

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter X: Mikeitz (Gen. 41:1–44:17)

Essay 14. The reaction of the brothers to the return of their funds

ירושלמי פרק ב' דברכות, פד דמך ר' סימון. אומר ר' לוי ומה אם אחי יוסף על שמצאו מציאה נצא לבם שנאמר "וניצא לבם." אנו שאבדנו את ר' סימון, על אחת כמה וכמה עכ"ל.

The Jerusalem Talmud, chapter 2 of Berachot states:

Rabbi Simon bar Zevid died. Rabbi Lea came in and said the following eulogy: there are four things that are used in the world that, if lost, are replaceable. Silver has its place; gold has its place; iron will be taken from the dirt; and from stone they are able to get copper. These, if they are lost, can be replaced. But what of a Torah scholar who dies, who will bring us his replacement? “But where can wisdom be found; where is the source of understanding?” (Job 28:12).

Rabbi Levi said, “What about the brothers of Joseph, who when they found a treasure [when Joseph ordered the surreptitious return of their funds to their sacks? That should have brought them happiness, and yet] their hearts sank, as it says in Scripture, ‘Their hearts sank’ (Gen. 42:28). [If they were saddened by the return of something that, in any event, was replaceable,] we, who have lost Rabbi Simon bar Zevid, [should feel such sadness] even more so.

- Yerushalmi, Berachot 20a-20b

והוא תמונה מה ענין זה לזה ומה הוסיף תת פח לצער אבידה זו ממצואת אחי יוסף? והנה לו לומר בקיצור אם מי שאובד אבידה כל כך מצטער עליה עד שאין לו רצון לספר עצמו לכבוד המועד פדאיתא בפרק ג' דמועד קטן, כגון שנאבדה לו אבידה ערב הרגל ועי"ש, אנו שאבדנו הצדיק והחכם לא כל שפן.

This is strange, for what connection is there between this and that, and how does the finding of the funds of the brothers of Joseph add to the eulogy, which is designed for giving strength to those suffering from this pain of loss? [Rabbi Levi] could have briefly said that if one who loses an object is so distressed about it that he doesn't have the will to tell himself to honor the coming festival—as is brought in the third chapter of Moed Katan (14a), for

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example because an object was lost to him on the eve of a festival, and see there¹—then we, who have lost the righteous and wise man, are no less distressed. Why did Rabbi Levi instead discuss a situation where people received their money back, and instead of experiencing joy, experienced anxiety?

וניש לומר שאם היה אומר פן, לא היה לו פח להכריח ההתאוננות במיתת הצדיק, שהרי האמת הוא שלפעמים חס ושלום הצדיק מת בעוון הדור ומיתה זו היא אבדה גדולה להם. אבל אפשר נמי שהצדיק הזה כבר השלים תיקונו בעולם הזה והגיע זמנו לנאסף. ואין זו אבידה לנו אלא אדרבא יש מציאה גדולה לנו שהקב"ה הפליא חסדו עמנו שאין הצדיק נפטר מן העולם עד שנברא צדיק כמותו.

It can be said that if [Rabbi Levi] had spoken thus, speaking only about others who were distressed at losing something, he wouldn't have strongly advanced the mourning following the death of the righteous man, Rabbi Simon. For the truth is that sometimes, G-d forbid, the righteous dies because of the iniquity of the generation, and this type of death is indeed a great loss to [the people of that generation], and reason to mourn. But it is also possible that this righteous man has already completed his correction in this world and it was time for him to be gathered to his people.² This latter case is not a loss to us, but rather we have a great treasure that the Holy One, Blessed be He, has wonderfully graced with us, for it is said that a righteous man does not die from this world until another righteous man like him is created.³ Thus, we don't know whether Rabbi Simon's death was strictly a cause for sadness, for example if it were due to the iniquity of his generation, or if it was a cause for celebration, because he had completed his mission in life, and because a substitute was born to take his place. It may be better to bring a case where there is some ambiguity as to whether the situation is good or bad.

ומשום הכי הביא ראיה מאחי יוסף שמצאו מציאה "ויקראו איש אל-אחיו." ולכאורה עשו שלא פהוגן שאדרבא היה להם להודות להקב"ה על שנמתן להם מטמון בצמתחותם, דהא תנו מברך על הטובה מעין הרעה וכו'. ופירש הרב עובדיה מברטנורא, כגון דאשכח מציאה נאף על גב דרעה היא וכו' השתא מיהא טובה היא ומברך הטוב והמטיב עכ"ל.

