

Parshat Miketz - Yosef and his Brothers

In Parshat Miketz, Yosef rises to royalty in Egypt. Yet, despite his high position, not once does he attempt to contact his father. Does Yosef no longer care for his father who loved him so dearly and now grieves for his lost son?

Last week, in Parshat Vayeshev, Yaakov Avinu's ten sons conspired to kill their own brother for what appears to be petty jealousy! Can there be any excuse for this cruel behavior?

How are we to understand the behavior of our ancestors in these two Parshiyot? Do the turbulent events of Sefer Breishit simply teach us of our 'shameful' heritage, or do they carry a message for future generations?

This week's shiur attempts to tackle these difficult questions by projecting the "bechira process" - the theme of Sefer Breishit - onto the story of Yosef and his brothers. Part One uses this theme to explain the brothers' hatred of Yosef, while Part Two applies this concept to explain Yosef's **master plan**.

Part I: "Sinat Achim" & Idealism

To uncover the motive behind the brothers' hatred of Yosef, we must return to the story of Yosef's dreams (at the beginning of Parshat Vayeshev). Let's begin with a quick review of these two dreams:

1. "And behold we were gathering sheaves in the field, and my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf." (37:7)
2. "And behold - the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." (37:9)

One need not be a prophet in order to interpret Yosef's two dreams. Clearly, they point to his developing sense of superiority over the entire family. However, they also echo an earlier sibling rivalry in Chumash - that between Yaakov and Eisav! Recall the blessing that Yitzchak gave to Yaakov, though he intended to give it to Eisav:

"May God bless you with ... an abundance of grain ... Be **master over** your brothers, and let your mother's sons **bow down** to you." (27:28-29)

This parallel suggests that Yosef's dreams may not only hint to his future leadership position, but they could also point to Yosef as the **only** 'chosen son,' just as Yaakov himself emerged as Yitzchak's only chosen son! Add to this:

- ◆ Yaakov's love and special treatment of Yosef (see 37:3);
- ◆ His "ktonet pasim" (special cloak), a sign of royalty;

- ◆ Yosef is the first son of Rachel, Yaakov's 'primary' wife;
- ◆ Yaakov's silence regarding Yosef's dreams ([see 37:11](#));

and the conclusion is obvious: Yaakov plans to name Yosef (or possibly Yosef and Binyamin, the son's of Rachel) his exclusive heir(s). Yosef's dreams simply add 'fuel to the fire!'

This background allows us to suggest an ideological basis for the brothers' decision to kill Yosef.

All in the Name of God

Had Yosef been a bit more righteous in his brothers' eyes, they may have conceded to his destiny as either the 'leader' or the 'chosen' son. However, their perception of Yosef's character troubled them. In their eyes, Yosef was a slanderer:

"And Yosef brought bad reports ('diba ra'ah') of his brothers to his father." ([See 37:2](#))

The brothers, aware of the challenges facing God's special Nation, recognized the need for exemplary leadership. Could Yosef possibly assume this role? To the brothers, the mere thought of 'Yosef the Slanderer' becoming the leader was horrific. From their perspective, it was simply unthinkable that Yosef could assume the leadership of a nation destined by God to be characterized by "tzedek u'mishpat" ([see 18:19](#)). For the sake of "klal Yisrael," they conclude: Yosef must be weeded out!

Hence, the brothers faced a predicament similar to that of Rivka in the previous generation. Just as Rivka had realized that Yitzchak was mistaken in his favoring of Eisav, so too the brothers realize Yaakov's mistake in favoring Yosef. Just as Rivka resorted to 'trickery' to ensure that the proper son would be blessed, so too the brothers decide to use 'trickery' to ensure that Yosef would not be appointed their leader. Considering that the entire fate of "Am Yisrael" was at stake, the brothers allow themselves to 'bend the rules' a bit, so as to secure the nation's future.

An ideal opportunity (for the brothers) arises when Yosef arrives at Dotan to visit them. In order to dispose of this menace, they plot first to kill him. Later they opt to sell him off to a distant land. In either case, their stated goal is to make sure that Yosef is removed from the Divine family ([see 37:20](#) - "v'nireh mah yihyu chalomotav"). Out of respect and concern for their father, lest he fret and worry about his 'missing' son for the rest of his life, they will dip Yosef's coat in blood so that Yaakov will think that he was truly dead. Hopefully, their father will finally realize that Yosef was "nidcheh" (rejected), and now Am Yisrael can continue to develop in the proper fashion.

