

Making “Counterfeit” Real

Category: Bereishis, Vayechi

Adolf Burger’s job in the Third Reich, and Yosef’s many cries in the Parsha.

The Forgery Plan

Good Shabbos!

At the 2007 Academy Awards, a Holocaust movie, “The Counterfeiters” won Best Foreign Language Film.

The movie tells the true story of Adolf Burger, a Slovakian Jewish printer who was forced by the Nazis (may their name be erased) to produce counterfeit British currency.

Adolf Burger passed away in December 2016 at the ripe old age of 99. He had been born in 1917 in Kakaslomnic, a mostly ethnic German village in northern Slovakia.

Before WWII, he entered the printing profession in the city of Bratislava. But as the war loomed and the Nazis imposed anti-Jewish rules, he was increasingly asked by his fellow Jews for forged proof of baptism documents. At the time, the Nazis imposed laws that increasingly persecuted Czechoslovakia’s Jews. But if one had documentation proving that he was Christian—specifically, that he had been baptized as a Christian before the outbreak of WWII, then he would not get sent to Auschwitz.

Thanks to Mr. Burger’s many forged baptismal documents, many Jews were saved.

Despite being a Jew himself, Adolf Burger was not sent to Auschwitz because the Nazi regime needed his printing authority as being vital to the economy as it was. But in 1942, he was caught by the Gestapo forging documents, arrested and sent to Auschwitz along with his wife. She died shortly in the gas chambers, while Adolf survived for a year-and-a-half.

But then, one day in March of 1944, he was ordered to appear before the camp

commandant. He didn't sleep all night. He shook in fear.

The next morning, he appeared at the commandant's office. "You are going to Berlin, Mr. Burger," said the infamous camp commandant, Rudolf Hess. "We need professionals like you. You will work there under pleasant conditions and you will be treated well."

Adolf Burger, surprised at the title "Mr." that had instantly reverted him to a human being from a number, found it hard to believe what he was hearing. To him, it was like he had gone up from hell straight to heaven.

The train on which he shortly found himself took him to Berlin. From there, he was transferred to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in nearby Oranienburg. Once inside its gates, he was brought to an isolated site within the camp, a "camp in the camp"—an isolated cage surrounded by barbed wire into which other prisoners could not see.

Only then did Adolf Burger understand why he merited escaping the bitter fate of his friends left behind in Auschwitz: His experience in forging documents, which had brought him to Auschwitz in the first place, was now the reason his life was being spared. The Nazis (yimach shmom) needed someone with his forgery expertise.

A secret factory for producing forged documents operated at Sachsenhausen. It was intended to produce the largest currency counterfeiting operation in history, and its work was part of a vast Nazi plot to flood England with counterfeit currency so as to collapse the British economy. And Adolf Burger, who had produced counterfeit documents while serving in the anti-Nazi underground in Slovakia, was one of Europe's best.

Inside this secret compound, Burger was shocked to find all the latest technological equipment, including the newest machines and devices. It was a diabolical plan—to set up a government forgery facility inside a concentration camp on the outskirts of Berlin and to use political prisoners, all Jews, for the exclusive purpose of forging foreign currency.

This massive counterfeiting campaign was dubbed "Operation Bernhard," named after Bernhard Krieger, the SS leader who directed it. Officer Bernhard insisted on using only Jews—so that he could eliminate them once the campaign was

completed.

Orders were clear: The bills were to be genuine enough that even experienced British currency experts would be unable to find any difference between them and authentic British currency. Towards that end, all their tools and equipment were legitimate— including paper perfectly sourced and printing plates replicated to perfection, all down to the tiniest details. Along with all that, workers at the compound had mathematicians to help them crack the serial codes and formulas that the Bank of England used.

Some 140 people were forced to work at this factory. Compared to other prisoners, they were given excellent conditions. “Life was good, but we knew that we were only being given a vacation from death,” Burger later said. He personally did not believe that he’d get out alive. But meanwhile, they had everything: food, white sheets on every bed, a personal bed for each prisoner, and the SS guards didn’t even shout at them. They were actually treated like human beings.

No less than 130 million counterfeit British pounds were produced by the Sachsenhausen facility. The Nazis planned to dump them from planes on the streets of England.

Fortunately, however, the plan never got off the ground—along with the Nazi plan to counterfeit American dollars.

With defeat looming towards the end of the war, the Nazis tried to preserve the factory and transfer it to camps in Austria. The SS tried to round up all the workers and kill them en masse, but some of them managed to delay the roundup—at which point the Nazis fled Sachsenhausen. As a result, in May of 1945, the Jewish laborers of Operation Bernhard found themselves being liberated by Allied forces.

But in their flight, the Nazis had taken dozens of crates filled with counterfeit bills and dumped them in Lake Toplitz, high up in the mountains of Austria. Some of those bills were recovered decades later. Adolf Burger himself was present during one of those recovery missions, and was excited to see his fake bills being pulled from the water.

However, not all of the forged bills were dumped in Lake Toplitz. Some of them had been distributed to German spies around the world during the war, and

others were given to senior Nazis who escaped Europe after the war.

In 2007, Adolf Burger said, "I want people to know that the Nazis weren't just murderers but regular criminals, too."