Because of this, [Rabbi Levi] brought a proof from the brothers of Joseph, that they found a treasure, but their hearts fell, “and trembling, they turned to one another” (Gen. 42:28). Apparently they did so unreasonably, for to the contrary, they should have acknowledged the Holy One, Blessed be He, for giving them the treasure in their bags (Gen. 43:23). As we learned in a Mishnah,⁴ one should recite a blessing for good that befalls him just

¹ Moed Katan 14a: “Rabbi Zeira asks: If one lost an item on the eve of a festival [and omitted to honor the festival by cutting his hair or laundering his clothes, can he say that] since he was a victim of circumstances beyond his control, he is permitted [to cut his hair and launder his clothes on the intermediate days of the festival?].” The rabbis were not lenient in such a situation.

² Gen. 25:8: “And Abraham . . . was gathered to his people.”

³ Yoma 38b: “Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yochanan said: No righteous person departs from this world until another comparable righteous person is created, as it is stated: ‘And the sun rises and the sun sets’ (Eccl. 1:5).”

⁴ Mishnah Berachot 9:3; Berachot 54a.

as for the bad. Furthermore, Berachot 60a reads: “In a case where one found a lost object, despite [the fact] that it is [ultimately] bad for him [because] if the king heard about it, he would take it from him, it is favorable at present [that he found the treasure].” Regarding this, the rabbi, Ovadia of Bartenura,⁵ explained that one should recite the blessing, “Who is good and Who does good.” At the end of the Bar Kochba revolt, the Romans destroyed the Beitar stronghold and slaughtered all the Jews there. The Romans did not allow other Jews in Israel to bury the dead for many years, at which time it was discovered that, miraculously, the victims’ bodies had not decomposed. In appreciation, the sages of Yavne then added the prayer, “Who is good and Who does good” to the prayer after a meal: “Who is good” because the bodies had not decomposed, and “Who does good,” because burial was eventually allowed.⁶ We see here that an incident can have both good and bad elements: the slaughter at Beitar was tragic, but the miracle that occurred for the bodies and the eventual permission to bury them was good. Whether something is viewed as good or bad, we should accept it and show gratitude to G-d.

וְצָרִיד לומר שְׁכַּוְנוֹתָם הִיְתָה לְחֵלֶק וְלוֹמַר, בְּשִׁלְמָא הָתָם זֶה שְׁמַצָּא מְצִיאָה בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה הִיא מְצִיאָה וְדָאִית. אֲלָא שְׁיֵישׁ לְחוּשׁ שְׁאֲחֵרִי כִּן יִשְׁמַע בְּהַּ הַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁזֶה הוּא דְבָר חֲדָשׁ שְׁלַעַת עֵתָה אֵינּוּ בְּעוֹלָם, וּמִשׁוּם הִכִּי חַיִּיב לְהוֹדוֹת לָהּ עַל אוֹתָהּ הַמְצִיאָה שְׁמַצָּא. אָבֵל כְּאִן בְּנִדוּן שְׁלָהֶם הַמְצִיאָה אֵינָה מְצִיאָה וְדָאִית, שְׁאֵם הָאָמַת שֶׁהִנִּיחוּ שָׁם אוֹתוֹ הַכֶּסֶף לְהִתְגַּוֵּל עֲלֵיהֶם, אֵינָה מְצִיאָה כִּלְלֵל אֲלָא אֲדָרְבָּא אֲבִידָה הִיא לָהֶם, וּמִחֲמַת הַסֶּפֶק שְׁנִפְל בְּלִבָּם בְּאוֹתָהּ מְצִיאָה יֵצֵא לָבָם וְיִקְרְדוּ, אֲנִי שְׁאֲבָדְנוּ אֶת רַבִּי סִימּוֹן שְׁאֲבָדָה הִיא וְדָאִית אֲלָא שְׁיֵישׁ סֶפֶק דִּילְמָא אֵינָה אֲבִידָה, אֵינּוּ בְּמַכְלָ שְׁכִן שְׁיֵישׁ לָנוּ לְהִתְמַרְמֵר זֹאת.