Thus, based on the theme of Sefer Breishit, the brothers' plot to dispose of Yosef, though inexcusable, is understandable. It is not simply out of petty

jealousy that they want to kill Yosef, but rather out of a 'sincere' concern for the future of Am Yisrael.

Maase Avot Siman La'Banim

The story of Yosef and his brothers can serve as a reminder that lofty spiritual goals can often blind us to the most basic principles of moral behavior. Certainly, this lesson that we can learn from the story of "mechirat Yosef" applies especially to our own generation, at both the national and the individual levels.

Based on this week's discussion, one could suggest that the "piyut" that we recite on Yom Kippur about the Ten Martyrs (who were killed by the Romans during the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and the Bar Kochba revolt) reflects this same message. In that piyut, Chazal connect those tragedies to the brothers' selling of Yosef. Even though that event had taken place over a thousand years earlier, Chazal consider the behavior of Am Yisrael during that time period similar to that of Yosef and his brothers. The reason is rather obvious. Recall that Chazal cite "sinat chinam" [petty hatred of one another] as the primary sin of that generation (even though Torah study was at an all time high - see Mesechet Gittin 55b with regard to the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza). Hence, that piyut may be making that same statement in a poetic manner. The generation of "churban bayit sheni" had repeated the sins of an earlier generation, and therefore deserved punishment. God may project the sins of an earlier generation on a later one, but only if the latter continues in the same pattern of sin.

Part II:

Why Doesn't Yosef Write Home?

Until this point, we have focused on the brothers' perception of the "bechira" process. Now, we shift our focus onto Yosef's perception of the "bechira" process, in order to answer our second question: Why didn't Yosef write home? First, let's explain our question.

Considering Yosef's very close relationship with his father [recall that he was Yaakov's "ben zkunim" - see 37:3], one would expect him to have made every possible attempt to contact his father. Yet, even after his appointment as head servant of the House of Potiphar, Yosef makes no effort to inform his father that he is alive and well. And surely, after his appointment as the Commissioner of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, Yosef should have no problem whatsoever contacting his father. Nevertheless, Yosef doesn't seem to bother. It appears that Yosef has wiped his past from his memory.

This question is raised by Ramban (see 42:9) and dealt with by numerous other commentators. Ramban explains that Yosef's actions were motivated by his aspiration to ensure the fulfillment of his dreams. Somehow, according to Ramban, Yosef understood that in order for the Divine plan to unfold, he must not contact his family.

Abravanel argues on Ramban's assertion that Yosef's primary drive was to fulfill his childhood dreams. Instead, he explains Yosef's entire strategy as an attempt to bring his brothers towards proper teshuva. (See Nechama Leibowitz on Sefer Breishit who deals with this "shita" in depth.) However, even though Abravanel's interpretation explains Yosef's behavior after his brothers arrived, it does not explain why Yosef did not contact his father **before** they arrived in Egypt!

R. Yoel Bin Nun, in an article in Megadim vol. I (a publication of the Herzog Teachers Institute), offers a fascinating solution, based on an analysis of Yosef's perception of the "bechira" process.

In our shiur, we employ Rav Bin Nun's approach to explain Yosef's behavior during his first twenty years in Egypt - **before** his brothers arrive. However, to explain Yosef's overall '**master plan**,' we employ Abravanel's approach as well, adding a little twist of our own.

Rav Yoel begins his article by taking issue with Ramban's basic claim that Yosef feels obligated to ensure the actualization of his dreams. It is unthinkable, he argues, that Yosef would cause such suffering to his father simply because of a dream. Rav Yoel also contends that "pshat" of the parsha indicates that Yosef remembered his dreams only **after** the brothers came (see 42:9). During the approximately twenty years beforehand, his dreams seem to have been forgotten!

To explain Yosef's behavior, Rav Yoel suggests that Yosef had no idea that his father believed he was dead. Rather, Yosef assumed that the brothers knew of his sale, and hence he expected his father (and/or his brothers) to come to his rescue. After all, the Yishmaelim were international traders who traveled quite often through Eretz Canaan. Surely, Yosef hoped, his father would find out that he was sold and demand that the brothers trace the sale and then go to Egypt to buy him back. However, many months passed and no one showed. Yosef's hopes were replaced by a feeling of rejection. After several months (or years), he gradually reached the conclusion that he must have been 'rejected' from the "bechira" process. Reluctantly, he accepted his new fate, understanding that he was no longer wanted by his family.

