

Parashat Vayechi

The Scars of Enmity

In last week's parasha, we witnessed Joseph's reunification with his family after 22 years of separation. We like to think that the old differences have been patched over, the family tensions relegated to the past, as the sons of Yaakov settle in Egypt as a harmonious family unit.

But is that really the case? How might we characterise the relationship between Yoseph and his brothers during the years that followed their reunification as a family? One scene that closes the parasha this week raises deep questions as to the degree to which the family rifts had been successfully healed. Immediately following Yaakov's burial, we read the following scene:

When Yoseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said: 'What if Yoseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did to him.' So they sent a message to Yoseph, 'Before he died, your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Yoseph: Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' And now, please forgive the offense of the servants of God of your father.' And Yoseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him and said: "We are prepared to be your slaves." But Yoseph said: "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? ... fear not I will sustain you and your children." He reassured them, speaking kindly to them." (50:15-22)

As we examine the brothers' actions we sense a pervading feeling of despair and panic. See the lengths with which they appeal to Yoseph:

- First they send a message
- They append their own plea: "Please forgive the offense etc." They describe their actions as offence (פשע) and evil (רעה).
- His brothers fling themselves before him
- They offer themselves as slaves

This harsh and disturbing passage is something of a surprise. We are struck how this scene showcases the family as has having regressed 17 years. Just as the brothers feared for their lives when Yoseph was the "Egyptian Man" who accused and threatened them, just as they had declared themselves then as slaves – הנונו לך לעבדים (44:16) - they now repeat those same words. As they prostrate themselves before Yoseph we sense that the intervening 17 years of family unity have been mere illusion. Now, after their father's demise, the brothers have returned to the same position, bowing in fright before the powerful Yoseph.

We are even more startled as we realize that the majority of traditional commentary perceives this posthumous message from their father as an elaborate forgery.¹

"Great is peace, for even the Tribes uttered a falsehood so as to strike peace between Yoseph and the Tribes; as its states: Your father gave us an instruction before he died" ... we never find that Yaakov issued any such instruction." Midrash Rabba (100:16)

After 17 years of living together, how is it that the brothers developed such an intense fear of Joseph? Was this a sudden shift or a gradual development? Did it awaken unexpectedly after Yaakov's death, or was there tension, suspicion, even antipathy, all along?

AFTER YAAKOV'S DEATH

The text pinpoints Yaakov's death as the catalyst to this scene: "When Yoseph's brothers saw that their father was dead." But what specific aspect of Yaakov's demise shifted the family dynamics?

One Biblical allusion is evident in the brothers' words. The brothers express their fears by saying: וְיִשְׁטַמּוּ יוֹסֵף – translated as "What if Yoseph bears a grudge?" When we view this in an intertextual perspective, we find ourselves recalling a particular scene in the book of Bereshit. There, Esav expresses his seething hatred of Yaakov after he had been betrayed by this brother. He vows to kill him after his father's death:

Esav harbored a grudge against Yaakov (וישטם) ... and Esav said to himself, "Let but the mourning period of my father come and I will kill my brother, Yaakov." (27:41)

The haunting recurrence of this language suggests that the brothers anticipated a similar response from Yoseph. Yoseph, their victim of yesteryear, is the menacing Esav, who has merely been biding his time until Yaakov's death so that he may now unleash his pent-up violence. Was this mere paranoia? Were they concerned that – "the Egyptian Man" – who had disguised his true identity

¹ Literary scholars too: "There has been no hint of such a deathbed prospection, nor indeed of Jacob's discovery of the crime for which he allegedly urges forgiveness. Taken together with the emphasis on the brothers' fear of revenge, therefore, their unsupported report makes sense as a desperate fabrication" (Sternberg, Meir, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pg.378)

One does wonder, however, if Joseph was aware that Yaakov was ignorant of his brothers' hand in his sale, how the message could possibly have worked. If Yoseph knew it was a fabrication, what effect could it have? Would he suspect that Yaakov somehow knew by means of prophecy?

According to Rashi, there are various allusions to the sale in Yaakov's final blessing. See Rashi's comments to 49:6 .sv. "*ubir'zonam ikru shor*"; 49:9 s.v. "*mitereph*"; and 49:23 s.v. "*ve-ravu*". These comments presume that Yaakov IS aware of the violent act performed by his sons, whether actively-conscious or prophetically inspired.

However, it is difficult to support this view, as if Yaakov knew all the facts, we suppose he would have condemned Yehudah for instigating Joseph's cruel fate and exonerated Reuven for trying to save him.

and motives in the past, was possibly was engaged in yet another masquerade? Or perhaps something specific awakened their suspicions particularly at this point – after their father's death.

BACK TO THE PIT

The Midrash explains the emergence of the brothers' suspicions after Yaakov's death with two wonderfully evocative images:

The brothers saw that their father was dead and they said: Maybe Joseph bears a grudge.

Rabbi Levi said: [They feared this because] Joseph no longer invited them to dine with him.

