



Parshat Mikeitz
By Rabbi Josh Hoffman

In parshas Mikeitz, Ya'akov sends his sons down to Egypt to buy food that they need for sustenance during the ongoing famine. In Egypt, they are directed to Yosef, who is the second in command to Pharaoh, and has been placed in charge of the food supply, and the Egyptian economy in general. Yosef recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him, and he accuses them of being spies. This begins a long series of deceptions on the part of Yosef, which eventually induce the brothers to bring their youngest brother, Binyamin, down to Egypt. Yosef then has his silver goblet planted in Binyamin's bag, and, as the brothers again go on their journey back to their home, Yosef sends someone to arrest Binyamin. This leads to the dramatic scene in the beginning of next week's parsha, Vayigash, in which Yehudah pleads with Yosef to let Binyamin go, and, finally, Yosef reveals himself to his brothers. The commentators all discuss why Yosef put his brothers through this tortuous process, and why he left his father in the dark as to his whereabouts. Many different theories have been proposed, but I would like to focus on one of them, which has clear allusions to a well-known passage in Maimonides' Laws of Repentance.

Rabi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, in his commentary to parshat Mikeitz, asks many questions about Yosef's conduct towards his brothers, and concludes that his motivation was to see if they still hated the children of Rachel. He therefore accused them of being spies and forces them to bring Binyamin down to Egypt, and ultimately accused Binyamin of stealing his cup, an act which could lead to his death. Thus entire process, says the Abarbanel, was a way of seeing if, when circumstances came to that point, they would allow Binyamin to be kept in prison, as long as they themselves would be free, or if they would go to great extremes to save keep him from having to go to prison. If they would decide to put their own lives in jeopardy in order to save Binyamin, says the Abarbanel, they would then have done complete repentance. What does he mean by this phrase, "complete repentance?"

Nechama Leibovitz, in her Gilyonot to parshat Mikeitz, 5705, refers the reader to the formulation of Maimonides in his Laws of Repentance, 2:1, where he writes:
"What is complete repentance? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit it, yet he abstains and does not commit it because of his repentance." According to Abarbanel, this was what Yosef was trying to bring his brothers to achieve. He wanted to place them in a situation identical to the one in which they originally sinned against him, acting out their hatred toward a son of Rachel by having him sold and thus endangering his life. Here, too, Binyamin was in danger of being imprisoned and ultimately put to death for his alleged crime. However, instead of allowing him to be imprisoned by Pharaoh's viceroy, they stood up for him and saved his life. In this way, they achieved complete repentance, as formulated by Maimonides.

Rabbi Aharon Soloveichik gave a psychological twist to this approach of Abarbanel. He explained that Yosef's brothers suffered from a 'black sheep complex.' When one member of a family acts in a particularly bad way on a consistent basis, he is branded as the black sheep of the family, and looked at as someone who can never do anything good. This person begins to accept this appellation as an accurate assessment of his personality, and incorporates it into his consciousness. The brothers, too, had developed such a complex, feeling that what they had done to Yosef was so terrible that they could never repent for that deed. Therefore, Yosef wanted to prove to them that they were really good people in essence, and that, when faced with the identical situation would arise again, they would not repeat their original actions, but, in fact, achieve full repentance.