

PARASHAS MIKEITZ

A Change of Heart

There was no convincing the Egyptian viceroy. Jacob's sons kept protesting that they had come to Egypt in all innocence to buy grain for their starving families, but the hostile viceroy would have none of it. They were evil spies, he insisted, and he had them arrested and thrown into the dungeon. Only one would be allowed to return home to bring evidence of their innocence, while the others would languish in prison.

Three days later, however, the viceroy apparently has a change of heart. As we read in this week's Torah portion, he has the brothers brought before him, and he tells them that, because he fears the Lord, he will modify his earlier decree. Instead of keeping them all incarcerated until their innocence is established, he will keep only one and allow the rest to return home with food for their hungry families.

After the viceroy makes his announcement, the Torah adds, "And so they did." But what was it that they did? The Torah does not specify. Instead, the Torah goes on to record their words of self-recrimination for having sold their brother Joseph into slavery. "We are indeed guilty of mistreating our brother," they say. "We saw his extreme distress when he pleaded with us, but we did not listen to him. That is why we are being subjected to this misfortune." But the mystery remains. What was it that they did as soon as the viceroy had spoken?

Let us consider for a moment. Twenty-two years have gone by since that fateful day when the brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Why do they finally acknowledge their guilt at this particular moment?

The commentators explain that the unexpected actions of the viceroy prompted them to reevaluate their own deeds so many years before. The viceroy ruled Egypt with the iron hand of an autocratic despot. He answered to no one except for Pharaoh, who gave him virtual carte blanche to do as he pleased. When he decrees that all the brothers would be locked up until they proved their innocence, it is inconceivable that he would suddenly have a change of heart. Why should he? Clearly, their fate is sealed.

And yet, wonder of wonders, the viceroy does indeed have a change of heart. What could this mean?

The brothers see in this a clear message from Heaven. A person must always keep an open mind and not feel locked into his original positions. No matter what, he must always maintain an objective perspective. If he thinks he may have made an error, he should correct

it, though his ego may suffer somewhat. If even the arrogant and haughty viceroy had changed his mind of his own accord, surely Jacob's sons could do no less.

Originally, they had agreed among themselves that Joseph deserved to die, or at least be sold into slavery, for his supposed transgressions. Once they had arrived at this decision, they had been immovable, and all Joseph's pleas for mercy had fallen on deaf ears. But now they took their example from the viceroy who had shown the courage to reexamine his earlier decision. "And so they did." They, too, reexamined their earlier actions and found them wanting.

A married couple sought the help of a great sage.

"My husband is insufferable," the wife complained.

"I'm only reacting to her nastiness," he retorted.

"Think carefully," said the sage. "When did this all begin?"

"About a week ago," said the wife, "I baked a very fancy cake, and he forgot to take it out of the oven. All that work for nothing!"

"I didn't forget," protested her husband. "The message wasn't clear."

"Now wait a minute, young man," said the sage. "She did leave you a message, didn't she? But you couldn't admit that you made a mistake, so you defended yourself with all your might."

The husband nodded sheepishly.

"Well then," said the sage, "I think we can resolve all your problems. Just admit you were at fault and apologize. I'm sure she will forgive you."

In our own lives, we are constantly presented with situations that demand of us that we take a stand one way or the other. And once we have taken this stand, it sometimes takes on a life of its own. Once we have invested our honor and credibility in a particular position, we sometimes find ourselves going to great lengths to defend the indefensible. However, if we keep an open mind, if we are honest with ourselves and consider the possibility that we may have erred, we will discover that the ultimate honor always lies in embracing the truth and doing what is right.