**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT MIKETZ**

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In loving memory of my parents:

Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z”l

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**Binyamin in the Land of Egypt**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

In a different context, we clarified our understanding of Yosef's goal when he accused his brothers of being spies – namely, his desire to bring his brothers to recognize the sin of his sale, repent for it, and repair it, even if this would take them down a difficult and painful path.[[1]](#footnote-1)

And Yosef said unto them the third day, “This do, and live; for I fear God. If you be upright men, let one of your brethren be bound in your prison-house; but go you, carry corn for the famine of your houses; and bring your youngest brother unto me. So shall your words be verified, and you shall not die.” (*Bereishit* 42:18-20)

I.

As we noted, Yosef not only demands of his brothers that they bring Binyamin before him, he also makes it clear to them that the missing brother, Binyamin, is suspected of spying and coming to see the nakedness of the land, perhaps even more so than the rest of the brothers. Thus, he makes clear the danger that bringing him to Egypt will involve. Were he to be brought to Egypt, he would be in real danger of being thrown into prison, or perhaps even worse.

Binyamin was the surviving son of Rachel and his father's current favorite, the son for whom his father may have made a new coat of many colors to replace the torn and blood-stained coat of Yosef. It may be that Binyamin, like his older brother, was a dreamer who saw himself as the chosen brother.

In our opinion, it is not necessary to say that already at this stage Yosef planned to accuse Binyamin of stealing his goblet, which would have supported the suspicion, as it were, of the Egyptian ruler that Binyamin was the key figure in the espionage affair, who therefore stole the viceroy's goblet. Yosef's test of his brothers appears to be much simpler: Will they agree to endanger Binyamin by bringing him to Egypt despite the concern that he would fall in the footsteps of his older brother into the Egyptian abyss from which there is no return?

We believe that Yosef hoped that the brothers would not return to Egypt. Perhaps they would send him a letter by way of a messenger that owing to the distress of their elderly father, they had decided not to bring Binyamin down to Egypt; they must protect him at all costs from all dangers, and they must protect him sevenfold from the hostile atmosphere that prevailed against them in Egypt. Perhaps they would write in this letter that they had decided on their own to suffer the famine with their families and hope for God's mercies. They chose to leave their brother Shimon in the Egyptian prison and not to endanger Binyamin.

Had they done this – and even had they not written this imaginary letter, but had they at least not returned so quickly to Egypt with Binyamin – Yosef might have been convinced about their desire to repair the sin of his sale to Egypt at all costs, even at the cost of a heavy famine and the cost of leaving Shimon the son of Leah in the Egyptian prison. The sin of Yosef’s having been sold to Egypt would have been repaired through the brothers’ stubborn defense of Binyamin, who would not be brought to Egypt.

Indeed, this is also what Yaakov wanted:

And he said, “My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he only is left; if harm befall him by the way in which you go, then will you bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.” (*Bereishit* 42:38)

Were this the case, Yosef could have exploited the fact that Shimon was left in Egypt (and perhaps he left him there for this purpose), in order to send him to his brothers, who had repaired their ways, to reveal his identity to them through Shimon and to invite them to live under his protection in Egypt.

Elsewhere, we suggested that it was precisely Shimon who was imprisoned because Yosef's cover story regarding his concern about espionage pointed to Shimon as the primary suspect, owing to his conduct in Shechem. We would like now to add the possibility that Yosef wished to give his brothers the opportunity to repair their sin, and he was concerned about Shimon's negative influence in this area, more so than that of any other brother, for clear reasons.[[2]](#footnote-2)

II.

However, matters turned out differently and, in our opinion, to Yosef's disappointment, the brothers in the end returned to him in Egypt, bringing Binyamin with them. Yosef's treatment of Binyamin in his first meeting with him is somewhat puzzling:

And he lifted up his eyes and saw Binyamin his brother, his mother's son, and said, “Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke unto me?” And he said, “God be gracious unto you, my son.” And Yosef made haste, for his heart yearned toward his brother; and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber and wept there. (*Bereishit* 43:29-30)

Yosef cries here for the second time (he will later cry a third time). He cries now because he feels sorry for his brother. But why does he feel sorry for him? Yosef was the hated brother, rejected by his brothers, who could not speak peacefully to him. Yosef left the house at a young age on the dangerous road to Shechem. He was cast into a pit, sold as a slave, and cast again for many years into an Egyptian prison. Why should he have pity to the point of tears for Binyamin, who had lived a relatively peaceful life, raised a family, and lived under the protection of his father all his days? Binyamin should have wept for Yosef, not the other way around!

