YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

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Dedication 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**

**Why didn't Yosef write to his father?**

In *Parashat Vayigash*,we are witness to a moving and poignant encounter between Yosef and his brothers. We have been waiting several chapters for this moment – and finally, it arrives! With all the feelings of joy that arise in this *parasha*, Yosef's revelation to his brothers raises a complex and interesting question: Why did this not take place sooner? Why did Yosef wait so long, since the time he went down to Egypt, to inform his father that he was still alive?

This question troubled many commentators, including the *Or Ha-Chaim*:

I have seen fit to pay attention to the matter of Yosef: how did he not feel his father's grief for so many years? It is true that during the period of his slavery, it can be argued that he tried but did not succeed. But after he rose to greatness, why didn't he write a letter to his father to diminish his grief? For Yosef knew the extent of Yaakov's love for him and that he would mourn for him for many years; why then did he not send a letter to inform him that he was alive? (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bereishit* 44:26)

In this *shiur*,we will try to understand the suggestions proposed by the various commentators, concluding with the path suggested by the *Or Ha-Chaim*.

**I. Fulfillment of the Dreams**

The first time that Yosef and the brothers meet after his sale, the brothers have come to buy food in Egypt and do not know that the ruler facing them is actually Yosef. The first thing Yosef's brothers do upon meeting him is prostrate themselves before him:

And Yosef's brothers came and bowed down to him with their faces to the earth. (*Bereishit* 42:6)

The Torah continues with a description of Yosef's suspicious reaction:

And Yosef saw his brothers, and he knew them, but made himself strange to them, and spoke roughly with them; and he said to them: From where do you come? And they said: From the land of Canaan, to buy food. (*Bereishit* 42:7)

The Torah then highlights two details that are not part of the story itself, but are constantly in the background:

And Yosef knew his brothers, but they knew him not. And Yosef remembered the dreams which he had dreamed of them… (*Bereishit* 42:8-9)

The fact that Yosef recognized his brothers, while they did not recognize him, is certainly important for understanding the story – but what is the relevance of Yosef's remembering his dreams? Rashi (*Bereishit* 42:9) suggests Scripture is noting that Yosef's dream did in fact come true, in that the brothers were bowing down to him. The Ramban, on the other hand, offers the very opposite interpretation:

In my opinion, the matter is the reverse. Scripture states that when Yosef saw his brothers bowing down to him, he remembered all the dreams which he had dreamed concerning them – and he knew that in this instance, not one of the dreams had been fulfilled. He knew that it was inherent in their interpretation that according to the first dream, at first all his brothers would bow down to him, as it is stated: "And behold, we were binding sheaves" – for "we" refers to all eleven of his brothers [including Binyamin, who was not present at this encounter in Egypt]. The second time, in accordance with the second dream, the sun, the moon and eleven stars would bow down to him. Now, since he did not see Binyamin with them, he conceived of the strategy of devising a charge against them so that they would also bring his brother Binyamin to him, in order to first fulfill the first dream. (Ramban, *Bereishit* 42:9)

Thus, according to the Ramban, the entire maneuver with Binyamin was planned from the outset, with the purpose of fulfilling Yosef's dreams. In light of this, the Ramban also explains why Yosef does not rush to inform his father that he is alive:

It is for this reason that he did not wish to tell them at this time, "I am Yosef, your brother," and to say, "Hasten and go up to my father," and send wagons, as he did to them the second time, for in that case his father would undoubtedly have come at once. It was only after fulfillment of the first dream that he told them ["I am Yosef your brother"], in order to fulfill the second dream. Were it not for this consideration, Yosef would indeed be regarded as having committed a great sin – bringing anguish to his father, leaving him for many days in the position of being bereft and mourning for Shimon and for him. Even if it were his intention to cause his brothers minor anguish, how could he not have compassion for his elderly father? But he assigned each to its proper timein order to fulfill the dreams, knowing that they would truly be fulfilled. (Ramban, ibid.)

This interpretation is not without difficulties. First, according to the Ramban, it is understandable why *after* the brothers arrived Yosef did not rush to reveal himself to them, but before that, why did he not turn to his father? Moreover, many commentators objected to the fundamental idea that it is a person's responsibility to see that his dreams are fulfilled. This is what the Abravanel writes:

I have already written that the fulfillment of the dreams was not by way of the physical bowing… And furthermore, the fulfillment of the dreams was cast upon the Holy One, blessed be He, and not upon Yosef the dreamer. (Abravanel, *Bereishit* 41)

The Abravanel has a different explanation for the bowing in the dream, but he also argues that the fulfillment of the dreams was in the hands of Heaven. Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, in his book *Akeidat Yitzchak*,writes in similar fashion:

This is what should be joined to this story, namely, why didn't Yosef inform his father about all his glory, seeing that he had the power to relieve him from his distress and sadness, and all the more so in the years of famine to save him from death and reinvigorate him? I am puzzled by what the Ramban wrote, that he did this in order to make his dreams come true, for of what benefit was it to him for them to be fulfilled? Even if there were a benefit, he should not have sinned against his father, but rather he should have refrained from sinning against him. As for the dreams, He who made them should provide their solution. It is also enormous folly for a person to try to fulfill his dreams, for they are things that happen without the person's intention. (*Akeidat Yitzchak*, *sha'ar* 29)

