

PARASHAT VAYECHI

Dedicated in memory of our parents Jack Stone z"l and Helen and Benjamin Pearlman z"l

and in honor of Esther Stone by Gary and Ilene Stone

NEW PUBLICATIONS FROM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION:

Yosef's Teshuva By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. Introduction

In the second half of Sefer Bereishit, we read about the process of repentance that the sons of Yaakov undergo. The first to repent is Reuven, who attempts to prevent the sale of Yosef, thereby repairing his sin in the episode of Bilha.[\[1\]](#) He is followed by Yehuda, who progresses from his behavior in the episode of Tamar to his readiness to remain in Egypt as a slave in place of Binyamin. Similarly, the brothers as a group repent, admitting their sin in selling Yosef – "But we are guilty." Does Yosef undergo a similar process?

Yosef's sins are recounted at the beginning of parashat Vayeshev, and we may divide them into three categories:

1. Speaking evil of his brothers: "And Yosef spoke badly of them to their father" (37:2). As Rashi explains:

"Any evil that he perceived in his brothers, the sons of Leah, he would report to his father: that they would eat a limb from a living animal, that they would scorn the children of the handmaidens, calling them 'slaves,' and that he suspected them of immoral relations. For all three he was punished: for his accusation of eating the limb of a live animal – 'And they slaughtered a goat...' after his sale; they did not eat its flesh while it was alive. For telling his father that they called their brothers 'slaves' - 'Yosef was sold as a slave.' And for the immorality of which he accused them – 'And his master's wife cast her eyes upon Yosef.'"

2. The recounting of the dreams to his brothers and to Yaakov: The actual recounting, with no mention of God, expresses a superficial faith in the significance of the dreams, not as part of an overall Divine plan, but rather from a narrow, personal perspective.

3. Yosef's conceit in his recounting of the dreams to his brothers and father: This unnecessary element of conceit only aggravates the difficult relationship between himself and his brothers: "And they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words" (37:8). Ramban explains: "They hated him for his dreams, but also for the conceited way in which he recounted them."

Did Yosef repair these sins, and if so – how?

B. "Do Solutions not Belong to God?"

The first repair that we encounter concerns the second sin mentioned above. While Yosef makes no mention of God in the recounting of his dreams to his brothers, when he is called upon to interpret the dreams of others, his attitude is seen to have changed. He tells the royal butler and baker, "Do solutions not belong to God? Please, tell me" (40:8). More specifically, he declares before Pharaoh: "It is not me; God will restore Pharaoh's peace of mind" (41:16); "What God is going to do He has told to Pharaoh" (ibid., 25); "What God is going to do He has shown to Pharaoh" (ibid., 28); "For the thing has been determined by God, and God will hasten to perform it" (ibid. 32).

Yosef comes to understand – the long and difficult way, leading from the pit to Potifar's house and back to prison, including two additional years of prison after asking the butler to remember him and help him – that all is in the hands of heaven, and that man is only part of a great and wondrous Divine plan. The road to realization of glowing dreams will sometimes be paved with hard labor and suffering. Only later will Yosef understand part of the significance of this Divine plan: "So now, it is not you who sent me here but rather God, and He made me a father to Pharaoh and master of all his household, and ruler of all of the land of Egypt" (45:8); "God worked it out for the good, in order to arrange things such at this time that many people should be saved" (50:20).

C. "Here is Seed for You"

After Yosef settles his father and his brothers in the land of Goshen, he turns his attention to the needs of the land of Egypt. First he gathers all the money of the land, and then all the cattle:

"And Yosef gathered all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, for the corn which they bought, and Yosef brought the money to Pharaoh's house. And the money ran out in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, and all of Egypt came to Yosef saying, 'Give us bread, for why should we die in your presence – for the money is gone.'

Yosef said, 'Bring your cattle, and I shall give you in exchange for your cattle, if there is no money.'

They brought their cattle to Yosef, and Yosef gave them bread in exchange for their horses and their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and he fed them with bread in exchange for all their livestock for that year." (47:14-17)

A cursory reading of these verses creates the impression of a cold and uncaring attitude on Yosef's part towards the Egyptians, who are on the verge of starvation. Yosef seems to be exploiting his control of the grain in order to separate the Egyptians from the last of their possessions. After he has taken everything that they have, they beg:

"We cannot hide from my lord that the money is finished, and the livestock has been given to my lord; we remain before my lord with nothing but our bodies and our land. Why shall we die before you, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for bread, and we and our land will be slaves to Pharaoh, and give seed that we may live and not die, and that the land will not be desolate." (ibid. 18-19)

The Egyptians offer themselves to Yosef as slaves to Pharaoh, bereft of their land and of their rights as free people, all for the purposes of obtaining the bare minimum that even a slave requires – food.