Yosef's Tears

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion of Vayechi, in which we conclude the story of Yosef that we have been reading for the past four weeks. One of the things we read about again and again throughout the saga of Yosef is Yosef's crying.

The first time we encounter a weeping Yosef is in the Parshah of Mikeitz, when Yosef accuses his brothers of being spies. And there, Bereishis 42:21, the Torah tells us, "Each man said to his brother, 'But we are guilty for our brother whose soul's pain we saw as he pleaded to us and we did not listen.'" So there, when Yosef saw that his brothers regretted selling him, it made him cry. "And he turned from upon them and he wept," the Torah continues there.

The second time we find Yosef crying is when he is reunited after 22 years with Binyomin, his one brother from the same mother. There, the Torah (Bereishis 43:30) tells us that "Yosef hastened because his mercies had been aroused towards his brother and he wanted to cry, and he entered the chamber and wept there."

The third time is in the Torah portion of Vayigash, when Yehudah tells him that he's prepared to be his slave for life as long as their brother Binyomin is set free. Why? "For how can I go up to my father and the lad is not with me, lest I see the evil that shall find my father?" And when Yosef hears that Binyomin not coming back will cause their father Yaakov such pain, he can't take it anymore. "And he set his voice to weeping... and Yosef said to his brothers, 'I am Yosef!'" (Bereishis 44:2).

The fourth time Yosef cries is when he hugs his brother Binyomin and the rest of his brothers in one big happy reunion: "And he fell upon the neck of his brother Binyomin and wept, and Binyomin wept on his neck, and he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them" (Bereishis 45:14-15).

The fifth time is rather climactic (as if the other ones were not!)—the time Yosef is finally reunited with his beloved father Yaakov. After so many painful years apart, he finally sees his own father again in Goshen, and the Torah tells us, “And he appeared to him and fell upon his neck, and wept upon his neck more” (Bereishis 46:29).

The sixth time appears right here in our Torah portion of Vayechi. After the 17 best years of Yaakov’s (and Yosef’s) life, when Yaakov finally passes away, the Torah tells us: “And Yosef fell upon his father’s face and wept over him and kissed him” (Bereishis 50:1) This was a cry of pain and mourning over the loss of a father.

And finally, our Parshah brings us to the seventh and final crying spell—but this time, it’s in a category of its own. It’s not a cry of emotion at his brothers regretting their having sold him; it’s not crying at meeting his brother or father or even weeping over the passing of his father—it’s something else entirely.

After Yaakov Avinu passed away, Yosef’s brothers were worried that “perhaps Yosef will spurn us and surely return unto us all the evil that we bestowed upon him.” In other words, they feared that now that their father had passed on, Yosef would take revenge on them (and he certainly had the power to do so). So they sent him a delegation to inform him that their father Yaakov had requested that they forgive him for what they had done. When Yosef heard those words, the Torah tells us that “Yosef cried when they spoke to him” (Bereishis 50:17).

What made Yosef cry? What exactly was he crying about?

Fake It Till You Make It

To answer that, the Rebbe quotes the Baal Shem Tov in a Sichah, saying that “when a person sees something bad in someone else, it’s proof that that very thing exists within him; like a person looking in a mirror, if his face is clean, he will see no blemish, but if he sees dirt in the mirror, it’s only because his own face is dirty” (Likutei Sichos Vol. X, pg. 24).

And that’s why Yosef was pained. He understood that the fact that his brothers were worried that he might hate them was because deep in their hearts, they still didn’t love him, and that if they were in his shoes, they would definitely have

taken revenge—“and on this I weep.”

In other words, at the time of Yaakov’s passing, it’s 17 years after he’s been reunited with his family—and Yosef now suddenly discovers that they really have not reunited with him. All the camaraderie and good cheer that they showed him as a brother was false—now Yosef finds that deep in their hearts, they’re afraid he still hates them.

Despite the fact that when they were reunited for the first time, he explicitly told them that he believed that it was all from G-d—“Do not be angry in your own eyes that you sold me here, for it was for sustenance that G-d sent me before you” (Bereishis 45:5) and again, when he said, “It was not you who sent me here but the L-rd” (Bereishis 45:8).

Yosef was sure that the entire saga was behind him—and now, he suddenly discovers that all the smiles and hugs were not sincere, that there is still a split in the family; and it is this depressing fact that makes Yosef cry.

True, Yosef was depressed over the fact that his brothers really didn’t love him.

But here’s the point: Their “counterfeit” behavior is sometimes precisely the right thing to do.

You see, sometimes a person can get up in the morning and not be in a good mood. So he goes through his morning not smiling at anyone, saying that he doesn’t want to put on false faces because it’s just false. He doesn’t want to appear pleasant because doing so is a lie.

But that approach is wrong, my friends.

The right thing to do is to smile at other people even if you don’t feel like it at all—and eventually, if you act pleasantly, it will affect your mood and you’ll begin feeling pleasant and being pleasant.

And this is true not just for interpersonal relationships, but also for our relationship with G-d.

Some will say that it’s not right to do a mitzvah that you don’t identify with. They feel that if you do that mitzvah, you’re being fake and you’re lying to yourself.

But with that, the Rebbe teaches us: Fake it till you make it! Just do the mitzvah—and ultimately, you'll identify with the mitzvah.

Good Shabbos!