

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Vayeishev

“AND THE PIT WAS EMPTY; THERE WAS NO WATER IN IT.”
(BEREISHIS 37:24)

**A different approach
is given by Rabbeinu
Bechaya**

OUR SAGES ADDRESS the obvious repetition in the above verse in various ways. Rashi (ibid.) quotes the Midrash that although there was no water in the pit, there were dangerous snakes and scorpions. A different approach is given by Rabbeinu Bechaya (ibid.) quoting the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 84:16) which explains: The Torah is telling us that the “pit” of Yaakov – his children – was empty, and it had no water – they did not know the Torah (which is compared to water). Rashi explains that the brothers did not know the punishment for their action of kidnapping their brother.

**They didn't think they
were doing any crime or
misdeed**

Rashi and the Midrash cannot be understood in a simplistic manner. We know that our patriarchs, as well as Yosef and his brothers, observed the *mitzvos* meticulously – even before they were given at Sinai – and were well versed in the Torah's every detail. It is impossible to think that they were not aware that kidnapping was forbidden and carried a severe punishment. We must interpret the words of the Midrash and Rashi to be telling us that the brothers did not fully appreciate the severity and far-reaching impact of their selling Yosef. Had they appreciated the gravity and consequences of this sin, it would have prevented them from transgressing. Yet even this approach is difficult to comprehend. We know the brothers were great *tzadikim*. Their sale of Yosef was not a common act of sibling rivalry or petty vengeance. Our sages tell us that the brothers convened a *beis din* and decided that they were required to kill Yosef because his talebearing was endangering their very lives (S'forno). If they felt they were doing a *halachically* mandated act, why would it have made a difference how much they appreciated the punishment for kidnapping? They didn't think they were doing any crime or misdeed that deserved a punishment!

**It would have jolted
their senses**

The human being has an almost limitless capacity to boost his motivation to higher levels of care and concern. The brothers, spiritual giants on the loftiest levels of human perfection, surely employed painstaking effort in deliberating the case of their brother Yosef and the perceived threat he represented. They weighed and reviewed the evidence repeatedly, and found Yosef guilty and deserving of serious consequences: death or at least sale into slavery. However, had they increased their concern for the crime of kidnapping one iota more, it could have spelled the difference. Even though they felt that they were taking the correct course of action, if they would have had a greater appreciation for the severe punishment for kidnapping, it would have jolted their senses. They would have looked at the matter with even more penetrating insight and perhaps would have recognized that their actions were not wholly justified. Understanding that their actions can have a great impact on future generations and that, even more than a thousand years later, ten of the greatest Jewish leaders of their generation would be killed for this action, would have sharpened and enhanced their decision making process.

This Midrash and Rashi teach us the value of constant daily *mussar* study and gaining even a slight additional understanding of how much is at stake when we serve Hashem in this world. This valuable technique can upgrade the spiritual quality of our service of Hashem, and give us a life of constant growth, elevation and true satisfaction.