YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**PARASHAT MIKETZ**

**Sicha of HarAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

**The Meaning of Yosef's Estrangement**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

The Ramban (42:9), as well as several other commentators who adopt his approach, discuss Yosef's estrangement from his brothers and the great severity with which he treats them up until the moment when he reveals his identity. This leads them to another question: why did Yosef not send word to his father, the moment that he rose to his elevated position in Egypt, telling him that he was still alive? Why did he allow his father to suffer such profound anguish and mourning for his son for an additional nine years?

We have previously discussed the approach of R. Yitzchak Arama, author of the commentary Akeidat Yitzchak, as well as the Abarbanel, explain that Yosef's estrangement from his brothers arose from his desire to test their relationship towards Binyamin, to test if they had repented for their past treatment of Yosef himself. We have also addressed the relationship between Yosef’s dreams and the interpretation Yosef suggested for Pharaoh’s dreams, along with the interplay between and dream and a prophecy.

The sin of Yosef's brothers in selling him is not one of the milder misdeeds of Sefer Bereishit. This sin – selling a free man into slavery – is considered in the Torah and Prophets (e.g., Shemot 20:13; 21:16; Devarim 23:16; Yoel 4:1-8; Amos 2:6-10) as one of the most severe of sins. This sin is comparable to the sin of Kayin and the sins of the generation of the Flood, the generation of the Tower of Bavel, and the people of Sedom. It is only natural that the punishments meted out to Kayin, to the generation of the Flood and to the people of Sedom should be replaced here by the repentance of Yosef's brothers. This repentance is one of the foundations upon which all of Sefer Bereishit rests – together with the punishment of sinners – and it should not be presented as an insignificant detail related only in connection with Yosef's mistake. The story of the brothers’ repentance is equal in weight and importance to the story of the Flood and the overturning of Sedom – if not greater than them.

In previous articles, I have sought to prove that all of the brothers' actions – and particularly those of the 2 leaders, Reuven and Yehuda – are influenced and dictated by the sin of selling Yosef and the need to atone for it. Our impression is that the ultimate structure of the family and the fate of the brothers depends on their repentance being accepted. Yosef knows this, and regards himself as a partner in this process – both because of his close (passive) connection with the sin, and because of his constant feeling, especially because of his dreams, that he is responsible for the future of Yaakov's family.

THE PLAN

How did Yosef intend to redirect his brothers from the sinful path of hatred, selling their brother and lying to their father, to the path of repair and repentance?

Before addressing this question, let us first address a puzzling element in the story of the meeting between Yosef and his brothers when the latter come to receive grain. The Torah elaborates at length on how Yosef accuses his brothers of spying and how they attempt to justify themselves and prove that this accusation is unfounded. Could this dialogue actually have taken place in reality as it is described? How could it be that not a single one of the brothers sensed that perhaps this was a pre-planned, staged performance, whose purpose was not to arrest spies?

My assumption is that Yosef began to plan the encounter with his brothers already when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream and understood that, as viceroy, his brothers’ sheaves would come to bow before his own sheaf, to eat from his table.

INVESTIGATION OF YOSEF'S BROTHERS

Yosef’s plan was aimed at saving Egypt during the years of famine, but at the same time he was also planning a way to bring his dreams to realization. The Divine spirit within him goaded him to plan a way of leading the brothers to correct their ways, and a way of testing whether they had indeed done this.

Yosef knew that sooner or later his brothers would arrive, seeking food, and thus the dream of the sheaves would be fulfilled. The second dream – with the stars bowing before him – would be realized only when he would be able to bring about the hoped-for spiritual process of saving the brothers from the abyss of their sin; only thus would the family be able to be reunited in the proper way (not artificially), so that Yaakov would die knowing that all his children were worthy heirs of his heritage.

Perhaps this is how Yosef prepared his trap. Many citizens must have been questioned during the first few years of the famine, while Yosef was busy nationalizing all property, for fear of an uprising against the regime. It seems that the suspicions were more serious concerning foreigners, who may have arrived in some or other disguise. Perhaps Yaakov’s sons – particularly Shimon and Levi – were naturally regarded with caution in foreign lands after what they had cunningly perpetrated in Shekhem. Their entry into Egypt through – according to Chazal – different entry points, was also not counted in their favor as soon as they were identified as brothers. As if this were not enough, the brothers were also found to be expressing particular interest in the fate of a slave who had been brought to Egypt some 22 years previously. From the perspective of the Egyptian security services, these men were trying to glean details about the Egyptian viceroy – the king’s second-in-command. For this reason, they were clearly suspicious, and there was no difficulty in having them imprisoned without Yosef having to disclose his true intentions.

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We may assume that the brothers were separated from one another and placed in different cells, so that their testimonies could be compared against each other. In their interrogation, they were questioned as to every possible aspect concerning their family and their aims. Perhaps they underwent torture and were forced to tell every detail. Because of their inability to coordinate their testimonies, they had no choice but to tell the truth. It quickly became apparent that, in addition to the 10 “suspects” that the security services were holding, there were another 2 suspects that had not yet been caught. The entire security system (directed and staged by Yosef, of course) was put on alert in order to arrest the 2 missing “prime suspects,” whom the brothers were stubbornly protecting, denying that they had come with them to Egypt. In their interrogation, it was discovered that all the brothers gave the same story about Binyamin, but perhaps there were contradictions as to the fate of Yosef. The brothers must certainly have mumbled and stammered, ashamed to admit that they had sold him into slavery. The interrogators noted the discrepancies in the different versions of what they said, and their suspicions deepened. Each of the brothers was taken to his cell and beaten severely, with the demand that he answer the question, “Where is Yosef?” By the time the brothers met again, 3 days later, they understood very well the reason for the punishment that had befallen them:

They said to each other: But we are guilty on account of our brother, for we saw his distress when he pleaded to us but we did not listen; therefore this trouble has come upon us. (42:21)

Yosef demonstrates generosity towards them and does not demand that they bring their lost brother. However, he is insistent that they bring the remaining brother – Binyamin – to ensure that there are no other spies roaming around in Egypt.

