



Parashah Insights
by
Rabbi Yaakov Hillel
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Parashat Miketz
Yosef and His Brothers

The Meeting

Parashat Miketz recounts the story of Yosef's rise to power in Egypt and his subsequent meeting with his brothers, which reaches its climax in *Parashat Vayigash*. Yosef's behavior, from the moment he first saw his brothers until he revealed himself to them with the words "I am Yosef," raises many questions. Yosef was a *tzaddik*. Why did he put his brothers through so much unnecessary anguish? If he recognized them immediately, he could easily have revealed himself at once, without the subterfuge and pretense. What was the purpose of the elaborate production he staged, if in any case, he intended to reconcile with them when it was all over?

Careful study of the Torah's account of the events can help us understand Yosef's intentions and how they were fulfilled.

When Yosef's brothers came to Egypt, Yosef recognized them immediately. Even so, he dealt very harshly with them, treating them like strangers and accusing them of being spies. He pretended not to believe that they were simply a group of brothers who had come to buy food for their large family, and insisted that they bring their younger brother down to Egypt. Then, for good measure, he had them all put in prison for three days (42:7-15).



When he released them, he insisted once again that they prove their innocence by bringing their younger brother down to Egypt. It was at this point that Yosef heard something of great significance. Never dreaming that he understood their language, the brothers told each other that this suffering could only be Divine punishment for their heartless treatment of Yosef (42:17-22). After that, Shimon was taken into custody to ensure their return, and the brothers were dispatched to Canaan. Yaakov refused to consider sending Binyamin to Egypt, but when the food ran out, he had no choice but to ask his sons to make the trip again (see *Ohr HaHayyim* on *Bereshit* 43:2). Yehudah explained to his father that it would be impossible for them to return to the viceroy without Binyamin (43:1-5), but it was only when Yehudah personally guaranteed Binyamin's safe return that Yaakov reluctantly consented (43:8-13).

When they returned to Egypt, events unfolded in a strange, almost inexplicable manner. Yosef invited the brothers to a royal feast in his home (43:18). He greeted Binyamin with exceptional warmth, and also singled him out when he gave gifts to the brothers – Binyamin received fully five times as much as the others (43:29, 34). At the same time, however, he ordered his steward to plant his silver goblet in Binyamin's sack. The brothers, relieved that the encounter with the Egyptian viceroy had gone so well, were shocked when his servant caught up with them on the road back to Canaan. It did not take long for the missing goblet to be discovered in Binyamin's sack, and the horror-stricken brothers were promptly returned under guard to Yosef's palace (43:4-12).

Yehudah, true to his pledge to Yaakov, took charge of the negotiations with the viceroy, declaring that they were *all* his servants, not only Binyamin. All things considered, Yosef's reply was quite gracious: he said that only the one who was caught with the goblet would be made a slave, while the others could return home in peace (43:16-17).

Our *parashah* concludes with these words, and the continuation of the argument between Yehudah and Yosef is related in *Parashat Vayigash*. In very strong terms, Yehudah presented the brothers' side of the events and explained how much Binyamin meant to their elderly father, saying that he would die if they returned without him (44:30-34).

Yosef had heard enough; the moment of revelation had come. To the brothers' utter shock, the viceroy suddenly said, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" (45:3).



Setting the Stage

We learn these *parshiot* as children, and continue to review them yearly as adults. As a result, we may take the Torah's description of these events for granted. In fact, though, Yosef's actions were actually very carefully planned with a specific purpose in mind. We can understand Yosef's behavior in light of the laws of repentance, taught by our Sages and codified by the Rambam.

The Rambam asks, "What is *complete* repentance?" In answer, he defines a true *baal teshuvah* (penitent) at the highest level. He is someone faced with a very special situation, where with no effort, he could backslide and return to his former ways. He is within easy reach of the old, familiar sins, with all their fond memories: the opportunity is there, the temptation is there, and the ability to act is there. Nothing is stopping him but his own fear of G-d, and yet – he refrains, because he knows that this is Hashem's Will. He goes on to describe the entire process of repentance, including sincere regret, abandonment of the sin, the commitment not to sin in the future, and verbalized confession (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:1-2).

Clearly, this successful confrontation with favorite sins from the past is not a basic requirement of repentance. If we are sincerely committed not to return to our old ways, that resolution itself is our *teshuvah*. This is true even if it remains in the realm of the heart alone, and has not yet been tested in actual practice. We learn this from a teaching of our Sages concerning the laws of marriage.

Our Sages teach that if a man betroths a woman, and while giving her the ring says, "You are married to me on the condition that I am entirely righteous," she is considered a married woman (*Kiddushin* 49b). This holds true even if until then he was in fact entirely wicked, because he may have made a mental pledge to change his ways. Even if he has not actually carried it out yet, it still carries weight. Of course, only the Al-mighty Himself can gauge the sincerity of a thought of *teshuvah*. And yet, our Sages tell us that this act of betrothal has enough value to be of significant standing in *halachah*.