The logic behind Yosef's 'mistaken' conclusion can be explained in two ways - either through either a 'conspiracy theory' or a more conservative approach.

The Conspiracy Theory

Let's take a look at the events from Yosef's perspective. At age 17, full of teenage energy, emotion and ambition, Yosef is sent by his **father** to check on his brothers. As soon as they see him, they immediately take off his coat and throw him into a pit. Only a short time later, a group of Midyanim (or his brothers - see <http://www.hatanakh.com/en/articles/who-really-sold-yosef>) remove him from the pit and sell him to a caravan of Yishmaelim. Yosef

concludes that his brothers are either pulling some type of 'prank' on him, or may have even sold him into slavery. Recall, however, that Yosef never heard the brothers' original plan to kill him. Most likely, Yosef concludes that as soon as his brothers come home, his father will investigate the matter (or someone will snitch), and Yaakov will make sure that Yosef is found, by tracing the sale to Egypt.

Yosef is totally unaware that the brothers had tricked their father with the blood-stained coat. He has no idea that his father presumed that he was killed by a wild animal.

The months pass, and nothing happens. Yosef begins to wonder why no one has come to look for him. Does his father no longer care about him? Why did the brothers throw him into the pit as soon as he arrived? Why did his father send him out alone on such a long journey to see his brothers who hated him? Slowly, Yosef comes to the realization that Yaakov must have received some divine decree that Yosef is rejected, and only Leah's children [and not Rachel's] had been 'chosen.' Rachel, as her premature death may have indicated, had not attained the same matriarchal status as Sarah and Rivka.

In his article, Rav Bin Nun even suggests that Yosef may have entertained the thought that this entire conspiracy to sell him may have been coordinated by his father. He raises the possibility that Yosef (after many years of pondering these events) may have concluded that his father had actually sent him knowing that the brothers would sell him. Rather than confront Yosef directly with the terrible news of his 'rejection' from the family, Yosef thinks that Yaakov may have preferred that the brothers do the 'dirty work' for him.

However, it is possible to follow a similar direction without the need to entertain this 'conspiracy' theory, which itself appears to be a bit far-fetched. One could suggest that Yosef may have supposed that when the brothers returned home, they had convinced their father that Yosef's disappearance was a Divine indication of his rejection.

Yosef 'Had' a Dream

Alternatively, one could suggest that Yosef, because he was sold by his brothers, simply feels 'rejected' by his family. Despite his father's love for him, he may have preferred to begin a new life, even if it meant that his father would miss him, rather than face returning to live with his brothers. [That is definitely a very understandable reaction for a seventeen year old.]

In any case, and regardless of what may have transpired at home since he was sold, Yosef is convinced that he has been abandoned by his family. He accepts this fate, and decides to lead his own life, cut off from his family and childhood dreams. Just as Eisav established Edom, Yosef will make a name for himself in Egypt. He can even bring the name of God into society in his own way, despite not being part of the Chosen Nation.

This tragic misunderstanding can explain why Yosef, even after rising to power, never contacted his family.

All this suddenly changes some twenty years later when Yosef recognizes his brothers when they come down to Egypt to buy grain. As they bow down before him, Yosef suddenly remembers his long forgotten dreams. Should Yosef dismiss this as pure coincidence, or should this partial fulfillment of his childhood dreams lead him to reconsider his earlier conclusions?

With this background, we now attempt to explain Yosef's plan.

Yosef Has a Plan

Yosef's immediate reaction not to reveal himself to his brothers is quite understandable. But the sequence of events that follows is quite confusing. If Yosef simply wants to hide his identity from them, he can simply ignore them. Surely, Yosef did not entertain every foreigner who came to purchase food. So why does he accuse his brothers of being spies? Why does he return their money? Later, when they come back, why does he plant his special cup in Binyamin's bag?

Certainly, it appears to be more than random 'teasing' his brothers (to get back at them). Clearly, Yosef has a strategy, and his actions suggest that he has some sort of 'master plan,' but it is not so clear what that master plan is.

In his article, Rav Bin Nun explains Yosef's 'plan' as an attempt to determine what had happened to Binyamin. The fact that Binyamin was not with the brothers the first time they came to Egypt supports his suspicion that Bnei Rachel had been rejected. Therefore, his primary goal is to find out if Binyamin is still alive. If he is, then Yosef could question Binyamin concerning what 'really' happened in the family, and afterward Yosef could re-unite with his family. If he is not alive and/or if his father is already dead, then Yosef would most probably prefer never to reveal himself to his brothers. [This explains why Yosef accuses his brothers of being spies. The 'spy accusation' allows Yosef to question them concerning their family roots etc., without raising the suspicion that he may be their brother.]