Said Rabbi Tanchuma: He meant it for the sake of heaven. Joseph said, "Father used to seat me higher than Judah, who is king, and higher than Reuben, who is the firstborn. Now it is not right that I should sit higher than them." But the brothers understood matters differently and said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us."

Rabbi Yitzchak said: He (Joseph) went and looked into the pit.

Said Rabbi Tanchuma: He meant it for the sake of heaven, but the brothers understood matters differently and said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us."

(Bereshit Rabbah 100:8)

Rabbi Levi's suggestion is that Yoseph stopped inviting his brothers to dine with him. The Midrash suggests that after his father's death, Yoseph was in a quandary as to the seating plan around the family table. Wary of offending Yehudah (destined for the monarchy) or Reuven (the biological firstborn) he simply refrained from inviting his brothers to his home. Rank order is a sensitive issue in this family.²

How should we understand this explanation at a more abstract level? It is quite obvious that the death of the great father-figure, the family patriarch, leaves a vacuum, a looming empty seat at the "head of the table." Now, in the new family configuration, the question is who will fill that seat. And hence, the issue of leadership amongst the brothers is now not a theoretical question, but rather a matter of practicality. This Midrash suggests that Joseph decides not to meddle in the politics of family hierarchy. At age 17 in his youthful precociousness Joseph had promoted himself as leader of the family. Joseph seems to have learned a few lessons since then. Notwithstanding his Egyptian political status as viceroy, he refuses to meddle in the family hierarchy, preferring to withdraw from his brothers rather than to ignite the incendiary family frictions. His brothers however, perceive his caution and reticence as deliberate distance, a reflection of deep-seated bitterness and hostility. This reading merely compounds the tragic misunderstandings of the family as Joseph's careful sensitivity is terribly misjudged by his brothers. Instead of communication and trust, we find fear and suspicion.

² Bereshit 43:33 informs us how on a previous occasion, Yoseph had sat his brothers in birth order.

The second image, presented by R. Yitzchak: "He (Joseph) went and looked into the pit", is equally fascinating. Let us recall that the brothers have just returned from their father's funeral in the land of Canaan; more precisely, in the city of Hebron. The Midrash imagines that their route in Canaan had passed by the pit into which Yoseph had been cast when he had been sold to Egypt. Yoseph stopped by the pit pensively. The brothers watched on as Yoseph stood, lost in thought as he peered into the deep cistern. That scene gave the brothers room to suspect that the ghosts of yesteryear had been reawakened, that Yoseph was re-living his traumatic experience of slavery. Anticipating a retaliation of sorts, they devised a plan to defend themselves.

Now, the pit into which Yoseph was cast was located in Dotan, north of Sh'chem. It is highly improbable that the route to or from Hebron took them via Dotan, in which case, this Midrash fails to match the facts. And yet, I believe that this Midrash succeeds in capturing a significant dimension of the story. Let us contextualize this scene: Yoseph has not returned to Canaan for 39 years. When he goes to bury his father, he returns to the town which he left at the tender age of 17. One can only imagine how many childhood memories flood back to him, and quite possibly, some of these memories reminded him of his tense and unhappy childhood marred by the acrimony and struggle with his siblings. Furthermore, the last time that he was in Hebron was on that auspicious day in which he was sent from "the valley of Hebron" by his father, with the task of seeking "the peace" of his brothers. In other words, if Yoseph didn't pass by the pit, he certainly stepped back in time to the fateful day of the attack by his brothers and his subsequent sale, and he could easily recall his last moments in Hebron, a 17 year old youth embarking on a trip that unexpectedly lead him in slavery to Egypt. The brothers might have been justified in their fears that the experience would have evoked certain vindictiveness in Yoseph.

SECRETS AND LIES

These midrashim explain arousal of the brother's fears after Yaakov's death with suggested scenarios for. But this outburst of fear on the part of the brothers may not have been a sudden realization, a momentary transition. It is not improbable that the seventeen years in which the family resided together in Egypt saw considerable family tension. We wonder as to the extent to which Yoseph and his brothers interacted during those years. Did they live as neighbors, or did Yoseph reside near the national administrative center and they in the "suburbs" of Goshen? Did the brothers ever really get to know Yoseph?

The Ramban's comment to 45:27 is particularly relevant in this context:

"It seems to me according to the text that Yaakov was never informed that the brothers sold Yoseph. He thought that Yoseph had lost his way in the field, and that people seized him and sold him to Egypt. The brothers refrained from telling him the truth because they feared for their lives lest he get angry and curse them, as he did to Reuven, Shimon and

Levi. Yoseph, in his goodhearted manner also did not wish to inform him of the truth. Hence it says (50:16): "They sent a message to Yoseph, 'Before he died, your father left this instruction:' – If Yaakov had known about it, they should have all pleaded with their father in his lifetime to deliver the instruction directly to Yoseph – for Yoseph would not defy his father's explicit command... and they would not then have to fabricate evidence."

