

Why did Yosef Hide his Identity from his Brothers?

By Rav Zeev Weitman

A.

Parashat Vayeshev describes Yosef's descent from the loftiest heights to the lowliest depths – from the favorite and beloved son, born in his father's old age, to a hated and persecuted brother who is cast into a pit with the intention of leaving him to die there. He is then sold as a slave, and finally finds himself cast into prison in Egypt. The *parasha* concludes with Yosef facing a dead end; even his seemingly last hope – that the royal butler might bring about his release – is thwarted when the butler promptly forgets him upon his release from prison.

Parashat Miketz, in contrast, describes a meteoric and most surprising rise from the prison dungeon directly to the highest seat of government. Yosef becomes the most powerful man in Egypt; his word is law, as second to the king and as overseer of the entire country and its enormous economy. No one in Egypt raises a hand or foot without his authority.

Contrasting with this ascent, *Parashat Miketz* also describes Yosef's brothers' descent, level after level, as they become increasingly embroiled in the consequences of their actions towards Yosef and his alienation towards them. By the end of the *parasha*, it is they who find themselves at a dead end and in a very difficult situation when Yosef's goblet is discovered in Binyamin's sack. They understand that Binyamin will now not be able to return with them to their father in Eretz Canaan, and they cannot imagine how their father, and they themselves, will survive this terrible blow.

One of the most troubling questions in *Parashat Miketz* is formulated by Abravanel:

Why did Yosef alienate himself from his brothers and speak harshly to them? Was this not a criminal transgression on his part, being vengeful and holding a grudge? And even if they conspired to cause evil to him, God turned it for the good – so why should he seek revenge twenty years later? ... And as for his elderly father, who had already suffered much upheaval and worry – how could he not have mercy upon him, and feel pain for his father's sorrow?

Yosef Does Not Seek Revenge

Although a first reading of the narrative may suggest that Yosef does indeed exact revenge on his brothers for their treatment of him, repaying them for their cruelty, a more precise and careful reading shows that this is quite unlikely – and not only because of our prior assumption that such behavior is not appropriate to so righteous an individual as Yosef, as he is depicted in the text:

1. If Yosef's aim had been revenge on his brothers for their treatment of him, he would not have acted in a way that caused pain and worry to his aged father and saddened him much more than it did his brothers.

2. Throughout the story, we see that Yosef has to overcome his compassion for his brothers and has difficulty restraining himself so as not to weep. He expresses his love and affection towards them with gentle and compassionate behavior, even as he hides his identity from them. This shows that he acts with a certain aim in mind, rather than out of animosity or hatred towards them. This explains why he decides to let all the brothers go and to hold only one in detention, why he invites them to eat with him, and why he gives them gifts. Nechama Leibowitz z"l concludes from all of this that Yosef longs for his brothers. She adds that we see, following Yaakov's death, that Yosef tells them that they need not fear him because he is not in the position of God, Who decides who is deserving of punishment; he tells them that everything that happened was ultimately for the best. In her view, Yosef's noble conduct is incompatible with the idea that he would have acted out of revenge – certainly not at the expense of causing anguish to his father.

3. The Torah introduces and explains Yosef's actions with the words, "Yosef remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and he said to them, 'You are spies...'" The stated motivation has nothing to do with Yosef having been cast into the pit, his brothers' desire to kill him, or his pleas that went unheeded, etc.

Commitment to Realizing the Dreams

On the basis of this verse, Ramban explains that what motivated Yosef was a commitment to realize his dreams, which he apparently viewed as prophecy and as Divine guidance for his own conduct. When Yosef sees that Binyamin does not come down to Egypt with his brothers, he acts in such a way as to obligate his brothers to appear together with Binyamin so that the dream in which eleven stars bow before him will be realized in full.

