

YOSEF AND HIS FATHER

Zvi Lampel

One reads with pain how Yaakov, faced with the blood-stained coat of his beloved Yosef, falls into inconsolable grief. One can imagine his regret over sending Yosef out of his safe confines to “seek out the welfare” of his brothers. Indeed, *Bereishis Rabbah* (84:13) states that when Yaakov *Avinu* reflected about having sent Yosef out to his brothers, “his inwards tore themselves [to pieces] (*mis-chas'chin*).¹ It explains that Yaakov’s sending Yosef to his brothers was the putting into motion the fulfillment of “*osso eitza amuka*,” that deep, divine, master plan G-d revealed to Avraham *Avinu* at the *Bris Bein HaB’sarim*, to eventually put Yaakov in a situation forcing him with all the *Bnei Yisroel* to leave Canaan and relocate in Egypt.² So the fact is, this action was irrational, forced by divine intervention.

Now, we may know this, but we must realize that the participants in the events as they were occurring could not. Yosef obeyed his father despite the irrationality of doing so, but one must wonder what was going on in Yosef’s mind at the time. What did he think his father was thinking?

I would like to suggest that determining this will provide an answer to a problem formulated by the Ramban (*Miketz* 42:8): The Ramban points out that Hebron is a mere six-day’s distance from Egypt. Why then did Yosef refrain from contacting his grieving father for 22 years, to let him know that he is alive and well?

Indeed, while leading a successful life as the manager of Potifar’s home, or perhaps even while acting as the prison’s warden, and certainly immediately after becoming Egypt’s Viceroy, it would seem that Yosef somehow could have delivered a message to his father that he is alive and well in Egypt. He could do this even without incriminating his brothers, by telling his father simply that when he went searching for his brothers, some Arabs had kidnapped him and sold him to Egypt.³

I suggest that Yosef, not knowing his father thought he was killed, was afraid that his father, as well as his brothers, may have considered him a dreams-of-grandeur *moreid b’malchus* (planning to usurp the kingship position assigned to Yehuda) or a *navi shekker* (a false prophet) who, for his own good and character rectification, needed to be sent into exile.

So, while working in Potifar’s house, and when sitting in prison, as long as he did not hear from his father or brothers, he hoped for the day that his father—knowing full-well, in Yosef’s mind, that he was there—would have pity on him and send word that he was forgiven. Knowing that his dreams were true prophecies, what could he say to his father?

And when he became viceroy, and his dreams were beginning to come to fruition, he would not send that news to his father, out of respect. He would not exercise the audacity to say, in effect, “See, you thought my dreams were dreams if grandeur, that I was a *navi shekker* or *moreid b’malchus*; but look! I am now the second to the king of Egypt!” He

would not gloat. He thought his father was well aware that he was in slavery in Egypt, and that that is precisely where he wanted him to be. This is why he did not send word to his father that he was alive.

Why would Yosef think this? The *pesukim* immediately preceding those that tell us of Yosef's being sent out, inform us that when he told his father his dream of the heavenly bodies bowing to him, Yaakov expressed anger at him—"Va-yig'ar bo aviv," and berated him, exclaiming, "Do you think I and your mother will prostrate ourselves before you?" Yosef saw his father was angry at him because of his dreams. True, the *posuk* goes on to inform us that "V'aviv shomer ess ha-davar," his father kept an eye on the matter meaning, as Rashi says, he thought—or perhaps hoped—that Yosef's dreams would really come true. But Yosef was not a mind reader. All he knew was that his father, like his brothers, was angry at him for his dreams. And now his father sent him out into the hands of his brothers.

And one more factor: All the years that Yosef was forced to stay in Egypt, he did not see anyone from his family making any attempt to contact him. No one from his family came, nor did any message from them arrive. There was no indication of any desire on their part to bring him back or even inquire of his welfare.

All the factors we mentioned above form strong indications that his father felt the same way about him as did his brothers. After all, if his father did not feel this way, and was not part of the scheme to eliminate him, and was still alive, why, once the brothers came back, didn't Yaakov order them to get down to Egypt and rescue him? (Again, Yosef had no idea about the coat-dipped-in-blood ruse, nor that his brothers would lie to Yaakov.) And what about Binyamin? Why wasn't he lobbying to rescue him?

Yosef did not know that his father thought he was dead! Up until Yehudah's revelation that Yaakov cried, "*Toraf toref Yoseph*, Yosef has been utterly torn apart," Yosef was told by his brothers only that, "*V'ha-yelled aynennu*,"— "the boy is not [with us]," which could simply mean that the family knew the fact that he is living elsewhere. Prior to Yehudah's revelation, Yosef knew nothing of the coat being dipped in blood, nor of his father's conclusion that his son was killed. What he saw was the lack of evidence that his father was interested in retrieving him.

Another point must also be emphasized. The thought that Yaakov would participate in sending Yosef into exile does not necessarily entail thinking that his love for Yosef before being told his dreams diminished at all afterwards. On the contrary, Yosef could have concluded that his father did this out of his love for him. He could have concluded that Yaakov thought that Yosef unfortunately succumbed to entertaining delusions of grandeur, and the necessary cure was for him to experience exile. Those familiar with Jewish tradition should easily comprehend the concept of a loving Father/King sending his children into exile for their own good, not out of hatred, or even despite of his love for them, but precisely because of it. This approach posits no diminishing of love of Yaakov for Yosef, or of Yosef's perception of his father's love for him. As long as his father did

not seek him out, Yosef's righteous, humble self-deprecation allowed him to conclude that his loving father very well may have determined that he needed to experience exile from his family and their land. And as long as his father did not seek him out, Yosef could not dismiss the possibility that his father felt he must still remain in exile.

