

Parshat Miketz.

The Transformation of a Family

Now Joseph was the vizier of the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them; but he acted like a stranger towards them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan to procure food." Now Joseph recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him. He recalled his dreams that he had dreamed about them, and he said "You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness." (42:6-9)

Confronted with the arrival of his brothers in Egypt, Joseph subjects them to an ongoing chain of harassment. He torments them, imposing harsh intimidation and tortuous moral conflicts. It is not his brothers that Joseph inflicts with suffering and anxiety. He puts his aging father Jacob through the most heartbreaking dilemma, as he forces Yaakov to make the decision to part from his dear son Benjamin, wrenching him from the family homestead towards the dark unknown territory of Egypt. Joseph inflicts enormous tension and agonising heartache upon every member of his family. He strains all the emotionally sensitive ties within the family.

The question has been asked before, but it still remains an important focus within the story; why does Joseph do it? Why does he wish to subject his family to such torture? Is he having fun, getting his revenge? Is he hopelessly heartless? Or does he have a plan, a belief that his ongoing torment will eventually result in something positive? And if he does have a plan, we may ask - does his plan work out? - Or does Joseph break down in tears before his brothers before his strategy has come to its fruition?

Chavruta Study

1. This week, our analysis is primarily based upon the p'shat of the Yoseph story, the nuances and tone set by the plays of language within the textual fabric of the Torah itself. To that end, the best reading is simply to -

Read Chapters 42-44 inclusive.

2. Yoseph's conscious fulfilment of his own dreams:
See Ramban on 42:9 : "Vayizkor Yoseph et Hachalomot"

3. See these articles by Nechama Leibowitz in here "Studies in Bereshit"

1. We are truly guilty
2. Why did Joseph conceal his identity?

4. There is a quite wonderful book by Robert Alter, a leading scholar of Biblical literary methods. The book is called "The Art of Biblical Narrative" and it is worth reading in its entirety. For our purposes, see pg.159-177 and pg.137-140. Many of my observations in this shiur have been strongly influenced by his readings of texts.

The Shiur Section:

In our introduction, we have highlighted our primary question: Why does Joseph put his brothers through an ongoing series of tests and harassment? The commentators, ancient and modern, have offered a number of suggestions to shed light on this perplexing mystery.

Rav Yoel Bin-Nun¹, a contemporary Bible scholar, suggests that Joseph's actions are part of a plan. The objective is to lure his brother Benjamin to Egypt and thereby expose the truth about the family's attitudes to him.

One of the fresh ideas in Rav Yoel's interpretation of the story is his understanding of Yoseph's thinking. He posits that Joseph is in a state of confusion as to the motives of his family. He doesn't know whether his sale was a deliberate attempt to remove him from the family (like Esau and Yishmael before him) or an unplanned outburst, a violent result of a pent-up of hatred within the family. Obviously, the determination of one option or the other is pivotal as to whether Yoseph has any hope of re-uniting with his long lost family. For Joseph, the only figure who might reveal the truth is Benjamin. After all, Benjamin is his "full" brother, and he was too young at the time of his sale to be involved in its planning or execution. Joseph wanted to have a personal conversation with his brother, Benjamin, to reveal the hidden motives behind his sale to Egypt 22 years earlier². The entire drama was aimed at achieving this objective. To be seen as serious, Joseph had to act cruelly, talk in a hostile tone, and subject the brothers to some humiliation. He meant no real harm. His decision as to whether he could re-enter the family and expose his true identity depended upon the family's attitude towards him. It was this information that he sought.

Nachmanides (1192-1270), the first to confront this question, proposed a rather strange theory (based on 42:9 - "He recalled his dreams"). He suggested that Joseph was trying to bring to fruition his boyhood dreams. Joseph had dreamed as a teenager of his mastery over the family; he dreamed of his eleven brothers and even his father bowing to him (see 37:5-10). In the wake of his successful experiences with the dreams of others, (remember the butler and baker, and Pharaoh's dream was his ticket to his powerful appointment,) he now seeks to realise his own dreams. He devises a plan to bring about a situation in which his family in its entirety come and bow to him. This rather grandiose theory, attributing certain megalomaniac motives to Joseph is opposed by some, who stress the futility of the human role in the world of dreams and their actualisation. After all, God gave the dream, should He not bring its fulfilment?

A third theory, that of the **Abarbanel** (1430-1508), suggests that Joseph wanted somehow to send his brothers on a journey of repentance. Their awful act - the sale of a brother - was a supreme moral low point, which had the potential to haunt the family for generations to come. Joseph saw the

¹ See the articles the journal in Megadim no. 1 and 2 for Rav Yoel's article and the response by Rav Yaakov Medan.

