
פרשת וישב

פרק לז פסוק כה

וַיִּשְׁבוּ לְאֶכְל־לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אַרְחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגְּלַעַד וּגְמֻלֵיהֶם נִשְׂאִים נִכְאֹת וְצָרִי וְלֹט הִוְלָכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם:

רש"י

וּגְמֻלֵיהֶם נִשְׂאִים וְגוֹמֵר: לָמָּה פָּרְסָם הַכְּתוּב אֵת מִשְׂאָם? לְהוֹדִיעַ מִתּוֹן שְׂכָרוֹן שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים, שְׂאִין דָּרְכוֹן שֶׁל עַרְבֵיִים לְשֵׂאת אֶלָּא נִפְטָ וְעֵטְרוֹן שְׂרִיחוֹן רַע, וְלָזֶה נִזְדַּמְּנוּ בְּשָׂמִים שֶׁלֹּא יִזַּק מֵרִיחַ רַע.

מושג

לְהוֹדִיעַ מִתּוֹן שְׂכָרוֹן שֶׁל צַדִּיקִים¹ ... וְלָזֶה נִזְדַּמְּנוּ בְּשָׂמִים שֶׁלֹּא יִזַּק מֵרִיחַ רַע.

Translation:

To make known the reward of Tzadikim... to him it happened that there were spices, so that he should not be harmed by the foul odor.

Explanation:

Although the descent of the Jewish people to Mitzrayim was commencing with the sale of Yosef, Hashem wanted to send a message to Yosef, and thus to the entire nation, that he had not forsaken them. A Yishmaeli caravan, which usually carried foul smelling cargo, 'happens' to pass by carrying pleasant smelling spices. The brothers sell Yosef to the caravan², and Yosef realizes that Hashem, while punishing him, is still taking care of him³. This realization will help Yosef successfully survive the many ordeals he will undergo until he rises to greatness in Egypt.

Looking in the Pasuk:

The Musag is derived from the fact that the Torah saw fit to tell us what type of cargo the caravan carried. This seemingly irrelevant fact carried with it an important Divine message⁴: that even when He is compelled to punish, Hashem does not abandon us. In addition, there seem to be contradictory reports in the Torah regarding through whom the sale took place, the ישמעאלים or the מדינים. Carefully reading the text reveals the 'coincidental' appearance of both the ישמעאלי haulers and the מדיני merchants which made the sale of Yosef possible.

Musag Learning Outcomes:

Know: The surprising presence of spices amongst the cargo of the Yishmaeli caravan which brought him to Egypt conveyed to Yosef the message that Hashem still cared for him.

Understand: Even when Hashem is compelled to punish, He does not abandon us, but continues to seek our welfare. This is the result of us being like children to Hashem, whose goodness to us is expressed by His continued interest in our lives even when He displays His displeasure with our actions.

Think: How the text of the Torah, when read carefully, carries with it messages that help us understand Hashem's attributes as well as clarify Biblical events.

1 See note #3

2 See note #1

3 See note #2

4 Whether it was only Yosef who understood the message, or whether the brothers also understood is discussed in footnote #8.

NOTES

1. There is a lack of clarity as to how the sale of Yosef actually took place. The problem is that the Pesukim themselves seem to openly contradict each other. Our Pasuk refers to ארחת ישמעאלים, and our Musag talks of Yosef being with them and the spices they were carrying. In Yehudah פסוק כז says: לכו ונמכרו לישמעאלים, again pointing to the fact that the ישמעאלים bought Yosef from the brothers. In the next Pasuk, however, the מדינים סחרים appear and the Pasuk reports that they sold Yosef to the ישמעאלים who then brought him to מצרים. In פסוק לו we read: והמדנים מכרו אתו אל-מצרים, seeming to contradict our previous understanding that it was the ישמעאלים who carried him to מצרים, and, finally, in פסוק א the Torah tells us:

ויקנהו פוטיפר סריס פרעה שר הטבחים איש מצרי מיד הישמעאלים אשר הורדהו שמה, conflicting with the previous source that told of the מדינים bringing him to מצרים. To explain the conflicting Pesukim, Rashi (ד"ה ויעברו) teaches, שנמכר פעמים הרבה, that Yosef was sold multiple times. Rashi (ד"ה וימשכו) adds the order in which he was sold: והישמעאלים למדינים והמדנים למצרים.

There are a number of difficulties with Rashi's understanding. First, if the מדינים bought Yosef from the ישמעאלים only *after* the brothers sold him to the ישמעאלים, then why does the Pasuk mention the מדינים *before* the brothers sell him to the ישמעאלים? Second, how does Rashi explain the Pasuk which says that the ישמעאלים sold Yosef to מצרים? Third, if the first caravan of ישמעאלים were not the ones to bring Yosef to מצרים, then why does the Torah mention that the first group were on their way to מצרים? And, finally, if the first caravan only carried Yosef until they sold him to the מדינים then Yosef only had the pleasant smell of the spices for a short time, and not all the way to מצרים!