Rashi's interpretation of the phrase, "Yosef remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them," is: "And he knew that they had been fulfilled, for here they were, bowing before him." This is the opposite of Ramban's view – that his recollection of the dream led him to conclude that his dream had *not* been fulfilled, for only ten brothers bowed before him, and he knew that the dream had included all eleven brothers. The second dream had pointed to the next stage, when the entire family – including his father – would bow before him. Since Binyamin had not accompanied the brothers, Yosef thought up a scheme that would force them to bring him as well so that the first dream could be realized.

Rambam uses this conclusion to resolve his great question concerning Yosef's behavior:

For one must ask: After Yosef had spent many years in Egypt, becoming an officer and supervisor in the house of a great royal minister, how is it that he did not send a single letter to his father to notify him [of his whereabouts and of his situation] and to console him? For Egypt is only a six-day journey from Chevron, and even if it had been a year's journey away, he should have sent word to his father, who could easily have redeemed him, with his vast fortune?

In Ramban's view, Yosef understands that the dreams did not come to reveal the future to him merely in order to satisfy his curiosity. Rather, they were meant to guide him, so that he could conduct himself in such a way as to bring about their realization. Therefore, he waits patiently for the moment when he will rise to greatness and his brothers will need his help. When the time finally arrives and he sees that Binyamin is not with them, he understands that the dream has not yet been fully realized and acts in order to complete what is still missing.

Ramban goes on to explain that after the first dream is fulfilled, Yosef reveals his identity to his brothers and asks them to bring his father in order to fulfill the vision of the second dream as well.

The Problem with the Trick of the Goblet

A major problem with the Ramban's explanation is posed by the story of the goblet, which plays no role in advancing the realization of the dreams and seems like a regression prompted by revenge. Its purpose, after all, is a final and absolute severance from the brothers. As Yosef tells them in the final verse of our *parasha*:

And he said: ... "The man in whose hand the goblet is found – he shall be my servant; as for you – go up in peace to your father."

Were it not for Yehuda's speech and Yosef's subsequent decision to reveal his identity, the brothers would have returned to their father in Canaan, while Binyamin would have remained alone with Yosef in Egypt.

To resolve this question, Ramban suggests a different explanation for Yosef's behavior here. He explains that Yosef's intention was to test the brothers' loyalty towards Binyamin. His concern, as Ramban explains it, was

that they were jealous of their father's love [for Binyamin], as they had been in his case, and therefore he did not wish for Binyamin to accompany them, for perhaps they would harm him before Yosef had had a chance to test their love for him.

To this we may add that Yosef not only tests their loyalty towards Binyamin, but also offers his brothers an opportunity to repent and atone for their sin towards him by treating Binyamin differently. In other words, Yosef is putting his brothers through an educational course and testing whether they have repented for their treatment of him.

Nechama Leibowitz cites the opinion of the *Akedat Yitzchak*, who rejects Ramban's approach outright. To his view, the dreams were not meant to be fulfilled; making them a reality did not benefit anyone or achieve anything. In any event, such an intention would certainly not have justified the suffering caused to Yaakov. He writes: "As for the dreams – He Who gives dreams would provide their solution." He goes so far as to state: "It also seems extremely foolish for a person to try to realize his dreams."

Nechama Leibowitz herself does not accept the view of the *Akedat Yitzchak*, and she proves from other instances in *Tanakh* that dreams are indeed meant to be fulfilled. However, she too is troubled by Ramban's explanation, arguing that Yosef should have found a way to realize his dreams that did not involve causing suffering and anguish to his father.

She therefore adopts from Ramban only the idea behind the concealment of the goblet – an idea that is also accepted by both Abравanel and the *Akedat Yitzchak*. Accordingly, Yosef acts from the outset with a view to ascertaining whether the brothers have repented, and perhaps also to provide them with the opportunity to atone for their sin and to achieve complete repentance by demonstrating their willingness to sacrifice their own lives to save Binyamin.

Yosef's Mistake

An innovative and modern approach proposed by some contemporary scholars, in different variations, seeks to explain Yosef's behavior as the result of a prior decision to cut himself off from his brothers and his father's household, with different reasons offered for this decision.

