

INFLUENCE TECHNIQUES



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT VAYEISHEV
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

When Yosef's brothers decide they are going to kill him and throw him into a pit, Reuven realizes that he needs to intervene to save Yosef's life. While Reuven's explicit intention is to return Yosef to Yaakov, he is caught in a predicament. What can he say or do that will convince the brothers not to kill Yosef? Their decision seems unanimous and definitive. The Midrash states that if Reuven would have known that his decision would be recorded for history, he would have picked Yosef up on his shoulders and escorted him back to his father. But is this realistic? Would the brothers have allowed Reuven to just walk away with Yosef after they have condemned him to death?

Dr. Robert Cialdini is known for his research on influence and persuasion. He spent three years as an "undercover" researcher training at used car dealerships, telemarketing firms, and fund-raising organizations in order to observe, analyze, and categorize principles of effective persuasion. If we analyze how Reuven influenced and persuaded his brothers in this crucial moment, we will uncover several strategies that Dr. Cialdini outlines in his research.

In the introduction to his bestselling book *"Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion,"* Dr. Cialdini writes that the first and foremost principle of persuasion is tapping into the other person's self-interest by convincing others that their decision will turn out best for them. It is so fundamental and obvious, he writes, that he doesn't even count it as one of his six principles of influence. This, Rabbeinu Bechaye argues, is Reuven's strategy in convincing his brothers not to kill Yosef. He doesn't just say "let's not hit him" because that would leave open the possibility that Reuven was motivated by his own feelings of empathy and self-interest. Rather, he adds the word *"nefesh,"* in order to emphasize that the goal is to avoid killing Yosef for the brothers' own sake: in order that they don't become murderers.

Another powerful category of influence is when the influencer convinces others that they are alike by identifying socially as a group with similar interests. Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor identifies this strategy within Reuven's word-choice. Reuven doesn't speak *at* them saying "don't hit him," rather, he purposefully includes himself in the group with the intention of increasing his influence by saying, "let *us* not hit him." Rabbeinu Bechaye suggests this strategy is also apparent in another strategic word-choice. Instead of saying "don't spill *his* blood," he just says, "don't spill blood." This subtle tactic indicates to the brothers that Reuven identifies with their hatred of Yosef and he is not concerned about Yosef's blood per se. Rather, the argument is not to spill any blood for the sake of not becoming murderers.

Dr. Cialdini writes that there is a single word that will dramatically boost the power of influence: *because*. In one study by Dr. Ellen Langer, when people making copies at a photocopier machine were asked by a stranger "Excuse me, I have 5 pages, may I use the Xerox machine?" 60 percent of the people complied. When the stranger added "because I am in a rush," 94 percent complied. Even more fascinating, when the stranger just added the obvious explanation of "because I have to make copies," there was still a 93 percent compliance rate. Just by adding a reason, influence is increased. Abarbanel sees this strategy in Reuven's argument as well. At first, all Reuven says is "let's not kill him" (37:21). Apparently, the brothers were not convinced yet, so Reuven adds in the next pasuk, "let's not spill his blood, let's throw him into a pit" (37:22). Abarbanel explains that after the brothers didn't respond to his general statement of "let's not kill him, Reuven now provides the "because." Let's not kill him *because* it is terrible to spill innocent blood directly.

By analyzing the *pesukim* in depth, we get a glimpse into the genius of Reuven's strategy to stop his brothers from committing murder. By using the subtle persuasion techniques of self-interest, group identification, and providing an explanation, he is able to diffuse a threatening situation and save Yosef's life.

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