

# YOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

*Dear Haverim,*

Under the heading of "better late than never" or "very early for next year", Dr. Avi Shmidman and I collaborated to compose a "final stanza" to the piyyut "Ma'oz Tzur", thanking God for the modern-day miracle of Jewish statehood. You can find the text, translation and commentary at <https://sites.google.com/site/shmidman/Home/MaozTzur-thefinalstanza.pdf>

Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I

Then Yoseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Yoseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Yoseph said to his brothers, "I am Yoseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. (B'resheet 45:3)

Subsequent to Yehudah's heartfelt plea on behalf of his younger brother (and ward) Binyamin (44:18-34), Yoseph is unable to control himself. Shooing out the bystanders in his court, Yoseph then reveals himself to his brothers.

There are three questions I would like to pose; two of which are local to this "outburst" of Yoseph, the third which addresses the entire Yoseph-brothers interaction in Egypt until now:

- 1) What caused Yoseph to lose control over his emotions?
- 2) It is clear from here that Yoseph intended to control himself and not reveal his identity - at least at this point - to his brothers. What was his plan that was disrupted by this loss of control?
- 3) The general question: What was Yoseph's intent in the whole charade with his brothers? Why didn't he immediately greet them when they first came down to Egypt?

Another slice of this question is, as Ramban asks:

How is it that Yoseph, 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 Hevron, 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 B'resheet 42:9)?"

In other words, besides his treatment of the brothers in his court, how did Yoseph allow his father to mourn for so many years when he could have easily informed him of his whereabouts and safety?

Rabbis Yoel Bin-Nun and Yaakov Medan, both of Yeshivat Har Etzion, addressed this issue in the first issue of the Tanakh journal Megadim, put out by the Teacher's College of the Yeshivah. A synopsis of their approaches is available right here, courtesy of Yeshivat Har Etzion.

## II

### RABBI BIN-NUN'S APPROACH

There are two basic facts that must be stressed to understand Yoseph's behavior. First of all, the family tradition until this point (in Avraham and Yitzchak's families) was to pass the mantle of leadership on to one son and to send the other(s) away. Second, we have to remember that even though we, the readers, are aware of everyone's part in the story - the "players" only know what is revealed to them.

Based on this, Rabbi Bin-Nun suggests that Yoseph had no idea that his father was mourning his loss. If anything, the events which led up to his sale convinced him that father had been convinced by the sons of Leah to reject Yoseph and select them (or one of them). Yoseph knew nothing of the bloody coat, used to convince Ya'akov that he was dead. As far as he was concerned, Ya'akov's lack of interest in his welfare (evidenced by Ya'akov's not looking for him after his "disappearance" in Dotan) proved this point - Ya'akov had rejected him and accepted the arguments of his brothers.

When the brothers came down to Egypt, Yoseph found one opportunity to really find out what had happened back at home - if only he could speak with Binyamin, his full brother! Therefore, Yoseph acted as he did - in order to get Binyamin down to Egypt and then to get him alone (as his slave - at the end of Miketz) in order to find out what had really transpired back in Hevron.

This was, according to Rabbi Bin-Nun, Yoseph's original plan. The plan was disrupted because of

Yehudah's impassioned plea for Binyamin's freedom. Suddenly Yoseph was faced with new information which turned his entire perspective around - father had thought him dead and that's why he had never come looking for him! (This synopsis doesn't even come close to doing Rabbi Bin-Nun's treatment justice...)

### III

#### WHAT CAUSED YOSEPH TO LOSE CONTROL?

As mentioned above, one explanation for Yoseph's outburst is the new information - that instead of having been rejected by father, his father had been mourning for him.

There are, however, several other ways to understand his sudden reaction. (Take into account that there are good reasons to reject Rabbi Bin-Nun's explanation - see Rabbi Medan's rejoinder in the Megadim article.) I would like to suggest five of them.

#### A: AN ACCUMULATION OF COMPASSION

In two earlier passages (42:24 & 43:30-31), we read about Yoseph's emotions and how he had to turn away from his brothers in order to regain his composure. Significantly, in the second passage, we read that vaYit'apak - ("he restrained himself"); which is the same word used in our passage - v'lo Yakhol Yoseph l'Hit'apek - ("he could no longer restrain himself"). We can understand from this use of the unique word hit'apek that the Torah is trying to associate his earlier restraint with the present lack thereof. In other words, the emotional accumulation, climaxed with Yehudah's plea, caused Yoseph to finally break down. This is apparently Rashbam's understanding of the verse.