We are forced to conclude that Yosef interpreted the relatively rapid arrival of Binyamin and his brothers in Egypt as a sign that the brothers ruled the family and not their father. They were prepared to abandon their brother Binyamin, the son of Rachel, in return for food or for the release of their brother Shimon. He understood that nothing had changed; the brothers' sin against him continued with Binyamin his brother, and Binyamin was being treated with estrangement, either secretly or openly, just as he had been treated. He felt sorry for his brother and wept for him.

This second weeping, over Binyamin, is the opposite of his first weeping:

And they said one to another, “We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us.” And Reuven answered them, saying, “Spoke I not unto you, saying: Do not sin against the child; and you would not hear? Therefore also, behold, his blood is required.” And they knew not that Yosef understood them, for the interpreter was between them. And he turned himself about from them and wept. (*Bereishit* 42:21-24)

The first weeping, over the brothers' distress, was a cry of emotional agitation, a cry of hope. Yosef saw his brothers showing remorse for their actions and engaging in a reckoning for having sold him into slavery. He wept, but he was not tempted to reveal his identity to them. Repentance for sin is comprised not only of confession and recognition of guilt. Repentance is first and foremost capacity for repair. Yosef decided to test his brothers' capacity for repair through Binyamin. His second weeping was a cry of emotional excitement over his meeting with Binyamin, but it was also a cry of disappointment – disappointment over the fact that his brothers had brought Binyamin down to Egypt, rather than risk their lives in order to protect him.

Yosef wept, but he was wrong! There was one point that he did not take into account with respect to his brothers' return to Egypt with Binyamin. When he became aware of this point that he had not previously considered, he wept a third time. In order to understand this point, let us go back to what happened in Yaakov's house when the brothers returned without Shimon.

III.

And Yaakov their father said unto them, “Me have you bereaved of my children: Yosef is not, and Shimon is not, and you will take Binyamin; upon me are all these things come.” And Reuven spoke unto his father, saying, “You shall slay my two sons, if I bring him not to you; deliver him into my hand, and I will bring him back to you.” And he said, “My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he only is left; if harm befall him by the way in which you go, then will you bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.” (*Bereishit* 42:36-38)

Rashi (ad loc.): Me have you bereaved – The inference is that he suspected them of having slain or sold him [Shimon], as they had done to Yosef.

My son shall not go down with you – He did not accept Reuven's offer. He said: What a fool is this oldest son of mine! He suggests that I should kill his sons. Are they his only and not mine also?

Reuven is the first of the sons to take initiative. He proposes that he will take responsibility for Binyamin's safe return, and he offers his own two sons as a surety. Rashi already had difficulty with Reuven's offer. What is the nature of this offer? Why should the two sons of Reuven be put to death if Reuven fails in his mission?

We suggested elsewhere that Reuven's words hint at Yehuda's punishment for his part in Yosef's sale – the death of his two sons, Er and Onan. Reuven accepts upon himself similar punishment should he cause Binyamin what Yehuda had caused Yosef, and leave him in the abyss of Egypt. Yaakov's suspicion that his sons were responsible for Yosef's death only deepened. He is not prepared to entrust them with Binyamin.

Even though Yaakov did not know what happened in Dotan, he appears to have been correct. Reuven had failed there in his attempt to save Yosef. How, then, would he be able to save Binyamin should difficulty arise?

