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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

OF MICE AND PEOPLE

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

The Scottish poet and farmer Robert Burns was moved to philosophic reflection by the sight of an overturned mouse nest in his freshly ploughed furrow. The poor mouse had spent much time perfecting its home to the best of its ability. But it had no sense of context; it could not see the big picture.

Are humans any different? "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft a-gley". There is no necessary connection between intentions and consequences. Burns concludes that mice have the advantage of us. Mice live in the moment and never suffer the torments of pessimistic anticipation. Humans live in terror because we understand the limitations of our perspective, but cannot overcome them. We know that our best efforts cannot prevent our best-laid plans from going awry, and therefore we – not just the cowards among us – die a thousand times before our deaths.

Burns' despair has one implication that may be either damning or redeeming. He at least seemingly undermines any rationale for accountability. If intentions have no necessary relationship to consequences, how can we be held responsible as the author of those consequences? If we **know** that intentions have no necessary relationship to consequences, why should the most evil of our practical intentions be taken more seriously than fantasies? R. Tzadok HaKohen MiLublin takes this bull by the horns and argues that sin fundamentally consists in the belief that one might be held accountable for the consequences of actions, when such accountability would suggest that an action took place which contradicted G-d's Will. How could such a thing be?

One might be forgiven for believing that this week's parshah confirms R. Tzadok's view. After Yaakov's death, Yosef (50:20) denies any right or intention to punish his brothers for their treatment of him.

ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה
א-להים חשבה לטובה
למען עשה כזה להחיות עם רב
*You thought evil of me;
G-d thought it into good,*

*so as to be able to do what He has done to this day,
namely to keep many people alive*

This is the reading adopted by Rashbam.

- "א-להים חשבה לטובה"

הק' גרם לכם

ואתם לא פשעתם בי

כי לטובתכם נתכוון הק'

"G-d thought it into good" –

The Holy caused you (to act this way)

(therefore) you have done me no offense

because the Holy intended this for your benefit

I tend to see this as one more instance of Rashbam smashing a three-dimensional text with a mallet repeatedly until it is perfectly flat. There is no nuance or complexity left at all; all's absolved that ends well, and Yosef's conception of justice and internal emotions align perfectly with G-d's intention.

Rashbam's mallet is consciously aimed at the psycho-theological skyscraper that emerges from Rashi's commentary.

ויאמר אלהים יוסף:

אל תיראו

כי התחת א-להים אני?

שמא במקומו אני, בתמיהה!?

אם הייתי רוצה להרע לכם, כלום אני יכול!?

והלא אתם חשבתם עלי רעה

והקב"ה חשבה לטובה

למען עשה כזה להחיות עם רב

והיאך אני לבדי יכול להרע לכם!?

Yosef said to them:

Do not fear,

as am I in place of G-d?!

Do I stand in His place?!

If I had wanted to do you evil, would I be able!?

Behold you thought to do me evil

But The Holy Blessed One thought it into good

so as to be able to do what He has done to this day,

namely to keep many people alive

So how would I by myself be able to do you evil?!

In Rashi's reading, Yosef is not reconciled to his brother's actions, only reconciled to the practical

impossibility of punishing them. Yosef understands that he can only act within the parameters of G-d's plan, and he understands that plan as aimed not (only) at his own good, but rather as the good of the many people – perhaps Jews, perhaps, Egyptians, perhaps both – that he saved from dying of famine. Yosef is impotent, not forgiving. It is possible that his mature recognition of the impossibility of vengeance leads eventually to a genuine rapprochement. It is also possible that he is greatly frustrated by the big-picture constraints he must work within. Consider as an interesting parallel Lavan's words to Yaakov in 31:29:

יש לאל ידי
לעשות עמכם רע
וא-להי אביכם אמר אלי לאמר
השמר לך מדבר עם יעקב מטוב עד רע:
*There is (Divine?) power in my hand
to do you evil*

But the G-d of your father said to me yesterday:

“Guard yourself against (even) speaking to Yaakov, whether for good or for evil”.

Note that Rashbam there as well portrays Lavan as accepting G-d's restriction out of regard for His honor, rather than chafing against His involuntary imposition. I prefer to see Lavan's attribution of Divine power to his hand as significant. (There may be similar subtle significance to writing **יוסף** ויאמר **אלהם** יוסף just before he says **התחמת א-להים אני**.)

Rashi's psychologically complex reading of Yosef has theological implications. For Rashbam, it is wrong to hold a grudge, or to think less of somebody, for actions undertaken with malevolent intent that nonetheless turned out well. Rashi, by contrast, sees no reason for Yosef to modulate his evaluation of the brothers' character in accordance with the consequences of their actions. They did wrong, and deserve to have bad things done to them – it's just that in this case specifically he believes that G-d has told him that the big picture takes precedence over human justice.

I may seem to be belaboring the point. So let me explain why I think this issue matters so much.

We really cannot know the consequences of our interpersonal behavior. The bully at school may turn her victim into a tireless crusader for the unfairly victimized; the shallow or cruel or sexist *talmid chakham* may inspire a generation of students to go into *chinnukh* lest their children be educated by the likes of him; the sadist who humiliates an alcoholic beggar may cause them to “hit bottom” and seek help. These positive consequences do not excuse their behavior. Nor are we obligated to wait to

see how things turn out before we mete out our own consequences.

These cases are low-hanging fruit. The more challenging ones are where interpersonal cruelty is directly and explicitly justified on the basis of the big picture. After all, “one must not be too great a tzaddik”, and “the mercy of the foolish is cruelty”. All true. And yet (I hope) we all can recognize that such justifications are inherently dangerous, and people who use them often tend to damage themselves spiritually. If we could image souls, I suspect we'd find that a lot of our harsher polemicists had CTE.

One reason for this is that we tend to think of the negative consequences narrowly, and the positive consequences broadly. So we say: we only attacked one woman, or suggested that one man ought be thrown in a pit, and in exchange we preserved what we see as a vital religious principle in our community. Let's grant that positive for the moment.

This analysis doesn't acknowledge that few human beings are islands. What we do to a person affects their friends, and their families, and their students – and in turn their friends, and their families, and their students. Who saves a life, saves a world; who affects a life, for good or for ill, often affects a world.

Many years ago I listened as a public rabbinic figure gave what seemed to me an interminable and insupportable speech at the bar mitzvah of a child he hardly knew. At one long-suffering point, I gave into the temptation to whisper a sarcastic remark to the person sitting next to me – who turned out to be the speaker's nephew. I try to keep in mind now, when I speak and when I write about another person, that their nephew is probably in the audience. This can't paralyze all criticism, but hopefully it improves my judgment of what is necessary.

A thousand years after Parshat Vayigash happened, the haftorah tells us that Yechezkel still felt the need to heal the breach between Yosef and his brothers: Chazal tell us that in their time Gentile kings still held the Jewish people as a whole accountable for the sale of Yosef; and that we did not respond by citing Rashbam. Nor should we today.

Shabbat shalom!