

R. YOEL BIN-NUN'S ARTICLE ON YOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: WHY DIDN'T JOSEPH CONTACT HIS FATHER?

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

Adapted by Zvi Shimon

The following is an abridgement of articles written by Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, a teacher in the Herzog Teachers' College affiliated with Yeshivat Har Etzion, and Rabbi Yaakov Medan, a teacher in the yeshiva, which originally appeared in Hebrew in Megadim 1.

Ramban poses a difficult question, one which continues to puzzle whoever studies the book of Genesis:

"How is it that Joseph, after living many years in Egypt, having attained a high and influential position in the house of an important Egyptian official, did not send his father even one message to inform him (that he was alive) and comfort him? Egypt is only six days' travel from Hebron, and respect for his father would have justified even a year's journey! (It would) have been a grave sin to torment his father by leaving him in mourning and bereavement for himself and for Shim'on; even if he wanted to hurt his brothers a little, how could he not feel pity for his aged father (Ramban to Gen. 42:9)?"

Abarbanel poses the same question, but more bluntly:

"Why did Joseph hide his identity from his brothers and speak harshly to them? It is criminal to be as vengeful and recriminating as a serpent!... How is it that as his brothers were starving and far from home, having left their families and small children and, above all, his aged, worried and suffering father waiting for them, did he not show compassion, but rather intensified the anguish by arresting Shim'on?" (chap. 4, question 4)

1) RAV YOEL BIN-NUN'S SOLUTION:

The usual solution, advanced by the Ramban that Yosef was trying to fulfill the dreams, is rejected by R. Bin-Nun, chiefly because it doesn't address, in his opinion, the moral question. How could Yosef have left his father in torment, only to bring his dreams to fruition?

Our entire outlook on this story changes, however, if we accept the fact that Joseph did not know that his brothers had fooled his father with the coat, the blood, and the lie that Joseph had been devoured by wild animals. Such thoughts never occurred to him! Hence it was Joseph who spent thirteen years of slavery in Egypt and, the following years of greatness wondering: "Where is my father? Why has no one come to look for me?" All the factors are now reversed, when seen from Joseph's point of view. Egypt is, after all, close to Canaan, and Jacob was a rich, important and influential man, with international familial and political connections. The Midianites or Ishmaelites who brought Joseph to Egypt were his cousins; is it possible that no one from that caravan could be located in all those years? We know that Jacob does not search for his son, as he thinks Joseph is dead, but Joseph has no way of knowing this.

Joseph's wonder at his father's silence is joined by a terrible sense of anxiety which grows stronger over the years, as seasons and years pass by and no one comes. Joseph's anguish centers on his father: the voice inside him asking **where is my father?** is joined by another harsh voice: **Why did my father send me to my brothers that day?** He concludes that his brothers must have succeeded in convincing Jacob, and he has been disowned. Years later, when Joseph rides in the viceroy's chariot, when he shaves his beard and stands before Pharaoh, it is clear to him that God must have decreed that his life would be lived separately from his family's. He gives expression to this feeling in the name he gives his eldest son, born of an Egyptian wife:

...he called him Menashe, because God has made me forget (nashani) all my labor and my father's house (41:51).

To forget his father's house!

Joseph's entire world is built on the misconception that his father has renounced him, while Jacob's world is destroyed by the misconception that Joseph is dead. Joseph's world is shaken when his brothers stand before him, not knowing who he is, and bow down to him. At that moment, he must question this new reality -

("he remembers the dreams he dreamt about them")

and is thrown back into the past. Stalling for time, he begins a line of inquiry - and action - which is geared to one end: to find out why his father had rejected him, if at all. He plots to keep Benjamin, so that his maternal brother can tell him all that has transpired. This was Joseph's plan to find out what had happened and how to deal with it.

Judah's response was an attempt to obtain Benjamin's release by appealing for mercy for his aged father. In so doing, he tells Joseph - totally unintentionally - exactly what he wanted so desperately to hear, thereby freeing him and eventually Jacob, from their mutual errors.

"Your servant our father said to us: 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One has left me; I said he was devoured and I have not seen him since. (If) you take this son too and tragedy befalls him you will bring my old age down to She'ol in agony' " (44:24-30).

Joseph needs to hear no more. He finally realizes the naked truth: No one has cut him off at all! He has not been forgotten!