² Joseph was 17 at the start of the story (37:2). He is 30 when he rises to the position of governor/viceroy of Egypt (41:46). His brothers come to Egypt after the 7 years of plenty and 2 years of famine (see 41:54 and 44:6), thus the calculation of 22 years.

need for his brothers to somehow repair their ways. The sons of Leah needed to address their feelings of superiority over the sons of Rachel and their cruel insensitivity to the emotions of their father. They needed to understand the feelings of a young adult thrown into the confusion of another land, with another language, treated like a slave. Thus Joseph gave them a taste of their own medicine.

" Joseph decided to put them (his brothers) to the test, as to whether over the past twenty two years that they had been parted, they had changed their attitudes and character. He sought to know whether they regretted their actions towards him... Thus he accused them of espionage until he witnessed their repentance as they state (42:21) 'We are guilty on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed when he pleaded with us, that is why this distress has come upon us.'"

THE LITERARY METHOD

We shall take this last hypothesis that reads the Joseph narrative as driven by a theme of repentance and repair, and we shall delve into its workings. We shall attempt to understand the rhythm of teshuva within the Joseph narrative. But we shall do it from a different angle. We will not look simply at the storyline. Instead, we will focus on the way on which the story is told; the literary approach, as it is known. We shall focus upon a number of striking literary observations and textual parallels which will clearly describe and indeed animate the process that Joseph engenders within the minds and souls of his brethren. Likewise, we shall begin to understand the emotional process that Joseph undergoes during the entire process until he breaks down in tears before his brothers, revealing his true identity to them.

The literary method tries to examine the text as it is written. The use of language, the repeated occurrences of phrase form the basis of this method. This particular method of Bible study is embraced in midrashic literature, and has been renewed by modern scholars. In this sense, it forms a bridge between ancient rabbinic interpretation and modern academic thinking. Let us give two examples to describe the method. We will use these examples as an introduction to the Yoseph story and then progress applying some of our observations to the continuation of the narrative.

The brothers' initial descent to Egypt is described in the following way:

"Jacob saw that there were provisions in Egypt ... and he said "...God down there and get us provisions from there so that we may live and not die." Then Joseph's ten brothers went down to get provisions of grain from Egypt. But Benjamin, Joseph's brother, Jacob did not send with his brothers for he thought he might meet disaster. Thus the sons of Israel came to get provisions among the others who had come..." (32:1-5)

Note the way the word "brother" is used with sophisticated subtlety within this parsha. How are Jacob's sons described here in this passage?

Naturally, since they are following their father's command, they are described as the "sons of Israel". But there is another title given to this group who are travelling to buy grain in Egypt. They are described as "Joseph's brothers". The Torah, as it is describing their journey to Egypt, is already indicating to us that these ten brothers are not simply Jacob's sons, but Joseph's brothers. Indeed, they are destined for a meeting with their long-lost brother. One might take this observation a stage further. The entire and sole purpose of their journey - unbeknown to them - is the examination and reassessment of that relationship of brotherhood. Many years earlier they failed to act as "Joseph's brothers." Now however, that relationship with its unhealed scars and buried guilt will resurface and be

reopened to scrutiny.

It is interesting then, to think about the inner meaning of the other "brother" phrase in this passage; when the Torah talks of "Benjamin, Joseph's brother". Clearly this phrase means something different, in its genealogical context and in its emotional impact than the previous "Joseph's brothers". Benjamin is a brother in a different way. Benjamin is Joseph's only full brother being born from both Jacob and Rachel. Jacob withholds Benjamin from the mission to Egypt because he is particularly concerned about his fate. This fact, this reference, then ironically raises once again the issue of the favoritism of the Rachel children. We shall soon see that to a certain degree, the entire story is about the brothers coming to terms with that special treatment³.

RECOGNITION: THE WORD VAYAKER / VAYINAKER.

Here is a second example of a literary play on a single word. As we have quoted above, in our introduction, the brothers when they were presented to Joseph, failed to recognise him.

"When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognised them (vayakirem); but he acted like a stranger (vayitnaker) towards them and spoke harshly to them... Now Joseph recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him." (42:5-6)

The word which is mentioned repeatedly here in this parsha is the word - vayaker - a term of recognition. Even Joseph's estrangement from his brothers is described with a variety of that verb - vayitnaker. Now, this word is familiar to us from earlier on in the Joseph story.

"They sent Joseph's multicoloured coat and brought it to their father, and they said, "We found this. Examine it! (haker na!) Is it your son's coat or not?" He recognised it ... and observed mourning for his son many days" (37:32-35)

We can claim that the Torah is connecting this meeting with the Joseph sale by its subtle but precise uses of language. This connection will become clearer as we examine some of the dialogue between the brothers.

