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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYIGASH

**"I am Yosef; Does my Father Yet Live?"
Yosef Reveals His Identity¹**

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The story of Yosef and his brothers takes a surprising turn when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers. Just when it seems that Yosef wishes to permanently cut himself off from his brothers, and when he manages to get his hands on Binyamin, he finally reveals his identity, and everything appears to work out well. Precisely because of this surprising turn of events, the question arises: What did Yosef see at this time to make this sharp turn? A number of answers to this question have been suggested. These explanations were originally intended to answer the flip side of the difficulty in Yosef's conduct: Why didn't Yosef reveal himself to his brothers earlier, or at least attempt to let his father know that he was still alive?

This question was raised first by the Ramban (42:9), who accounts for Yosef's behavior by explaining that he was waiting for his dreams to be fulfilled and for his brothers to prostrate themselves before him. The Abravanel (chap. 42, second question) and others propose that Yosef wanted to check whether his brothers still held a grudge against him because he was the son of Rachel, their father's favorite wife. Once it became clear that they were ready to sacrifice themselves to ensure Binyamin's liberty, Yosef understood that they regretted their earlier actions. Since they fully repented, he allowed himself to reveal his identity to them. The common denominator of these explanations is that they assume that until the moment that Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, he conducted a carefully thought-out plan; only when it was realized did he decide to reveal his identity.

R. Yoel Bin Nun disagrees with this approach.² In his opinion, Yosef's dreams were already fulfilled earlier. In addition, in Yehuda's speech, he emphasizes the guarantee that he had given his father and his father's psychological state; there is no proof here that the brothers' attitude toward Binyamin had really changed. R. Bin Nun further notes that the verses leave the impression that the move was spontaneous on the part of Yosef, and therefore was not part of a pre-arranged plan.

We would like to justify this view of Yosef's revelation from another perspective.

"And God sent me before you to place for you a remnant in the land"

Together with his revealing of his identity, Yosef presents his perspective on the course of events until that point:

And Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef; does my father yet live?" And his brothers could not answer him,

for they were affrighted at his presence. And Yosef said to his brothers, "Come near to me, I pray you." And they came near. And he said, "I am Yosef your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years has the famine been in the land; and there are yet five years, in which there shall be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to give you a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt..." And he fell upon his brother Binyamin's neck and wept; and Binyamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. (45:3-15)

Yosef indicates that the purpose of his speech was to relieve his brothers' difficult feelings about having sold him into slavery, because ultimately it turns out that the whole process was part of a Divine plan, the purpose of which was to benefit everyone. At the end of the speech, he embraces Binyamin, followed by his other brothers, and he seems to have succeeded in relieving the panic that gripped his brothers when he revealed his identity to them.

However, at the end of the book of *Bereishit*, we read about a move that undermines this impression:

And when Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Yosef will hate us, and will fully requite us all the evil which we did to him." (50:15)

For no apparent reason, Yosef's brothers now fear Yosef's revenge. The *midrashim*, and in their wake the Biblical commentators, adopt two main approaches to explain the conclusion reached by Yosef's brothers. The first approach is that of the *Midrash Aggada*, which is cited by Rashi. According to this view, Yosef's attitude toward his brothers did indeed undergo a practical change following their father's death:

"And when Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead." What did they see? They saw that he withdrew from them, for as long as their father Yaakov was alive, he would eat with them, and they with him. But when he died, he withdrew from them. Immediately they sent to Yosef: "...So shall you say to Yosef, 'Forgive, I pray you now, the transgression of your brothers.'" (*Midrash Aggada* [Buber], *Bereishit*, *Vayechi* 50:15)

The second approach is that of the *Sekhel Tov* (ed. Buber, *Vayechi* 50:15), the *Chizkuni*, and others:

"And when Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead" – That is to say, that fear of him was removed from Yosef. "They said, 'It may be that Yosef will hate us.'" What did they see to say this? When they returned from Chevron, they passed through Shechem to Dotan. Yosef leaned over his chariot and looked at the pit into which his

¹ Unless specified otherwise, all references are to the book of *Bereishit*.

² "*Ha-Pilug Ve-Ha-Achdut: Kefel Ha-Ta'ut Ve-Helem Ha-Gilui – Mipnei Mah lo Shalach Yosef (Shali'ach) el Aviv?*" *Megadim* 1, pp. 20-31. R. Bin Nun's

alternative proposal to resolve the matter was reinforced by the words of Shafan HaSofer in his addenda to the *Yerushalmi* (cited by Yaakov Spiegel, *Megadim* 5, pp. 93-94).

brothers had cast him, and sighed. When his brothers saw this, they said, "Hate is still in his heart."

