

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Chasa Risa *bas* Yosef Osher *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Cedars of Lebanon

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV 5776

This *parshah* contains the dramatic episode of the clash between Yosef and his brothers. The end result is well known, culminating in the tribes selling their brother into slavery.

At one point in the narrative, Rashi (*Bereishis* 37:33) addresses a glaring question. Ya’akov, of course, suffered for years due to the loss of his son. Why didn’t Hashem simply inform him that he was really alive? Based on the *medrash*, Rashi answers: לפי שֶׁהִקְרִימוּ... אֵת כָּל מִי שֶׁיִּגְלֶה, וְשִׁתְּפוּ לַהֲקִיבָה עִמָּהֶם – “For they promulgated an edict of excommunication... on any who would reveal (what really happened to Yosef), and **they included Hashem with them** (in this venture).”

These comments appear to be nothing short of remarkable. As many commentators wonder: How could such a pact be binding on Hashem? No one has the authority or ability to obligate Him in anything, of course; why, then, did Hashem seem to acquiesce (as He indeed did not reveal the matter to Ya’akov)? And what does it even mean that they “included” Hashem in their designs?

There is another tragic episode in our history which, in many ways, parallels the story of the *Shevatim* (tribes). In fact, as we shall see, it was actually a result of the original affair. The events, which are recorded in numerous *medrashim*, are perhaps most familiar to many through their appearance in the prayer services of two very emotional days: Yom Kippur and Tishah B’Av. At these times, we recall the episode of the *Asarah Harugei Malchus* (Ten Martyrs, Executed by the Government Forces) as we recite the special hymns that relate the moving narrative (“*Arzei Halevanon* [Cedars of Lebanon]” on Tisha B’Av, and “*Eileh Ezkerah* [These I Shall Recall]” on Yom Kippur). Below is a recounting of the initiation of the proceedings, based largely on the “*Eileh Ezkerah*” hymn. In his classic, super-commentary to Rashi, the Levush gleans insight from the following events to clarify the perplexities mentioned above.

Sealed from on High

The Roman ruler at the time may have been something of a scholar, taking the time to familiarize himself with some aspects of Torah law and Biblical events. It was not love of knowledge that motivated his researches, however, but something much more sinister.

This ruler had investigated the story of Yosef and his brothers – how he was kidnapped and sold into slavery, with the proceeds of the sale used to purchase shoes (*cf. Amos* 2:6). Thus he discovered his pretext and decided to “right the wrongs” that had been perpetrated long ago.

Cynically, he filled his palace with shoes, which he proceeded to show to a group of the greatest Torah sages of the time. He presented them with a legal question: What is the Torah’s mandate regarding a case of kidnapping? How is the perpetrator punished? The Sages had little choice but to answer that through such an act, one incurred the death penalty (*Shemos* 21:16). Having anticipated this response, the ruler turned to them and referenced the shoes serving as the backdrop for this show-trial. “Your forefathers, the *Shevatim*,” he told them, “perpetrated just such a deed against their brother, whom they sold for shoes. As the

punishment you just mentioned was never meted out against them, you will have to be killed in their place.”

The Sages had no doubts about the nefariousness of this “upholder of justice,” but they suspected that the matter might have been ordained from Above. They asked for some time to determine if, indeed, a Heavenly decree was pending. Their request was granted.

In the words of the *piyut* (hymn): “(The Sages) turned their eyes on R’ Yishmael Kohen Gadol (the High Priest)... R’ Yishmael purified himself and pronounced the Holy Name of Hashem with trembling / He ascended to the Upper Realm and inquired (about the matter) from the Angel Gavriel / Who said to him: ‘Resign yourselves to this, O righteous and beloved ones / For I have heard from behind the partition that so it has been decreed (by Hashem)...’”

A Window to the Past

While the precise calculations of the Almighty are beyond our capacity to grasp, we know that they are perfect and just. With the knowledge that the decree had indeed been issued from Above, the Sages resigned themselves to their fate. The hymns proceed to outline the cruelty of their murderers and the glory of their martyrdom.

The Levush understands that, indeed, this event did contain a significant element of atonement for the deed perpetrated by the *Shevatim*. He utilizes this idea to clarify the issue of the brothers’ apparent inclusion of Hashem in their pact of silence. Thus he references a foundational principle concerning Divine retribution, as laid forth in the Mishnah (*Sotah 1:7*):

בְּמִדָּה שֶׁאָדָם מוֹדֵד, כֵּן מוֹדְדִין לוֹ.

“In the manner that a person perpetrates a deed, such will be meted out to him (as punishment).”

Based on this notion of “measure for measure,” the Levush uncovers what really took place with the pact of the *Shevatim*. We have already seen manifestations of this principle in the episode of the *Asarah Harugei Malchus*; for example, shoes figured prominently in the proceedings, just as they did in the original deed. The other details of the event were likewise not arbitrary.

Turning his focus on the method used by R’ Yishmael to consult with Heaven, the Levush deduces that it must also be patterned after the original event. That is, it never happened that the *Shevatim* “obligated” Hashem to follow their decree of silence under threat of excommunication; surely, this applied only to fellow humans and not to the Almighty. Rather, it must be that one of the brothers (the Levush postulates that it was Levi, the progenitor of R’ Yishmael Kohen Gadol) likewise ascended to the Heavens in a similar manner to “consult” with Hashem. At that point, the brothers simply inquired of the Heavenly Court if their design would succeed and their father would be kept unaware; to this query, they received an affirmative reply. But Hashem had his own calculations as to why He sought fit to keep this knowledge from Ya’akov (as discussed previously [*Mishnas Chaim, parshas Toldos*]).

Thus, Hashem was acting with His own plan in mind. He was not sanctioning the brothers’ designs, nor submitting to their pact of silence; He simply informed them of the fact that, from His part, He would not interfere by revealing anything to their father. But *they* were ultimately responsible for how they decided to use this information.