THE PLAN IS UPSET

Yosef's strategy is well-thought out, but it is upset. Yosef is deeply moved by Reuven's words to his brothers:

Reuven answered them and said: Did I not tell you, saying, “Do not sin against the boy” – but you did not listen; now behold, his blood is required. (42:22)

When Yosef hears this, his goes off to a quiet corner and WEEPS FOR THE FIRST TIME. But he knows that this is not enough. Reuven's reaction, and the reaction of the rest of the brothers, is an acceptance of their punishment for their sin, but this falls short of representing true ‘tikkun’ (repair). Yosef leads the brothers into a test concerning Binyamin. In my view, his intention was not to cause Binyamin to be brought to Egypt, but rather the exact opposite! Yosef demonstrates to them, by means of his whole carefully staged performance, that the purpose of bringing Binyamin is so that he can be interrogated in the Egyptian dungeon, on suspicion of spying. It is clear to everyone that if Binyamin is brought to him, it may not be possible to get him out of there and return him to his father. It is for this reason that Yaakov is so reluctant to send Binyamin (who is already past the age of 30, and is father to 10 sons), and it is for this reason that Reuven and Yehuda must offer such great commitments to guard him.

Despite all of this, will the brothers bring Binyamin to Egypt? Yosef expects that the brothers will protect Binyamin and not lead him into the danger awaiting him in Egypt at the hands of the viceroy. He expects that they will prefer to remain hungry in Canaan, even leaving Shimon in the Egyptian jail, so long as Binyamin will not be in danger. Yosef is prepared to regard this as repentance and ‘tikkun’ for what the brothers had done to him.

Indeed, for a long while the brothers do not return with Binyamin in tow. Perhaps Yosef is already on the point of revealing his identity to Shimon and telling him about the test that he had set up for the brothers. Perhaps he is on the point of sending for his father and brothers, calling them to come and make peace. One could ask: what proof has he as to any ‘tikkun’ on the part of the brothers? After all, it is quite likely that it is their father who is refusing to allow them to take Binyamin. But Yosef knows well that Yaakov is no longer the real leader of the family. Just as they had deceived him as to the sale of Yosef, so they could find a way to bring Binyamin to Egypt, if they so chose.

But then the brothers return, and Binyamin is with them! At first, Yosef believes that they are repeating the sin of his sale; he expresses his disappointment in WEEPING FOR A SECOND TIME:

Yosef hurried – for his mercy was aroused towards his brother – and he sought to weep; he came into the chamber and wept there. (43:30)

Why was Yosef's mercy aroused towards Binyamin? Binyamin had grown up with his father, had established a large family, and was living well. It was Yosef himself who was deserving of pity: why is he, who was taken from his father’s home and thrown into a pit in the valley of Dotan, and then into the dungeon in the house of the captain of the guard, now crying for Binyamin?

In my view, when Binyamin was brought to Egypt, this signaled to Yosef that Binyamin, too, was still not loved by his half-brothers. He deduces that Binyamin, too, is persecuted and hated. He concludes that the hand of Yehuda – who wanted to sell him – prevailed over the hand of Reuven – who wanted to save him. He has no knowledge of the terrible guarantee that Yehuda supplied in order to take Binyamin.

Nevertheless, Yosef’s caution prevents him from drawing conclusions too hastily. He decides to test the brothers once more – through the plot of the goblet. Stealing the goblet used by the ruler for divining would clearly verify the suspicion of spying. He causes Binyamin to be “caught,” and has him returned to the viceroy’s palace.

This time, Yosef presents the brothers with a more difficult test. He causes the brothers to envy Binyamin, just as they once envied Yosef himself. He demonstrates greater affection for Binyamin than for them, allotting him a five-fold ration (43:34). He even gives them reason to hate Binyamin – “thief of the divining goblet” – for embroiling them once again in the suspicion of espionage. Finally, he tests their reaction to his desire to make Binyamin an eternal slave in Egypt.

The similarity to the story of Yosef’s sale is as close as it could possibly be. The brothers tear their garments, just as they once stripped Yosef of his coat, and Yehuda joins Reuven in accepting their punishment:

Yehuda said: What shall we say to my lord; how shall we speak and how shall we justify ourselves? God has found the sin of your servants; behold, we are slaves to my master - both we and he in whose hands the goblet was found. (49:16)

Even this is not enough – until Yehuda’s emotional speech. In this speech, Yosef suddenly learns of Yehuda’s guarantee for Binyamin’s safety. Suddenly he understands: they have not brought him down to Egypt with a view to abandoning him. Yehuda is prepared to be enslaved for the rest of his life in place of Binyamin. He is ready to give up his life for his half-brother, and to spare his father anguish. He is prepared to accept full justice – measure for measure – for selling Yosef to Egypt, and to become – in place of Yosef and Binyamin – a slave there forever. NOW YOSEF WEEPS FOR THE THIRD TIME. This weeping – the hardest and the longest – is where he reveals his identity to his brothers. Here, finally, it is not only “sheaves” that are bowing before him – men seeking food – but shining stars, brothers who have taken the path of”tikkun.”

This shiur is abridged from the Hebrew original. The full shiur can be accessed [here](https://www.etzion.org.il/he/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%9E%D7%A7%D7%A5-%D7%A4%D7%A9%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%A0%D7%9B%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA).