

Joseph's Game

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Last week we read of the developing scheme of Joseph to confuse, bully and humiliate the brothers. One wonders at what moment the brothers realized they were being played.

When they came down a second time with Benjamin they are taken not into his office but into his home. They protest their innocence thinking this is payback for the money returned the first time. But Joseph has arranged to bring our Simon and reunites them. His servant makes light of the money. He gives them water, washes their feet while they wait for Joseph to come home to join them.

Joseph returns. He is friendly. He inquires after their father. He sees Benjamin. He cannot contain himself and he leaves the room to cry privately. He returns to say goodbye and then disappears because Egyptians don't sit down to eat with Hebrews. The brothers are seated according to their seniority. How did he know? And they receive presents with Benjamin getting a more than everyone else. Surely, they must have wondered? And indeed, that's what the Torah says. They were amazed (confused). So why could they not connect?

Then Joseph plants his silver cup in Benjamin's sack. They are discovered. Joseph tells them he is a magician and that's how he knows everything. The world is spinning out of control. They don't understand. They don't know what to do. Judah is distraught. He offers himself instead of his younger brother. Joseph refuses and then Judah begins his plea.

Perhaps they didn't read the signs because they were so guilty. We often see how guilt can weigh down on people that they cannot see what is obvious. Yes, Joseph is playing psychological warfare to test them. A feature, the test, that God uses throughout the Torah. And to ensure they accept that he, Joseph is now the boss. But as we will see, they never succeed entirely freeing themselves from the guilt of what they did. And this looks like penance.