The deficiency of these two approaches is obvious, as they rely on details that are not even alluded to in Scripture. On the other hand, the verses do not spell out the basis for the brothers' fear of Yosef. The only fact that the text provides is that the fear came to the surface with the death of their father. From this we may understand that the fear was always there below the surface; now it simply became more tangible. We must thus understand whether there could have been a basis for the brothers' fear, given that it appears that Yosef's relationship toward them was especially warm and that he had adopted a forgiving attitude toward them despite the injustice that had been committed against him.

"You meant evil against me"

Due to the brothers' fear, they invent a testament in the name of their father, according to which he had asked Yosef to preserve the integrity of the family and not take revenge against them. Upon hearing their words, Yosef bursts into tears and responds:

And Yosef said to them, "Fear not; for am I in the place of God? **And as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.** Now therefore fear you not; I will sustain you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (50:19-21)

If we listen carefully to what was said on this occasion, we find that there is a significant difference between what is stated here and the analysis of the events that Yosef presented when he earlier revealed his identity to his brothers:

"And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; **for God did send me before you to preserve life.** For these two years has the famine been in the land; and there are yet five years, in which there shall be neither plowing nor harvest. **And God sent me before you to give you a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance.** So now it was not you that sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt." (45:5-8)

When Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, he clears them of all guilt. He mentions the fact that they sold him, but immediately interprets it as part of a larger Divine process. Moreover, the Divine process that included the sale of Yosef was undertaken for the purpose of saving their own family and giving them a remnant on the earth. The people of Egypt are not mentioned at all; ostensibly, they are merely a backdrop for this Divine process, which focuses on the family of Yaakov. Yosef's appointment as ruler of Egypt is also interpreted in light of the Divine plan to save them.

But in the course of Yosef's reply to his brothers after the death of their father, the account of the events is completely different, and to some extent even the opposite. Yosef recognizes his brothers' guilt, although he knows that even though they thought to do him evil, God turned their thoughts into goodness. This goodness involves keeping the masses of Egyptians alive. By virtue of the Divine move to secure the economy of the Egyptian people, his brothers also benefited from Yosef's supplying them with all their needs. Thus, the goal of the Divine move was focused on Egypt, but Yosef's family was given the opportunity to enjoy the good of Egypt. When he revealed his identity to his brothers, Yosef

had claimed just the opposite – that the whole process was intended to keep his family alive, and by virtue of this process the inhabitants of Egypt were able to survive the famine!

"And when Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'It may be that Yosef will hate us'"

Perhaps the difference between Yosef's analyses of the course of events will lead us to an answer to our question regarding what caused Yosef's brothers to fear Yosef's revenge after the death of their father. On the face of it, Yosef's second analysis, after his brothers approached him, seems to be much more compatible with reality. He is aware of his brothers' sin committed against him. Nevertheless, he is able to retroactively judge their actions from a broader perspective, in light of the results of this process. Accordingly, he defines the goal of the move in a realistic and reasonable manner – as a means of keeping the Egyptian people alive.

When Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, it seems that he deliberately paints reality in a way that suits his brothers' traits. His words indicate that the entire process, with all the suffering that was caused him personally, was done to save them, and he views this now as justified.

In the hearts of his brothers – who, with their mouths agape, hear these words from the mouth of the one who abused them until just a moment ago – it is possible to imagine the next move. At the time that these words were stated, they did indeed lead to a great rapprochement between the brothers. But later, with a more sober look at their content, these words may actually have planted fear in their hearts. The surprising change in Yosef's attitude toward them and the extreme analysis that he adopted in his interpretation of the course of the events could very well have led them to think that his optimistic analysis of reality was nothing but part of the burst of emotion that accompanied the event. When examined against reality, his words seemed overly optimistic and a bit detached.

The brothers never really had an opportunity to clarify the matter with him, and perhaps they were comfortable with that. But it is also possible that the exaggerated content of the warm words that accompanied the revelation of his identity was a source of concern for them – a concern that came to the surface after their father died.

The proof for this is in fact the revised speech that Yosef gave. In that speech, he proves the validity of their concerns, for his previous speech was indeed far from reality. It stands to reason that he too rethought the matter, but his virtue revealed itself in the fact that even though he reviewed what happened in a cold and reasonable manner, he remained true to his conclusion. He did not hate his brothers, despite what they had done to him.

The verses shed light on the matter with which we began our discussion. A comparison of Yosef's analyses of the events indicates as R. Bin-Nun has suggested. The speech that Yosef gave when he revealed himself to his brothers was spontaneous and not planned; it was given out of a burst of emotion, when Yosef collapsed in front of his brothers, who were pleading on behalf of their brother and father. This emotional collapse is what raised their fear that these words might be valid for the time being but would not stand the test of time.

