

# CONVERSATIONS

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

In this week's Parsha, the encounters between Yoseph and his brothers are the masterful and imaginative creations of Yoseph. Many of the commentaries explain that Yoseph had two motives for manipulating his brothers.

1. He was testing his brothers to see if they had repented for having sold him into slavery. The Rambam - Maimonides in the laws of Teshuva - Repentance explains that true repentance is when a person experiences the same circumstances that resulted in past sinning, but now exhibits proper behavior and self-control. In order to test his brother's repentance Yoseph had to create a set of circumstances that would potentially pit brother against brother. If the brothers would support and defend each other refusing to further compromise the integrity of Yakov's family, their Teshuva and sincerity would have been proven.
2. Yoseph needed to make sure that his two dreams would be fulfilled. In his first dream all eleven brothers had bowed down to him. Upon seeing his brothers for the first time only ten of them were there to bow to him. Therefore, he had to manipulate the events so that Binyamin was brought down to Mitzrayim - Egypt without the brothers yet knowing that he was Yoseph.

In analyzing the conversation between Yoseph and the brothers following their initial confrontation, a number of questions need to be answered.

In verse 42:16 Yoseph demanded that one of the brothers be sent back to Canaan to fetch Binyamin while the remaining brothers be kept hostage. In the next verse all the brothers were imprisoned for three days. Verse 42:18 records that Yoseph seemingly changed his mind during those three days and required that only one brother remain hostage while the others return to fetch Binyamin.

1. What happened to Yoseph's first demand of sending back only one of the brothers?
2. Why did Yoseph imprison them for three days?
3. In Verse 42:16 Yoseph swears that their honesty would be tested "by the life of Pharaoh." In Verse 42:18 Yoseph professes a "fear of G-d" as the reason for his change of heart and concern for their families welfare. Whose G-d was he referring to? If he was referring to their G-d, how did the viceroy of Egypt know about the obscure beliefs of a small Canaanite family? Why didn't Yoseph reference Pharaoh's name after the three days of prison?
4. Following their three days of imprisonment the Brothers associated their troubles with their

actions against Yoseph. Why did this occur to them after they were released rather than during their imprisonment? Why in Verse 42:22 does Reuven seem to play the petty part of "I told you so?"

5. Verses 42:23-24 relate that Yoseph overheard their conversation and couldn't stop himself from crying. Why did Yoseph cry at that moment?

As explained by the commentaries, Yoseph was determined to facilitate and test his brother's repentance. Additionally, Yoseph knew that he and his brothers were setting the stage for the growth and development of their family into the Jewish nation in preparation for receiving the Torah. (Axiomatic to our belief in the divinity of the Torah is the fact that it was given to a nation of three million, rather than to a single person or small group of people.) Furthermore, Yoseph and the Brothers knew that honesty, especially in the arena of justice, was essential for the Jews to accomplish their mission as teachers and role-models for the rest of the world. If we are perceived as honest and truthful the other nations will want to learn from the example of our life-style. If we are perceived as unfair and dishonest all other potential truths and lessons will be discounted by the world as hypocritical and false.

If we contrast verse 42:16 with the end of verse 42:20, we notice at the end of Verse 20 the words, "And they did so." The reason why Yoseph imprisoned all the brothers for three days was because they first refused Yoseph's demand that one of the brothers return to fetch Binyamin while the remaining nine stay in prison. However, after being in prison for three days the brothers accepted Yoseph's second demand of one brother staying behind in Egypt while the rest went to fetch Binyamin.

Yoseph's first demand was designed to test the unity of the brothers. Initially, when they had sold him into slavery, the brothers had justified their decision on the basis of family unity. They had perceived his dreams as a threat to their participation in the formation of the Jewish people. Their understanding was that Yoseph saw himself as the sole successor to the spiritual legacy of Avraham, and the rest of them as among the "other nations." That is why in the first dream all the brothers bowed down to Yoseph. Yoseph had postured himself as the "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," and the rest of them as accepting of his dominant spiritual role.

The second dream further confirmed their fears because Yakov and Leah, the sun and the moon, were bowing to Yoseph. They understood the dream as proof of Yoseph's desire to be the last of the Forefathers. The last of the Fathers had to be the "chosen one" because all the preceding generations culminated in his selection. The other eleven brothers would then be included among the "multitude of nations" prophesized to descend from Avraham and Sarah.