And Yehuda said unto Israel his father, “Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live, and not die, both we, and you, and also our little ones. I will be surety for him; of my hand shall you require him; if I bring him not unto you, and set him before you, then let me bear the blame for ever. For except we had lingered, surely we had now returned a second time.” And their father Israel said unto them… “Take also your brother, and arise, go again unto the man; and God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that he may release unto you your other brother and Binyamin. And as for me, if I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.” (*Bereishit* 43:8-14)

What is the difference between Yehuda's words and the words of Reuven? Was it just the fact that the famine worsened and they ran out of food, as is suggested by the *midrash* (*Sekhel Tov*, s.v. *ve-ha-ra'av kaved*)? Was it for this reason that Yaakov decided to hand over Binyamin?

It seems rather that what convinced Yaakov was the depth of Yehuda's guarantee. This may be related to Yehuda's personality. But it is possible that there is also a difference in content between what Yehuda said and what Reuven said. Reuven related primarily to his guilt, should he, God forbid, leave Binyamin in Egypt. His guilt would lead to the aforementioned punishment – the death of Reuven's two sons. Yehuda, in contrast, related to his responsibility to bring Binyamin home. This responsibility is not a momentary matter; it will drive him each and every hour, each and every day. He will never forget this responsibility for the rest of his life, and in practice it will fall upon him to actualize it. Even if he fails the first time, he will never tire of trying to restore Binyamin to his father at all cost.

In Yehuda's surety we hear an echo of his guilt for his part in the sale of Yosef, which was replaced by his taking responsibility for the sale and the need not to rest until Yosef is safely returned home.

Yosef, the ruler who was testing his brothers, did not know the depth of Yehuda's surety, upon which Yaakov relied when he entrusted him with Binyamin. He wept the second time because he saw in Binyamin's being brought to Egypt, despite the great danger that hung over his head, a demonstration of scorn for the life and freedom of Binyamin, son of Rachel. He will eventually learn of the depth of Yehuda's surety, and the profundity of the repair that he accepted upon himself. Then he cried for a third time.

IV.

Let us go back to Yosef. Yosef participated in a feast in which he drank with his brothers, perplexed between his two episodes of weeping. The first time he cried, he saw the buds of regret and repentance, confession and acceptance of responsibility for their sin involving Yosef. The second time he saw their inability to risk their lives in order to repair their sin. The doubt ate away at him. What should he do? He decided to administer one more test, another accusation of espionage. Will the brothers risk their lives for their brother, or will they abandon him?

And he commanded the steward of his house, saying, “Fill the men's sacks with food, as much as they can carry, and put every man's money in his sack's mouth. And put my goblet, the silver goblet, in the sack's mouth of the youngest, and his corn money.” And he did according to the word that Yosef had spoken. As soon as the morning was light, the men were sent away, they and their asses. And when they were gone out of the city, and were not yet far off, Yosef said unto his steward, “Up, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say unto them: Wherefore have you rewarded evil for good? Is not this it in which my lord drinks, and whereby he indeed divines? You have done evil in so doing.” And he overtook them, and he spoke unto them these words. And they said unto him: “Wherefore speaks my lord such words as these? Far be it from your servants that they should do such a thing. Behold, the money, which we found in our sacks' mouths, we brought back unto you out of the land of Canaan; how, then, should we steal out of your lord's house silver or gold? With whomsoever of your servants it be found, let him die, and we also will be my lord's bondmen.” And he said: “Now also let it be according unto your words: he with whom it is found shall be my bondman; and you shall be blameless.” Then they hastened, and took down every man his sack to the ground, and opened every man his sack. And he searched, beginning at the eldest, and leaving off at the youngest; and the goblet was found in Binyamin's sack. (*Bereishit* 44:1-12)

This was a difficult test. Not only were the brothers expected to risk their lives in order to save Binyamin, but they were supposed to suspect him, and rightfully so, of having entangled them in his actions and reviving the suspicion of espionage from which they had extricated themselves. Because of him, they were liable to turn into slaves in Egypt, in fulfillment of a condition that they had accepted.