In order to answer all the above, we turn to the commentary of the אור החיים הקדוש⁵ who explains as follows: The ישמעאלים were not merchants but rather more like the truckers of today; they carried merchandise from place to place, as the Pasuk says נשאים נכאת וצרי וכו'. They, therefore, would not be the ones to buy Yosef from the brothers. However, at the same time appear the מדינים סחרים, who, as the Pasuk tells us, were the סוחרים, the merchants. Explains the אור החיים הקדוש, the מדינים were the ones who actually bought Yosef, and the ישמעאלים carried him. The brothers wished to sell him to the ישמעאלים, however the appearance of the מדינים was necessary to make this happen, exactly as the Pesukim relate. Upon reaching מצרים they again work in tandem. The ישמעאלים bring the 'merchandise' while the מדינים take care of the business end. This explains why the Pasuk tells us ויקנהו פוטיפר... מיד הישמעאלים אשר הורדהו שמה, and also והמדנים מכרו אתו אל מצרים, the sale to the מצרים was bartered by the מדיני merchants, who took him from the hands of the ישמעאלים, who had carried him to Egypt.

Thus, in order for the sale of Yosef to take place, two things had to happen simultaneously: Both the ישמעאלים and the מדינים had to pass by the brothers at the same time in order for one to effect the sale of Yosef and the other to carry him to מצרים.

2. The source for Rashi's comments are found in (וישב פרשה פד סימן יז) which reads:

וישאו עיניהם ויראו: א"ר אבא בר כהנא והלא אין דרכן של ישמעאלים להיות טעונים אלא עורות ועטרן! אלא ראה מה זימן הקדוש ברוך הוא לאותו צדיק באותה שעה שקים מלאים בשמים כדי שתהא הרוח מנשבת בהם מפני ריחן של ערביים.

The question that must be asked is that this seems like a very small compensation for the Tzaddik, יוסף. Put simply, I would highly doubt that Yosef, as he is being sold into slavery by his brothers and ripped away from his father and his homeland, is thinking, "Well, at least it smells good here!" In his misery, Yosef most probably did not even notice the spices, so what type of מתן שכרן של צדיקים is this? I am sure that Yosef would have preferred to return home to his father as his reward and pass on the spices.

Perhaps we might answer by bringing a similar Chazal. The Gemoroh (ברכות מה:) teaches us the origins of the fourth ברכה in המזון known as הטוב והמטיב:

ואתו היום שניתנו הרוגי ביתר לקבורה תקנו ביבנה הטוב והמטיב, הטוב שלא הסריחו, והמטיב שניתנו לקבורה.

5 Not coincidentally, I am writing these notes on טו תמוז, the יארצייט of the אור החיים.

Again, we are forced to ask: The murder of thousands upon thousands of Jews by the Romans in the destruction of the city of Beitar was a national calamity that almost matched the destruction of the בית המקדש. Why in the world would I make a ברכה over such a tragedy? True, the bodies did not decompose, but that is a very small consolation at a time of great suffering; why institute a blessing that says Hashem is טוב? After all, the Gemoroh (שם ג.ד.) teaches us: על בשורות טובות אומר ברוך הטוב, והמטיב, על בשורות רעות אומר ברוך דיין האמת?

Even more difficult to understand is when we consider why this ברכה was instituted in המזון. The תוספות⁶ explain that this is because usually ברכת המזון is recited over wine, which reminds us of this event. It seems that the Romans had stacked up the bodies of the murdered Jews around their vineyards, thus, explains תוספות, drinking wine reminds us of the historical background which led to the blessing. But, again, we must wonder: Being reminded of the piles of bodies which surrounded the vineyards should make us sick to our stomachs, not inspire us to bless Hashem's goodness!

I think the explanation lies in first asking: Why did the Romans want to pile up the bodies? What did they want to accomplish? The answer is that they wanted to break the spirit of the Jews. They wanted them to relive the tragedy day after day when they passed by the slowly decomposing bodies. They wanted to constantly drive home the point that there was no G-d who protected the Jews or cared for their welfare. And, they should have been successful.

But, then something miraculous happened. As the Jews passed the bodies day after day, they noticed something; even in the sweltering heat of the summer months the bodies were not decomposing. G-d had not abandoned his people after all! The Roman ploy had backfired. Instead of demoralizing the people it gave them hope for the future. Yes, Hashem was angry with us and had punished us, but He has not forsaken us, and was sending us a clear message that He still cared. Immediately, the Romans allowed for burial⁷.

We may now understand why the blessing of הטוב והמטיב was established regarding this event. For the extent of Hashem's goodness towards us is exhibited most clearly when He still cares for us even when we do not follow His will. Like a father towards a wayward son, He punishes us because it is necessary for our own good, but loves us no less.