A fundamental question arises here: to what extent should a prophet act to fulfill his prophecy? It is possible that this question was already discussed in the Gemara in *Berakhot*, where the Gemara describes a conversation that took place when King Chizkiyahu fell ill and the prophet Yeshayahu went to visit him (see II *Melakhim* 20 and *Yeshayahu* 38):

He said to him [=Chizkiyahu to Yeshayahu]: Why so bad? [=Why am I sick?] He replied: Because you did not try to have children. He said to him: The reason was that I saw by the holy spirit that the children issuing from me would not be virtuous. He said to him: What have you to do with the secrets of the All-Merciful? You should have done what you were commanded, and let the Holy One, blessed be He, do that which pleases Him. (*Berakhot* 10a)

In response to Chizkiyahu's question, why did God treat him so badly, Yeshayahu answers that this was his punishment for not engaging in procreation. Chizkiyahu seemingly had a good excuse: after all, he had a prophetic vision that the children to be born from him would not be virtuous! However, Yeshayahu teaches him an important principle in the service of God – that a person must do what he is commanded; the consequences and results of these actions are in the hands of Heaven. Even if a person received a prophecy that his actions will cause bad things, he is still subject to God's commandments and must not deviate from them.

Therefore, in our case as well, Yosef should have proceeded in accordance with God's command, and not refrained from showing respect to his father in order to realize his dreams.

**II. Educating the Brothers and Preserving the House of Yaakov**

The *Da'at Zekeinim mi-Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* explain Yosef's lack of contact as stemming from a desire to preserve the integrity of Yaakov's family:

In addition, he was afraid that if he would tell his father [that he was alive], his brothers would hear, and panic, and flee, this one to the north and that one to the south, out of great fear that he would kill them, and as a result, his father would grieve over *them*, and he would cause great distress to him. This is why he waited until his brothers came to him, and then he first revealed himself to them and appeased them with words, telling them that he had no bad feeling for them, and he asked them to inform their father that he was the ruler of the entire land of Egypt. (*Da'at Zekeinim* 42:1)

Yosef assumed that if his father received word that he was alive, Yaakov would discuss it with the brothers and try to clarify what had happened to Yosef. This would undoubtedly create rifts in the family – and it is precisely these rifts that Yosef wished to avoid. In order to avoid them, Yosef waited until his brothers themselves regretted the sale, at which time it would be possible to reunite and live together as a family.

In a similar, but slightly different way, Rabbi S. R. Hirsch explains that Yosef and his brothers must undergo a process of forgiving past sins before they can make themselves known to each other:

We must try, from what we are told, to explain Yosef's behavior. We should have thought that if only for his father's sake, he would have made himself known to them immediately… A clever man like Yosef would also not think that he had to fulfill all the details of his dreams. If a dream has any meaning, one can leave its realization to the One who sends it. It could be that considerations of urgent necessity caused him to adopt a behavior which otherwise must appear as senseless and purposeless spitefulness. This, apart from Yosef's character, his undeniable cleverness cannot allow us to suppose to have been the motive. If we put ourselves completely in his position, we could arrive at the following explanation.

Had Yosef wished his attitude towards his father and his brothers to remain really as the governor, and nothing but the governor, did he not care whether or not he would re-enter the family circle as son and brother, he would not have required all these contrivances. But he, who, even as an Egyptian prince had brought up his children for the house of Yaakov, and who also desired his bones ultimately to rest in the land of his fathers, felt it absolutely necessary for him to be convinced of two things: (a) that he himself can have a different opinion of his brothers, and above all (b) that his brothers have a different opinion of, and felt quite differently towards him. Their inner feelings towards one another must have become quite different to what they formerly were, otherwise an intimate relationship would never be able to be re-established, and even if outwardly the family were to be reunited, the family would be lost to him, and he for the family… In a word, that, the moment he revealed himself to them as Yosef, the scales would fall from their eyes, and on both sides it would be possible to cross out the whole of the past. Only so could he hope to be really restored to his father and his sons as son and brother. Unless we are mistaken it must have been considerations such as these which kept Yosef back from sending information to his father during the years of his good fortune. (Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, *Bereishit* 42:9)

Both of these interpretations are plausible, but they carry both a moral and a practical difficulty: Is Yosef the one who is fit to "educate" his brothers? Furthermore, who said that Yosef's brothers would ever reach Egypt and that he would be able to influence them to repent of their past sins?

It must also be remembered that Yaakov's family had experienced a number of difficult crises: from the foundation of the family with the substitution of Leah for Rachel, through the arguments about the births in the house of Yaakov, the incident of Shekhem and Dina, and the reaction of Shimon and Levi, and the actions of Reuven. Yaakov was able to withstand all these family crises and still keep the family intact. Why did Yosef not rely on Yaakov to do the same here?

