

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

It has become the classic scenario of "rags to riches", where "man plans and G-d laughs."

The scene of Yoseph's first contact with brothers after 20 years of separation exhibits his masterful manipulation of facts and events. However, a careful reading of that encounter begs for further clarification.

1. Why did all ten brothers go to Egypt to buy food? As we see from Yakov's concern for Binyamin's safety, travel in those days was dangerous. Why hadn't Yakov sent a few of them with an entourage of servants and camels and kept the core of the family safe and secure?
2. Why did potential buyers meet with the Viceroy, the second most powerful man in Egypt? There must have been lesser bureaucrats appointed to handle such transactions?
- 3: On what logical basis did Yoseph contrive his accusation against his brothers that they were spies?
4. The brothers responded to Yoseph's accusations in two parts. First, they said that they were all sons of one father. Secondly, after Yoseph repeated his accusation they related the additional facts that they used to be 12 brothers, but "one is no longer with us and the youngest is with his father in Canaan." Why did the brothers feel the need to share their family history with this apparent stranger?

The story of Yoseph and his brothers took place against a backdrop of world events and history. To understand their story we must broaden the scope of our discussion to include some of those events.

The hunger which Yoseph had prophesized extended way beyond the borders of Egypt. We are told that the entire Middle East, northern Africa, and possibly beyond, were afflicted by the devastating famine. The only country with food reserves was Egypt. Not only did Egypt have enough for her own citizens but Yoseph's gifted administration had guaranteed them the envious economic position of having enough food for the rest of the world. Therefore, buyers from around the world traveled to Egypt to purchase food.

Along with this unparalleled economic opportunity came increased concerns for Egypt's safety. Hungry men are desperate men, and there was a real possibility of attack and invasion from neighboring countries. Therefore, Yoseph set up an elaborate security system to protect the sovereignty of Egypt.

The first lines of defense were the gates of the city. The Medresh says that the city had ten entrances, and at each gateway Yoseph appointed guards trained to spot potential danger. Any concerns or suspicions were to be immediately report to him. Additionally, Yoseph expected that the famine would force his brothers to come to Egypt. He had instructed his security force to be on special alert for men dressed like his brothers. (Keep in mind that throughout the history of the Jews in Egypt, they did not change their names, language, or mode of dress.)

Rashi 43:3 & 13 explains that the brothers had another agenda in traveling to Egypt. The brothers regretted having sold Yoseph into slavery and were determined to find him, redeem him, and bring him back to Yakov. Considering that Egypt had become the marketplace for the world there was a possibility of Yoseph being in Egypt. Therefore, it was necessary for all the brothers to go to Egypt so they could properly search for him. No one else, including servants, knew what the brothers had done, and therefore, no one else could be entrusted to find Yoseph!

Rashi (42:13) also explains that in his attempt to find Yoseph each brother entered the city from a different gate. We can assume that for reasons of safety, the market place was at the center of the city and that all main thoroughfares led to the marketplace. The brothers were all similarly dressed and were spotted by Yoseph's guards stationed at the city's entrances. The information was dispatched to Yoseph and each brother was placed under surveillance and followed as they made their way through the city.

The brothers, because they were looking for Yoseph, did not make their way directly to the center market. Instead, they wandered through the city exploring side streets and alleys, markets, stores, inns, and theaters. The security guards reported the brother's suspicious behavior directly to Yoseph.

Under normal circumstances, foreign buyers would not have met with the viceroy of Egypt, however, given the suspicious behavior of the brothers, Yoseph took charge of the situation.

Upon meeting his brothers, Yoseph spoke with them, "harshly." He neglected established protocol and immediately asked them, "Who are you and from where do you come?"

The brothers, unsuspecting and innocent, answered honestly. "We are buyers from Canaan."

The next part of the conversation was far more involved than recorded in the text of the Parsha. Yoseph confronted them with the suspicious fact that they had entered the city from ten different entrances. If they were mere buyers why had they divided the group in such a suspicious manner? Clearly, their behavior revealed that they were spies who had come to gather information on the city's strengths and fortifications in preparation for invading Egypt and stealing her wealth!

The brothers responded to Yoseph's accusation and said, "No! We are only buyers. We do not even have an allegiance to a specific country. We are merely a family, all the sons of the same father, trying to survive the terrible famine. We did not come to spy!

Yoseph again accused them of being spies because their story did not explain why they had each

entered from a different entrance, or why they had wandered the city's streets. Therefore, the brothers were forced to explain to Yoseph their hidden agenda.

"We were twelve brothers, the sons of the same father. The youngest is back home and the other was lost to us long ago. The reason we entered from different directions and wandered the city was an attempt at finding our long lost brother, not to spy on the city!"

Yoseph then took their honest and heartfelt explanation and twisted it into further proof of his accusation.

"If you were spies, I would expect you to have a prepared explanation for your suspicious behavior. Most buyers come to the city, proceed directly to the market, buy their supplies, and return to their homes as quickly as possible. You have this moving, personal, and unsubstantiated story of a lost brother and a younger sibling. I will not believe you until you bring your youngest brother to Egypt as proof of your story."

As with many other stories in the Chumash, the story of Yoseph's manipulation of his brothers has many levels of meaning and intent. Yoseph wished to recreate for his brothers the circumstances that would provide them with the opportunity to do complete Teshuva for having sold him into slavery. The brothers were focused on finding Yoseph and protecting the rest of the Bnai Yisroel from further harm. The Parsha only reveals the bare bone facts of these events with the rest of the story relegated to Talmud and Medresh.

Yoseph's story has become the classic scenario of "rags to riches" where "man plans and G-d laughs." While Yoseph and his brothers engaged each other within the limits of their own manipulations, G-d was busy designing the next stage of Jewish destiny.

Good Shabbos.

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