YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

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Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of

Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.

Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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**Parashat Vayigash**

**Sicha of HarAV MosHeh Lichtenstein**

**THe cost of Exile**

Adapted by Immanuel Meyer and Binyamin Frankel

Translated by David Strauss

### A Hebrew man

At first glance, the story of Yosef and his brothers seems to have a happy end, with the family reuniting in Egypt and Yosef tending to all of his family's needs. As we shall see, however, Yosef is characterized by tragedy.

The Midrash in *Devarim Rabba* describes the difference between Moshe and Yosef. While Moshe is buried in the plains of Moav, Yosef merits being buried in the land of Israel. Why did Yosef merit that which Moshe did not? The Midrash explains that Moshe made no effort to identify himself as a Jew, a Hebrew, an Israelite. When the daughters of Yitro first see him, they describe him as an Egyptian: “And they said: An Egyptian man delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds” (*Shemot* 2:19).

In contrast, Yosef repeatedly emphasizes his identity. He feels his Jewish, Israelite identity in every fiber of his body. Thus, for example, he describes himself in his conversation with the chief butler and chief baker: “For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews” (*Bereishit* 40:15). So too in his encounter with Potifar's wife, Yosef decides to stand his ground. Here we must consider the great temptation he faced. The greatest temptation was, of course, Potifar's wife herself, who did everything she could to seduce Yosef. Beyond that, however, submitting to Potifar's wife would provide him with an opportunity to free himself of the slave status with which he was currently shackled. Yosef is aware of this opportunity, but he knows that such conduct would involve giving up his identity as an Israelite. Yosef successfully withstands the temptation, chooses to follow in the path of the image of his father, and stands firm in his Jewish identity.

Perhaps the strongest expression of Yosef's Jewish identity is found in the part that he played in Yaakov's burial. Yaakov, who enjoyed distinguished standing as the father of the ruler, asked to be buried in the land of Israel. The Midrash describes a conversation between Yosef and Pharaoh, the latter trying to have Yaakov buried in Egypt. Yosef manages to push Pharaoh into the corner, and to bury Yaakov in the land of Israel.

The significance of burial specifically in the land of Israel and not in Egypt is great. Baron Rothschild's decision to be buried in Zichron Yaakov, and not in Europe, raised a commotion among the highest officials in the French government, who could not understand how a person who was so attached to their country could choose to be buried in the land of Israel. Choosing to be buried in a particular country attests to a person's identification with that country. The meaning of Yosef's request of Pharaoh to allow him to bury his father in the land of Israel is that despite his connection to Egypt and his sense of belonging to Pharaoh and to Egyptian culture, in the end, Egypt is not his country and he belongs elsewhere. He is a Hebrew from the land of the Hebrews. Yosef merited and his own request was fulfilled: he too was buried in the land of Israel.

While it is true that Yosef did in fact merit being buried in the land of Israel, the tragedy was that he did not merit to return to Israel during his lifetime. He never made it home, to the home that he left on that bitter day so many years earlier. Yosef dreamed of becoming the head of the family, to be the leader. Were his dreams fulfilled? No. His dream was to be a leader in the land of Israel! Did he dream or hope that on his account Yaakov and his sons would go down to Egypt? His dream was not fulfilled. Yosef reaches a position of leadership, but it is leadership in the land of Egypt over the Egyptian people, and not as he had dreamed at the outset. When Yaakov goes down to Egypt, he bows before Pharaoh, but not before Yosef. In the end, Yosef's leadership is incomplete, for at all times he is subject to Pharaoh's lordship. Yosef never returns home as he had wanted, and does not once again become part of the family as he had dreamed he would.

Thus, although Yosef finds himself in a difficult state of loneliness, at the center of Egyptian culture, he succeeds in maintaining his identity and his faith. Further proof can be brought for Yosef's cleaving to his Jewish identity in the account of his sending wagons to his father in anticipation of his coming down to Egypt. It is related there that when Yaakov saw the wagons (*agalot*), his spirit was revived (*Bereishit* 45:27). Rashi explains why (ad loc.):

As evidence that it was Yosef who was sending this message, he had informed him of the religious subject he had been studying with his father at the time he left him, viz., the section of the heifer (*agala*) that had its neck broken (*Devarim* 21:6). It is to this that Scripture refers in the words, "And he saw (i.e., comprehended the meaning of) the *agalot* (here to be taken in the sense of heifer) which Yosef had sent" – and it does not state "which Pharaoh had sent" (as one would expect if *agalot* meant wagons).

Yosef sends his father a message – beyond the fact that he is alive, he has held fast to the Torah lesson that he had learned with his father Yaakov. This is what may be learned from here, in addition to the connection between the story itself and the *egla arufa*, which deals with a person who was murdered and those responsible for his killing were not found.

### Egyptian influence

Not everything, however, was rose-colored. *Chazal* tell us that those very wagons that carried such an optimistic message bore the symbol of idolatry. Yosef was not aware of this because this was the symbol of the royal house, but Yaakov took note and was saddened. Yosef's sensitivity to idolatry had dulled.