**III. Compulsion**

Other commentators suggested inserting a detail that is not explicitly written in the Torah in order to explain Yosef's actions. Thus the *Bekhor Shor* writes:

"What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?" Yehuda said: Why should we commit this sin to kill him and not receive any benefit from his death? It is better that we should sell him and the sin not be so severe, and we benefit, and we will also not see him anymore, and he will not mock us. It seems that when they sold him, *they made him swear* that he would not come back to his father's house, and not reveal himself to his father, and not inform his father that he was alive and had been sold, and not say there that he was one of the sons of Yaakov, with no signs and no proof. And so he did, as it was better for him to do that, and not die at their hands. For if this were not the case, when he rose to greatness in his master's house, and for nine years was ruler of Egypt, during the seven years of plenty and two years of famine, why did he not send to his father saying, “Here I am in Egypt”? After all, he knew that his father grieved over him! Rather, certainly he swore to them. (*Bekhor Shor*, *Bereishit* 37:26)

According to this, Yosef's silence stemmed from a halakhic oath.

Rabbi Yeshayahu Halevi Horowitz (the *Shela*)suggests an even more far-reaching proposal:

This explains why, for 22 years, Yosef did not inform his father that he was alive: that the hand of God did this. This was in one of two ways: Either the holy spirit rested upon Yosef and commanded him not to inform his father that he was alive, and Yosef had to fulfill God's command [despite the pain it would cause his father], because both he and his father are obligated to honor Him, may He be blessed. Or he was under compulsion, because the Holy One, blessed be He, removed free choice from Yosef, so he would not choose to inform his father. Yosef is not to be blamed for this, because he was forced by God, blessed be He – and God acted as an atonement for Yaakov. (*Torah Or*, 26)

Of course, the words of the *Shela* are remarkable, both because of their distance from the plain meaning of the verses, and, even more, from a conceptual point of view: Does God withhold free choice from human beings?

The common denominator of these two interpretations is also the great difficulty in both of them – their distance from the plain sense of Scripture.

**IV. Causing Shame**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* offers a different understanding that explains Yosef's actions:

It seems that Yosef's reason was praiseworthy. For from the time of his descent to Egypt until the time that His word came to pass and he was removed from prison to rule, he was unable to inform his father. Even assuming that he was able to do so, he was afraid for his life that if his brothers would know about the matter, owing to their shame and embarrassment before their father, they would dedicate themselves to removing him from the world so as to not be humiliated before their father…

And after he was released from prison, and became a great minister, and the first concern no longer applied, nevertheless, he refrained from informing his father, in the spirit of what *Chazal* said: "It is better for a man to cast himself into a fiery furnace than he should put his fellow to shame in public" (*Bava Kama* 59a). He was concerned about his brothers' honor, so as not to put to them to shame before Yaakov… and he suffered that his father would remain in his grief, rather than humiliate them. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 45:26)

On the face of it, this proposal sounds rather weak: Is Yosef truly willing to suffer so much in order to avoid embarrassing his brothers? Furthermore, this does not sound like the Yosef we know from the beginning of *Parashat Vayeshev*, who brought his brothers' evil report to their father. Why is it so difficult here for Yosef to put them to shame?

If we delve more deeply, however, we can see this as a reflection of a general change that Yosef underwent in Egypt. This significant, deep-seated change may be a significant aspect of Israel's descent into Egypt and their transformation into a nation.

The relationship between Yosef and his brothers, as mentioned, was never one of calm and serenity. There were fights between the brothers from birth, and between their mothers even earlier than that. But when he went down to Egypt, something changed in Yosef. Yosef no longer brings his brothers' evil report to their father, but spares them so as not to put them to shame. Things also changed with the brothers, to the extent that they see themselves as guilty for what happened to Yosef.

What changed in Yosef following his descent into Egypt? Ostensibly, he should have become more firm in his position that the brothers are problematic, and that their actions must be brought to their father's attention! How is it that what happens is the exact opposite?

It can be suggested that Yosef learned an important lesson for all future generations in the wake of his sale. A quarrel between brothers does not necessarily end with an evil report being brought to the father, but is liable to deteriorate to the point of wanting to kill, sell, and break up the entire package. It is not possible to live as one nation with such hatred between brothers. Even hatred that begins with minor tattling of one kind or another may end in actions that divide the family and tear it apart. Yosef saw firsthand how far an argument between brothers could go, and he is not prepared to contribute to it anymore – even at the price of being forgotten forever in Egypt.

If this is indeed the case, we can learn a great lesson for our time from the actions of Yosef:

Our Rabbis taught: Those who are insulted but do not insult, hear themselves reviled without answering, act through love and rejoice in suffering, of them it is stated in Scripture: "But they who love Him are as the sun when he goes forth in his might" (*Shoftim* 5:31). (*Shabbat* 88b)

The capacity not to respond to provocation, disgrace, and slander is a fundamental necessity for the building and establishment of a nation. Perhaps that is why God brought about Israel's descent to Egypt precisely out of strife and discord – so that we should understand their severity and the degree to which the building of a nation requires that they be removed from our midst.

(Translated by David Strauss)