However, there is still no comparison between a *tzaddik* whose repentance consists of positive and pious thoughts, and one whose sincerity has been successfully tested in the much more difficult realm of actual temptation.

With this in mind, let us return to the words of the Torah. "And Yosef saw his brothers, and he recognized them... and Yosef recognized his brothers" (42:7-8).



Why is the fact that Yosef recognized them important enough for the Torah to mention it not once, but twice?

Yosef recognized his brothers not only on a physical, visual level, but in a much more profound, spiritual sense. He not only saw them, he saw into their souls, and recognized the spiritual blemish (*pegam*) caused in them by their sin of selling their brother. He also recognized the source of that sin: in the words of our Sages, “For two measures of fine wool (the striped tunic) that Yaakov gave to Yosef more than to his other sons, his brothers envied him” (*Shabbat* 10b). Their jealousy when their father favored Yosef as Rahel’s son and singled him out for special treatment, as evidenced by the special tunic (37:3-4, Rashi), had destroyed the fraternal love between them.

Can we – can anyone – presume to pass judgment on the brothers and their deeds? We are incapable of comprehending their lofty spiritual stature, and of understanding why they acted as they did. Our Sages tell us that “Yaakov, his bed was perfect, [meaning that] all his sons were righteous, as is written, ‘We are all the sons of one man’” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 36:5, citing *Bereshit* 42:11).

What we can say, however, is that considering their high level, they had committed a serious sin. They had certainly approached the matter with the utmost gravity, judging Yosef in keeping with the exacting laws of the Torah, and they had found him guilty, even deserving of death (see *Bereshit* 37:17, Rashi). But, as we learn from the Torah and the teachings of our Sages (*ibid.*), their judgment was so colored by personal bias and ill feeling towards Yosef that they were actually prepared to kill him. Instead, they “only” threw him into a pit full of deadly snakes and scorpions, and then sold him to a caravan of Yishmaelites bound for Egypt.

This is why the Torah tells us, “And Yosef saw his brothers and he recognized them... And Yosef recognized his brothers, and they did not recognize him.” He recognized them, and also recognized their sin and the spiritual blemish it had caused. He saw something else as well: the way to eliminate the blemish. Yosef, who truly *did* love his brothers, knew that this was an unparalleled opportunity to help them achieve complete repentance for their sin against him.

Let us see how Yosef accomplished his goal.

Yosef sought to structure a situation comparable to that which had existed when he was sold, twenty-two years before. By exposing the brothers to the same



temptation to harm Binyamin, Rahel's younger son who was now their father's favorite, they could repent and atone for their earlier sin by withstanding the identical trial. To this end, he set a very negative tone for their "reunion:" "And he acted like a stranger to them, and he spoke to them harshly... and he said to them, 'You are spies'" (42:7,9).

Having extracted the information that they had a younger brother at home, he said, "With this you will be tested (42:15)" – their behavior now would be the test of their sincerity. How would the brothers react, not only in thought but also in deed, when faced with the same trial all over again? Would they "be able to leave here" by annulling and correcting the blemish caused by their sin, leaving it behind them and erasing it entirely through perfect, complete repentance? There was one way to find out: by "bringing your younger brother here" (ibid.).

The parallel was perfect. The brothers had envied Yosef, Rahel's older son. They must have also envied Binyamin, Rahel's younger son. When Yosef had been at home, he had been very much the apple of his father's eye (37:3). Now too, they knew that "[Yaakov's] soul was bound to [Binyamin's] soul" (44:30). Just as Yosef had enjoyed privileged status, so did Binyamin. The other brothers had been sent down to Egypt in search of food, while Binyamin stayed safely home at his father's side (42:4).

Their father had suffered great anguish all the years that Yosef was gone: "And all his sons and daughters arose to comfort him, and he refused to be comforted. And he said, 'I will go down to the grave in mourning for my son'" (37:35). As Yaakov himself had said, his suffering over Binyamin would be no less: "And you will take also this one from me, and [if] disaster befalls him, you will have brought my old age down to the grave in evil" (44:29).

Now they could be rid of Binyamin, spared even the need to fabricate a story as they had for Yosef's disappearance. They had only to tell Yaakov that Binyamin had foolishly gotten himself into serious trouble in Egypt, and now he was paying for his thieving ways. If anyone should be blamed, it was Binyamin, not them. It was all from G-d, after all, and it was simply the plain truth. They could leave the object of their envy and hatred far away in Egypt, and return home as a united, happy family.

