

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Vayigash 20 “Woe Unto Us”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. Now that Chanukah has ended, our Jewish winter holiday season has drawn to a close. I’ve always thought it fitting to link Chanukah with Thanksgiving, because the Chanukah prayers, specifically ‘al hanisim’, specify that its purpose is *L’hodot Ul’hallel L’shimcha hagadol* - to give thanksgiving to God. Even more striking is that when the Rambam discusses the laws of Hallel, our prayers of thanksgiving, he does so in his treatise on the Laws of Chanukah, not in the Laws of Prayer.

Nonetheless, because of Chanukah’s timing, many people associate it with the secular holiday season of Christmas and New Year’s, so it’s intriguing to consider our historical connections with these holidays. Now, I’m not sure what actually transpired, but if you do the math, you’ll realize that since Jesus was Jewish and supposedly born on December 25, New Year’s Day would have been the occasion of his bris. In fact, the Church of England, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Lutherans and the Eastern Orthodox all ring in the New Year with the Feast of the Circumcision. And it may surprise you to know that in Israel and many other places around the world, New Year’s Eve is

known as Sylvester day, named after a Christian saint. When I was as student in Jerusalem, the secular Jews treated Sylvester's day like a big holiday, with dancing in the streets. Of course, we already celebrate the Jewish New Year, so having an alternative name for the secular New Year may seem unremarkable to Israelis. What they might not realize is that "Saint" Sylvester was a notorious anti-Semitic Pope and famously responsible for the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. In modern times, Jews in Israel and America have the luxury, if you will, of such ignorance, and they can afford to be amused when they discover the irony of this celebration. But over the course of our history, there has certainly been reason for the Jewish people to worry about persecution by non-Jewish leadership.

And that anxiety is precisely what the brothers were fighting about in our parsha. Joseph was threatening to enslave Benjamin after his chalice was planted in Benjamin's sack. It was as if Joseph wished to taunt his brothers by saying, *This is the child you have to protect for Jacob's sake and now we'll take him from you.* They were traumatized because they felt entrapped by someone they assumed to be non-Jewish ruler, and despite many clues along the way, it never occurred to them that he was

Joseph. According to the midrash, they were so shocked when he revealed himself, that they died and had to be resuscitated.

Our sages say that this should be a lesson to us: *Oy lanu Miyom Hadim, oy lanu miyom hatochacha! Woe unto us because of our personal judgment [after we die]!* But what failing does this lesson address that we must be so concerned about? I think the problem being raised here is our readiness to prejudge too quickly. There were many signs that Joseph was not whom he appeared to be, but the brothers did not see what was right in front of their face, because they had a preconceived notion, a prejudice that tainted their perspective.

This lesson is valuable in many facets of our lives. When we size up other people, we usually think that we have enough information. But my Rosh Yeshiva Rav Yakkov Weinberg zt'l used to teach us from this story in the Chumash, that we may not see the whole picture, which is especially true when it comes to judging other people. As Hillel says in Pirkei Avot 2:4, *Al tadin et chavercha ad shetagia limkomo - Don't judge someone else until you stand in his shoes.*

This pitfall is exemplified in a famous story told by R' Shlomo Carelbach, that I bring in the introduction to my

Passover book, *Bringing Order to the Seder*, about *Yossele the Holy Miser*, a reputed miser who is despised by most people in his village. When he dies, they do not even want him buried in their cemetery, but then to their shock, they discover that he was not the person they imagined – it turns out that all along, he had been giving money to the needy, but he had done so anonymously.

This tendency to view people in the most negative light is especially relevant in the darkness of our exile, when our worst experiences can make us cynical and quick to judge. Of course, we should not be disingenuous -- we do need to be cautious if we truly feel threatened by someone's behavior. But the lesson of our parsha is that if we make an extra effort to avoid negativity, and we strive to maintain a positive outlook about the world, our lives will be immeasurably enhanced, both in this world and the next. Shabbat shalom.