R. Yoel bin Nun suggests that Yosef's decision was based on a mistake.^[1] Yosef believed that he had been rejected from his father's household, just as Yishmael and Esav had been pushed out in the preceding generations in favor of their respective brothers. Yosef believed that his sale was undertaken with his father's knowledge, and that Yaakov had perhaps sent him in the first place to check on his brothers with the intention that they would take care of removing him from the House of Israel. Since Yosef knew nothing of the brothers' ruse of dipping his coat in the blood of the ram, he could not understand why his father did not come to redeem him or seek him out – and these thoughts led him to the conclusion that his father was apparently persuaded by his brothers that there was no choice but to force him out, just as Yishmael and Esav had been forced out.

Yosef therefore reconciled himself with reality as he mistakenly understood it; he decided to rebuild his life outside of his father's house. He thus named his firstborn son Menashe, "For God has caused me to forget (*nashani*) all my toil and all of my father's house." He thanked God for being able to put his sorrow and suffering – and his father's house – behind him.

Yosef realized his mistake only when he heard Yehuda's plea on behalf of Binyamin:

"Your servant, my father, said to us: 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. And one went out from me, and I said, 'Surely he has been torn in pieces;' and I have not seen him since. Now if you take this one from

me too, and some disaster befalls him – you will bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol.”

Only at this point did Yosef discover that his father was not party to his sale. His father knew nothing about it, and still believed that Yosef was devoured by a wild animal! Suddenly, it became clear that the fact that Yaakov did not seek him out made sense in light of his certainty that Yosef was no longer alive. Perhaps Yosef understood that his brothers tricked Yaakov by presenting a false story about him having been torn apart by wild animals. In any event, as soon as he understood that his entire policy had been a terrible mistake and that all his thoughts and feelings of rejection by his father were unfounded, he immediately revealed his identity to his brothers and sought immediate reunification with his father.^[2]

Is Yosef the First “Yored”?

A similar direction, but with much greater criticism of Yosef, was proposed before R. Yoel bin Nun by Prof. Yisrael Eldad in his *Hegyonot Mikra*. He views Yosef as the prototype of the “yored,” the Israeli who leaves Israel and suddenly finds succor for all his troubles and difficulties in a foreign country; he therefore seeks to assimilate in that land and to cut himself off completely from his father's house, from his heritage, and from his native culture. Prof. Eldad expands further on the name Menashe, which reveals Yosef's real and genuine aspiration to forget and cut himself off from Yaakov's household. Yosef understands that so long as he lived at home, he suffered from his brothers, and so long as he remained faithful to the values and culture of his father's house, he suffered in Egypt, too. Now that he has shaved off his beard, changed his manner of dress, taken on an Egyptian name, and assumed the position of Pharaoh's chief minister, he is able to forget his troubles, his suffering, and his father's house.

Eldad concludes from this that Yosef is completely uninterested in his father and his fate, and he consciously decides to forget him. He understands the name Ephraim as reflecting the same mindset. “For God has made me fruitful (*hifrani*) in the land of my affliction” – right now things are going well for Yosef, and he has no interest in renewing contact with his father. The whole idea of concealing the goblet is to have Binyamin, his brother, remain with him in Egypt, while the rest of the brothers return to their father in Canaan.

Prof. David Hanshke adopts the same idea, and even cites teachings of *Chazal* that support this view:

When Yosef saw that he had achieved this [great success in Potifar's house], he began to eat and drink and to curl his hair, and said, “Blessed is God Who has caused me to forget my father's house.”

Hanshke similarly maintains that Yosef decided that since there was apparently no hope of returning to his father's house, he would assimilate into Egyptian society. He hides his identity from his brothers because he has no wish to return to them and to the toil and suffering that he had previously experienced. Having achieved the office of second to Pharaoh, he wants nothing to do with his ancestral home.

