

Report Card

וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת דְּבָרָם רָעָה אֶל אָבִיהֶם

"Yosef brought their evil report to their father." (37:2)

Rashi writes that the brothers were accustomed to refer to their half-brothers; the sons of the maidservants, derogatorily as slaves, and it was this that Yosef reported to his father. Harav Shimshon Pincus explains the meaning behind this explanation of Rashi, which implies a degree of slight on the part of the sons of Leah towards the sons of Bilhoh and Zilpoh.

He writes that it is well known that there were only four matriarchs of Klal Yisroel; Soroh, Rivkoh, Rochel and Leah, which perforce excludes Bilhoh and Zilpoh from this illustrious group. As such, Rav Pincus notes that it is difficult to understand how the maidservants could be the mothers of several of the tribes of Israel, given that they are not counted amongst our foremothers. He explains that their ability to be a part of the creation of the twelve tribes was due to their total self-abnegation to their mistresses. This giving up of self meant that their actions are seen as the actions of their mistresses, as though the maidservants were simply an extension thereof. This idea was well known to the sons of these women, and was the source of the debate between Yosef and his other brothers. The brothers were of the opinion, that the negation of self exhibited by Bilhoh and Zilpoh should also apply to their sons. This was not, stresses Rav Pincus, an attempt to insult or degrade the sons of the maidservants. Rather, they argued that the servant of a king attains a degree of importance almost inseparable from that of the king himself. As such, the sons of Bilhoh and Zilpoh would have the same status as the sons of Rochel and Leah through acting as their servants. Therefore, as opposed to degrading their brothers, the sons of Rochel and Leah were actually giving them a large degree of honour by asking them to serve them. In contrast, Yosef disagreed with this perspective. Yosef argued that the maidservants had achieved such a degree of self-annulment to Rochel and Leah that there was no further need of any such efforts on the part of their sons. The status of Bilhoh and Zilpoh as parts of Rochel and Leah was total, so that their sons were born into a situation whereby they were virtually already the sons of Rochel and Leah.

Rav Pincus continues to suggest, that this argument between the brothers and Yosef was actually a continuation of another debate between them. When Yosef dreamt of the sun, the moon and the stars, the moon was intended to represent his mother, Rochel, who was no longer alive. However, Yosef's dream was not incorrect, because Bilhoh, as Rochel's maidservant, was so much a part of Rochel that she could be considered to represent the moon herself, just as her mistress had done while she was alive. It was this point that caused Yaakov to publicly rebuke Yosef, pointing out that his mother was dead and the dream was worthless, whilst privately, as the Possuk puts it, "Noting the matter," meaning recognising that Yosef was correct in his understanding of the status of Bilhoh. This was also, concludes Rav Pincus (in his son's name) the source of the dispute regarding Reuven moving his father's bed from Bilhoh's tent to Leah's. Reuven held like the other brothers that Bilhoh had not sufficiently achieved the status of a wife in Rochel's absence and was therefore not entitled to the status of primary wife of Yaakov, whilst Yaakov disagreed.

A Foreign Land?

וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵי אָבִיו

"Yaakov dwelt in the lands of the sojournings of his father." (37:1)

The Kli Yokor explains the famous Midrash that this Possuk hints to why so much sorrow befell Yaakov. He writes that Avrohom had been informed that his descendants would be exiled to a land that was not theirs, and that Yaakov was included in this general rule. This is based on the well-known idea that the four hundred year exile of Klal Yisroel in Egypt actually began with the birth of Yitzchok.

He continues, and explains that Avrohom and Yitzchok understood that from Yitzchok's birth onwards they had to conduct themselves as though they were in exile, and as such they lived a nomadic lifestyle. However, Yaakov, who had actually accepted the full brunt of the decree of exile when he acquired the birth right from Eisov, did not live this way. Yaakov desired to dwell, meaning to make a permanent dwelling place, in the place his father and grandfather had instead had a succession of homes. It was this unwillingness on the part of Yaakov to accept the consequence of the decree of exile, that led to the sale of Yosef and the consequent troubles that befell him.

Silver Value

וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף

"They sold Yosef to the Ishmaelites for twenty of silver..." (37:27)

The Chizkuni explains why Yosef, who is described as beautiful, was sold for such a low price. He writes that the time Yosef spent in the pit had made his face sunken and wane and this therefore lessened his value. Alternatively, he notes that twenty silver coins is the value given by the Torah for a five to twenty year-old in terms of donating a person's value to the Beis Hamikdash.