

THE GATHERING STORM CLOUDS OF RECONCILIATION

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

"Please forgive the spiteful deed of the servants of your father's G-d"...Yosef said to them, "Fear not, for am I in place of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good."... Yosef said to his brothers, "I am about to die, but G-d will surely remember you and you will go up out of this land...When G-d will indeed remember you, then you must bring my bones up out of here."^[2]

Yosef's request/instruction to his brothers about his burial is short and to the point. Remarkably, Yaakov's similar request to Yosef^[3] is wordier. He tries to convince Yosef, rather than simply order his as his father – which he was certainly entitled to do, especially about his burial – which is a halachic requirement of a son. Why this inversion?

Upon further reflection, the difference between the requests is enormous. We don't need to negotiate, to cajole, to convince someone who has no cause to refuse our request. Either they will agree, or they won't. We do need to do all of those when speaking to someone who has a personal interest in denying our request. Yaakov had to be more elaborate and convincing in his pitch to Yosef, because he could anticipate huge push-back from his powerful son.

Yaakov had become a kind of superhero to the Egyptians. They were aware of the Nile rising towards him, as Chazal teach. They believed that even the remains of a holy person like Yaakov would confer blessing upon them; they very much wanted Yaakov buried in their country. Yosef, they reasoned, could certainly not oppose this. As the second most powerful person in the realm, he was entitled to choose the choicest burial plot for his father. As a foreigner who had made good in their country, he dared not oppose the popular will!

So they thought. To ignore those wishes exposed Yosef to contempt – and to danger. He had ample reason to deny his father's directive. Yaakov understood that he would have to win over his son to his cause. Chazal convey this idea pithily when they say^[4] that "Yaakov commadnded Yosef because he had the ability to do," i.e. he had the ability to block Yaakov's burial in the family plot in Canaan.

Yosef's parallel request of his brothers encountered no resistance. They never saw themselves as part of the Egyptian culture. They remained outsiders, strangers, grateful that they were given sanctuary in a country that was not theirs. Whenever they or their children would leave, they would have no compelling reason to leave Yosef's remains behind. Yosef found it unnecessary to belabor the point. He made the request of his brothers simple and pointed. Nothing more was required.

Yet parts of Yosef's conversation with his brothers are difficult to understand. Why would Yosef speak of Hashem "remembering" them (even using the doubled verb of **פָּקַד יִפְקֹד**), as if Hashem would redeem them from some horrible fate? Yosef spoke to them while he was firmly in power – and while they lived a charmed existence in Goshen, supported by a generous subvention from the throne. Before Yosef died, did they see themselves needing deliverance?

Chazal^[5] warn us about associating ourselves with governmental authorities, who have use for people only as long as they suit their own needs. We can imagine Yosef slowly coming to this realization, as well as sensing the first stirrings of push-back from the Egyptians against this band of foreigners that they were harboring. Yosef – with all the power that he officially had – did not feel that he could approach his superior directly about his father's request to be buried in Canaan! He felt the need to turn to outsiders speak to Paroh on his behalf. "Yosef spoke to Paroh's household, saying, 'If you please...speak now in Paroh's ears...'"^[6] Why was he so timid? Could they really turn down the person who had done so much good for the realm? If they could ignore the debt of gratitude they owed him, how stable would his position be in the long run? Would they rewrite history altogether with the passage of time, denying the role that he had played in saving Egypt? If they would, what kind of fate would await the children of his brothers? The grandchildren?

As Yosef pondered a situation of creeping hostility to himself and his clan, a terrible thought crossed his mind. His brothers had dealt evilly with him, but the consequences were positive. Through his sale, the family survived the regional famine. He, on the other hand, had worked only with good intentions towards his family – but the consequences of their coming to Egypt were turning dark and somber. Moreover, their bad intentions affected only a single individual, while his directive to join him in Egypt looked like it would negatively impact a large group of people.

Yosef found comfort only in the knowledge that he was participating in a larger Divine drama – the fulfillment of the prophecy of Avraham of a national exile. He, Yosef, was simply an agent of Hashem's greater plan. But if that was the case, why should he treat his brothers any differently? Their decision to sell him to Egypt was also part of G-d's script. They, too, were Hashem's agents.

The longer Yosef thought about these ironies, the more forgiveness he found in his heart for his brothers. Despite the difference in intent, he saw the commonality of their roles in contributing to a larger Divine plan. Through this, Yosef and his brothers grew ever more reconciled to each other.

Yosef's ominous **פָּקַד יִפְקֹד** (doubling the verb for Hashem remembering them) is entirely justified. Even while his powers were in full force, Yosef realized that his position, and that of his family, was precarious. Dangerous times – horrible times – would soon be upon them. Hashem would surely deliver all of them. He would remember Yosef; He would remember them. Ironically, they would all find themselves in need of deliverance. Yosef stresses this in his request, "You shall bring up my bones from here with you."^[7] He underscores "with you:" We are all in this together. The shared sense

of destiny implied in the words "with you" also drives another comment of Chazal,^[8] "How do we know that the *Bnei Yisrael* took with them the remains of the other *shevatim* when they took those of Yosef? From the words 'with you.'" I.e. the commonality allows the bones of all the *shevatim* to be carried together, even though halacha dictates^[9] that two people were enemies in life should not be buried together. In the case of Yosef and his brothers, the hatred had dissipated and disappeared.

This also is what stands behind Chazal's treatment^[10] of the doubling of the oath Yosef's survivors took in regard to his bones: **השבע השביע** / he had surely adjured them. Chazal apply the doubled oath to the two parties to the grievance. He (Yosef) swore that he harbored no grudge towards them in his heart; they swore similarly regarding their feelings towards him. We understand why they needed to be forgiven. But what had Yosef done to them? Surely this means that there was room to blame Yosef – despite his good intentions – for the terrible straits that they all found themselves in before Hashem delivered them.

Ironically, the realization on the part of both Yosef and his brothers that their actions had produced results very different results from what they expected helped heal the wounds and bring them together.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'Hamaaseh, Vayechi (2), by R. Yechezkel Libshitz .
2. Bereishis 50:17, 19-20, 24-25 .
3. Bereishis 47:29-31 .
4. Yalkut Shimoni #156 .
5. Avos 2:3 .
6. Bereishis 50:4 .
7. Shemos 13:19 .
8. Sechel Tov, Beshalach 13:19 .
9. Yoreh Deah 362:6 .
10. Shemos Rabbah 20:19 .