"I am Yosef; does my father yet live?"³

Let us now expand our gaze and look from above at the two situations in which these two speeches were delivered. First of all, there is a linguistic similarity between the speeches. Yosef uses similar expressions: "to save you alive" (45:7), "to save much people alive" (50:20). But we also find identical patterns of behavior. Before Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, Scripture paints the scene of the event as follows:

As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away, they and their asses. And when they were gone out of the city, and were not yet far off, Yosef said to his steward, "Up, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, 'Why have you rewarded evil for good'..." And he searched, beginning at the eldest, and leaving off at the youngest; and the goblet was found in Binyamin's sack... And Yehuda and his brothers came to Yosef's house, and he was yet there; **and they fell before him on the ground.** And Yosef said to them, "What deed is this that you have done..." And Yehuda said... "God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, **we are my lord's bondmen**, both we, and he also in whose hand the cup is found..." Then Yehuda came near to him, and said, "Oh my lord, let Your servant, I pray you, speak a word in my lord's ears, and let not your anger burn against Your servant; for You are even as Pharaoh"... Yosef could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, "Cause every man to go out from me." And there stood no man with him while Yosef made himself known to his brothers. **And he wept aloud;** and the Egyptians heard, and the house of Pharaoh heard. (44:3-45:2)

The second time the brothers open the subject, we find to our surprise that the parties behave in an identical manner:

And when Yosef's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Yosef will hate us, and will fully requite us all the evil which we did to him." And they sent a message to Yosef, saying, "Your father did command before he died, saying, 'So shall you say to Yosef: Forgive, I pray you now, the transgression of your brothers, and their sin, for that they did to you evil.' And now, we pray you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." **And Yosef wept when they spoke to him.** And his brothers also went **and fell down before his face;** and they said, "**Behold, we are your bondmen.**"

We see the brothers falling on their faces and proclaiming, "We are your bondmen," while on the other side, Yosef comes to tears when he sees their conduct. Now we must look for the meaning of the similarities between the situations.

"The sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me"

Many years earlier in the land of Canaan, Yosef began presenting his dreams to his brothers, and he thereby succeeded in stirring up their wrath against him:

And Yosef dreamed a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him yet the more. And he said to them, "Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your

sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf." And his brothers said to him, "Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us?" And they hated him yet the more for his dreams and for his words. And he dreamed yet another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, "Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me." And he told it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow down to you to the earth?" And his brothers envied him; but his father kept the matter in mind. (37:5-11)

We all know what happened next, and the brothers' ways separate for years. However, after a lengthy period, suddenly they meet again. This time Yosef is the ruler, and they come to buy food. When they appear before him, Scripture reveals the memories that flood his thoughts:

And Yosef was the governor over the land; he it was that sold to all the people of the land. And Yosef's brothers came **and bowed down to him with their faces to the earth.** And Yosef saw his brothers, and he knew them, but made himself strange to them, and spoke roughly with them; and he said to them, "From where do you come?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan to buy food." And Yosef knew his brothers, but they knew him not. **And Yosef remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them,** and said to them, "You are spies; to see the nakedness of the land you are come."

The mention of Yosef's dreams at this stage suggests that Yosef saw what was happening before him as a realization of those dreams. But was Yosef correct in his analysis? Surely the brothers bowed down not to Yosef, but rather to the viceroy of Egypt!

Yosef's dreams seem to come true only in the concluding passage of the book. When the brothers come to confess their sin to Yosef, knowing his true identity and then bowing down before him – only then does his dream come true. But this prostration comes against a background of false suspicion. They suspected Yosef of harboring an intention to harm them, and this was not true. Yosef never planned to take revenge against them for what they had done to him. Here the brothers were mistaken about what they attributed to Yosef.

Against this background, we can understand the Torah's intention in the parallel to the previous situation, where Yosef casts fear upon his brothers when he tries to remove Binyamin from their hands. It seems that here his threatening behavior is in vain, since they have already regretted his sale and he knows it. The Bible seems to hint that here it is Yosef who has erred:

And they said one to another, "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us"... And they knew not that Yosef understood them; for the interpreter was between them. (42: 21-24)

The Bible seeks to hint by way of the parallel between the two pictures that from a certain perspective, the story of Yosef and his brother is a drama of errors. The brothers erred in their false suspicion of Yosef, while Yosef erred in his maintaining an estranged attitude for such a long time. He should have ended that

³ This part of the *shiur* is based on the appendix to my article, "Ha-Oz Ve-Ha-Anava – Bein Reuven Le-Yehuda," *Megadim* 3, pp. 31-32.

earlier, thereby sparing everyone, and especially his father, unnecessary grief. Thus, according to our understanding, after all of the commentators' explanations of Yosef's failure to inform his father that he was still alive, Scripture wishes to allude that the fact remains that he erred about this point.

The Bible creates a parallel between the passage at the end of the book in which Yosef's dreams are fulfilled and the passage in which he reveals his identity because the former is meant to replace the latter. The warm atmosphere and mutual appreciation that the brothers showed each other over the course of the request for forgiveness was supposed to replace the harsh and cruel attitude when they bowed to Yosef when they pleaded for Binyamin's pardon. Had the brothers been on the same side of the fence, prepared to give each other greater trust, both parties would have been spared a great deal of pain.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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