In short, everything was exactly the same as it had been twenty-two years earlier; the only difference was that now the object of their jealousy was Binyamin. And yet, Yosef realized that something in the brothers' attitude had



changed for the better. It was time for Yosef to orchestrate the next stage, and see just how far that change really went.

When the brothers returned to Egypt with Binyamin, Yosef made an obvious show of favoring the privileged younger brother. He did all he could to arouse the brothers' negative feelings, anger and jealousy included, against him. When he first met the others, he had spoken to them roughly. To Binyamin, he said, "May G-d be gracious to you, my son" (43:29). To make his point even more obvious, he gave them all gifts – but gave Binyamin five times as much (43:34).

Yosef's steward saw to it that "the goblet was found in Binyamin's sack." When he brought the entire group back to Yosef, Yehudah acted as spokesman, telling Yosef, "We are servants to my lord, also we and also he in whose hands the goblet was found." Yosef virtuously insisted that only Binyamin, the so-called thief, would have to remain behind, while the others could all return home (44:16-17).

This was the critical moment. What would the brothers do with this generous offer? Would they leave Binyamin to a life of slavery and go their own way? Would they once more ignore their father's heartbreaking agony, as they had when they told him that "Yosef was torn apart" (37:33)?

It was Yehudah who spoke again. Arguing for Binyamin's release, he said, "Your servant took responsibility for the youth" (44:32). Rashi tells us that with these words, Yehudah explained why he was so much more deeply involved than the other brothers. He, Yehudah, was the only one who had bound himself to guarantee Binyamin's safety, risking excommunication in this world and the next should anything happen to him.

In keeping with our explanation of the development of the events, we can understand Yehudah's words somewhat differently as well. It was Yehudah who bore the greatest responsibility for the sale of Yosef, because it was he who had said, "Let us sell him to the Yishmaelites" (37:27). Now, in keeping with the Torah's principle of "measure for measure" (see *Sotah* 8b, *Sanhedrin* 90a), he was prepared to sacrifice himself to a greater degree than any of the others in order to save Binyamin from a life of slavery.

Yehudah went on to explain just what it would mean to their father to lose Binyamin: "When he sees that the youth is not there, he will die, and your servants will bring down the old age of your servant, our father, in anguish to the



grave” (44:31). In other words, Yehudah said, it was impossible for them to repeat the same terrible error a second time. If he failed to return with Binyamin, “I will have sinned to my father for all time” (44:32). He gave himself up entirely for his brother, saying, “And now, please, let your servant stay here instead of the youth as a servant to my lord, and let the youth go up with his brothers.”

This was it. Yosef saw that his brothers had truly repented in full for their sin, going through all the stages necessary for complete repentance. They realized that they had failed the test of envy, hatred, and vengeance, and sinned against Yosef. They recognized their troubles as punishment for their sin and accepted Hashem’s judgment. This time, they would not leave a brother to his fate.

When Yosef saw beyond all doubt that Yehudah had repented in full, he was overcome with emotion. He “could not restrain himself before all those who stood before him, and he called out, ‘Remove everyone from before me’... And he raised his voice in weeping...” (45:1-3).

I Am Yosef

Now it was also time, Yosef knew, for a few well chosen words of rebuke: “And Yosef said to his brothers, ‘I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?’” Our Sages, commenting on this verse, tell us “Woe to us from the day of judgment, woe to us from the day of rebuke” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 93:10). Understood literally, Yosef’s simple words were actually a very powerful reproach.

When it came to Binyamin, the brothers had repeatedly stated that their father would not survive the loss of his son. If that was so, he asked, was *his*, Yosef’s, father still alive? Had they bothered to think about Yaakov’s terrible anguish when they had sold him to a passing caravan, presumably never to be seen or heard from again? Had Yaakov survived the blow they had dealt him then? “And his brothers could not answer him, for they were frightened of him” (45:3). His words were so true, so painful, and penetrated so deeply that they were incapable of responding.

There was more still to come. “And Yosef said to his brothers, ‘Please, come over to me,’ and they approached. And he said, ‘I am your brother Yosef, whom you sold to Egypt’” (45:4). Our Sages teach that he told them to come close to him to show them that he was circumcised (*Bereshit Rabbah* 93:10), obviously as a way of proving that he was indeed their lost brother Yosef. We can



understand our Sages' statement on a more profound level as well. This was a second, perhaps even more scorching round of rebuke. Apparently, there was a distinct connection between Yosef's circumcision and his brothers' sin in selling him "to Egypt."

