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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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**PARASHAT MIKETZ**

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Dedicated in memory of my father, Hillel ben Yechiel (Herman) Reiter, of Debrecen, Hungary, whose *yahrzeit* falls on the 24th of Kislev.   
May his soul be among the righteous in Gan Eden.

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**Yosef's Behavior in the Encounter with his Brothers – Part I**

**Dr. Brachi Elitzur**

One of the most dramatic narratives in the Torah, arousing our emotions anew with each reading, is the story of Yosef's reunion with his brothers following a break of 22 years. The story is suspenseful, but at the same time, its power to influence lies in the fact that it is a very human story, encompassing profound and mixed emotions ranging between anger and compassion, hatred and longing, a quest for vengeance and forgiveness.

The text adopts the perspective of both parties, thereby creating a sense of identification on the part of the reader with both. The absolute support for Yosef is never in question, but the exposure of the brothers' feelings, the process of regret and self-recrimination that they undergo, and their bewilderment at the suspicious attitude towards them on the part of the Egyptian viceroy, all arouse empathy towards them, and even some wonder at Yosef's deliberate affliction of them while they are in Egypt.

Yosef's point of view is both revealed and hidden. The reader is party to the emotional turmoil that is aroused in him at the sight of his brothers, but is not made aware of the motivations behind his actions. The reader is aware of what has happened to Yosef during the years of severance from his father's house, in contrast to the silence that the text maintains with regard to the brothers during this time.[[1]](#footnote-1) But other than Yosef's limited revelation to the royal butler concerning the circumstances of his sale ("I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews…" [40:15]) and a hint of his acceptance of his situation in his explanation for naming his son Menashe (41:51), the reader is not party to the processing of his mental trauma and his resultant feelings towards his brothers and his father.

This lacuna has, over the generations, given rise to many attempts to fill in the missing information. Various commentators credit Yosef with planning the reunion with his family. This plan is gradually revealed in the description of the brothers' descent to Egypt and their encounter with him there, reaching its climax in Yosef's sudden weeping and revelation of his identity in the middle of Yehuda's speech and his request that they bring his father down to Egypt. Let us examine briefly the suggestions offered by the various commentators as to the purpose of the plan:[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. Yosef takes revenge on his brothers, measure for measure (Abarbanel):

The brothers were not deserving of this punishment for selling him – meaning, the death sentence – like one who "kidnaps a man and sells him." However, they were still deserving of punishment for selling him, owing to their evil intentions… And for this reason, Yosef treats them "measure for measure," for he does no actual harm to them, but rather causes them mental anguish, just as they had not harmed him physically, but had caused him anguish through their intention to harm him, while God had meant it for positive purposes. Yosef's brothers had sinned against him in suspecting him of telling tales about them and "speaking badly of them to their father." For this reason, they hated him "and could not speak peaceably to him," since they believed that he spoke peaceably to them only in order to spy on their affairs, [and they expressed this hatred] in casting him into the pit where he was **imprisoned** and from which he **could** **not escape** and move to and fro, and also in giving him as a **servant** to the Midianites who were going to Egypt. Therefore, God put it in Yosef's power to punish them with the same forms of anguish.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Yosef is trying to fulfill his dreams (Ramban):

For when Yosef saw his brothers bowing to him, he remembered all the dreams that he had dreamed about them, and knew that none of them had been fulfilled on this occasion. He knew from his interpretation of the first dream – “Behold, we were gathering sheaves…” – that at first, all his brothers would bow to him. This [the word “we”] referred to all eleven brothers. Afterwards, the sun and moon and eleven stars would bow to him, as in the second dream. And since he did not see Binyamin with them, he thought up this plan to maneuver them so that they would bring his brother Binyamin to him, so as to fulfill the first dream first. Therefore, he did not wish to tell them, “I am Yosef, your brother,” and to urge them, “Hurry and go up to my father” and to send the wagons, as he did after their second visit – for his father would unquestionably have come right away. Only after the first dream had been fulfilled did he tell them, in order to have the second dream realized. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 42:9)

1. Yosef wants to see whether his brothers have undergone any sort of inner change and whether they have repented (Seforno and Abarbanel):