We have already mentioned the position of the Abarbanel that this is a story of repair, of repentance. An integral ingredient in the repentance process is the admission of guilt, whether explicitly or by implication, on the part of the brothers. After Joseph had imprisoned the brothers for three days, they emerge and are told that Simeon is to be held until they return with Benjamin. This is their reaction:

And they said to one another, 'We are truly guilty concerning our brother in that we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us and we paid no heed; therefore all this distress has come upon us.' And Reuben said: 'Did I not tell you to do no wrong to the boy, but you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood.'" (42:21-22)

Many commentators have noted that this detail, of Joseph screaming and pleading to his brothers from the pit, is entirely absent from the story (in Ch.37) of his sale. There, Joseph is silent. We don't hear his voice at all. Suddenly, at this juncture of the story, we hear this important piece of information from the mouth of one of the brothers! Why are we given this information specifically at this point in the story? Why is this the first time that we hear Joseph screaming from the pit? Dr. Meir Weiss comments:

"The recalling of this long buried episode here, at this juncture represents the awakening of the brother's

³ For more on this method of family connections creating a certain drama within the text, see Nechama Leibowitz . Torah Insights pg 172-173.

conscience. Joseph's heartrending pleas for mercy more than they emanate from the pit, now well up from the depths of their own hearts. This constitutes the underlying intention of the narrative in citing this detail here. It is meant to reveal what is going on in the consciousness of the brothers at that moment, indicating their remorse." ⁴

This observation demonstrates an important emphasis within our story. It is now, at this moment, that the brothers "hear" Joseph's cries for the first time. This is the moment that those cries sink in. This is the moment that they penetrate beyond the cold hard outer surface of indifference. The Torah reports Joseph's impassioned pleas here, because it is at this moment, and not before, that the message is received. Now they are sorry. At the time, they were deaf, distant.

We might suggest that this observation connects with the textual highlighting of the phrase, "vayaker - vayinaker". What does one recognise and what does one choose to ignore? When is one deaf and when does the sound penetrate? The whole notion of recognition is as much psychological as it is related to the senses. We decide what to hear, what to be sensitive to, who to be good to and who to hate. The brothers' discussion here talks of the Joseph incident as if it were yesterday. In fact twenty-two years have passed. But their experience of incarceration in an Egyptian jail, with the looming thoughts of family members not returning home, with the false accusations and the feelings of vulnerability, has brought to the surface renewed realisations, fresh thinking, recognitions and perceptions.

THE MONEY.

This internalisation of the guilt for the sale of Yoseph would seem to recur in the next episode where the brothers stop at an inn on their return journey to Canaan, and find their money returned to their sacks. Their response is extreme in its heightened emotion and fear:

"My money has been returned! it is in my bag!" Their hearts sank; and trembling, they turned to one another saying, 'What is this that God has done to us?'" (42:28)

What is so fearful about the finding of the money? Why does it induce such feelings of impending disaster, to the point of turning to God as if he is issuing a punishment? Rashi views the source of their worry that Joseph will implicate them in further wrongdoing.

But we might suggest a simpler explanation⁵. The brothers already have their guilt of Joseph's sale firmly planted in their minds. They know that he was sold to Egypt. Now they return from their ordeal and find money in their sacks. The Hebrew word for money used here is Kesef - silver. And Joseph was sold down to Egypt for "twenty pieces of silver" (37:28). The blood money has reappeared in their sacks! The narrative even describes it as being discovered twice (see 42:26,35), each time with an exclamation of fear and horror. It is as if their sin is chasing them.

RESPONSIBILITY

So the brothers have been re-confronted with their sin of yester-year. The question is, how they will deal with their feelings of confusion and guilt.

It would appear that Joseph's plan of asking them to bring Benjamin down to Egypt, rather than being a vendetta of sorts, is directed achieving a certain resolution. He forces them to exercise brotherhood and familial unity. Now they - the brothers who deserted Joseph all those years ago - will have

to take responsibility, to protect, the son of Rachel, on a journey down to Egypt. That which they failed to do in the case of Joseph, they will be forced to do for Benjamin. We will shortly explain the extent of this responsibility, but for now, one textual parallel will clearly reinforce the image of Benjamin's descent to Egypt echoing the previous descent of Joseph.

Joseph is sent to Egypt on a Yishmaelite trading caravan;

"bearing gum, balm and ladanum to be taken down to Egypt." (37:25)

In our story, Jacob, after he has given reluctant permission for Benjamin's journey advises his sons,

"Take Some of the choice products of the land with you...as a gift for the man - some balm and some honey, gum ladanum ..." (43:11).