Our Sages teach that each of our Forefathers embodied one of the Divine Attributes, which they brought to great heights. Our Forefather Avraham was the *ish ha'hessed*, literally "the man whose essence was lovingkindness." Yitzhak was *ne'ezar b'gevurah*, girded with the trait of *Gevurah* (Might), also known as *Din* (Judgment). Yaakov was *ahuz b'middat ha'emet*, imbued with the trait of truth, also known as *Tiferet* (Glory). Moshe and Aharon, the two "pillars" supporting the Torah, represented *Netzach* (Infinity) and *Hod* (Splendor). The root of Yosef's soul was *Yesod* (Foundation), symbolized by the sanctity of the *brit kodesh*, man's organ of procreation. He is known as Yosef *HaTzaddik* because he is the "tzaddik who is the foundation (*yesod*) of the world" (*Mishle* 10:25), the symbol of the sanctity of the covenant of circumcision.¹

The commandment of circumcision consists of two parts, as we learn from the blessings recited at the *milah*. The *mohel* performing the circumcision recites the blessing "...and commanded us concerning circumcision." This blessing is related to the actual process of cutting off the foreskin, which is over in a second or two. The *mohel* makes the cut, everyone says "*mazal tov*" – and it's done. For this, one blessing would appear to suffice. However, the father also recites a blessing as well, "...Who commanded us to bring him into the covenant of our Father Avraham." A child's entry "into the covenant of our Father Avraham" does not conclude with the procedure; membership is an ongoing lifelong task, which does not end, but only begins with circumcision.

With his reference to circumcision, Yosef reminded his brothers that his essence was *Yesod*, the sanctity of *brit kodesh* carefully guarded against the most difficult of trials. In painful contrast, Egypt was the living personification of impurity (see *Yehezkel* 16:26 and 23:20, Rashi). Egypt was the *ervat ha'aretz*, literally "the nakedness of the land" (42:9), the specific location on earth most susceptible to impurity and immorality. And that was where they had sent Yosef, walking away without a second thought while he was left to contend with the likes of Potiphar's wife.

¹ See *Parashah Insights on Lech Lecha* for a fuller discussion of this topic.



When they accepted his rebuke, the brothers' repentance was truly complete. Now Yosef could reassure them, telling them that "it was not you who sent me here, but G-d" (45:8). He had no intention of using his position of power to take revenge. On the contrary, he said, "I will provide for you," and the entire family would survive the famine.

Learning Yosef's Lessons

The Torah is the Al-mighty's eternal wisdom. It does not merely relate stories, or even record history. If the story of Yosef and his brothers is recounted in such detail, it is clearly because it carries important lessons for all future generations. Let us try to understand the message for our times in Yosef's life.

The life of Yosef – Yosef *HaTzaddik* – had been marked by a series of troubling, perplexing events. Yosef, the product of his saintly ancestors and pious home, understood that they certainly had not happened for nothing. He also understood, when he saw his brothers, that this was their opportunity to repent in full for sinning against him.

Torn from his safe home and sold into slavery in a foreign land, Yosef was forced to grapple with the extremely difficult trial of Potiphar's wife. Why? Because Yosef was to be the embodiment of the Divine Attribute of *Yesod*, elevating and sanctifying the *brit kodesh*. The more difficult his trials in this realm, the greater the spiritual elevation of overcoming them would be. He was a humble slave alone in Egypt, the land which epitomized immorality. He was faced with a very determined woman who had considerable power over him as his master's wife. What is more, based on her astrological charts, she firmly believed that she was destined to have offspring from Yosef, and that therefore, her burning desires were actually right and proper (*Bereshit Rabbah* 85:2). For Yosef to prevail took incredible strength, raising him to great heights in the Attribute of *Yesod* (see *Yoma* 35b).

When Yosef was suddenly and miraculously hauled out of the dungeons to rule over Egypt, he realized that it could only have happened for a more lofty purpose than his own personal advancement. In time, his position indeed became a source of salvation for Yaakov and his family, with Yosef supporting them all throughout the difficult days of the famine.



Yosef thus learned that come what may, Hashem was always with him, protecting him spiritually and materially even in what seemed to be the worst of times. It became clear to him that no one but the Al-mighty could help or harm him. His brothers had wronged him terribly, and it would have been only natural for him to hate them and exact a well-deserved revenge. And yet, even when he could have repaid them for every last ounce of suffering they had caused him, he did not. He rose above ordinary human nature and instead showered them with good, even after their father's death. "He comforted them and spoke to their hearts," reassuring them that he would always take care of them (50:21).

We can learn from the example of Yosef *HaTzaddik*, who maintained and even enhanced his purity and sanctity despite the corruption of his surroundings. Like Yosef, we should analyze the trials and temptations which confront us at all turns, and try to understand what the Al-mighty wants of us in every situation. Just as Yosef went to great lengths to help his brothers repent in full and rectify their sin, we too should help our brethren repent and return to Torah. Above all, if we sincerely seek to correct our own sins, Hashem will surely provide us with the opportunity. With His help, where we failed in the past, we will succeed in the present and the future, achieving the highest levels of repentance and rectification. Together with our brothers, we can achieve spiritual perfection and merit the World to Come.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.