Ramban states that Yaakov never discovered that his sons had sold Yoseph into slavery. This is quite remarkable. It explains why the commentators insist that the brothers' letter is a fabrication. However, this secret, the subterfuge that the brothers are engaged in, must take its toll on the family. According to Pesikta Rabati (3:10), the brothers' vow of silence to prevent Yaakov from finding out about Yoseph's sale utterly undermined Yoseph's relationship with his father:

"Joseph's virtue was ... that he did not visit his father on a frequent basis. This we see from the fact that others had to come and inform him that his father was ill. From here we understand his righteousness – that he sought never to be left alone with his father, so that his father could never ask him: "What did your brothers do to you?" And he (Yaakov) would curse them."

One cannot minimize the devastating implications of this midrashic reading. Essentially, it contends that Yoseph sacrificed his relationship with his father in order to cover for his brothers - so that the secret of his sale not be revealed. It is difficult to fathom the emotional difficulty of the situation. After all the years of separation, after Yaakov's desperate pining for his beloved son, Yoseph never allows himself an intimate moment, a private conversation with his father; he ensures that they are never in seclusion, so that his father would be unable to enquire as to the events of that auspicious day when he was sold. What a sad situation! What a terrible quandary, and what a dreadfully heavy price to pay!

According to this understanding, the sons all collaborate in order to protect themselves from their father's anger. Possibly they also wish to save their father some serious heartache. And yet, as we have said, these secrets and lies fester. Joseph is prevented from having a normal relationship with his father. There are many issues and sentiments that remain buried, conversations and discussions that do not transpire, as the brothers and Joseph never allow their feelings into the open. The emotions are deeply buried, and after Yaakov's death the Pandora's Box reopens.³

FEAR AND LOATHING

³ Rashi spends some effort examining the word "לו" in the brothers' opening phrase, "לו ישתמנו יוסף". He suggests that whereas it is standardly translated as a wish or whim - "If only" - that translation would be inappropriate in this context. However, one can sense a subtext here as if the brothers want Yoseph to get furious with them. "If only Joseph would hate us!" After all they had put him through, his controlled demeanor was perplexing, unnatural, infuriatingly non-vindictive. Might we suggest that they wanted to see Joseph express some anger, to hear his outrage?

As an illustration of these hidden feelings, the degrees of misunderstanding in this family, let us turn to a startling suggestion from the Netziv as he comments on the scene in which Yoseph reveals his true identity. There, he says to his brothers:

"And now, be not upset or distressed that you sold me..."

Why would the brothers be upset about the sale? The Netziv comments:

"He (Yoseph) thought that possibly... some of them, even at this point, felt that they had been correct (to sell him) but that their plan had gone wrong by selling him to Egypt, a place where one could rise to great power, rather than selling him to a more lowly destination..."

The Netziv is suggesting that even after this entire saga, Yoseph at least, suspects that many of the brothers might still wish that they had disposed of him. In other words, the family rifts have not healed. They are still wide open; deep and painful. Yoseph thinks that his brothers still hate him, would be happy to somehow dispose of him.

Did they ever clarify their feelings to Yoseph? Did he ever manage to convey his forgiveness to them?

All of this is highly troubling. The final death-bed scene in which Yaakov blesses each of his sons, appears to represent a unified family, but after Yaakov's death, our story exposes the scars of enmity that are yet unhealed.

The Rabbis suggested that this scene represented an attempt at peaceful conciliation, as the midrash indicates: "One is permitted to state falsehoods for the sake of peace." In other words, the brothers' approach is an attempt at resolving the family tension.⁴ But we get the sense that this is a case of too little, too late.

In the final account, Yoseph remains apart from the brothers most of his life. While they live in Canaan, he is in Egypt. Later they settle in Goshen, whereas Yoseph seems to reside apart, in the Egyptian metropolis. In death, Yoseph's bones are removed from Egypt, whereas the brothers' caskets remain in Egypt.

UNITY IN THE FUTURE?

This then, is a rupture unhealed. Unfortunately it is prone to unraveling frequently. Jewish history is filled with tension between the tribes. It is only at "the end of days" that Yehezkel can foresee a unification, a healing of this rift:

The word of God came to me to say: You, Son of Man, take one piece of wood and write on it, "For Yehudah and the Children of Israel, his friends,"

⁴ We might recall Rashi's comments to 37:4 "And they could not speak with him peaceably" in which Rashi says that they were open about their hatred to him and made no attempt to put on a friendly face if they were resentful towards him.

and one piece of wood and write on it, "For Yosef, the wood of Ephraim and the entire House of Israel, his friends." Bring them together each to the other to become one piece of wood, and they will become one in your hands. When they say to you, your people, "What does this mean?" Tell them, so says God: Behold, I will take the tree of Yosef which is in the hand of Ephraim and the tribes of Yisrael, his friends, and I will put on them the tree of Yehudah and make them one tree, and they will become one in My hand." (*Yehezkel* 37:15-20)

What does this symbolism mean? God explains:

I will take the Israelite people from amongst the nations that they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter and bring them to their own land. I will make them **one nation** in the land on the hills of Israel and **one king** shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. (*Ibid.* 37:21-23)

Shabbat Shalom!