At first Yosef accepts their proposal willingly:

"Yosef purchased all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians sold each his field, for the famine prevailed over them, and so the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he moved them to the cities, from one end of the border of Egypt to the other." (ibid. 20-21)

The resettlement of the people in cities appears to have been aimed at removing any connection between them and their land: "As a reminder that they no longer had any portion in the land, and he settled someone from one place in another" (Rashi). However, in light of all this the continuation of his scheme is somewhat surprising:

"Yosef said to the people: Behold, I have bought you this day, and your land, for Pharaoh; here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. At the harvest times you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh, and four parts shall be your own for seed of the field, and for your food, and for the needs of your households, and to feed your children." (ibid. 23-24)

What is the meaning of this change? If Yosef at first accepted the people's proposal to sever themselves from their land and to become slaves to Pharaoh, why does he suddenly return the people to the land, under quite reasonable conditions – a tax of only 20%?

It seems possible to suggest that Yosef indeed retracted his original intention. At first he may have found it impossible to free himself from the compelling sense of the power that he commanded – absolute control over all the property of Egypt. But, upon reflection, Yosef understood that power is not necessarily positive, and sometimes great wealth may cause its owner great harm. One day, the seven years of famine will end. Will the years of servitude and humiliation that the Egyptians have suffered not give rise to deeply-felt grievances that may erupt into real rebellion? Hence, Yosef

reconsiders his plan and proposes an economic proposal more favorable than anything they could have dreamed of, and at which they rejoice: "They said, 'You have saved us; let us find favor in my lord's eyes, and we shall be servants to Pharaoh'" (ibid. 25). Again the Egyptians offer themselves as slaves to Pharaoh, but what a great difference in attitude! When they first approached Yosef, their declaration was rooted in unbearable torment and a complete lack of alternative, while now they repeat it with profound gratitude.

Ramban draws out the lesson of this story:

"The point of the text recounting this, and of the whole story, is to teach us of Yosef's great wisdom, understanding and knowledge. He was a man of integrity who brought all the money to the house of Pharaoh, not making himself treasures and hidden treasuries in Egypt or sending it to the land of Canaan. Rather, he gave all the money to the king who trusted him, purchasing for him also the land and the people, thereby finding favor also in the eyes of the people, for God brings success to those who fear Him."

According to theory I am proposing, Yosef's actions, as explained by the Ramban, arise from the change that Yosef undergoes. This represents the repair of his third sin – his recognition of the limits of power and might.

D. "God Worked it out for the Good"

After Yaakov is buried, our parasha describes the brothers' appearance before Yosef:

"Yosef's brothers feared, for their father had died, and they said: 'What if Yosef will hate us and repay us for all the evil that we did to him?'

They sent word to Yosef, saying, Your father commanded before his death, saying: 'So shall you say to Yosef: Please, now, forgive the iniquity of your brothers and their sin, for they did evil to you, and now please forgive the iniquity of the servants of the God of your father.'

Yosef wept when they spoke to him. His brothers, too, went and fell before him, and they said, 'Behold, we are your servants.'" (50:15-18)

What is the meaning of Yosef's weeping here? Elsewhere, Ramban writes (45:27):

"It seems to me, from a literal reading of the text, that Yaakov was never informed that the brothers had sold Yosef. Rather, he thought that Yosef had become lost in the fields, and whoever had found him had taken him and sold him to Egypt. The brothers did not wish to tell him of their sin, for they feared for their lives lest he become angry and curse them, as he did to Reuven, Shimon and Levi [further on, 49:3-7]. And Yosef, moral character that he was, did not want to tell him, and therefore it is written, 'They sent to Yosef saying, Your father

commanded before his death, saying....' Had Yaakov known of this matter, it would have been appropriate for them to ask of their father on his deathbed that he personally command Yosef, for Yosef would honor him and not rebel against his word, and then they would face no danger and would not need to invent words of their own."

Ramban proves from the direct approach of Yosef's brothers to him, rather than via their father, that Yaakov never had knowledge of Yosef's sale. In light of this, it seems that Yosef wept because he knew – as the brothers apparently did not – that not only were their words not true, but they could not have been true. Their request to their brother arose from a firm conviction that Yosef had told his father of the circumstances of his arrival in Egypt. But they were wrong! Yosef wept, then, out of sorrow that his brothers did not trust him, and believed that his good treatment of them was merely a result of his respect and love for Yaakov.

If all of this is true, then Yosef's repentance reaches its climax here. If at first Yosef brought his father all kinds of bad reports about his brothers, now – when he could have told his father of their terrible misdeed - he refrained from doing so, and kept the awful secret to himself. Thus Yosef also repairs his first sin, that of speaking badly of his brothers to his father.

The Torah makes no mention of what Yosef did tell Yaakov concerning the circumstances of his disappearance and long absence. The Midrash (Pesikta Rabbati, 3) provides a wonderfully descriptive explanation:

"When they sensed that Yaakov was ill, they came and notified Yosef. Is all of this meant in praise of Yosef, showing that his respect for his father's honor was such that he would not enter there at any time, and that had others not come and told him that his father was ill, he would not have known? [Surely not.] Rather, it tells of his righteousness – that he did not wish to be alone with his father, so that his father would not ask, 'What did your brothers do to you?' and curse them... Therefore, he would not go in to his father at any time."