Yosef realized the same. Of course, the sweet smell of spices could in no way assuage the pain he felt. He realized that Hashem was punishing him by distancing him from his loving father. However, by smelling the spices he also recognized that something else was happening. Why in the world, he asked himself, are these Arabs carrying spices? The answer was obvious: Hashem was still there with him⁸, עמו אנכי בצרה, and this realization would be the secret to his survival and the inspiration which would spur him towards greatness.

That Hashem wished to send a message to Yosef, conveying to him that He had not forsaken him, is echoed in the words of the Midrash which explains the words in Tehilim⁹ לא יעזב את חסידיו:

6 מסכת תענית לא. ד"ה תיקנו

7 Perhaps this explains the double blessing of not decomposing and the allowance for burial: הטוב והמטיב, הטוב שלא נסרחו והמטיב שנתנו לקבורה. Since they did not decompose, which gave the people hope, the Romans realized their plan had had the exact opposite result, and immediately allowed for burial.

8 It is interesting to note that the דיבור המתחיל רבה of the Midrash mentioned at the beginning of this note is on the words נשאים נכאת וצרי. Perhaps the brothers themselves came to the same realization; that something unique was happening. Maybe seeing the strange sight of an Arab caravan carrying spices spurred them to think that Hashem wanted Yosef on that caravan and not in the pit. This would seem to be borne out by the order of the Pesukim, in which the Torah informs us as to the nature of the cargo before telling us of the brothers' decision to sell Yosef. We propose that the nature of the cargo was the catalyst to their decision. (Also, the words in the Midrash ראה מה זימן הקדוש ברוך הוא may point to the same understanding.)

The same peculiarity is found in an additional Midrash which teaches:

הרי הוא אומר וישבו לאכל לחם וישאו עיניהם והלא אין דרכן של ערביים להיות נושאים אלא עורות ריה רע ועטרן אלא שנתנו צדיק ההוא בין דברים החביבין, והרי דברים קל וחומר ומה אם בשעת כעסן של צדיקים מרחמים עליהן בשעת הרחמים על אחת כמה וכמה. (ילקוט שמעוני תורה פרשת שמיני רמז תקכו - תוספתא ברכות פרק ד.)

Here too the words in the Pasuk the Midrash comments on are וישאו עיניהם and not נכאת וכו'. The Midrash also strengthens our explanation of the presence of the spices assuring Yosef that Hashem was still with him even when Hashem's anger was expressed against him.

9 לזכר כי ה' אהב משפט ולא יעזב את חסידיו לעולם נשקרו וְרַע רְשָׁעִים נִכְרְתוּ:

דבר אחר מדבר ביוסף, היכן שמרו? ויעברו אנשים מדינים סוחרים, ומה היו טוענים והלא אין דרכן של גמלים לטעון אלא עטרן, וכתוב נכאת וצרי ולוט, אלא אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא יהא צדיק זה נתון בין ריח רע, אלא אזמין לו ריח טוב, הוי ולא יעזוב את חסידיו. (יילקוט שמעוני תהלים רמז תשל"ב)

3. As mentioned in the above notes, Rashi is basing his commentary here on the מדרשים found in the מדרש רבה on בראשית and in the ילקוט שמעוני on Tehilim. However, neither uses the wording מתן שכרן של צדיקים. What is particularly troubling is that the reward given to Tzadikim is reserved for עולם הבא, and not in this world. This is taught in Pirkei Avos (פרק ב משנה טז): וְיִאֱמָן הוּא בְעַל מְלֹאכְתָּהּ: (פרק ב משנה טז) וְיִשְׁלַם לָהּ שְׂכָר פְּעֻלָּתָהּ. וְדַע, מִתֵּן שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל צְדִיקִים לְעֵתִיד לְבוֹא. Rashi himself¹⁰, quotes the Gemoroh in (כ.ב.) which teaches עירובין (כ.ב.) So, how can Rashi comment that Yosef is receiving his reward in this world?

Perhaps we might answer, using the idea developed above, that certainly a pleasant smell can in no way be construed as an actual reward for his Mitzvos given the terrible predicament Yosef found himself in. However, Rashi comments, knowing Hashem did not abandon him was the 'reward' he did receive. While a Tzadik is not compensated for his deeds, the mere fact that he is constantly aware of Hashem's presence and guiding hand is reward in itself. This is the מתן שכרן של צדיקים of which Rashi speaks.

4. Questions for further discussion:

- In Rashi's understanding of the Midrash, he writes that the purpose of the spices was so that Yosef should not be 'damaged' by the foul smell¹¹. To what type of damage do you think Rashi is referring?
- Can you think of other examples in Tanach where Hashem displays His love for us even in times when He seems to be angry with us?
- If all that Hashem does is, in the end result, for our good, why then do we make different ברכות for good (ברוך הטוב והמטיב) and for bad (ברוך דיין אמת) news?

10 דברים פרק ז פסוק יא

11 None of Midrashim I have found that Rashi might have used as a source use the wording of נזק, damage.