

Genesis: Removing Our Blindspot

Category: Bereishis, Mikeitz

The hot question is: how did Israel miss the warning sign?. The answer might be right here in the parshah.

How Did They Miss the Warnings?

Since October 7th, everyone has been asking the same question: How is it that the Israeli intelligence didn't detect the impending attack? As time passes, more and more evidence emerges that there was a constant stream of information coming to the military and all the heads of state indicating that Israel was about to be attacked.

Just last week, the Wall Street Journal published a video showing how, months before the war, Hamas released clips of their training exercises for attacking kibbutzim and military camps. They compared these videos with footage from the actual attack on October 7th, revealing remarkable similarities. They trained to capture soldiers and civilians just as they did in the real attack—and they didn't hide it at all.

Furthermore, it came to light this week that one month prior to the conflict, the deputy of Ismail Haniyeh gave an interview to the Arabic media, vowing a “war that will catch Israel off guard.” This adds to the cascade of revelations we've been exposed to in the past two months, repeatedly highlighting how everyone knew the situation was dangerous, yet no one took any action.

What happened here?

They Missed All The Signs

In the same vein, we encounter a similar question in this week's Torah portion. This week, we continue reading about the saga of Joseph and his brothers. We learn how Joseph rose to become a leader in Egypt, and led them through seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Two years into the famine, Joseph's brothers arrived in Egypt to buy food, as it was the only place which still

had food to sell.

Joseph accuses them of spying, a severe crime in those days, and the Torah notes, “And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him” (Genesis 42:8). Rashi explains that when Joseph was sold by his brothers, they were already adults, while he was still a child without a beard. Now, 22 years later, he was an adult with a beard, making it difficult for them to recognize him.

Now, it’s understandable that they might not recognize him at the outset, but as the story unfolds, the fact that they don’t recognize him becomes less and less understandable, especially since Rashi says that Joseph looked just like Jacob!

When the brothers denied being spies, they provided unnecessary information—explaining that they were actually a family of twelve brothers, with one remaining in Canaan. Seizing the opportunity, Joseph suggests a test: if they bring their youngest brother (whom they left behind), it will prove they are not spies. He proposes they all return home, keeping one brother as collateral until they bring the youngest brother.

Whom does he choose to detain? Reuven? Yehudah? No, he chooses Shimon. This decision should have raised a red flag among the brothers. How would Joseph know that Shimon, specifically, is the dominant and perhaps dangerous one, the one who needs to be separated from the others?

When they return home to Canaan, they discover that Joseph not only provided them with the food they sought to buy but also returned the money they had paid for it. That was highly unusual! Something should have seemed ‘off’ to them.

When they return to Egypt, this time with Benjamin, Joseph invites them for a Shabbat dinner. This should again have triggered discomfort among the brothers. On one hand, Joseph accuses them of spying, but now, he invites them for a meal? Something is off.

When they come to the meal, the first question Joseph asks them is, “Is your elderly father well... is he still alive?” What’s with the sudden interest in the elderly father of that group coming from Canaan?

Then, crucially, the Torah recounts that Joseph did not eat his meal together with the Egyptians because the food that Jews consume is an abomination to the

Egyptians. So, when they see him eating with them, it becomes clear that he is not an Egyptian. Yet, this still doesn't trigger a red flag for them!

During the meal, Joseph makes the ultimate odd move. He plays with his cup, as if the cup has Divine powers, and he announces the seating arrangements based on their family order, the sons of each mother seated together. Finally, when it comes to Benjamin, he declares, "He has no mother, and I have no mother. This one sits with me" (Genesis 43:29). The Torah emphasizes the men's amazement at this revelation. Perhaps they finally began to suspect that something was going on...

But then, the strange behavior continues. The Torah recounts, "And they drank and were merry with him." How is it possible that after encountering him repeatedly, being in his presence, and sharing a drink, the brothers still didn't recognize their long-lost brother whom they missed so dearly?

When It's Right In Front Of You

Sometimes, you might find yourself looking for something important, and you can't find it anywhere. You look and you look—and suddenly, you discover that it was right in front of you all along. Why does that happen?

There's an interesting mystical practice for finding lost items. If someone loses something and can't locate it, they invoke the following Midrash: "Rabbi Binyamin said, 'Everyone is presumed blind until G-d opens their eyes, as it says, 'And G-d opened her eyes.'" In other words, this idea—that a person is initially presumed blind—is derived from the story of Hagar.

The Torah tells us that as Isaac grew up, Sarah decided that Hagar and her son Ishmael had to leave the household because of Ishmael's negative influence. Abraham wasn't keen on the idea of expelling Hagar and Ishmael, but G-d intervened and told Abraham to listen to Sarah's voice. Reluctantly, he sent Hagar and her son away.

The Torah recounts that they ran out of water in the wilderness, and Ishmael was on the brink of dying from thirst. Hagar, in tears, cried out to G-d, and an angel came to save her. Then the Torah states, "And G-d opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water." It means there was a well there all along, but she couldn't see it.

Hence, the Midrash concludes that “everyone is presumed blind until G-d opens their eyes” (Bereshit Rabbah 53:14).

What is the Midrash trying to convey by saying that everyone is presumed blind?

We Forget G-d

The world is designed in a way that conceals and obscures the Creator. In our day-to-day lives, it’s challenging for a person to perceive that G-d constantly sustains and gives life to the world. It is easy to convince ourselves that we deserve credit for our success. We worked hard, and therefore excelled in prestigious university exams, made big achievements, and we can rightfully take pride in our accomplishments.

True, you may be a genius, but you were born this way—you were inherently gifted, and born to affluent parents who could afford to send you to good institutions—none of these are your own merits. Being born in a good neighborhood and a supportive environment is not your personal achievement. We often forget that all of this is a result of G-d’s blessings. We did not work for it; we were born with it. When we fail to see all this, we are “presumed blind.” We don’t see the hand of G-d in our lives.

This is, in general, a message of the entire book of Bereishit.

It’s a book that teaches us Divine Providence. In contrast, Shemos is full of miracles—the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven, and so on. In Bereishit, there aren’t as many explicit miracles. Joseph simply asked two prisoners why they looked troubled, and that led to him becoming the ruler of Egypt. There were no overt miracles—but we see the hand of G-d clearly guiding the way.

The Remedy

What causes this blindness, and how can we remedy it?

Joseph’s story teaches us that hatred among siblings is the cause of this blindness. The brothers’ animosity toward Joseph prevented them from paying attention to all the hints he repeatedly sent their way. They refused to entertain

the thought that it might be Joseph behind the beard.

This may also be reflected in Israel's history. The internal strife preceding the recent war blinded the entire military and country. They were so immersed in internal conflicts that there was no room at all to heed the signs, publicity, and behaviors of Hamas indicating an imminent threat.

The way to cure this ailment of blindness is through love, Ahavat Yisrael. When we start to care about each other, help each other, and really look the other in the eye, we suddenly discover that they too—even those with whom we have deep disagreements—are humans with thoughts, emotions, dreams, and so on. When we look into their eyes, we gaze into their soul. And when souls meet, all barriers fall.