into slavery, to the detriment of both his and their standing.

The Torah does not tell us whether the brothers obeyed Yoseph, but I think it is a reasonable presumption that they did. The Torah also reports no subsequent moral recrimination, and when Yaakov dies, every indication is that the brothers are unwilling to face any consequences of the sale—they league together protectively—and therefore have never fully accepted responsibility for their actions.

I suggest that this would be quite predictable. Moral accounting delayed is moral accounting prevented. The habits of avoidance grow stronger with practice. Worse, the unwillingness or inability to address large past moral issues spills over into the present, as there is always a fear that conversations will get out of hand and “blow up” by calling attention to the elephant in the room.

Now it is also the case that productive moral accounting is hard to do, and often degenerates into mere finger pointing, the entrenching of grievances, and/or putting an official imprimatur on lies and injustice. Commissions of Truth and Reconciliation often achieve neither, and their genuine if limited effectiveness in South Africa should not prevent us from recognizing this. So perhaps Yoseph was fully aware of what he was doing, and thought it the lesser of two evils.

But perhaps this result is sufficiently distasteful that it drives the midrashic tradition to suggest a very different understanding of RGZ. According to Rabbi Elazar (*Taanit* 10b), Yoseph warns the brothers not to engage in Halakhic conversation lest *תרגזו עליכם הדרך* = the way RGZ upon you.

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Rashi explains that the intensity of such conversation might lead them to get lost. This is an explanation I relate to very easily, having missed quite a few highway exits in the context of such conversations.

The Talmud points out, however, that R. Ilai bar Berakhyah states that two scholars who travel together without “having words of Torah among them” deserve to be burnt. R. Ilai derives this from a fascinating reading of the farewell scene of the prophet Eliyahu and his disciple Elisha. The two are “walking and talking” when chariots of fire separate them, after which Eliyahu ascends in a windstorm to the heavens. R. Ilai apparently sees the chariots as potential threats, which are evaded narrowly (the fire passes between Eliyahu and Elisha without singeing either, sort of like the night bus in Harry Potter) because of ongoing Torah conversation.

So wasn't Yoseph endangering the brothers by banning Halakhic conversation?

The Talmud answers that there are two kinds of halakhic conversation – *girsā* and *ijyun*. *Girsā* is the literal review of memorized material, whereas *ijyun* is the attempt to understand or develop principles. Yoseph banned only *ijyun*, while Elisha and Eliyahu were engaged only in *girsā*.

I have to say that I find it hard to accept that Elisha and Eliyahu spent their last moments together, and it is clear in context that both know these are their last moments, engaged in deliberately superficial Torah conversation. Furthermore, they had no destination, and thus were at no risk of getting lost! So perhaps the Talmud means to say only that Yoseph banned *girsā*. Indeed, *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 5:1 offers three options for the topic of Elisha and Eliyahu's final conversation: Creation, the Divine Chariot, and the Consolations of Yerushalayim (presumably ultimate Redemption). None of these seem easily assimilable to halakhic *girsā*.

I also have to admit that in my own experience the attempt to limit halakhic conversations to pure information exchange, as for example in *divrei Halakhah* offered just before prayer, rarely works. (I often started ad hoc mincha minyanim reflexively, by declaring that “The halakhah is that one should say a halakhah before beginning prayer” and leaving it at that.) Perhaps the advent of printing, and consequent devaluation of recitation and memorization, have made the whole genre inaccessible.

So my preference, admittedly against Rashi, is to read the midrash as suggesting that Yoseph banned halakhic argumentation because of the anger=RGZ that would emerge among the brothers specifically in the context of such arguments. More, he banned them not because the anger would harm them, but because it would distort those arguments. Yet more strongly, I suggest that Yoseph banned the brothers from engaging in halakhic conversations because they had not yet engaged in moral accounting.

Why? In the aftermath of moral disaster there is often an urge to make new regulations. Sometimes this is healthy, but often the making of new rules is a way of avoiding responsibility for the failure to properly administer the old ones. This is particularly the case when the new rules are made *davka* by those who had administrative responsibility for the old rules, and even more particularly, when they have never truly been held morally accountable—by themselves and others—for the previous disaster.

Had the brothers engaged in halakhic conversation on the way, doubtless they would have promulgated highly detailed rules against kidnapping brothers who have annoying dreams. But their weaknesses of envy and ambition would have found other outlets. The first step to genuine teshuvah, and worthiness of responsibility, would have been to simply accept that Halakhah for now must be made by others, and their job was merely to learn what those others said – *girsā* rather than *ijyun*.

The problem is that Yoseph himself has never acknowledged his own culpability for the breakdown of his fraternal relationships. So who is left to make the rules?

In political terms, it is very difficult to find genuinely new leaders; leadership is often the result of personality traits rather than of opinions, and so the same people rise to the administrative top time after time regardless of past performance, especially when their past failures are perceived as moral rather than practical.

Halakhah has no panacea for these issues, and Modern Orthodoxy specifically should resist the urge to seek out enlightened beings who are immune to human weaknesses.

What we can perhaps suggest is that the ideal outcome here would have been for Yoseph and his brothers to develop new rules together, and really, with Yaakov as a full participant as well, and with each of them acknowledging how they had contributed to the past failure. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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