"And Binyamin's portion was greater” – to see if they would become jealous of him. (Seforno, 43:34)

“In the mouth of the sack of the youngest” – to see what pains they would go to in order to save him. (Seforno, 44:2)

He wanted to test them, in order to know whether, during the 22 years that he had not seen them, they had changed their traits, and whether they regretted what they had done to him, and what their situation was now. And therefore he tested them, saying, “You are spies,” until he saw that they had repented completely, as they declared, “But we are guilty." (Abarbanel, ad loc)

1. Yosef wants to assess his situation from the point of view of his family (R. Yoel Bin Nun):

Yosef goes about getting his questions answered: He must bring Binyamin – his brother, son of his mother. He knows everything: why did their father submit? And what happened? And what will happen now? Therefore, Binyamin must be brought down, to replace Shimon, and he must remain with Yosef. From him it will be possible to find out everything about "your old father of whom you spoke" and about all that has transpired in the meantime. Then Yosef will be able to decide whether or not to break his silence.[[4]](#footnote-4)

What all of these proposals share is their view of Yosef's behavior and words as deliberate and as possessing a defined goal. The debate surrounds the question of which aim Yosef had set for himself.[[5]](#footnote-5) What I would like to propose in this *shiur* is that Yosef's words and actions reflect confusion and a lack of planning, arising from the tremendous power of the emotionally laden and unexpected situation in which he finds himself. Perhaps in his wildest dreams he had prepared himself for a future meeting with his brothers; perhaps he had even prepared the questions he wished to ask and the statements that he wished to make. But these remained in the realm of his imagination. The shock and amazement at this unplanned encounter with ten brothers all at once, with him as ruler and them as needy travelers come from afar to find food, scrambled his thoughts and left him disorientated and befuddled.

One might argue that in his first encounter with his brothers, Yosef was indeed caught unprepared, and therefore his words and actions on that occasion might have been spontaneous and guided by momentary emotion; afterwards, however, once they had left and he had the opportunity to organize his thoughts, he planned his steps so as to achieve the sought-after goal – as proposed by the various commentators. To this I would offer two responses. First, most of the proofs cited by the commentators are based on Yosef's initial actions in his first encounter with the brothers, which was entirely unexpected. Second, Yosef's thoughts about anything pertaining to his home and family are mired in chaotic opacity: his father, his younger brother, the family inheritance in Shekhem. Most of all, he is troubled by the question of what led to his brothers to display such cruelty towards him, ignoring his pleas while he was in the pit, and their ultimate decision to sell him to the Yishme'elim. Many questions swamp him, demanding answers, but Yosef has decided in the meantime not to reveal his identity. His planning ability is limited, since any information that is introduced into the encounter is likely to upset whatever he seeks to achieve and render his plans irrelevant. Perhaps, at the end of the day, when Yosef goes home to rest after his day's work and to get his thoughts into some order, as he tosses and turns, unable to sleep, he plans his next steps – but these are changed and overturned at the next encounter, where the demonic portrait of his brothers, which has been engraved in his heart for the 22 years of their separation, starts to crack, showing the sensitivity, concern, and devotion underneath.

We shall attempt to support this proposal via the following steps, to be covered in this *shiur* and the next one, on *Parashat Vayigash*:

1. We will enumerate the questions arising from Yosef's words to his brothers and his demands of them.
2. We will propose three possible factors influencing his actions.
3. We will trace Yosef's attempts at maneuvering among these three factors, by analyzing his words and actions as set forth in a. We will show that the storm of emotions that overcomes his thinking prevents him from planning any sort of process leading to a defined aim (in next week's *shiur*).
4. We will address the question of why the text documents and thereby shares with the reader the confusion and storm of emotions experienced by Yosef, in contrast to the absence of any hint of what Yosef feels towards his brothers from the moment that he is thrown into the pit (also in next week's *shiur*).