Although this explanation flows nicely from the above presentation, it does not explain every detail of Yosef's behavior once Binyamin does arrive. After all, once Binyamin comes, why doesn't Yosef simply take him aside and question him. If Yosef only needs to determine what really happened in the "bechira" process, what point is there in planting his cup in Binyamin's bag? Surely, one cannot remain oblivious to Yosef's obvious attempt to create a situation that prompts the brothers to repent (as Avrabanel explains so beautifully).

On the other hand, one must also explain the reason for Yosef's returning their money, and for seating them in order of their birth, etc. These acts seem to be more of a 'tease' than an impetus for them to do "teshuva" (repentance). What is

Yosef's intention in all of this? Furthermore, if his goal, as Avrabanel explains, is only to lead the brothers towards doing teshuva, then his 'second' plan seems unnecessary - after all, they had already shown remorse for their sin at the first encounter. Recall their initial remorse, that Yosef himself overheard them saying:

"Alas we are **guilty**, for we heard his crying out [when he was thrown in the pit], but we did not listen ... therefore this fate has befallen us..." (see 42:21-23!)

Finally, if the Avrabanel's contention is correct, who gives Yosef the right to 'test' his brothers to see if they have repented? Is Yosef allowed to play God? Is it permitted to tease, trick, and confuse others in order to awaken their soul? Even so, does this justify causing his father further aggravation?

Playing God or Playing Man?

One could suggest the following explanation:

Even though Yosef may have forgotten his dreams for some twenty years, when his brothers arrive in Egypt and bow down to him, it suddenly dawns on him that his childhood dreams may actually be coming true after all. If Binyamin is still part of the family, as his brothers' claim, then the "bechira" process may have actually included Bnei Rachel.

Suddenly, all the events that transpired become pieces of a much larger puzzle. Yosef suddenly realizes as well that the family must ultimately unite, with himself responsible for its leadership (as his dreams suggested). Yosef now sees God's fingerprints on every piece of the puzzle, but he cannot reveal himself to his brothers for a very simple reason. If he did so immediately, a wound would be opened that could never be healed. Let's explain:

Yosef does not need to play **God**, to ensure that his brothers do teshuva; that is God's responsibility. Yosef, however, does have to play **leader**. Given the situation created by "mechirat Yosef," had Yosef revealed his identity at this point, his brothers would have 'melted' on the spot! How could they face him? How could they ever be able to speak to him? The shame of their relationship with him could create an eternal barrier between them.

Although they all may have remained 'chosen,' family unity and fraternity would have been impossible to achieve. Therefore, Yosef finds it necessary to do something that would reunite the family. He needs to create a situation that will bond the family both physically and spiritually. [Indeed, this is the mark of a true leader.]

Furthermore, had Yosef informed his father at this point (before informing his brothers), then Yaakov's anger toward his sons would have undoubtedly brought him to curse them. This, for sure, would yield disastrous results for the

future of Am Yisrael. Yosef must restrain his emotions for a few more weeks in order to create a situation of true family unity.

With this background, one can suggest that Yosef's primary goal from the very beginning is to create a situation whereby the brothers can redeem themselves, by putting them through a difficult test: the brothers must forfeit their lives in order to save Binyamin. [Yosef also does many other things to make the brothers wonder and think, to shake them up a bit - "cheshbon ha'nefesh".] By planting his cup in Binyamin's bag, not only will Yosef find out whether the brothers had done teshuva, but the brothers now have an opportunity to **prove to themselves** that they have done teshuva - that they are indeed men of virtue! Only after they demonstrate willingness to give up their lives for Binyamin will they be able to face Yosef as a brother, and unite once again as a complete family.

Finally Yosef will reveal himself (in Parshat Vayigash), but despite his intense desire to do so, he holds himself back until he has created a situation where the brothers cannot only look at him, but will also be able to 'look at themselves.'

Maase Avot Siman La'Banim

By the end of this entire episode, God had created a situation that would guarantee the physical survival of Am Yisrael during the famine (and also set the stage for "geulat mitzraim"). Yosef, in the meantime, had created a situation that would keep Am Yisrael united.

Throughout the generations God oversees our history, making sure that we survive, by creating opportunities for our redemption. However, as we enjoy His providence, it remains **our own** responsibility to make sure that we remain united as our destiny unfolds.

Shabbat Shalom,
Menachem