

**Joseph, Phone Home!
Vayigash 5776
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky**

We have all been waiting for this moment with bated breath. Tension has slowly been mounting with each passing week as we await this epic reunion of siblings have been separated for decades, each with their own tale to tell of an epic battle of good against evil. Unexpected familial revelations have rocked the very foundations of the universe, and changed the way all the protagonists relate to the world around them. Finally, the moment has have arrived, and Princess Leah and Luke Skywalker are together again...

Of course, that is also an accurate description of the narrative in this week's Parsha, but of course, it's not that simple. Last year, a congregant of mine in Woodmere named Dr. Danny Zanger was seated at lunch at a simcha in the neighborhood next to a local Rabbi with whom he is close, a Torah scholar of note. Danny asked this question that bothers him, and I'm sure many of you as well, whenever we read the four *parshiyot* that make up the story of Yosef's sale into Egyptian slavery and his subsequent meteoric rise to become the highest echelons of power. Danny offered an answer that this Rabbi dismissed as heretical, the kind of answer someone could only suggest if his mind had become corrupted by newfangled schools of Biblical interpretation. When he told *me* the question and shared the answer he thought of, I pointed out that he had unknowingly given the same answer as that of one of today's most innovative, original and even controversial teachers of Torah in Israel. His name is Rav Yoel Bin Nun; If

you've read the book "Like Dreamers" by Yossi Klein HaLevi, you are familiar with the figure of Rav Yoel Bin Nun as a fiery revolutionary totally dedicated to a biblical future for the State of Israel, but now he is better known for his Torah teachings. Our Thursday morning Parsha shiur at Akiba is on hiatus until school resumes, so instead, I would like to do something similar to what we do in the Parsha shiur and study this question, and Rav Bin Nun's explanation, together this morning. The question is a simple one.

Throughout all his time in Egypt, why did Yosef never send a letter home? Why didn't he attempt to establish contact with his father, who loved him so dearly? It's not that hard, especially if you are the most powerful person in Egypt.

The Ramban and many others are bothered by this question as well; In the first source on your source sheets, we see the Ramban's question.

רמב"ן בראשית פרשת מקץ פרק מב

כי יש לתמוה אחר שעמד יוסף במצרים ימים רבים והיה פקיד ונגיד בבית שר גדול במצרים, איך לא שלח כתב אחד לאביו להודיעו ולנחמו, כי מצרים קרוב לחברון כששה ימים, ואילו היה מהלך שנה היה ראוי להודיעו לכבוד אביו, ויקר פדיון נפשו ויפדנו ברוב ממון:

Ramban, Bereishit 42:9

"How is it that Joseph, after living many years in Egypt, having attained a high and influential position in the house of an important Egyptian official, did not send his father even one message to inform him (that he was alive) and comfort him? Egypt is only six days' travel from Hebron, and respect for his father would have justified even a year's journey! (It would) have been a grave sin to torment his father by leaving him in mourning and bereavement for himself and for Shim'on; even if he wanted to hurt his

brothers a little, how could he not feel pity for his aged father (Ramban to Gen. 42:9)?

The answer is that Joseph crafted this sequence of events, all in its proper time, to fulfill his dreams, so he could ensure they would be fulfilled."

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The answer is that Joseph crafted this sequence of events, all in its proper time, to fulfill his dreams, so he could ensure they would be fulfilled."

Rav Yitzchak Arama, the great Spanish commentator, finds the Ramban's answer to be unsatisfying, even baffling.

עקדת יצחק, סוף שער כט

ותמהני ממה שכתב הרמב"ן ז"ל שעשה כדי שיתקיימו חלומותיו, כי מה תועלת לו בשיתקיימו; ואף כי תהיה תועלת, לא היה לו לחטוא נגד אביו, אבל היה לו לחשוך עצמו מחטוא לו, והחלומות – **העושים יגיש פתרונם.**

Rav Yitzchak Arama, Akeidat Yitzchak Bereishit 29

It is worth considering as an addition to this story, why Joseph never told his father about the honor he had received . After all, he had the ability, in so doing, to calm his

*father's anger and sadness; certainly this would be true in the years of family, where he could have saved his father from death and revive him at the same time. I am baffled by what the Ramban, of blessed memory, wrote that Joseph crafted this sequence of events so that his dreams would be fulfilled. For what purpose would it serve to him if they were? And even if there was some kind of benefit to it, he should not have sinned against his father, and should have saved himself from this great sin, **and the dreams would be fulfilled by the One who creates them.***

Furthermore, Rav Bin Nun points out that even if the ultimate goal had been the realization of his dreams, in which his brothers prostrated themselves in his presence, Yosef had already accomplished that. The first time the brothers come down to Egypt to secure some food rations, they bowed before him- thus fulfilling the first dream.