Joseph could no longer restrain himself before all who were standing before him, and cried: 'Have every one leave me!'...and he cried out loud...and he told his brothers: I am Joseph: Is my father still alive? (45:1-3)

Does he live? Is he yet my father, who loves me and has not forgotten me? Is it possible?

Each of the players in our scene had a plan, and pursued that plan. But the plan which was finally revealed was a higher plan, geared at bringing Jacob's family to Egypt and creating the Jewish people.

2) RAV YAAKOV MEDAN'S CRITIQUE OF RAV BIN-NUN'S SOLUTION

This thesis of Joseph's suspicion towards his father is untenable. Joseph knew that he was, after all, his father's favorite son and that his father had made him the striped coat. He also knew that his father had loved Rachel most of all his wives. Above all, would a man like Jacob behave deceitfully, sending Joseph to his brothers on the false pretext of ascertaining their well-being, intending in fact that they sell him as a slave? Is there a son who would suspect his father of such a deed? This assumption is totally unrealistic.

It also remains unclear why Joseph, surprised that his father did not seek him out, came to harbor the kind of suspicions attributed to him by R. Bin-Nun. How could he be certain that his father knew of the sale, but refrained from searching for him? Why did it not occur to him that his father regarded him as dead? To this day, a person who disappears without a trace is presumed dead. Why should

we assume that Joseph did not believe that the brothers were lying to his father? It was precisely because the brothers did not habitually report their actions to their father that Joseph found it necessary to tell his father all their misdeeds (37:2).

In addition, R. Bin-Nun claims that Joseph's stubborn silence was broken upon hearing Judah say **he was surely devoured and I have not seen him since** (44:28). Joseph realized at this point that his father had not deserted him. However according to the simplest reading of the text, Joseph's resistance broke down when Judah offered himself as a slave instead of Benjamin:

Therefore please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not see to the sorrow that would overcome my father! ...Joseph could no longer control himself (44:32- 45:1).

R. Bin-Nun claims that Joseph's feelings of rejection by his family are the foundation for the naming of his first born **Menashe**, meaning **God has made me forget my hardship and my father's home** (nashani - made me forget).

In my opinion, the meaning of the verse is different. **My hardship** (amali) is to be understood as follows (see Ibn Ezra - Genesis 6:13): **God has made me forget completely my hardship and the HARSHIP of my parental home**. Joseph does not offer thanks to God for having made him forget his parental home, but rather offers thanks for enabling him to forget his tribulations (his labors) in his father's house. It is only after Joseph rises to the throne that he is able to make sense of his suffering in the two previous episodes, in prison ("amali") and in his father's house (beit avi).

3) RAV MEDAN'S SOLUTION: "THE PATH OF REPENTANCE"

Abarbanel offers the following explanation for Joseph's not contacting his father while in Egypt:

"Even after Joseph tested his brothers by accusing them of espionage, he was still not certain whether they loved Benjamin or whether they still hated Rachel's children, so he focused on Benjamin to see whether they would try to save him." (chap. 42, quests. 4, 6)

Joseph's behavior is part of an overall scheme to test the brothers and provide them with an opportunity to fully repent for selling him into slavery. The sin of Joseph's brothers is one of the more serious sins related in the book of Genesis. Both the Torah (Exodus 21:17, 20:13; see Rashi ibid; Deut. 24:7) and the Prophets (Joel 4, Amos 2:6-10 and many others) equate this sin of selling a free

man into bondage with the gravest of sins. The penitence of Joseph's brothers is not an incidental event appearing as part of another story, but a major theme of the narrative.

Reuven and Judah were vying for the family leadership, Jacob having effectively ceased playing the leadership role (see for example 34:5, 34:13-14, 35:22, 43:5). After Shim'on and Levi are excluded from the race for leadership, the struggle continues between Reuven and Judah. It finds expression in their argument as to Joseph's fate (37:22,26- 27), in the recognition of the sin of his sale (42:22 contra 44:16), in the assumption of responsibility for Benjamin in Egypt (42:37 contra 43:8-9) and in additional verses in the Torah.

Reuven and Judah were each engaged in a process of penitence for similar sins, Reuven for having slept with his father's wife (as appears from the simple textual reading), Judah for having lain, albeit unknowingly, with his son's wife. It would seem clear that their individual repentance is also part of the leadership struggle.