We have a powerful parallel here. The caravan in which Benjamin travels to Egypt mirrors the transport which carried his brother. They carry the same spices. They take the same route. They bear the same destination. But one thing is different. Joseph travelled there as a result of family discord and brotherly hatred. Now, the family is united in its responsibility, its understanding of the importance of unity. With Joseph, his brothers had betrayed him. With Benjamin, the brothers are protecting him. Things have changed.

JOSEPH CRIES

It is not only the brothers who are undergoing a process of healing and repair. Joseph too has certain emotions to work through. When the brothers appear before Joseph, together with Benjamin, he has to make a quick exit. He is overwhelmed by emotion and goes to a back room to cry.

"He saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son ... Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling towards his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there. Then he washed his face, reappeared, and - now in control of himself - gave the order to serve the meal." (43:29-31)

This is not the first time that Joseph has cried, and not the last. On his first meeting with his brothers, in response to their admissions of guilt, Joseph "turned away from them and wept." (42:24). It would appear that it was not simply the appearance of his brothers that gave him cause to lose his composure. Rather his hearing his brothers discuss their role in his possible murder and eventual sale to slavery that makes him weep. Now, months later, the image of Benjamin surrounded, protected by his brothers, gives him cause to cry. We wonder why. Is it just the sight of his brother who he has not seen since childhood? Or is it other images, of himself reflected in Benjamin, of the togetherness of the family which makes him cry?

The next time that he cries, will be the moment in which he reveals his true identity. What act might precipitate Joseph's historic confession? Until now, he has retained his composure. Even when he weeps, he manages to hide it from his brothers. He is "the man", "the master of the land". He gives over no sense of weakness or vulnerability. What brings Joseph to let his secret out?

THE GOBLET

I believe that the entire plan comes to a climax with the story of the silver goblet and Judah's desperate speech. Joseph has his silver goblet slipped into Benjamin's sack. As the brothers are making their way out of Egypt, the ordeal seemingly behind them, they are chased by Egyptian guards and the goblet found in Benjamin's sack. They are aghast at the accusations levelled against them and they respond by saying that if the goblet is found with any of them, that person should

⁴ Meir Weiss (quoted in Nechama Leibowitz's studies pg464) Meleket sippur Hamikra, Molad, Tishrei 5723 pp402-406.

⁵ See Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative pg139

be put to death. Now is the test. Do they leave Benjamin, or do they seek to protect him? How do they relate to the son of Rachel?

The Abarabanel sharpens the story here by reminding us of an earlier happening that mirrors this story in a rather startling way. Cast your minds back to the image of Jacob leaving Laban's house with his entire family. Laban pursues Yaakov (see 31:22-32) in search of his "gods" – the Terafim. How are the stories similar? Obviously, the **storyline** is parallel, with the stolen goods being held by the "youngest." The sense of accusation and the search for stolen good are noted similarities. Moreover, in both cases the escapees are convinced that they have left their troubles behind them. They are headed back home, to Canaan and the coast is clear. The chase returns them unexpectedly to a confrontation with the adversary that they had imagined they had left behind. But we can add a few further details:

1. **Language:** The phraseology of the two stories bear enormous similarities. The verbs used for the chase (RADAF, HISSIG); the theme of RA"AH and TOVA (cf. 31:24,29 and 44:4); the search by Lavan and Yoseph's men characterised by the verb CHIPUS.

2. **Divination objects.** Lavan is searching for his Terafim, otherwise known as his "gods." According to many commentators⁶ these are cult objects of divination that Lavan uses to determine the future.

Here too the brothers are hunted down for an object that has been stolen. The silver goblet is described as an object of telling the future;

"It is the very one from which my master drinks and which he uses for divination." (44:5)

3. **The death threat:** Jacob is sure that no one of his family would have stolen Lavan's Terafim and proclaims:

"Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive! ... But Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them" (31:32)

Indeed it is possible that Rachel's early death was due to this very curse by her husband Jacob!⁷ Here too, the brothers are ignorant of the truth, and in that state of ignorance they issue a death warrant against the thief of the object.

"Far be it from your servants to do anything of the kind! ... Whichever of your servants it is found with shall die; the rest of us, moreover will become slaves to my lord" (44:7-9)

Where is this parallel leading us? Why do these two events resemble each other so strongly? We shall suggest that this parallel takes on a rather sinister tone when it is added to the tense backdrop of the internal struggles within the family of Jacob. At the epicentre of that tension lie the struggle between the factions of the "sons of Leah" against the "sons of Rachel," each vying for control and influence.