**Questions arising from Yosef's words and actions**:

1. "And he made himself strange (*va-yitnaker*) to them" – Most of the commentators understand this verb as an expression of "strangeness" or "foreignness." Why does Yosef present himself as a foreigner to them and not reveal his identity?
2. Why does Yosef accuse his brothers of spying, when the purpose of their arrival in Egypt is known to him?
3. What is the reason for the imprisonment that he decrees for them? Could he not simply make any future provision of food to them conditional upon their bringing Binyamin?
4. Why does Yosef return their money to them?
5. Why does Yosef postpone his meeting with the brothers until noon, and place someone else in charge of hosting them?
6. What is the meaning of Yosef's seating the brothers in order of age?
7. Why does Yosef order that his goblet be placed in Binyamin's sack?
8. Why does Yehuda's speech cause Yosef to break down and reveal his identity?

**Factors influencing Yosef's behavior:**

The behavior of most people arises from a combination of the setting of goals and conscious thinking about the desired results, on the one hand, and instinctive actions motivated by subconscious emotion, on the other. The balance between these two factors depends on the individual personality and the specific circumstances of the situation. In our everyday routine, we tend to act on the basis of advance planning, exerting efforts to achieve our defined goals. In unexpected situations or those which involve emotional aspects, our instinctive reactions can sometimes prevail over our consciously thought-out behavior, evading the processing of the intellect that evaluates their contribution to attaining what we consciously want. Let us therefore examine the motives behind Yosef's planned and conscious actions, as testified to by the text, as well as the psychological factors motivating him in view of the emotionally charged encounter with his brothers – his last memory of them being the smell of the meal they share while he hangs between life and death, pleading for help from an abandoned pit on the way to Dotan.

1. **Sense of mission**

Yosef's sense of mission is mentioned at key junctions when he is required to act or to justify a choice that runs counter to a person's normal tendencies.

The attempts by Potifar's wife at tempting Yosef are rejected by him, and he reveals the reason for his response:

But he refused, and he said to his master's wife, “Behold, my master does not know what is in the house with me; he has given all that he has into my hand. There is none in this house greater than I, nor has he withheld anything from me but you, because you are his wife; how, then, can I perform this great wickedness and **sin against God**?" (39:8-9)

Later, Yosef emphasizes the Divine source of his inspiration in interpreting the dreams of the royal butler and royal baker:

And they said to him, “We have dreamed a dream, and no one can explain it.” And Yosef said to them, “**Do interpretations not belong to God**? Tell me, I pray you." (40:8)

Upon succeeding in interpreting Pharaoh's dream after the "professionals" had failed, Yosef does not boast of his abilities, but rather declares openly their origin:

And Yosef answered Pharaoh, saying, “It is not me; **God will give Pharaoh a favorable [literally, “peaceful”] answer**." (41:16)

And Yosef said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh's dream is one; **that which God is about to do He has declared to Pharaoh**." (25)

"It was this of which I spoke to Pharaoh: **That which God is about to do** He has shown to Pharaoh." (28)[[6]](#footnote-6)

Yosef's sense of mission is so deeply embedded in him that it makes an impression on Pharaoh, who appoints him, in view of this inner orientation, to the position of his deputy:

And Pharaoh said to his servants, “**Can we find such a man, in whom there is the spirit of God**?” And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “**Since God has shown you all of this**, there is none so insightful and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and by your word shall all my people be ruled; only in [occupying] the throne will I be greater than you." (38-40)

Yosef's recognition that his bitter fate is a function of the task ordained for him in Egypt is shown in the reason he gives for the name of his second son:

And the second [son] he named Efrayim, for **“God has made me fruitful (*hifrani*) in the land of my affliction**" (52)

The heroic climax of this recognition is to be found in Yosef's words to his brothers, clearing them of guilt and assuaging their regret over their cruelty towards him. The root "*sh-l-ch*" (to send) appears three times in this speech, indicating the fundamental centrality of this idea to him:

"Now therefore do not be grieved and do not be angry at yourselves that you sold me here, for **it was to preserve life that God sent me** (*shelachani*) before you. For it is now two years that there is famine in the land, and for five more years there shall be no plowing or harvesting. And **God sent me** (*va-yishlacheni*) before you to set up a remnant for you in the land, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now, **it was not you who sent (*shelachtem)* me here, but God**, and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and a lord over all his house, and a ruler over all the land of Egypt." (45:5-8)

Yosef continues to allay his brothers' fears of his revenge following their father's death, by focusing on the mission that is facilitated through his sale and presenting it as superseding the malicious intentions behind their act:

And Yosef said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? You had thought evil against me, but **God meant it for good, in order to make it happen this day that many people should be kept alive**." (50:19-20)

Thus, we can certainly assert Yosef's awareness of being entrusted with a role in a Divine plan as motivating his actions. This awareness is able to push aside the drives of lust, honor, prestige, and revenge, and to guide his conduct in keeping with the goal that God has set for him.