Of course, there was one other possible explanation for why his father did not send his brothers to reunite with them.—That his father, and perhaps Binyamin, too, was no longer alive. And so, Viceroy Yosef repeatedly asked his brothers of his father's welfare, and insistent about seeing Binyamin.

In *parashas VaYigash*, Yehudah is petitioning Egypt's Viceroy, not realizing that he is Yosef. He quotes Yaakov as saying, years after the sale of Yosef, "He has surely been torn [to pieces] and I have not seen him till now." One may wonder, if Yaakov thought Yosef had been torn to pieces, how could he have expected to see him? Apparently, the answer is he wasn't really sure that Yosef was killed (as Rashi says, explaining why no one could comfort him as a mourner), and over the years, Yaakov was conflicted, reacting in perplexity to the evidence of the blood-soaked coat as follows: Yosef had either been killed, or he is alive. But if he is alive, "I haven't seen him till now"—he should be back by now; or at least he would somehow let me know he is alive. He resists having closure on this and being consoled, due to the niggling hope that Yosef is somehow alive somewhere.

Simultaneously, we see Yosef being told—the very first time—of his father's boundless and continuous love for him; and—for the very first time—that his father thought he was dead. We can imagine how, as Yehudah continues with three more sentences in his plea for mercy for Binyamin, these new pieces of information are being digested in Yosef's mind, putting themselves together, confirming—for the first time—the true reason his father had not sent for him. The realization bubbles up in Yosef's heart and he can no longer continue the masquerade, and has no reason to. Yosef blurts out in loud cry, "I am Yosef! Is Father really still alive?!"

I originally thought of this *peshat* in the 1970's, and carried it with me for about 10 years. Finally, I found someone who said it before. Looking through the front and back material of the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, I came across a work called *HaSh'mattos HaYerushalmi*, by R. Shmuel Shraga Feigenson (where he quotes passages from *sefarim* that quote passages of the *Yerushalmi* that are absent in our editions). At the end of this work, he is left with a half blank, and to avoid wasting paper, he decided to fill it with two of his *chiddushim*, one of which is the approach I have given for why Yosef did not inform his father he was alive. He closes by wondering why none of the *ba'aley ha-peshat* have suggested it!

I later discovered that a contemporary, Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, also came up with the same approach, and has been criticized for suggesting that Yosef could have thought of his father as hating him. But his brothers, too, were *tzadikim*, yet hated him. Moreover, I present this thought by Yosef as a tentative one, although, given the facts Yosef had at

hand, difficult to deny. After all, his father did express anger at his dreams, and may well have decided that he needed to be exiled to be cured of his audacity. Again, out of love, not rejection.

I would also add that the episode could be symbolized by a theme in the *pesukim*: If one were to produce a play about the account of Yosef and his brothers, the costume director would be very busy. The *pesukim* accompany each new scene of Yosef's life with a depiction of a change in his clothing: The special garment Yaakov makes for him; the brothers strip him of his garment; Potifar's wife strips him of his clothing; when he's taken from prison he is given a change of clothing; Pharaoh places upon him royal wear (and Yosef gives to Binyamin five times as many garments as he gives his other brothers). The *pesukim* did not need to tell us these details to get the story across. Perhaps this was meant to symbolize the theme that everyone saw Yosef HaTzadik only externally: His father saw him as a leader, the brothers as a criminal, Potifar's wife as a potential adulterer, Pharaoh as a master strategist. But inside, Yosef *HaTzadik* was the same *tzadik* throughout his life and its vicissitudes.

¹ It depicts Yaakov as saying, "You knew that your brothers hate you, yet you said "*Henneni*"!—which in its literal sense would indicate that Yaakov eventually knew, or at least suspected, that his sons were responsible for Yosef's disappearance—apparently before discovering Yosef was really alive and well and unassimilated Viceroy of Egypt. Thus, Yaakov is depicted as not originally realizing the extent of his sons' hatred of Yosef until after-the-fact, but thinking that Yosef must have been aware of it; and it depicts him as being "torn" by the thought that Yosef followed his orders without question.

² As Rashi comments, "He sent him out from *Aimek Hebron*, the valley/deep place of Hebron." Hebron is highland, not deep! Thus, the reason to take the phrase as an allusion to the "deep, divine, master plan" laid out at the *Bris Bein HaBesarim*."

The Malbim considers irrational the very thought of sending the young Yosef out to dangerous territory to see the welfare of his older, stronger brothers. (Although I note that *Shmuel Aleph*, chapter 17 apparently indicates it was routine to send out a young son (in this case, Yishai sending David) with provisions to his brothers in the battlefield, with instructions to bring back word about their well-being.) He explains that Yaakov's strange act is one example of the rare occasions when Hashem intervenes upon man's free will and causes him to act irrationally.

The *Zohar* puts it that Yaakov knew that his sons hated Yosef, but he sent Yosef out to them nevertheless "because he did not suspect them [of doing Yosef any harm] because they were all 'zaka-in.'" It goes on to explain that [the fact that Yaakov misread his sons' attitude, and/ or the fact that they would take such measures against Yosef as they did, is only because] "Hashem caused all this, to fulfill the decree of the *bris bein ha-besarim*."

³ The Ramban answers that a prophetic message from G-d is in effect a commandment to the prophet to strive to bring the prediction about, and this forced Yosef to do all he did. Some *mefarshim* find the Ramban's solution inadequate