

TO SEE AND BE SEEN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Yisrael said, "How great! Yosef my son is still alive! I shall go and see him before I die."

Be'er Yosef: The poignancy is overwhelming. Yaakov, bursting with love for his cherished son from whom he was so tragically separated, desperately wishes to be reunited with him. He expresses his urgency in getting to see him. Conscious of his advanced age, he wants to ensure as best as possible that his death will not make the reunion impossible.

Yet this cannot be. It is understandable that people wish to beat Death's clock in order to accomplish something of great importance. A person may hope to be allowed to complete some mitzvah project before he dies. Achieving the mitzvah, or accomplishing the result of a plan long in the making, becomes the very purpose of living longer.

If, however, Yaakov wished to still the longing for his son that preoccupied him, he had nothing to fear from death! If he died, he would no longer be burdened with the pain of separation from his son! We must conclude that Yaakov had more on his mind than the stirring of his heartstrings for Yosef.

Quite possibly, Yaakov employed humility when he said that he wished to see Yosef. His real intention was that Yosef should see him. Yaakov had heard that his son had remained steadfast in this commitment to his father's values. Nonetheless, he suspected that in the space of a twenty-two year separation, some of Yosef's Jewish ardor had cooled. (He was not wrong. Chazal² say that Yosef forgot his learning during that interval.) Yaakov made it a priority to reenter Yosef's life, so that the father's example could stimulate and inspire the son. This was so important to him, that he pushed for the opportunity before death would rob him of it.

Yaakov's intention was to give his son a jolt of his depth and intensity. As it turned out, Yaakov was able to provide that at the very moment that the two of them met - and in a manner that Yosef hardly could have anticipated. Yosef spots his beloved father, and slowly approaches in his chariot, accompanied by a royal entourage. As was the practice through the realm, all those who became aware of his presence stopped what they were doing, bowed and prostrated themselves, and called "Avreich."³ Women gathered to catch a glimpse of his proverbial good looks.⁴

Yosef draws close to his father, throwing himself upon him in a loving embrace. Yaakov, however, does not return the embrace. Instead, he chooses the moment to recite the Shema.⁵ Firmly,

confidently he trumpets the words of emunah for all to hear.

The effect upon Yosef was overwhelming. Yosef had remained loyal to his father's teaching during twenty-two years of separation. But he had only memories of Yaakov upon which to rest his beliefs. He had not benefited all those years from observing the kedushah of Yaakov's conduct. Hearing Yaakov's declaration of the Shema struck Yosef's core and triggered new waves of crying.

The Torah speaks of Yosef crying "excessively." Rashi⁶ explains that he cried "more than usual." Is this worthwhile pointing out? How could Yosef, having lived with separation, loneliness, and imprisonment for as long as he did not cry more than usual?

Rashi means, however, that Yosef cried beyond what we could imagine is appropriate even for someone who had suffered as he did and was now reunited with his father. The excessive crying came from a different place. As we have explained, however, the extra dimension of tears came from the sense of awe in beholding his father once again, conducting himself with the kedushah of one of the avos.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 45:28
 2. Bereishis Rabbah 79:5
 3. Bereishis 41:45
 4. Rashi, Bereishis 49:22
 5. Rashi, Bereishis 46:29
 6. Ibid.
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