

Parsha Ponders

Vayechi | Jan 10, 2025 | 10 Teves 5785

Forgiveness consequences¹

ויצו אל-יוסף לאמר אביך צוה לפני מותו לאמר: כה-תאמרו ליוסף אנא שא נא פשע אחיך וחטאתם כ-רעה גמולך ועתה שא נא לפשע עבדי אלקי אביך ויבק יוסף בדברם אליו

[The brothers] commanded Yosef, saying: “Your father commanded before his death, saying: ‘Thus shall you say to Yosef: Please forgive the iniquity of your brothers, and their sins, for they have bestowed bad upon you. Now, please forgive the iniquity of the servants of the G-d of your father’” Yosef wept as they spoke to them²

We find that the brothers asked Yosef to forgive them for selling him into slavery. Although Yosef cried at their request, we don’t find explicitly that he forgave them. We know that even if someone repents for the wrong they’ve done to their friend, if the friend doesn’t forgive the sin isn’t fully atoned³. If Yosef never forgave them, that means the brothers died without the proper atonement. As a result, our Sages tell us⁴ that the ten famous Sages who were martyred by the Romans, known as the *Asara Harugei Malchus*, including giants like Rabbi Akiva, were reincarnations of the ten sons of Yaakov⁵. They were brutally killed in order to provide the necessary atonement for the sin of selling Yosef⁶.

However, *Sefer Chassidim* understands⁷ that Yosef indeed forgave the brothers⁸. It writes that someone who is truly pious is someone who is able to overcome their *middos* as be forgiving. Yosef is given as the prime example. How then can we understand why were the brothers punished with reincarnating as the *Asara Harugei Malchus*? The Chida suggests⁹ that the brothers sinned doubly. Although they sinned against Yosef and he forgave them, they also sinned against Hashem. The sale of Yosef became a public scandal, known to the Egyptians and Pharaoh. This created a terrible *Chillul Hashem*. Their *teshuva* wasn’t enough to fully undo the blemish, and they needed further atonement.

¹ Based on a *devar Torah* heard from Rav Yitzchak Horowitz of Givat HaMivtar

² Genesis 50:16-17

³ Bava Kamma 92a

⁴ Zohar Chadash Eicha, p. 37; Midrash Mishlei 1:13

⁵ Ten, because Yosef obviously didn’t sell himself, and Binyamin wasn’t culpable. A question that is asked is that Reuven also wasn’t culpable, as he wasn’t complicit in the sale. Several answers have been proposed. Zohar Chadash loc. cit. says that Reuven reincarnated into Rabbi Eliezer HaGadol, who wasn’t actually killed, but merely imprisoned. This implies that the name *Asara Harugei Malchus* isn’t literal. However, Benei Yissaschar Chodesh Tishrei § 12 explains that even though Reuven’s reincarnation was spared, the other brothers were reincarnated into ten. Either he means the 9 were somehow divided into 10, or either Binyamin or Yosef are somehow also held accountable. Yalkut Reuveni to Genesis 37:8 first suggests that Reuven was punished for moving Yaakov’s bed, and then cites Sha’ar HaGilgulim Hakdama § 31 and Chessed L’Avraham Ein Mishpat, Nahar § 25 that Yosef was punished for inciting the brothers to hate him

⁶ Rabbeinu Bachaye to Genesis loc. cit.

⁷ Sefer Chassidim § 11

⁸ This is also explicit in Midrash Tehillim § 10

⁹ Bris Olam to Sefer Chassidim loc. cit.

Although, Rav Elyashiv is quoted¹⁰ as bringing an explicit *gemarra* against the Sefer Chassidim. We see that Yosef didn't end up forgiving his brothers. What's the proof? The *gemarra* in Yoma teaches us¹¹ that if one needs to seek forgiveness for the wrongdoing he did to his friend, he only needs to ask them three times. The *gemarra* derives this from our verse with the brothers asking Yosef for forgiveness. There, there's three expressions requesting forgiveness. If Yosef indeed forgave them, what's the proof? Maybe they stopped after three times because he forgave them! It must be that he didn't forgive them, and nevertheless they didn't need to ask more than three times¹².

Why wouldn't Yosef forgive the brothers? They were clearly remorseful for what they had done. Yosef even said that only good came from their terrible deed¹³. Some suggest¹⁴ that for the pain and suffering he endured, Yosef surely forgave them. However, one thing was beyond forgiveness. The Torah that Yosef learned from his father Yaakov was so precious to him. All those years of learning with him that were lost can never be replaced. They were of infinite value, and he was thus unable to forgive them for that¹⁵.

Good Shabbos

¹⁰ Rav Horowitz cited this from Rav Elyashiv. I also found it in MiShulchan Rav Eliyahu Baruch to v. 17. Interestingly, He'aros Rav Elyashiv to Yoma 87a brings an interpretation that **Yosef immediately forgave** his brothers, yet we see from their triple expression that this is all that is necessary to ask. Maharsha ad. loc. says the same. See also Chashukei Chemed to Niddah 31b, where Rav Zilberstein brings himself Yoma 87a as a proof for a related teaching of his father-in-law Rav Elyashiv, that even after asking for forgiveness three times, the person isn't necessarily exempt from further atonement. We see the brothers were indeed punished, even though they did their due diligence of asking for forgiveness

¹¹ Yoma 87a

¹² Cf. Maharsha ad. loc.

¹³ Ibid v. 20

¹⁴ Rav Horowitz cited this from Rav Mordechai Tzuckerman, in the name of the Chofetz Chaim. I saw that MiShulchan Rav Eliyahu Baruch loc. cit. also cited this from Rav Tzuckerman

¹⁵ MiShulchan Rav Eliyahu Baruch remains at a loss how Yosef could be cruel to his brothers when *halacha* requires him to be forgiving. Rav Aryeh Leib Shteinman in Ayeles HaShachar ad. loc. suggests instead that while Yosef wanted to forgive them, it was beyond his present abilities. Rav Shteinman cites a related story of Rav Eliyahu Lopian who, when asked for forgiveness, asked for a couple of weeks so he could ensure the forgiveness was completely sincere