In this scene of the goblet the brothers see Benjamin "replay" his mother Rachel's actions. The Rachel-Leah tension inexorably rises to the surface. Benjamin's has repeated his mother's act. Are the B'nei Rachel always going to be troublemakers?⁸

⁶ See the Ramban and other commentaries to 31:19. Furthermore, we should note the use of the verb NICHUSH in the Lavan story 30:28 (see Ramban, Chizkuni there) and also 44:5,15.

⁷ Rashi 31:32

⁸ The Midrash draws upon our parallel. See Bereshit Rabba 92:8:

Now we have a key to understanding Joseph's motives in orchestrating the events in this particular direction. The Abarbanel:

"He thought; maybe they (the brothers) will think it is true, that Benjamin did indeed steal the goblet, JUST AS HIS MOTHER RACHEL HAD STOLEN HER FATHER'S GODS. Maybe they will say "the person who has sinned shall die" and will not plead on his behalf passionately, not due to any hatred, but simply out of their sense of embarrassment. Thus Joseph commanded that the goblet be placed in their sacks ...and if the brothers would have pity on him, and try in earnest to release him from slavery, expressing their love for him, then, they would be in Joseph's eyes as complete penitents (*baalei teshuva gemurim.*)"

But let us observe what happens. The brothers' instinctive reaction here is one of unwavering and total support for Benjamin. They respond, "we are then, ALL slaves of my lord" (44:16). They all take the blame collectively.

JUDAH

But Judah takes things a further stage. He steps in and speaks to Joseph. His speech is incredible because it relates in the deepest way to having learnt the message of the Joseph story. Judah – the leader of the Leah faction - expresses full awareness and acceptance of the special status of the Rachel faction of the family. He takes it as given, without comment. Moreover, he shows full understanding of what the loss of Joseph had done to his father, and what another loss of a "son of Rachel" might do to him.

"And we said to my lord, "We have an old father with a child of his old age, the youngest. His brother is dead and he alone remains from his mother, and his father loves him." And you said ... "Bring him down.." And we said ... "The lad cannot leave his father. If he were to leave him, his father would die." (44:17-22)

Judah continues to relate Joseph's insistence that Benjamin be brought to Egypt, and Jacob's reluctance, indeed his refusal to allow Benjamin to go.

"Your servant, my father said to us 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One is gone from me and I said surely he has been devoured, nor have I seen him since. If you take this one too from me and disaster befalls him, you will bring my white head down to the underworld in evil.' (44:27-29)

Judah then recalls his pledge to his father, "If I do not bring him back, I shall stand guilty to my father for ever." and it is at this point that Joseph breaks down.

This speech "is a point for point undoing, morally and psychologically, of the brothers' earlier violation of their fraternal and filial bonds."⁹ Here, Judah, the leader of the Leah faction in the family, has accepted the special status of Rachel. He is even willing to refer to her as Jacob's wife as if there were no other. He understands the meaning of loss, as it would kill his father. He also has learned the meaning of responsibility. His ultimate statement must be when he expresses readiness to replace Benjamin:

"Let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers." (44:33)

"When the goblet was found, they said to him (Benjamin): 'Thief, son of a thief!!' Then Joseph's men replied: '... Are these not all brothers who sold their brother?'"

⁹ Alter; *ibid.* pg 174

It is at this point that Joseph cannot stand the masquerade anymore. His brothers have demonstrated a complete reversal of their acts two decades earlier. Joseph has witnessed with his own eyes, the remorse, the care and love, the willingness to put their lives on the line for his brother, his surrogate, Benjamin. There is no more room for suspicion, no more room for acrimony and hatred. The wounds are now healed.

UNITY

This theory works from a dual perspective. From the brothers' point of view they have demonstrated their changed nature. But from Joseph's standpoint Joseph is concerned about his own re-entry into the family of Jacob. If his re-appearance is not to create too severe a trauma in the family, the moral and familial scar of his sale has to be cleared up in advance of that re-appearance. It is through Joseph's testing of his brothers and through their responsible stance throughout, that the sons of Jacob could be re-united, thereby becoming the people of Israel.

It is with this saga that a major theme of Sefer Bereishit comes to a close. Fraternal hatred and struggle, and rejection from the family have typified the book of Bereishit unto this point. Cain and Abel, Yishmael and Yitzchak, Esav and Yaakov; these are all stories of struggle and rejection. Now, for the first time, we witness a family which has resolved its struggles and infighting. It has been a painful process, but maybe a cathartic process of growth and maturation. From now on, the Children of Israel will work together, live together and support each other - all twelve brothers, in unity.

Shabbat Shalom