Does this sense of Divine mission always succeed in overcoming Yosef's human, psychological motivations? The *midrash* provides an eloquent description of the battle that rages inside Yosef when he is tempted by Potifar's wife:

"She caught him by his garment, saying…” – At that moment, the image of his father came and appeared to him at the window, and said to him, “Yosef, your brothers are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the *efod*, with you among them. Do you wish to have your name erased from their midst, and to be called an associate of harlots?” As it is written (*Mishlei* 29), "One who associates with harlots wastes his substance." Immediately, “His bow abode in strength” (*Bereishit* 49). R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Meir: [This teaches that] his passion subsided; “and the hands of his arms were made supple” (ibid.) – he thrust his hands into the ground, and his lust emerged from under his fingernails; “by the hands of the Mighty One of Yaakov” – who brought it about that his name would be engraved on the stones of the *efod*? None other than the Mighty One of Yaakov; “from thence the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel” – by virtue of this, he became worthy of being a shepherd [leader of Israel]." (*Sota* 36b)

But is Yosef victorious every time he contends with such a struggle?

1. **The desire for revenge**

The description of Yosef's conduct during his early years in Yaakov's house reveals a certain detachment from his brothers, and our impression is that he is oblivious to their emotional language. He passes evil reports about them to their father, without any thought for the hatred that such an action might arouse. He happily recounts his dreams to his brothers, with no sensitivity as to their emotional ramifications. He sets off with no hesitation at his father's request that he check on his brothers' welfare, with no fear for his life and taking along no means of protection. Yosef does not understand that appearing before his brothers in his striped coat is likely to reawaken the jealousy that might perhaps have subsided slightly in the pastoral surroundings of Shekhem and Dotan. His obliviousness also finds expression in his day-to-day conduct, as we may conclude from his journey to Shekhem, where he becomes lost, but does not think of asking for directions – unlike Yaakov, who consults with the local shepherds upon reaching Charan. This emotional disconnect would almost certainly have left Yosef astounded and bewildered by his brothers' seemingly inexplicable cruelty towards him. The attempt to understand why he had been cut off from his family and left to the mercies of passing Yishme'elim surely occupied his thoughts during his many lonely hours far from home.

Yosef, like Yaakov, is weaned from his innocence in a foreign land, where he acquires basic communication skills and is exposed to deceit and cunning as an accepted behavioral norm. The (positive) effects of this learning experience become manifest in the prison, where Yosef displays sensitivity towards the royal baker and butler in their gloomy state:

And Yosef came to them in the morning, and he saw them, and behold, they were sad. And he asked Pharaon's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, saying, “Why do you look so unhappy today?" (40:6-7)

Likewise, it is apparent in the fact that Pharaoh points to him as the ultimate leader, with the power to run a country and pass emergency legislation, with no fear of resistance groups arising among the masses:

And Pharaoh said to Yosef… “There is none so insightful and wise as you are. You shall be over my house and by your word shall all my people be ruled; only in [occupying] the throne will I be greater than you." (41:39-40)

What impact does this awakening have on Yosef's attitude towards what his brothers did? Has his exposure to the intrigues of government, and to such qualities as jealousy and the quest for power, not cleared the mists of his confusion and clarified his brothers' dark motives in pulling off his coat and casting him into the pit? Will this new insight not give rise to a desire for revenge, a desire to prove his victory, despite their intentions? Will the huge discrepancy between his status in Egypt and their groveling at his feet not cause him to flaunt his position and show off his victory by intensifying their dependence on his mercies? Indeed, the text highlights the contrast:

And **Yosef was the ruler** of the land, and **it was he who sold food to all the people of the land**; and Yosef's brothers came and **bowed themselves before him, with their faces to the ground**. (42:6)

