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## WERE YOSEF'S BROTHERS DOOMED TO HATE HIM?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

Yosef's brothers could not "speak to shalom with him". Rashi, citing Chazal, praises the brothers for avoiding hypocrisy. Does that imply that they were silent? Or rather that they explicitly rebuked him? In halakhic terms, they refused to violate *Do not hate your brother in your heart*, but did they fulfill *You must surely rebuke your fellow, and not bear sin because of him*?

Even if they rebuked him – does the Torah mean to say that **all** interactions with sinners must include rebuke? Is it hypocrisy to carry on normal social intercourse and rebuke only when a relevant issue comes up? That seems overly harsh. Seforno accordingly offers a less positive evaluation of the brothers' behavior:

Even though they had to speak with him regarding household management and shepherding, seeing as he was the one in charge by his father's command, they were unable to speak with him to shalom and companionship in the manner of brothers.

In contrast to Rashi, Seforno evaluates the brothers' inability to engage in normal social conversation with Yosef as a weakness and failure. Presumably the brothers held like Rashi. Since they end up selling Yosef into slavery, after seriously considering fratricide, I'm strongly tempted to pasken like Seforno.

However, arguments from consequences generally assume that we know not only what happened, but what would have happened. Rashi might respond that following Seforno would have led them to actual fratricide.

That response can be psychologically justified in a variety of ways. For example, hypocrisy often leads to self-loathing, and escape from self-loathing is a prime motive for violence. Or: every ordinary interaction with Yosef increases their sense of injustice at his place in the world, whereas abrasive interactions give them a sense of getting some of their own back.

But one should not evaluate behavior in a relationship from the perspective of one side only. The Torah tells us that the brothers' hatred was initially a reaction to the reality that

Yaakov loved Yosef more than he loved any of them. Yosef then aggravates the hatred by sharing dreams in which they acknowledge his superiority. However, the Torah does not tell us whether Yosef is aware of their initial hatred, or of their reaction to his dreams.

This nuances the dispute between Rashi and Seforno. Possibly Seforno would agree that when an undissolvable relationship begins to go sour, an aggrieved party has the obligation of rebuke rather than taking the easy short-term way out and sliding into permanent avoidance. The dispute is only whether the rebuke must be sustained until the other side acknowledges the breach and engages.

On the other hand, perhaps Seforno puts too much on the brothers by ignoring the power dynamics in the relationship. Perhaps it is Yosef, favored and in charge, who has the primary or only obligation to engage. Put more sharply: Yosef has nothing to lose that he deserves to have.

Midrash Tanchuma holds strongly that Yosef did not reciprocate his brothers' hatred and incivility.

He (Yosef) would come ask-about-their-shalom, but they would not respond to him.

Why? Because that was his practice, to ask-about-their-shalom.

You have people who, before they enter into authority, ask-about-the-shalom of people, but once they enter into authority, they become arrogant and aren't concerned to ask-about-the-shalom of the populace, but Yosef was not like that – even after he entered into authority, his practice was to ask-about-the-shalom of his brothers,

as the Torah says: *He asked-them-about-their-shalom.* (Bereishis 43:27)

The Holy Blessed One said to him: Yosef, you would initiate asking-about-the-shalom of your brothers in This World, while they hated you,

but ultimately – I will reconcile you and remove the hatred from amongst you and settle you in tranquility and make shalom among you,

as David Hamelekh said: *Behold how good and how pleasant brothers dwelling in togetherness.* (Tehillim 133:1)

I'm not convinced, on several levels.

First, Yosef asks about his brothers' shalom only when they come to Egypt the second time, bringing Binyamin. He speaks harshly to them the first time they come, and the Torah records no speech on either side when he is kidnapped.

Second, Yosef's approach as described in this midrash was more likely condescension than engagement. He asked-about-shalom to people as an authority, not as an equal. That can work and even be admirable in a hierarchical relationship that both sides accept. It is infuriating to a social inferior who regards their inferiority as an injustice.

Third, one-way social intercourse, especially from a position of power, rarely works. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Netziv both suggest that Yosef **predictably** made things worse by trying to speak shalom to them.

Malbim adds a vital psychological nuance:

Ordinary hatred cools when the enemy speaks words of  
shalom and reconciliation . . .

but hatred arising out of jealousy, and all the more so if one  
sees the enemy as lying in ambush against your life and dignity,  
and that he deserves death – increases when the enemy speaks  
about shalom . . .

If this is correct, we can use reactions to civility as a way of diagnosing the causes of hatred, and therefore whether seeking civil dialogue is a viable counter-hate strategy.

Deborah suggested that in our case the brothers' anger was displaced onto Yosef from Yaakov. We can develop this by saying that they needed to hate Yosef in order to avoid hating their father. Any sense that Yosef was a decent person was therefore profoundly threatening to them emotionally. Therefore they could not tolerate civility.

On this model, perhaps jealous hatred is always a matter of displaced anger. It follows reasonably that determining how to react wisely involves identifying the true object of the other's anger.

The two most likely objects are G-d and themselves. Jealousy entails the belief that X has something that I don't have but should have. How can that have happened? Either they don't deserve it, in which case G-d has been unjust, and I should be angry with Him; or they do, in which case I have been inadequate, and I should be angry with myself. If I am not willing to allow G-d to love someone else more than He loves me, or to believe that someone else deserves more than I do – I will hate them.

Let's suppose that Yosef had fully and correctly understood the fraternal dynamics. What could he have done to heal the relationship?

It's tempting to answer that Yosef could have abdicated any position of authority and preference. He could, in short, have engaged in utopian socialism. But I suspect this is a fantasy. First, nothing he could have done would have stopped Yaakov from loving him more than his brothers. In fact, Yaakov would probably have loved him all the more for trying to refuse the advantages. Second, Yosef had dreams. Forcing a person to give up their ambitions in the name of enforced material or social equality denies a more fundamental equality, which we can perhaps frame as an equal right to the pursuit of happiness.

Yosef's dreams come true in the end because he is capable of listening to Pharaoh's dreams without jealousy. That enables him to interpret them in a way that fulfills rather than competes with his own dreams.

I suspect that Yosef's only chance was to listen to his brothers' dreams in the same way that he listened to Pharaoh's. But this would have been extraordinarily difficult. The brothers may long since have given up dreaming (although Leah never stopped dreaming of a world in which Yaakov loved her as much as he loved Rachel). Or their dreams may all have been reactionary, dreams of revenge rather than of self-fulfillment.

*Shabbat shalom!*