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Parshat HaShavuah Series

PARSHAT MIKETZ

When the cup-bearer sees that Pharaoh's dreams could not be successfully interpreted by any of the courtiers, he suddenly recalls his failings. The Hebrew text emphasizes the plural: "My sins I recall today" (Genesis 41:9). From the context it is clear that the cup-bearer failed to keep his word to Joseph and bring his case before Pharaoh as a reward for successfully interpreting the cup-bearer's dream, foretelling his release from prison and the resumption of his duties. This sin of omission is significant, but singular. The Torah, however, has the cup-bearer confess to more than one sin.

The second sin, according to the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 89:7), was a different kind of sin altogether. The Midrash imagines the cup-bearer telling Pharaoh that "I saw you grieving over the dreams you had and did not reveal to you that I knew of a skilled interpreter." The first sin was a sin against Joseph. The second sin was a sin against Pharaoh.

From the perspective of the Midrash, the cup-bearer had sinned in neglecting his promise to help Joseph out of his wrongful imprisonment. But he also sinned in remaining silent to the anguish of Pharaoh when he had the ability to help. This is no less a sin than the first.

The Midrash, of course, is not only addressing a textual problem. It is addressing a behavioural problem. Too many people, like the cup-bearer, have information, skills, or resources that can help others but fail to use them. The withholding of such things is not only selfish but sinful. To his credit, the cup-bearer realized his failings and chose to act. The first step towards his rehabilitation was to admit his mistake. The next step was to do something about it.

The Torah has room enough for many heroes. Joseph is tacitly praised for his perseverance under difficult circumstances and lionized for his unimpeachable character and profound faith. The cup-bearer is no less a hero for owning up to his responsibilities and ultimately carrying them out.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Allen has been serving Beth Tikvah Synagogue, Toronto, Ontario for more than 21 years.

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