

WHY DIDN'T YOSEF SEND A LETTER?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 486 - Grandchildren in Halacha. Good Shabbos!

Why Didn't Yosef Send A Letter?

Yehudah restated to the Egyptian viceroy -- who was really his brother Yosef -- their entire earlier conversation. In doing so, Yehudah states: "My master has asked his servants saying 'Have you a father or brother?' And we said to my master, 'We have an old father and a young child of his old age; his brother is dead; he alone is left from his mother and his father loves him'" [Bereishis 44:19-20].

Rashi comments that in this dramatic appeal, Yehudah stated a falsehood due to his fear of the situation. Rashi is bothered by the fact that Yehudah knew full well that Yosef did not die. He knew that the brothers sold Yosef. How then did he tell an outright lie? Rashi answers that he did it out of fear. He was standing in front of the second most powerful man in the world. The relationship between the viceroy and the brothers was already strained, to say the least. It would simply not have been diplomatically appropriate to tell the truth at that point regarding the fate of their brother Yosef.

The Meshech Chochma argues with Rashi. He suggests that the brothers truly believed that Yosef died. The brothers knew how attached Yosef was to his father Yaakov. They felt that it was inconceivable that after all these years Yosef -- if he were still alive -- would not have made some attempt to contact his father. If he were still alive, they reasoned, he would have sent a letter.

In fact, The Meshech Chochma cites a Gemara [Kesubos 22b] that if a woman is positive that her husband died (because were he alive he would have contacted her) that testimony is given a certain degree of credence. In short, Meshech Chochma says that we do not need to say that Yehudah willingly falsified his statement regarding the fate of Yosef.

At the time when he wrote the Meshech Chochma, Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk was not aware of an earlier work that was subsequently discovered and printed that supports Rashi's position. The work, called Moshav Zekeinim al HaTorah from the Ba'alei HaTosfos, contains a tremendously novel

comment in Parshas VaYeshev [Bereishis 37:28]. The Moshav Zekeinim M'Ba'alei HaTosfos say that the reason Yosef never contacted Yaakov was that the brothers made him swear that he would never do so.

We imagine that the early interaction between Yosef and his brothers simply involved sibling rivalry and bullying. According to Chazal, however, the brothers convened a court and issued a Psak Din [a court ruling] sentencing Yosef for spiritual shortcomings on his part. Part of the sentence, in addition to his sale to the Ishmaelites, was that he be forced to swear that he would never reveal to their father what happened to him or where he was. Yosef took the oath.

In other words, Yehudah could not have come to the conclusion that because Yosef "did not write" that he must have been dead. Yehudah knew full well that Yosef could not communicate with Yaakov because he had administered the oath banning Yosef from doing so. Consequently, we must say that Rashi is correct - Yehudah was forced to tell a falsehood here because of the tension of the situation.

Why Cry Now?

The following discussion involves a psychological phenomenon that I have often wondered about. The pasuk says that when Yosef and Binyomin finally met they fell on each other's shoulders and cried [Bereishis 45:14]. Rashi quotes the teaching of Chazal that they cried based on prophetic knowledge. Yosef cried regarding the future destruction of the two Temples that would be in Binyomin's portion [Jerusalem] and Binyomin cried regarding the future destruction of the Mishkan that was to be Yosef's portion [Shiloh].

The question may be asked, however, why cry now?

I saw one explanation given by Rav Mordechai Pogmeranski of Telshe. Rav Pogmeranski cites the prophetic pasuk "He will eliminate death forever, and my L-rd Hashem/Elokim will erase tears from all faces" [Yeshaya 25:8]. Chazal teach that the words "from ALL faces" (m'al KOL panim) in this pasuk implies that in the future not only will the Almighty wipe away the tears of sorrow, He will wipe away tears of joy as well.

Why should there be a necessity to wipe away tears of joy? The answer to this question depends on how we understand the phenomenon of tears of joy. Rav Pogmeranski explains the reason people cry at a simcha [joyous occasion] is because they realize that the joy is fleeting. Subconsciously in the recesses of one's soul, the celebrant recognizes that the joy will be short-lived. Therefore, our Sages teach that in the future, not only will tears of mourning be wiped away, even the tears of joy will be wiped away -- because in that future time, we will experience joy that is permanent and everlasting.

This is how Rav Pogmeranski explains the tears of Yosef and Binyamin. On the one hand they looked into the future and saw that each tribe would be the home of the House of G-d in Israel. That was

cause for joy. But, they also saw that there would be an end to those Houses of G-d and that was cause for crying.

In my humble opinion, I do not believe this is an accurate explanation of the phenomenon of "tears of joy." I would like to suggest two possible alternate explanations of why people cry when they are happy.

First, I believe, that crying is an expression of intense emotion. It is a fact of the human psyche that when emotions are intense we cry. Therefore we can cry for trouble or we can cry for joy. In both cases, emotions may be intense. It is two sides of the same coin: Heightened emotions trigger the response of tears.

I believe that the other reason why people cry at a simcha is that when a person reaches such a milestone in life, he is very cognizant of what it took to get there. Any time we reach such a milestone -- like having a child or celebrating a Bar Mitzvah or marrying off a child -- we realize the sweat, tears, and toil that got us to this point. Therefore in every simcha there is the feeling of "woe, but how much did it take to get here." In that moment of joy, one feels not only the joy, but also all the pain it took to get to that moment of joy.

This too will explain the above-quoted pasuk from Yeshaya. In the future, when our mouths will be full of joy, the simcha will be so overwhelming that the painful aspect of that emotion -- the "tears of joy" -- will be quashed.

However, if we do not accept Rav Mordechai Pogmeranski's explanation, we must return us to our original question: Why did Binyomin and Yosef cry when they met?

This question may be answered by quoting an observation of the Sefas Emes: The wider context of the long-delayed reunion of Yosef and Binyomin was the scene in Egypt, brought about by the whole story of Yosef's estrangement from his siblings and their sale of him into slavery. In short, they were here because of Sinas Achim [hatred between brothers]. They were here because of Sinas Chinam [unjustified hatred].

They both intuitively knew that even though there was now a temporary peace and they had conquered the hatred that existed between brethren, the ugly head of strife among brothers would rear itself once again. That ugly head of strife among brothers would destroy both the Temples in the portion of Binyomin as well as the Mishkan in the portion of Yosef. Since at this moment they were so sensitive to what Sinas Achim and Sinas Chinam can create, when they looked at each other and saw the future Houses of G-d in each other's portions, they said: "this chapter is not yet over." They recognized that the chapter of Sinas Achim amongst the children of Yaakov had in effect just begun. This was the cause for their weeping on such an occasion.

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