The brothers' appearance before him prompts Yosef to exploit the situation by accusing them of being spies in order to have Binyamin brought to Egypt, and then planting the goblet in

order to have Binyamin remain with him so that they can build their family together in Egypt. It is only when Yehuda succeeds in conveying the depths of Yaakov's sorrow that Yosef can no longer restrain himself; he repents and is reunited with his brothers.

Prof. Eldad does not view the revealing of Yosef's identity and the reunification with his brothers and his father as a complete repentance, because Yosef does not return to his father's house; rather, he brings the entire household down to him in Egypt. Yosef is reunited with his family, but he does not relinquish his status and residency in Egypt. He calls to his brothers and his father's household to follow him to Egypt, to enjoy the abundance that this world power has to offer.

Following his proposed line of interpretation, Prof. Eldad shows how the descent to Egypt and the subsequent assimilation ultimately led to subjugation, torture, and infanticide. It was only in the wake of God's strong hand and outstretched arm – acting on Egypt and *Am Yisrael* suffering there – that it was possible to sever the nation from its exile and the culture in which it had sought to immerse itself.

Yosef's Silence

These modern interpretations have raised much controversy, and R. Yaakov Meidan and R. Chanan Porat were vehemently opposed to them. In an article published in *Megadim 2*, Rav Meidan attacked Rav Yoel bin Nun's interpretation, raising numerous difficulties with it and reinforcing the traditional view of Ramban, Abravanel, and the *Akedat Yitzchak*, who perceive in all of Yosef's actions a positive intention and desire to reunite the family once the brothers, headed by Yehuda, repent and demonstrate their loyalty to Binyamin to the point of being ready to give up their own lives for him.

Chanan Porat, in his book *Me'at Min ha-Or*, likewise rejects R. Yoel bin Nun's view:

I must admit that I find this interpretation by Rav Yoel extremely vexing: does the whole episode of Yosef and his brothers not pose enough difficult moral questions that we need to add a further unfounded suspicion on the part of Yosef towards his father? The very idea that Rav Yoel “plants” in Yosef's feverish mind – that his father knew about his sale – is altogether dubious. Would it not be more reasonable for him to assume that his brothers had hidden the matter of his sale from his loving father? At any rate, could Yosef, on the basis of such a flimsy notion, have made such a drastic decision and cut off contact with his father, without making any effort to judge him favorably?

Chanan proposes a solution that occurred to him as he was reading Shai Agnon's wonderful story, “*Ve-Haya Ha-Akov Le-Mishor*” (“And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight”). In this story, Menashe Chayim had been assumed dead, and his wife has married another man. Menashe Chayim maintains his silence and does not show himself before his wife in order not to destroy her life and that of her family. Inspired by this literary situation, Chanan provides insight into the reason for Yosef's silence – out of a noble desire to avoid the tearing apart of his father's household, Yosef chooses not to reveal his identity.

Not because he suspected his father of having been party to the sale, but rather, on the contrary, because it was clear to him that his brothers had hidden the matter from him. If Yosef were to reveal himself to his father and brothers, it would be very difficult to cover up the crime that they had committed. And then, even if Yaakov were not to expel the brothers from his home in fury, they themselves would not be able to look their father and Yosef in the eye, and they would be forced to leave in shame. The whole family would fall apart, and the vision of the House of Israel would be shattered. With hindsight, Yosef understands that he himself also had a part in the schism, and that it was his contentious behavior – both in speaking badly of his brothers and in boasting of his dreams – that led to the outburst of hatred against him. Therefore, he is now obligated – as a counterweight to his previous hurtful speech – to maintain silence, like Rachel, his mother, who remained silent on the day of Leah's wedding so that her sister would not be shamed and expelled from Yaakov's home. During those long years of severance from his father's home, Yosef does not know whether he will ever be able to return, but he is certain that, come what may, he will not speak badly of them again and will not cause the House of Israel to be torn apart. He will be able to return home only if the conditions allow him to restore family harmony and not to destroy it.

Chanan concludes his exposition as follows:

What heroism and kindness are concealed in this silence; how great it is... How much we should learn from it, at a time of election campaigning, shouting, and tumult... Our brother Yosef, how pure is your silence – "Silence unto you is praise."