The fact that Yakov considered Yoseph as special was obvious to them and further contributed to their fears of being left out of the Jewish equation. It was their desire to be part of the "kingdom of priests" that motivated their plan to remove Yoseph as a threat to their spiritual destiny. Just as Yakov had removed Eisav so too did they remove Yoseph.

If the Brothers had not done Teshuva for selling Yoseph, Yoseph's first demand should have been agreeable to them. By refusing his first demand, the Brothers put all of them, except for Binyamin, in danger of being killed. If that would have happened, Binyamin, the sole remaining son of Yakov and Rachel, would have, by default, become the fourth of the Fore-Fathers. In fact, Binyamin was the only brother to have already fathered 10 sons, far, more than any of the other brothers. Yet, the Brothers refused Yoseph's deal and showed that they had fully accepted their shared destiny as the Bnai Yisroel, the children of Yakov. Regardless of what might happen to them personally, they trusted Binyamin to care for their surviving sons and protect the fledgling nation.

We know that in order for the Jews to receive the Torah they had to attain a level of national unity, "like a single person with one heart." The three days of imprisonment were a foreshadowing of the three days of preparation (Shmos, 19:11) that the Bnai Yisroel would have to undergo before receiving the Torah. It was proof to Yoseph that his brothers had become a single entity with a shared destiny.

Ever since the days of Avraham, honesty and integrity, especially in regards to justice, had been the hallmark of the Jew. The notion of imprisoning all the brothers was fundamentally unjust and non-Jew like. It is what Yoseph refers to as "by the life of Pharaoh." If Yoseph had suspected the Brothers of being spies, sending back one of them to Canaan was as foolish as sending back all of them. Either way, the information regarding Egypt's defenses and weaknesses would have been delivered to the enemy.

If the Brothers were telling the truth, sending back just one of them would have consigned the family in Canaan to greater hardship or death due to the hunger. One man could not possibly handle the dangerous trip across the desert leading a caravan of camels loaded with provisions. If they were telling the truth then keeping one as hostage was just as effective as keeping nine, while providing sufficient manpower to bring food back to the family. That is what Yoseph called, "fear of G-d."

The contrast between the two demands is reminiscent of Avraham's conversation with Avimelech. When Avimelech questioned Avraham's motives for lying about his relationship with Sarah, Avraham answered, "because there is no fear of G-d in this place". There might have been a fear of Avimelech's arbitrary, and therefore, flawed justice; but there was no fear of G-d or an understanding of true justice. Therefore Avraham could not trust Avimelech or the Plishtim and had to take measures to protect himself and Sarah. When Yoseph used the term, "It is G-d that I fear," he revealed to the brothers that Avraham's influences had even reached Egypt, and that he was truly a man of justice.

Upon hearing Yoseph's judicial reasoning the Brothers themselves were forced to reconsider their position. G-d would not have allowed for them to be compromised by a man of justice and truth unless they were deserving of retribution. Considering that a secondary reason for their going to

Egypt was to find Yoseph, their thoughts immediately turned to that incident. Their difficulties with the Viceroy made it obvious that their desire to find Yoseph wasn't proof enough of their repentance; something was still missing from their Teshuva.

Reuven, who had already exhibited a unique sensitivity to Yoseph the "Yeled" (boy) at the time of his sale, (37:30 & 42:22) understood what was missing from their Teshuva. True that the brothers now regretted their decision to sell Yoseph; however, they had never exhibited any regret for the pain they had caused the young boy Yoseph. Therefore, Reuven pointed out to them that the reason for their tribulations was due to "sinning against the boy!" As the Rambam says, "Their insensitivity toward Yoseph was a far greater sin than the actual sale!"

Yoseph, upon hearing Reuven's words, had to cry. For 20 years, Yoseph had assumed that it was Reuven that had masterminded his sale into slavery. Reuven, as the first born, had the most to gain! With Yoseph out of the way he would be assured the rights of the first-born. Remember, it was Reuven who had already exhibited a personal concern for position within the family in the incident of switching Yakov's bed to the tent of his mother Leah. However, when Yoseph heard that it was Reuven who had tried to protect him, Yoseph was overwhelmed with emotion and he had to cry.

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