

Torah Table Talk

Who is the Righteous One?

Parshat Vayeshev

Genesis 37:1 – 40:23 / Amos 2:6 – 3:8



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.
"He was the perfect child."*

Theirs was a generation of affluence and complacency. The northern kingdom of Israel had expanded its borders and the nation was experiencing an economic boom. But the gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen as the neediest in society suffered at the hands of the privileged. It is against this background that Amos, a humble herdsman left his home in the Judean city of Tekoa to travel to the northern capital of Beth El to deliver the word of God. In a series of scathing critiques, the prophet condemned Israel's neighbor, no doubt winning the approval of his audience. But then he delivered his real message: the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were morally degenerate and were destined to be destroyed. Amos's message was so upsetting to the king and the people that Amaziah, the leading priest of his day ridiculed him and told him to return to his home in Judah. In today's passage Amos accuses the people of selling 'the righteous' for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes. This passage seems to hint at the sale of Joseph by his brothers for pieces of silver.

Amos 2:6-7 Thus said the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, for four I will not revoke it: Because they sold for silver the one whose cause is just, and the needy for a pair of sandals. Ah, you who trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the ground and make the humble walk a twisted course! Father and son go to the same girl, and thereby profane My holy name!

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86b

We have been taught that R. Yose son of R. Judah said: When a man commits a transgression, he should be forgiven the first time, forgiven the second time, forgiven the third time, but not forgiven the fourth time, as is said, "Thus saith the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, [yes]; but for four I will not reverse it" (Amos 2:6), and, "Lo, all these things does God work twice, yea thrice, with a man" (Job 33:29).

Martyrology, Yom Kippur Service (Silverman Edition)

These things do I remember and my heart is grieved. How the arrogant have devoured our people! In the reign of a certain emperor, ten sages, though innocent, were doomed to death by his command. The tyrant, searching our Torah for an excuse, yea, a word to slay us, found this law among our ordinances: And he that steals a man, and sells him, he shall surely be put to death." (Exodus 21:16) Elated, he summoned ten great sages of our Torah and put to them this question: "What is the law if a man is found stealing his brothers, one of the children of Israel and makes merchandise of him and sells him?" The sages instantly replied: "That thief shall die."

And the despot said: "They are your ancestors who sold their brothers who sold their brother Joseph to the Ishmaelites. If they were living I would pronounce sentence against them as you have spoken but now you must bear your fathers' sins.

Rashi, Amos 2:6

For selling the Tzaddik for silver: The judge would sell out the one who is innocent in the court case for a bribe of silver which he received from the other plaintiff.

Rabbi David Kimchi Radak

For selling the righteous one: Even though they had already transgressed three serious sins, that is, idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder, their sentence was not sealed until before God. Now that they committed this fourth sin, they have been sentenced to have their land destroyed and to be exiled by the King of Assyria. *Hamas* (lawlessness), was the fourth transgression they committed. So too the generation of the flood was condemned for *hamas* even though they had committed other transgressions, as it says, “For all the earth is full of lawlessness (*hamas*),” (See Genesis 6:13). How much more so is the case since the transgressions were committed by judges whose responsibility it was to establish the rule of law, and instead they perverted the law by taking bribes and twisted the words of the righteous, as it says in this verse.

Questions to Discuss

1. The book of Amos begins with a series of prophecies which open with the words *Koh amar Adonai*, “thus says the Lord...” In each prophecy the prophet condemns a nation for their violent and unethical behavior towards another nation. The list of condemnations concludes with Israel, the nation the prophet is addressing. How is Amos’s statement to Israel different from his statements to the other nations? Why do you think Amos begins in this way?
2. According to Amos what was the sin of the Northern Kingdom? Among his criticisms, the prophet says the people were guilty of profaning the name of God. What does this mean? Elsewhere in the Bible profaning the name of God refers to cultic offenses. How does he use this word here?
3. Each of the prophetic statements leading up to the one about Israel has the numbers three and four in it. They each begin: “For three transgressions...for four I will not revoke it...” What do you think this means? Why does God wait until the fourth transgression to condemn the people? What does this say about God?
4. Joseph is sold for silver by his brothers. “They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelite caravan.” He is the only one of the Patriarchs who is referred to as a *Tzaddik*. What is the connection between the word *Tzaddik* in each of these passages. We usually translate the word *Tzaddik* as righteous; what does it mean in these two contexts?
5. When the Roman emperor condemns the ten sages for sale of Joseph, apparently the sages do nothing to defend themselves. What argument could they have used to prove their innocence? Can children be tried for their parents’ transgressions in Jewish law?
6. Why do we recite the Martyrology on Yom Kippur afternoon? What does it say about guilt and punishment? How does it color the way we understand the purpose of Yom Kippur, sin and atonement? Do later generations sometimes suffer for the sins of earlier generations?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org. To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org. To see an archive of Rabbi Greenspan’s sermons and TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>.

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*