The Plot of the Goblet

Chanan Porat writes with tremendous spiritual power and with the enchanting, poetic style that characterized his great and noble spirit. Nevertheless, despite his comprehensive article, which addresses every detail of R. Yoel's argument, it appears to me that the plot of the goblet offers solid support for the position of those who maintain that Yosef's intention was to cut himself off from his brothers and to keep only Binyamin in Egypt, rather than to test the brothers' attitude towards Binyamin. For what is it that the brothers think of Binyamin when the goblet is found in his sack? Do they suspect that he really did steal it, or do they know that it is a plot? It seems that neither scenario is accurate; Yosef acts in such a way that the brothers understand that the goblet has nothing to do with Binyamin and that they are being punished by God.

Yosef commands his servant not just to place the silver goblet in Binyamin's sack, but also to "place each man's money in the mouth of his sack." When the servant catches up to them, he takes care to start his search with the eldest brother and to finish at Binyamin. Thus, the moment that the bag of each brother is opened, he sees his money in the mouth of the sack. And just as each brother is well aware that he did not steal the money, so he understands that Binyamin did not steal the goblet. This leads them to the conclusion: "What can we say to my master, what shall we speak, and how shall we justify ourselves? God has found your servants' transgression." The

brothers know that they are suffering a Divine punishment for their sale of Yosef, because the first time that they discovered their money returned to their sacks, Yosef made certain that they would understand it as a Divine miracle. When they return the money on their next trip to Egypt together with Binyamin, the steward of Yosef's house tells them, "Your God and the God of your father has given you treasure in your sacks; your money reached me."

If we accept the opinion of those who maintain that the plot of the goblet was meant to test the brothers and their attitude towards Binyamin, it is not clear why Yosef operates in such a way that the brothers understand that Binyamin is innocent. Seemingly, if Yosef had wanted to put them to a test and to assess their loyalty to Binyamin, it would have been more appropriate to see whether they would be ready to stand by him and be ready to lay down their lives for him even if they were not certain that he had not stolen the goblet. Another difficulty is that if they had not passed the test, and had not been ready to defend Binyamin, a complete break would have arisen between Yosef and Binyamin, on one hand, and the other brothers, on the other, while the plain text seems to indicate that Yosef's original plan was to send all the brothers safely home while he remained with Binyamin in Egypt, in order to build up their house as rulers and members of the highest echelons of the Egyptian empire. This plan changed only in the wake of Yehuda's speech, when Yosef could no longer contain himself.

The fact that we hear very clearly how Yosef longs to be released from the prison dungeon, but hear nothing of his longing to return to his homeland and his father's house – neither prior to his imprisonment nor afterwards, when he reaches his high position (it is only when he is about to die that he commands his brothers to take up his bones to Eretz Canaan) – strengthens the hypothesis that Yosef had decided, either out of his own will or because of his understanding of the situation – that he would not be returning to his homeland.

The modern opinions must still explain why Yosef causes such suffering to Yaakov, who loves him "most out of all his sons." Their response is that perhaps Yosef remembers that his father scolded him for recounting his dreams, and therefore he cannot rule out the possibility that his father had sent him to his brothers, who hate him, in order that they will distance him from the House of Israel. It is not for nothing that he responds to Yaakov's command to visit them with the same expression used by Avraham, who is sent by God to sacrifice his son: "Here I am" (*hineni*). Even if we do not go so far as to say that Yosef suspects that his father sent him in the first place with the intention that they would punish him for his arrogance, it is quite possible that he holds a grudge against his father for having acted with such lack of caution in sending him, defenseless, to his brothers, who harbor only animosity towards him.

Although we have addressed the conflicting opinions of Torah giants, I am certain that both views represent "the words of the living God" and that both approaches have their place in the plain meaning of the text and in the educational messages which we are meant to draw and imbibe as we read the story of Yosef and his brothers.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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