The first inkling of the impact that the memory of the sale has on his sense of mission is to be found in the complaint that he voices to the royal butler, in explaining his request for Potifar's pardon:

"But remember me when it will be well with you, and show kindness, I pray you, to me, and make mention of me to Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house, for **I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews**; nor have I done anything here, that they should put me in the dungeon." (40:14-15)

Later on, when he is appointed deputy to the king and recognizes the role for which he has come to Egypt, Yosef names his eldest son (born some 11 years after his sale) as taking the edge off his suffering, quelling his longing, and closing the chapter of his past:

And Yosef named his firstborn Menashe, **“For God has caused me to forget all my toil, and all my father's house**." (41:51)

Does this neutralizing effect, along with the time that has elapsed, and the recognition of his mission, stand him in good stead when he is put to the test, suddenly finding himself face to face with his brothers? Does the memory of the first eleven years of loneliness and oblivion not overcome him and dictate his response?

Upon revealing his identity to his brothers, Yosef chooses to present himself in terms of his last traumatic encounter with them:

And Yosef said to his brothers, “Come near to me, I pray you.” And they came near. And he said, “I am Yosef, your brother, **whom you sold into Egypt**." (45:4)

Is this the sole common memory that will prove to the brothers that the man speaking to them is their brother? Could Yosef not validate his declaration by invoking memories of his childhood in Charan, crossing the Yabbok, the stories about their uncle Esav, the flight from Shekhem, or the tragic death of his mother on the way?

It would seem that the experience of being in proximity to his brothers causes Yosef to be flooded once again with feelings of anger and a burning revenge, and this in turn affects the content of his words to his brothers and the strange demands that he makes of them.

1. **Feelings of longing**

Seventeen years of family experience is a lengthy and significant period in a person's life. Childhood memories, the stages of adolescence, the hours of shepherding in the fields of Shekhem, the unity among the brothers following Dina's rape, the long journey to the home of their blind grandfather in Beer Sheva, Reuven's great secret – all of these recollections must have surfaced during the lonely years before Yosef reconciled himself to his fate, and he must have held onto them in order to maintain his sanity. His marriage and the birth of his sons, alleviating his loneliness and enveloping him once again with the warmth of family, became a substitute for his memories of the past.

The sight of the brothers, as noted, gives rise to feelings of anger and revenge. But perhaps the sight of the brothers' current helplessness, the sense of guilt enveloping them, the new information as to Reuven's attempts to prevent the brothers from carrying out their evil plan, the brothers' genuine concern for their father's welfare, the surety for Binyamin – can all of this fail to arouse in Yosef some feeling of love and longing for his family's embrace? And if so, is Yosef capable of sending off his brothers, with the bundles of food that they have purchased in Egypt, taking his chances on another farewell with no way of knowing if and when he will see them again?

Yosef's feelings towards his family are not mentioned up until the moment of their reunion, and our assumptions in this regard are based on human nature in the general sense. However, from the moment of the encounter with them, Yosef is depicted as incapable of controlling his surging emotions, such that he is forced more than once to deviate from his plan so that his tears will not be detected. It seems that we cannot make sense of his behavior without recognizing the tremendous effect that the sense of longing and the human aspiration for a family reunion have on his behavior.

In our next *shiur*, we will analyze the effect of these three factors on Yosef's behavior from the moment he first lays eyes on his brothers until he reveals his identity to them.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Aside from the story of Yehuda and Tamar, whose chronological location is a matter of dispute. Some scholars question how the episode could have taken place during these years and propose that it actually happened earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These proposals were developed and broadened by later commentators; we will present only a partial sample of commentators adopting each of the opinions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yehuda Shaviv (ed.), *Perush Ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Yitzchak Abarbanel*: *Bereishit* (Chorev edition) (Jerusalem, 5767), 42, 7-8, pp. 709-710. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Y. Bin Nun, "*Ha-Pilug Ve-Ha-Achdut: Kefel Ha-Ta'ut Ve-Helem Ha-Gilui: Mipnei Ma Lo Shalach Yosef el Aviv*?" *Megadim* 1, pp. 20-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The difficulties posed by each of the proposed answers are set forth in the responses to R. Yoel Bin Nun's article; see vol. 2 of *Megadim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also verse 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)