According to the Midrash, Yosef refrained from secluding himself with his father so that he would not be forced to reveal the bitter truth.

However, there are other opinions – most notably Rashi - who differ with Ramban, maintaining that Yaakov was well aware of the sale of Yosef by his brothers. Throughout the parasha, we find a number of occasions where, to Rashi's view, Yaakov shows awareness of the sale of Yosef. Rashi agrees that Yosef's brothers did not tell the truth in their appeal to him, but not because Yaakov did not know the truth; rather, "They changed his words for the sake of peace, for Yaakov did not command thus, since he had no suspicions about Yosef." In other words, Yaakov was aware of what the brothers had done to Yosef, but never suspected that Yosef would seek revenge after Yaakov's death.

In light of this view, Rashi explains several of Yaakov's words to his sons as concerning the sale of Yosef, such as:

"'Shimon and Levi are brothers' – unanimous in their decision concerning Shekhem and concerning Yosef" (49:5);

"'from the prey' (mi-teref) – from what I suspected you of, when you said, 'Yosef has surely been torn apart; a wild animal has consumed him' – this is Yehuda, who is compared to a lion; 'my son, you have ascended' – you removed yourself [from their intention to kill him], saying, 'What benefit will there be...'" (ibid. 9)^[2]

To my mind, proof may be brought for the approach of the Pesikta and the Ramban, specifically from the closing words quoted above by Rashi. If Yaakov did indeed forgive Yehuda for all the years of his deception, together with his brothers, only because Yehuda proposed to sell Yosef rather than to kill him (as well as forgiving him for the episode of Tamar – see Rashi ad loc.), then why does Yaakov attack Reuven so heatedly? He says to him, "Reuven, you are my firstborn, my strength and the beginning of my might, excellency of dignity and excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, for you ascended to your father's bed, then defiled it; he went up to my couch." Was it not Reuven who had no part at all in the sale of Yosef, and who wanted to save him and return him to his father (37:22)? This question is all the more pointed if we see Reuven's desire to return Yosef as repairing his sin with regard to Bilha (see note no. 1). It seems, then, that Yaakov was unaware of the story of the sale of Yosef with all its details, and was therefore also unaware of Reuven's repentance.

E. Elements Common to Both Appeals to Yosef

We posited above that Yosef's dealings with two groups - the people of Egypt and his own brothers - express his repentance. Indeed, there are several interesting points connecting the two stories:

1. In both cases, people come to Yosef and offer themselves as slaves: "We shall be slaves to Pharaoh," "They said: Behold, we are your slaves."
2. In both instances, Yosef's reaction is favorable to those appealing to him, as described above.
3. In both stories, Yosef makes special note of one subject: feeding of children. When speaking to the people of Egypt, he says, "Four measures shall be yours, for seed for the field and for your food and the needs of your households, and TO FEED YOUR CHILDREN." When speaking to his brothers, he says, "Fear not; I shall FEED YOU and YOUR CHILDREN."

In light of the thesis of this shiur, the two parashiot come to be viewed as part of a single process, describing Yosef's repentance.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

[1] This is especially true in light of the understanding of Reuven's sin as arising from his desire to establish his own status as Yaakov's rightful heir. Cohabitation with the concubine of one's father is, in general, the expression of a political ambition – such as, for example, Avshalom's cohabitation with the concubine of his father, David, before all of Israel (Shmuel II 16:22); Ish-boshet's claim against Avner (Shmuel II 3:7); Adoniyahu's request that he be permitted to marry Avishag the Shunamite (Melakhim II 13-25); etc. In his desire to save Yosef, who is greatly loved by his father and who dreams of all of brothers bowing down to him, Reuven repairs his sin: "'May Reuven live' – for having allowed Yosef to live, 'and not die' – for his act concerning Bilha, BECAUSE HE REPENTED" (Bamidbar Rabba, 13).

[2] It is difficult to discuss Yosef's repentance without making note of the episode of Potifar's wife, who was responsible for Yosef having the unique title "Yosef the tzaddik" (Yoma 35b, and elsewhere) bestowed upon him. There can be no doubt that in this episode Yosef expresses a trait of great righteousness, both in terms of sexual purity and moral conscience. I have not addressed this episode, since there appears to be no direct link here between repentance and a preceding sin. But at the start of Yosef's story, Rashi notes, "'And he was a youth' – he acted in youthful ways, arranging his hair and grooming his eyes in order that he would look attractive" (37:2). To his view, Yosef repented for this behavior in Potifar's house: "'And Yosef was of beautiful appearance' – since he saw himself as a ruler, he began to eat and drink and to curl his hair. The Holy One said, 'Your father is mourning while you curl your hair? I shall stir up a bear against you...'" (39:6). However, this behavior is not explicit in the text; see Ramban ad loc.