#### B: A MULTITUDE OF INTERCESSORS

In our verse (45:1), Yoseph is unable to "control himself before all his attendants" - what is the connection between those who were attending to Yoseph and his inability to keep his emotions in check?

S'forno explains that he was not able to answer all of their questions and request with this heavy load on his heart - which is why he sent them out. Ramban, however, advances a much bolder explanation. He claims that all of the attendants and courtiers, upon hearing Yehudah's plea - which, by the way, Yoseph would have been foolish to reject, considering Yehudah's "plusses" over Binyamin (age, experience, power) - chimed in along with the brothers. Yoseph was unable to control himself in the face of this barrage of pleading, from all around, to have compassion on the young Binyamin and his hoary father.

Both answers A & B understand Yoseph's outburst as the result of "too much" - either an overload of emotions, accumulating from the brothers' earlier visits - or "too many" people pleading for Binyamin's freedom.

#### C: YEHUDAH'S T'SHUVAH IS COMPLETE

As Rabbi Medan points out in his article, Yoseph was chiefly concerned with ascertaining whether the brothers had done T'shuvah (repentance) from their heinous act of selling him into slavery. [Parenthetically, it is fairly clear from the text that the brothers never sold him into slavery and thought that Yoseph had died. Yoseph, however, had every reason to think that they had sold him, since he heard Yehudah suggest this course of action and the next thing he knew, Midianites were pulling him out of the pit and selling him to Yishma'elites, who took him as a slave to Egypt.] As we know from the Rambam (Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:1), the most perfect form of T'shuvah is a reversal of character as evidenced by acting differently in the same situation. Whereas Yehudah had been willing to sell Yoseph into slavery, Yehudah is now the one who steps forward to take responsibility - and to offer himself as the slave in Binyamin's place. This total turnaround on the part of the brothers' leader and spokesman signaled to Yoseph that their T'shuvah was complete and that he could now reveal himself to them.

#### D: ANOTHER EVOLUTION WITHIN YEHUDAH'S WORDS

Throughout the tumultuous life of the two wives, Rachel and Leah, we learn much (by reading between the lines via the Midrash and Rishonim) about the role of their children and their staunch defense of the honor which should be accorded each of their mothers.

The Rabbis even explain Re'uven's sin with Bilhah in light of his concern for his mother's honor after the death of Rachel. (BT Shabbat 55b). There is every indication that the enmity felt between Yoseph and his brothers was the direct result of their vying for power - and promoting the Leah or Rachel position in the family.

In reporting the debate between the father and brothers about bringing Binyamin down to Egypt, Yehudah quotes Ya'akov as follows: "You know that my wife bore me two sons..." (44:27) This "wife" is none other than Rachel. For Yehudah to be able to put aside his own feelings about his mother and her sister and to accurately report father's words indicated an emotional evolution. Yehudah (and, by extension, the other brothers) was able to accept Ya'akov's favoritism of Rachel and Yoseph. This turnabout not only emotionally tugged at Yoseph (along with the poignant reminder of his own mother's death) - it also signaled to Yoseph that it was "safe" to reveal himself and that his position in the family was safe.

## E: COMPASSION FOR YA'AKOV

When Yoseph finally reveals himself to his brothers (45:3), he makes a strange statement: "I am Yoseph! Is my father still living?" The recurring theme of Yehudah's plea of several moments earlier was father's inevitable heartbreak if Binyamin isn't brought safely back - so obviously the father is still alive! Why did Yoseph ask this question?

S'forno interprets Yoseph's question as rhetorical - "How could my father still be alive after all of these troubles?". The first thing on Yoseph's mind at this emotionally charged moment was his father's welfare. Note the theme of Yehudah's plea:

Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons; one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since. If you take this one also from me, and harm comes to him, you will bring down my gray hairs in sorrow to Sheol.' Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became surety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.' Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father." (44:27-34)

The image of Ya'akov's heartbreak and his suffering finally pushed Yoseph's emotional equilibrium far enough to cause him to lose control.

However we understand the cause - or causes - of Yoseph's outburst, one thing is clear. Yoseph felt torn between the "charade" which he found necessary to play out and his deep and abiding love for his family. Something in Yehudah's words allowed him to resolve this conflict, leading to the emotional rapprochement with his brothers and, ultimately, to a tearful reunification with his beloved father.

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