

Sisterly Sensitivity

Haftorat Vayeishev

Amos 2:6-3:8

My commentary on this week's haftorah is based on personal hardships I had to face. These difficulties strengthen my emunah that any suffering we need to endure are only tests for the sake of perfecting our character and becoming more sensitive and loving towards others. The importance of developing this sensitivity and compassion is the main theme of the haftorah reading.

The Connection between the Haftorah and the Torah Reading

This week's *haftorah* opens with an allusion to the sale of Yosef by his brothers, which is the main theme of this week's Torah reading. "So said Hashem, 'For three transgressions of Israel, I will turn away punishment, but for the fourth I will not turn away punishment, because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes'" (*Amos 2:6*). According to Radak, G d was willing to withhold punishment for the three cardinal sins – indecency, idolatry and murder, but not for injustice done to the poor. The Midrash explains this verse as referring to the sale of Yosef, the righteous. The brothers sold Yosef for 20 silver pieces (See *Bereishit 37:28*), with which they each bought a pair of shoes (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 37*). Against his collective brothers, Yosef was weak. Therefore, their taking advantage by having the upper hand is unforgivable to Hashem, who warns us numerous times in the Torah against mistreating the deprived.

Stepping on the Weak in Order to Achieve Personal Goals

Perhaps the emphasis on "selling the righteous for a pair of shoes," symbolizes how the brothers "stepped" emotionally on Yosef, completely disregarding his feelings. Moreover, the Hebrew word for shoes, "נעליים-*na'alayim*" also means lock. The brothers totally locked their hearts and desensitized themselves to Yosef's pain. This is what the brothers themselves realized during their *teshuva* (repentance) process in this week's *parashah*, "Truly, we are guilty concerning our brother, for observing the pain of his soul, when he pleaded with us, but we would not hear, therefore this distress came upon us" (*Bereishit 42:21*). Whereas, the brothers may have had good reason to sell Yosef, their lack of sensitivity to his feelings is unforgivable. Also today, some people, in their zeal to accomplish their important goals, do not always hold themselves back from stepping on those who are at a disadvantage, in order to climb their ladder of success. They may brush off their offense as being an insignificant mistake that inevitably happens when one has to act fast. However, is it not more important to start on the right foot and with *derech erez* (ethical behavior) than to step on the feet of others, in order to start right away?

Hashem Defends the Lost Dignity of the "Weaker" Sex

In my years of running a Torah institution for women, I have experienced discrimination in the political and financial arena, where women's power is often externally weaker. The prophet admonishes the Jewish people for taking advantage and stepping on those lower down on the social ladder, and eliciting Hashem's punishment to an even greater degree than the three cardinal sins. Rabbi Dovid Siegel explains that the mistreatment of orphans, widows, and the poor can never be

overlooked. Since they cannot rely on their financial or political power, they are compelled to place their total trust in Hashem. Therefore, Hashem immediately responds to the injustice done to them, defending their lost dignity. As women, we do not have to play political power-games in order to accomplish our goals. When we keep silent about the injustice incurred against us, in order to avoid *machloket* (dispute/dissension), while trusting in Hashem's retribution, we will reap immediate eternal reward.

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"They anticipate the dirt placed on the head of the impoverished" (*Amos 2:7*). The prophet rebukes the Jewish people, for insensitivity towards injustice. They would discriminate against the underprivileged and even drag the poor through the dirt when they refused to accept their unjustified treatment. This kind of behavior and attitude is totally inexcusable. In life, we often need to make conscious choices which may be good for one but not for another. Hurting someone else by our choice, may at times be unavoidable. However, when forced to make such a choice, where pain is caused to someone else, then we need to generate empathy and show our utmost sisterly sensitivity. Unfortunately, people – even women – do not always have the emotional maturity to take moral responsibility for the outcome of their choices. Rather than admitting that they are causing their sister pain, and being ready to face this pain with a sincere loving hug, it is easier to just smooth over hurt feelings and make believe they don't exist, or that they stem from the other person's personal problems. They may not realize that by accusing their sister of being wrong to feel slighted, being oversensitive, or negative, they are dragging the "poor" through the dirt, while rubbing salt into an already open wound.

The Impact of Lost Sensitivities

The emotionally mature approach is to acknowledge the hurts we inflict in others by our choices. This acknowledgment will bring us to sincerely apologize for causing this pain, realizing that in a certain place, an injustice was done. Rabbi Dovid Siegel explains that the brothers' lack of sensitivity towards Yosef's pain, unlike all other sins, could never be overlooked. The greatest scholars of Israel, the ten holy martyrs would suffer inhuman torture, and be brutally murdered in atonement for this offense (*Midrash Mishley, Parashat 1*). The fact that the torturous death of the ten martyrs remains the most tragic personal event in Jewish history, teaches us the impact of not only our actions, but also the way we carry them out. Even when harsh measures are justified, we must carry them out with proper sensitivities. As difficult as the balance may be, we must open our hearts, feel for our Jewish sisters, and show them the proper dignity and compassion they truly deserve. The more we work on this, the more we prepare ourselves for the day when, Hashem will circumcise our hearts to love Him with all our hearts (*Devarim 30:6*).