

J'accuse! (Vayigash)

No guilt is forgotten so long as the conscience still knows of it. -Stefan Zweig

In perhaps one of the most emotional and dramatic scenes in the Bible, Joseph, regent of Egypt, unrecognized by his brothers as the sibling they had sold two decades before into slavery, orders the enslavement of his younger and only full sibling, Benjamin. Judah, the half-brother originally responsible for the sale of Joseph into slavery, confronts the regent and pleads for mercy (Genesis 44:18).

Judah gives a long and moving monologue, explaining the special relationship Benjamin has with their father Jacob, of the fatal effects if Benjamin and Jacob are not reunited, and how Judah himself is willing to become a slave in Benjamin's place.

The irony of the situation is acute. The brothers who were so eager to sell Joseph into slavery are now going to extreme lengths to prevent the same fate from occurring to Joseph's only full-sibling. They appear to be repenting from their previous attitude of brotherly enslavement.

Joseph can no longer handle the display of fraternal loyalty and continue his charade. He commands for every person except the brothers to leave his presence, and then, in a cry that reverberates throughout Egypt, reveals himself: "I am Joseph!" (Genesis 45:3)

The very next words that Joseph speaks are difficult to understand: "Is my father still alive?" Of course his father is still alive! One of Judah's arguments for sparing Benjamin was to keep Jacob alive. Rabbi Ovadia Sforno (1475-1549), wonders as to this question of Joseph, the very first words he utters to his brothers after he reveals himself.

Sforno suggests that Joseph was accusing the brothers.

Joseph is asking: How is my father still alive after my own disappearance? Why weren't you concerned about his well-being when you sent me into a long and indefinite bondage? It's so nice that suddenly you are so caring for Benjamin, but how could you have betrayed me and our father with my slavery and silence all these years?

The next words of the same verse state: "and the brothers were not able to answer him, for they were fearful of him."

The Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Chagigah 4b) explains that the shock and shame of the brothers at this moment was so intense that they were literally left speechless with no defense to justify their crime. The same Talmud continues that if the reaction to the reprimand of a man of flesh and blood is so bad; imagine how severe God's reprimand will be for our own crimes and misdemeanors.

Nonetheless, after Joseph's initial revelation and accusation, he becomes conciliatory, forgiving them and explaining his view that his sale into slavery was really part of a divine plan to save the entire family of Jacob.

Jacob's family is then finally reunited and united, and the brotherly rivalry is set aside -- for at least a few centuries.

May we always strive for brotherly bonds, within our families, our communities and throughout our people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the discovery by archeologists of rare Hasmonean coins from over 2,000 years ago. Yet another Chanuka miracle!

<https://www.jpost.com/archaeology/archaeology-around-the-world/article-835496>