Another expression of the Egyptian influence upon Yosef is evident in the meeting between Yosef and Yaakov. The Ramban writes:

What seems correct to me is that Yaakov's eyes were already heavy from old age, and when Yosef arrived in his chariot, his face covered by his headdress in the manner of the kings of Egypt, his father did not recognize him, as his brothers also did not recognize him. Therefore, Scripture mentions that when Yosef presented himself to his father, who looked at him and recognized him, his father fell on his neck and wept on it…. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 46:2)

According to the Ramban, Yaakov did not immediately recognize Yosef, because Yosef was wearing the headdress of Egyptian kings. Yosef knew that he was about to meet his father, who was sure that his beloved son had died twenty-two years earlier. When he stood before his closet that morning and was deciding what to wear at this long-anticipated meeting with his father, he chose the headdress worn by the Egyptian kings. Yosef may have put it on unthinkingly, or perhaps he donned it in order to make his father proud, he being the effective ruler of Egypt. Either way, that very headdress caused Yaakov not to recognize his beloved son. That headdress, that Egyptian influence, set up a barrier between Yosef and his father.

Later in the story we find additional expressions of the Egyptian influence upon Yosef. One clear example of this is Yosef's decision to embalm his father: “And Yosef commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father; and the physicians embalmed Israel” (*Bereishit* 50:2). Yosef's decision can be understood as based on concrete motives. On the simple level, Yosef may have decided to embalm his father in order to allow him to be buried in the land of Israel, which required a journey of several days. Nevertheless, it is absolutely clear that the act of embalming reflects Egyptian influence, with its culture of death.

When we think about Egypt, the first things to enter our minds are pyramids and mummies. The Egyptian death rituals stood at the heart of their culture, this in stark contrast to the Jewish approach. Here we see that this striking and significant motif left its mark even on Yosef.

The manner in which Yosef dealt with distributing the food in Egypt also contains Egyptian elements:

So Yosef bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for the Egyptians sold every man his field, because the famine was sore upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. And as for the people, he removed them city by city, from one end of the border of Egypt even to the other end thereof. Only the land of the priests bought he not, for the priests had a portion from Pharaoh, and did eat their portion which Pharaoh gave them; wherefore they sold not their land. Then Yosef said unto the people: Behold, I have bought you this day and your land for Pharaoh. Lo, here is seed for you, and you shall sow the land. And it shall come to pass at the ingatherings, that you shall give a fifth unto Pharaoh, and four parts shall be your own, for seed of the field, and for your food, and for them of your households, and for food for your little ones. And they said: You have saved our lives. Let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's bondmen. And Yosef made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt unto this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth; only the land of the priests alone became not Pharaoh's. (*Bereishit* 47:20-26)

These verses describe how Yosef turned all of Egypt into a society of slaves. Such an enterprise is characteristically Egyptian, Egypt being closely connected to a culture of slavery. It is reasonable to assume that were it not for Yosef, eighty per cent of the agricultural produce would not have reached the Egyptian farmers, with only twenty per cent going to Pharaoh, but just the opposite. But it was still Yosef who turned Egyptian society into a society of slaves.

Moreover, the verses describe how the priests of Egypt received their food for free without becoming slaves. Yosef was forced by Pharaoh to give preferential treatment to the idolatrous priests. Here, having no alternative, Yosef yielded to Egyptian pressure.

The Egyptian influence upon Yosef reaches its climax in the following verse, which is perhaps one of the saddest verses in the Torah:

And he sent Yehuda before him unto Yosef, to show the way before him (*le-horot lefanav*)unto Goshen; and they came into the land of Goshen. (*Bereishit* 46:28)

Rashi (ad loc.) explains the purpose for the sake of which Yehuda was sent to Yosef:

A Midrashic comment: *Le-horot lefanav*, in the sense of "that there might be teaching before him" – to establish for him a house of study from which teaching might go forth.

Yaakov sends one of his sons to prepare a religious foundation in Goshen before the extended family of the sons of Yaakov arrives. Since we are dealing with a tribe of seventy members, a full religious infrastructure was needed: a synagogue, a house of study, a *mikveh*, and the like.Whom does Yaakov choose to send for this purpose? Not Yosef, the ruler of Egypt who is familiar with the local language and customs, but rather Yehuda. When a spiritual infrastructure was needed, Yosef, who had already been influenced by Egyptian culture for the last twenty-two years, would not be as capable in this regard as was Yehuda.

The message is clear. Even after all of Yosef's efforts to preserve his spiritual values and his Jewish identity for twenty-two years, Yaakov had to say to him, with all the pain that this involved, that the family of Yaakov now arriving in Egypt needed a different atmosphere than that to which Yosef was accustomed. They cannot live in close proximity to Yosef, to the house of Pharaoh. Yehuda will establish a house of study. Yehuda will lead the family of Yaakov, for it is he, and not Yosef, who has the spiritual ability to do so.

### Yosef recognizes the cost

We see from here how Yosef tried his best to resist becoming assimilated into Egyptian society, and how on a certain level he succeeded to so. But the cost was still there: One cannot live in another country, in a foreign culture, without being influenced by it. Strong as a person might be, and even if he is as strong as Yosef, he cannot avoid being influenced, consciously or unconsciously.

If a person wishes to preserve the highest possible spiritual level without giving in to external influences, he cannot live in Egypt, where he will encounter another culture that will influence and change him.

In conclusion, let us turn our attention to the fact that in the end Yosef himself understands the price that he has paid. He grasps the fact that his dreams were not fulfilled, and he distances himself from them:

And God sent me before you to give you a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God…. (*Bereishit* 45:7-8)

(This *sicha* was delivered at Seuda Shelishit, *Parashat Vayigash* 5773 [2012].)