It must be said that [the brothers’] intention was to draw a distinction between their situation and that of the Gemara⁷ **and say: Granted, there in Berachot 60a, this one found a treasure and at that time it was a certain treasure, and although one can feel that afterward the king will hear about it and seize it,⁸ at the time being this is something new** for the finder, **not yet present in the world, and therefore there is an obligation to thank G-d for the same treasure he has found.** In other words, we can assume that the finder in Berachot 60a was not a rich man, and the treasure he has found is therefore a true treasure for him, something that can change his life for the better, if it is not confiscated by the government. **But here, in [the brothers’] case, the treasure is not a definite treasure, for the truth is that [the Egyptians] placed their same money in their sacks, returning it to them.** Thus, **it’s not a new treasure at all, but rather like a lost object to them.** That is, the brothers would not have looked upon the grain they had

⁵ Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura (c. 1445–c. 1515), Italian rabbi.

⁶ Berachot 48b; Midrash Num. Rabbah 43:7.

⁷ According to tradition, the patriarchs followed all of the mitzvot. For example, Mishna Kiddushin 4:14: “We find that Abraham our father observed the whole Torah before it was given, for it is said, ‘Because Abraham obeyed My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws’ (Gen. 26:5).” Also Rashi on Gen. 32:5: “The word גרתי (“I stayed”) has the numerical value of 613 - תרי”ג - it is as much as to say, ‘Though I have sojourned with Laban, the wicked, I have observed the מצות תרי”ג, the 613 Divine Commandments, and I have learned naught of his evil ways.’ ”

⁸ Roman law included a “treasure trove” law, which was later incorporated also in England, Germany, France, Spain, Denmark, and other countries, whereby a finder was not necessarily entitled to any part of a treasure that he had found.

received as a fair trade for the funds they had surrendered. It is not uncommon, then or now, for one in desperate straits to find that not only have prices risen due to the law of supply-and-demand, but that truly exorbitant prices are being demanded by merchants and others who engage in unscrupulous price gouging.⁹ We can assume that the brothers had initially surrendered a small fortune in silver for the few sacks of grain that they received, so they may have considered that a loss. The return of the money was therefore only a recovery of what they considered to be rightfully theirs. Furthermore, they were from a wealthy family, so these returned funds, while considerable, would not greatly change their lifestyle. Therefore, they did not feel as obligated as the finder in Berachot 60a to express gratitude to G-d. For this reason, and **because of the doubt that fell upon their hearts regarding that treasure**, i.e., that they would possibly be accused of having taken grain from the Egyptians without having paid them, **their hearts fell and they trembled**. Rabbi Levi means: **We, who lost Rabbi Simon—whose loss is certain, but there is a doubt that perhaps it's not a loss—undoubtedly we have to resent [the loss].**

ועוד נשחכם שמת אין לנו תמורתו, שאף על פי שגולד צדיק אחר זהו לקיום העולם בלבד, וכמו נשפתוב, דור הלקד דור בא וכו' משונים זה מזה וכו' ואפילו הכי והארץ לעולם עמדת. והראיה שפני משה פני חמה ופני יהושע פני לבנה. ועוד שהצדיק שגולד עתה יאיר אורו לבנינו שיהיו בני דורו לאחר שיהיה גדול בתורה ולא לנו. ומשום הכי דייק לומר אין לנו תמורתו, לנו דוקא. ועיין בהידושנו לשיר השירים על פסוק אשכל הפפר.

Furthermore, regarding the sage who died, we have no substitute for him, for even though another righteous man is born, that is only so that the world will continue to stand, and as it is written, “One generation goes, another comes” (Eccl. 1:4) etc.—this one is different from that one—but even so, “the earth remains the same forever” (Eccl. 1:4). The proof is that the face of Moses was as bright as the face of the sun; while the face of Joshua was like the face of the moon.¹⁰ Furthermore, the righteous man who is now born will shed his light on our sons, who will be his contemporaries, after he becomes great in his knowledge of Torah, but he will not shine his light upon us, as he is now only a child. Because of this, it is accurate to say that we have no substitute for Rabbi Simon, for us specifically, i.e., as opposed to the next generation. See our novel interpretations for the chapter of Song of Songs, essay 5, on the verse, “My beloved to me is a spray of henna blooms from the vineyards of En-gedi” (Song of Songs 1:14).

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⁹ Thus, we find in Genesis chapter 23, that when Abraham needed a burial place for Sarah, Ephron charged the very high price of 400 shekels. In our days, we hear of people charging exorbitant prices for necessities after a natural disaster or other state of emergency, even though many governments prohibit the practice as a violation of unfair or deceptive trade practices law.

¹⁰ Bava Batra 75a.