Moreover, the episode could not but have caused them to remember Lavan's pursuit of them when they fled with their father from Aram-Naharayim. There Rachel, Binyamin's mother, stole the *terafim*, her father's divining instruments, just as Binyamin "stole," as it were, Yosef's goblet, the divining instrument of the Egyptian ruler. There too Yaakov had said: "With whomsoever you find your gods, he shall not live" (*Bereishit* 31:32), just as they themselves had said: "With whomsoever of your servants it be found, let him die" (*Bereishit* 44:9). There too there was a danger that Lavan would try to turn Yaakov their father into a perpetual slave because of the theft, but the *terafim* were never found. Here the brothers were on the verge of perpetual slavery. All of the animosity that the sons of Leah had all these years against Rachel, who, from their perspective, stole their mother's honor, should have burst out here against Binyamin. Would the brothers in this situation succeed in repairing their sin against Yosef, by risking their lives for Binyamin?

And they rent their clothes, and laded every man his ass, and returned to the city. And Yehuda and his brethren came to Yosef's house, and he was yet there; and they fell before him on the ground. And Yosef said unto them: What deed is this that you have done? Know you not that such a man as I will indeed divine? And Yehuda said: What shall we say unto my lord? what shall we speak or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants; behold, we are my lord's bondmen, both we, and he also in whose hand the cup is found.” (*Bereishit* 44:13-16)

Here it is Yehuda who speaks, and not Reuven who had spoken up in response to the accusation that they were spies. Yehuda retracts his offer to kill the thief and likens all of the brothers to Binyamin as being guilty of the offense. The responsibility for the crime is shared by all. Binyamin, as described by Yehuda, was just one of the gang, in no way exceptional. All of Israel are responsible one for the other.[[3]](#footnote-3) None of the brothers dared to protest. Yehuda was a true leader, and Yosef sees this. In contrast to Reuven, who said in his time of trouble: "Spoke I not unto you… and you would not hear" (*Bereishit* 42:22), blaming his brothers, Yehuda took the guilt upon himself – the guilt for the goblet explicitly, and the guilt for the sale of Yosef implicitly. It would appear that Yaakov was right when he chose Yehuda to be responsible for Binyamin, rather than handing him over to Reuven.

Translated by David Strauss

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1. This is the general path taken by the *Akeidat Yitzchak* and the Abravanel. We will suggest our own narrow lane within the context of their wider path. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "'Two of the sons of Yaakov, Shimon and Levi, Dina's brethren, took' (*Bereishit* 34:25) – and they plotted against Yosef and tried to kill him, as it is stated: 'And they said one to another… Come, now, therefore, and let us slay him' (*Bereishit* 37:19-20)" (*Bereishit Rabba* 97). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is difficult to ignore the similarity between the "halakhic innovation" of Yehuda and that which arises from the dispute between some of the leading Amoraim regarding the following issue: "It was taught: Regarding a party of men who were traveling on the road, and non-Jews stopped them and said: Hand over one of your members and we will kill him, or else we will kill all of you, then even if all of them will be killed, they must not hand over even a single Jew. If [the non-Jews] specified a particular person, e.g., Sheva ben Bikhri, they can hand him over to them, and not be killed" (*Yerushalmi*, *Terumot* 8:4 in the name of the Tosefta, *Terumot*, chap. 7). In the *Yerushalmi* ad loc., the Amoraim disagree about the meaning of what is stated in the Tosefta: "R. Shimon ben Lakish said: This applies where the [specified party] was liable for the death penalty like Sheva ben Bikhri. And R. Yochanan said: Even if he was not liable for the death penalty like Sheva ben Bikhri." According to R. Yochanan, even if the non-Jews falsely accused a particular Jew, if they singled him out, asking only for him, the community does not bear collective responsibility for him, and they can hand him over in order to save themselves. According to Resh Lakish, however, the collective responsibility applies even if he alone was singled out, provided that he had not committed an offense against them and the charges brought against him were false.

   In our case, the Egyptian ruler falsely accused Binyamin of stealing his goblet, but singled him out "to bear his punishment." Yehuda established here the law of collective responsibility. We assume here, as did Rashi, that at this stage Yehuda already understood that the Egyptian ruler was scheming against them. Yehuda established that the law is in accordance with Resh Lakish, and indeed the Rambam rules in accordance with his position. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)