At first glance there seems to be no connection between Reuven's sin with his father's wife or Judah's sin with his son's wife and the selling of Joseph. This, however is misleading. According to the simple reading of the text, Reuven's intention was to inherit his father's leadership in his lifetime, like Absalom who slept with David's concubine. His attempt to rescue Joseph and his dreams of royalty (37:20) is part of his repentance for his sin with Bilhah.

The proximity of the story of Judah and Tamar to the selling of Joseph indicates a connection as well. The chain of disasters that strike Judah, the loss of his wife and two sons, is apparently a punishment for selling Joseph. Reuven later advances the strange suggestion that Jacob kill his two sons, should he fail to return Benjamin from Egypt (42:37). It would seem that he was influenced by the punishment Judah had received for selling Joseph - the death of his two sons. This terrible punishment for a terrible sin is branded into Reuven's consciousness. Reuven is ready to receive the same punishment if he deserts Benjamin in Egypt.

Initially, Judah did not imagine that his sons died due to his sin, saying **Tamar's fate is that her husbands will die** (Yevamot 34 and Genesis 38:11). Finally, Judah realizes that Tamar was in the right and he admits **she is more righteous than I**.(38:26). Only at this stage did he realize that she was not destined to have her husbands die but rather that it was his destiny to lose his sons. The sin was his. From this recognition he rebuilds his shattered home.

The process of repentance accompanies the brothers wherever they go. When the Egyptian viceroy commands them to bring Benjamin, the second son of Rachel's, the brothers are immediately reminded of the sale of Joseph. The two contenders - Reuven and Judah - respond in character. Reuven sees only the punishment for the crime, and he does not suggest any means of rectification.

And Reuven answered them: 'Did I not tell you, do not sin against the child, and you did not listen; now his blood is being avenged.' (Gen. 42:22)

Judah acknowledges his sin, but also suggests a positive path of repentance for the evil done. He is not satisfied with sackcloth and fasting, which are merely expressions of mourning and acceptance of the verdict.

And they tore their clothesAnd Judah said, 'What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has divulged the sin of your servants; we have become my lord's slaves' (44:13- 17).

And further on,

Let your servant stay instead of the boy as a slave to my lord and let the boy go up with his brothers (44:33).

From Judah's speech it is apparent that he did not confess to stealing the cup. He considered the whole episode of the stolen goblet as a fabrication. Otherwise there is no sense in telling us of Benjamin's journey to Egypt, or his suggesting that he replace Benjamin. This is how Rashi and other commentators interpret Judah's words. His words, **God has revealed the SIN of your servants**, undoubtedly relate to the selling of Joseph.

Similarly, Judah's words to his father, **If I bring him not to you and set him before you, then I shall have SINNED to you forever** (43:9), indicate his understanding of the connection between Joseph's being brought down to Egypt and Benjamin being brought down to Egypt. Benjamin's abandonment in Egypt would be a continuation of his grievous sin of selling Joseph. What sin is there and why should he be punished if Benjamin is forcibly taken? We must therefore see the necessity of bringing Benjamin down to Egypt as a consequence of the sin. For Judah, protecting Benjamin at all cost is the atonement demanded for the selling of Joseph. In offering their respective propositions, Reuven and Judah remain faithful to their personalities: Reuven through acceptance of the punishment, and Judah through confrontation with the sin itself.

Our assumption is that Joseph too was plagued by his brother's sin and, consequently, with the future of the house of Israel, no less than with his own fate. From the time he was sold, he had begun to rebuild not only his own life, but his family's unity. This unification was not to be forced upon his brothers, but rather achieved by willingness and love. Joseph desired a unification born of his brother's regretting their sin, a product of wholehearted repentance. Joseph believed in his own ability to initiate such a process or at least to test its existence.

Joseph had commanded his brothers to bring Benjamin to Egypt. When the brothers actually brought Benjamin to Egypt, despite the danger, in order to redeem Shim'on and to buy food (in a way similar to how Joseph was sold **for shoes**), Joseph, who was unaware of Judah's assumption of guardianship and its importance, presumably saw the brothers' action as yet another failure to meet

the test and challenge that he had set before them.

Joseph cries three times. The first two times are inner, bound by self-restraint. The third time he breaks down totally and cries, openly and without control. R. Bin-Nun ignores the obvious connection between three instances.

