Beware the Dangers of Jealousy

Yosef’s brothers regarded him as the usurper of their roles in the Jewish nation. So when Ya’akov sent Yosef to report on their welfare, they saw it as an opportunity to defend themselves against this threat. They feared he would defame them to Ya’akov, and that they would be banished, just as Avraham banished Yishmael and Yitzchak banished Esav. In their view, Yosef was a rodef, a pursuer who threatened both their physical existence and eternal roles as the founders of the Jewish people. The brothers were so convinced they were justified, they sat down to eat bread without any pangs of guilt after selling Yosef. Their common meal was in effect a celebration of their unity and harmony now unhindered by Yosef’s evil designs. Even years later, when they searched their pasts for any sins that could explain a series of apparently tragic events, they could not come up with anything other than their failure to be more merciful.

Though the brothers felt fully justified, the Torah reveals to us that their misperception concerning Yosef was not simply an innocent mistake. Coloring their judgment was a slight evil decree. Yet we can learn from Rebbe Yochanan’s concern as to whether he had acted properly. In his rigorous self-scrutiny, another explanation of why he erred came to him. He had opposed the zealots, who led the rebellion against Rome. But the zealots had ignored his opinion and forced the issue by burning all of Jerusalem’s food supplies. The destruction of the Temple and exile of the Jewish people was an apparent vindication of the Temple to be spared out of a fear there would then be no clear proof he had been right. And he suspected that his own honor – offended by the zealots’ refusal to heed his decision – might have influenced his request. If that were true, and as a consequence, the Temple was destroyed, would he not have merited eternal death?

The Talmud tells us that Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai’s suspicions were unfounded. He was innocent; the Temple was destroyed by a Heavenly decree. Yet we can learn from Rebbe Yochanan’s concern as to the power of subtle traces of honor, desire and jealousy in distorting one’s decisions.

It is incumbent upon us to learn the devastating effect of jealousy and hatred from the sale of Yosef, even in its subtest forms and even in the greatest of people, so we can strive to conduct ourselves in a manner befitting the Jewish people, and may we merit seeing the ultimate reunion of Mashiach ben David.

Rabbi Zev Leff serves as the Rav of Moshav Matityahu.