מ"ב, ו

ויוסף הוא השליט על הארץ הוא המשביר לכל עם הארץ ויבאו אחי יוסף וישתחוו לו אפים ארצה
Bereishit 42:6

And Joseph was the governor over the land; he it was that sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brethren came, and bowed down to him with their faces to the earth.

But they weren't all there; Binyamin was still with his father. The second dream was fulfilled when they all returned to Egypt, this time with Binyamin, and all bowed down to him.

מ"ג, כו

ויבא יוסף הביתה ויביאו לו את המנחה אשר בידם הביתה וישתחוו לו ארצה

Bereishit 43:26

And when Joseph came home, they brought him the present which was in their hand into the house, and bowed down to him to the earth

So if Yosef had contrived this entire scheme to fulfill his dreams, he should have stopped there. Why string his brothers along, causing additional sorrow to his father?

Rav Bin Nun suggests a different approach which changes our perception of the story. In his view, this question can only be answered by realizing that *Yosef had no idea his father thought he was dead*. It did not occur to him that his brothers had contrived a ruse involving his colorful coat and the blood of a goat, which they showed Yaakov as evidence that he was devoured by savage beasts. Throughout his time in Egypt- 13 years in Egyptian slavery and then his years of ascent in the Egyptian palace- thinking to himself, "Where is my father? Why did *he* abandon *me*? Why didn't my father ever come search for me?" Every factor in the Ramban's question is now turned on its head. Egypt is a 6 day journey from Chevron...so why didn't Yaakov make that journey to see where Yosef was? And each year, the voice of doubt and resentment grew stronger, as Yosef began to think to himself that perhaps his brothers poisoned Yaakov against him, such that he was no longer Yaakov's most favorite child, but his least. After all, Yaakov did send him to his brothers that day that he was thrown into the pit. In Yosef's mind, the inescapable conclusion was that his father had disowned him. Eventually, Yosef arrived at the realization that it was time to move on with his life, which he dedicated to

erasing the influence of his father. He married an Egyptian woman, he served as a viceroy in Pharaoh's court and was effectively indistinguishable, at least externally, from a completely Egyptian man. Indeed, when his first child is born, he names him Menashe,

בראשית מא:נא

ויקרא יוסף את שם הבכור מנשה כי נשני אלקים את כל עמלי ואת כל בית אבי

*He called him Menashe, because God has made me forget (nashani) all my labor **and my father's house.***

Yosef builds his life on the misconception that he was forsaken by his father, and Yaakov's life was shattered by the misconception that his son was dead, the real reason he never looked for or sent for his son. When the brothers stand and bow before him, he suddenly remembers the dream he had in his immature youth, a dream about his brothers bowing, and his world is shaken. He therefore begins a process designed to reveal one thing- what his father really thought about him; that's why he wanted Binyamin, his only full brother, to stay behind- so they could have a personal conversation about what Yaakov was feeling. Yehuda's response is the impassioned speech at the beginning of this week's parsha, in which he attempted to secure Binyamin's freedom through an appeal to conscience and by invoking his aged father. In this speech, Yehuda unintentionally reveals the very information Yosef was so desperately seeking, because he tells Yosef what Yaakov said- "You know that my wife bore me two sons; one has left me, and I said he was devoured, and if you take the

other one from me and tragedy befalls him, I will go with grey hairs to my grave.” When Yosef hears that, he realizes the plain truth: I haven’t been forgotten by my father- he thinks I’m dead!

Rav Bin Nun’s explanation (the one offered as well by Dr. Danny Zanger) is not without its detractors, though he writes that in his mind, it’s the only one that fits with the plain meaning of the simple meaning of the text. Aside from the revelatory answer for this disturbing question, though, there is a powerful lesson for us here as well. So much of the way we relate to people is a function of narratives we have made up, or decided on in our heads, which are often the result of incomplete pictures. Shards of the truth become embedded in our psyche and we allow them to fester and infect our thoughts and minds because we think we know the whole story. Consequently, we place negative interpretations on even the most innocuous statements because of preconceived notions; we think we know the someone doesn’t like us (or we don’t like them), we attribute malicious motives to actions and events that can easily be viewed differently (which is often the case), and we put words in people’s mouth that we hear from others and form opinions in that way. Yosef and Yaakov each suffered deeply and irrevocably from this mistake; even after they reunite, their relationship is never the same, as we have no record of any contact between them for the final 17 years of Yaakov’s life. And all this could have been avoided if each one didn’t have the completely wrong impression of the other, and if they had sought to clarify what was actually said and done. In our families and social circles as well, the message for us is

to learn their lesson, so we can have open, healthy and productive conversations and relationships with the people we love the most.

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