A) *The brothers are subjected to an intensive interrogation during three days of imprisonment, inducing them to repent for their sin and accept the punishment and suffering, with Reuven in the lead (42:21,22). We have previously defined this kind of repentance as Reuven's repentance, a repentance which involves submission and acceptance of the verdict, but lacks a program for improvement and change. Joseph is prepared to accept his brothers' confession and their submission. He witnesses the newly reestablished connection of the ten brothers to the sons of Rachel, and he cries (42:24). But this is not sufficient for him. He requires a fuller, deeper repentance.*

B) *Joseph expected that the brothers would return to him empty-handed, placing themselves in danger by explaining to him that they had decided not to endanger Benjamin for the sake of Shim'on and were willing to suffer the shame of hunger. This is what would have happened, had Jacob had his way. Thus Joseph was disappointed when it became clear to him that the brothers had brought Benjamin in order to redeem Shim'on, despite the danger to their youngest brother. Joseph is unaware of Judah's assumption of responsibility for Benjamin. His mercy is aroused when he realizes that his younger brother's fate is to be no better than his - Joseph views Benjamin's being brought to Egypt as a reoccurrence of his own sale. True, in this case it is brought on by hunger and circumstances and is not the outcome of jealousy or hatred. Nonetheless, this was not the total repentance that was expected in the wake of the confessions he had heard from the brothers and Reuven in Egypt.*

The verse tells us that Joseph feels compassion towards Benjamin, and weeps in private. Joseph believes that Judah, the man who proposed his sale, had prevailed over Reuven, the man who tried to save him. This is the only possible explanation of Joseph's crying over Benjamin, his tears being tears of mercy for him and not tears of happiness at the event of their meeting. Why else, should the exiled, beloved brother, who had spent a third of his life in prison, have pitied his thirty-year old brother, who had remained with his father and raised a large family?

C) *Joseph decided to test his brothers once more. This time, however, the test would be more difficult. He makes his brothers jealous of Benjamin in the same way as they had once been jealous of him. He displays more outward affection for Benjamin than for them and increases his portion five times over as well as giving him a striped coat (and five other garments, 43:34). He also attempts to arouse the brothers' hatred towards Benjamin, for having stolen his goblet, an act which re-implicated them for the crime of espionage. Joseph's aim is to test*

their reaction to the prospect of Benjamin's permanent enslavement in Egypt.

The brothers rent their garments (parallel to Joseph's coat 37:23). Judah says, **God has found the iniquity of your servants**, and then offers himself into permanent slavery as atonement for his lifelong sin towards his father. At this point, Joseph is convinced of their total repentance. Judah's act combines two kinds of repentance. The first form of repentance is that required by the early mystics, (foremost, Rabbi Eliezer of Worms, author of the Sefer Rokeach), whereby penance must counterbalance the crime. Judah, in a torn garment as a permanent slave in Egypt, is in the exact position he had placed Joseph. Secondly, we have the repentance as defined by the Rambam (Law of Repentance 2:1):

....what is complete repentance? When a person is confronted with the opportunity to repeat his sin but restrains himself because of repentance, and not because of fear or weakness.

Judah now is prepared to give his life to save Benjamin. Joseph comes to realize his mistake in crying for pity over Benjamin. He understands that Benjamin's being brought down to Egypt was not the result of the brother's disdain for Benjamin but rather the result of Judah's becoming Benjamin's guarantor. Judah's repentance, including his attempt to amend the past, is a continuation and completion of Reuven's atonement. His weeping for the third time is a continuation of his weeping the first time, when Reuven submitted. When the repentance is complete Joseph is no longer capable of restraining himself, and he weeps openly. At this stage the brother's repentance for selling Joseph into slavery is complete and Joseph can reveal himself to them.

4) RAV BIN-NUN RESPONDS

After carefully reading Rabbi Medan's detailed arguments, I nevertheless maintain that my presentation of the events is the correct one. There is clearly a process of repentance and rectification on the part of Joseph's brothers, and this is our guide to understanding the affair. But all this is God's plan. All Medan's evidence proving a process of teshuva and restoration is correct; but there is no reason to credit Joseph with this. The challenge of repentance offered the brothers regarding Benjamin is a challenge issuing from God. Joseph was forever acting according to natural, human considerations. It should be noted that Rabbi Medan gives an extremely contrived interpretation of the verse **for God has forced me to forget all my tribulations and my father's house**. The verse seemingly coheres with my explanation. He also totally ignores Judah's words, **You have know that my wife bore me two, one departed from me and I said he was surely devoured**.

[Back to the Parashah](#)