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בס"ד

## Parashat Miqes Part I

### 1. Unknowingly Going to Yosef (Gen. 42:1-8)

Two years after Yosef interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker, while he was still in prison, Pharaoh had a dream that he felt was of great significance. After the soothsayers and wise men of Egypt failed to provide him a satisfactory interpretation his cupbearer stepped forth. Yosef had requested of him "when things go well for you please do me the kindness and mention me to Pharaoh and have me released" (Gen. 40:14), but he forgot Yosef. Now he remembered him. Yosef interpreted Pharaoh's dream convincingly, namely, that G-d was providing Egypt with seven years of great plenty followed by seven years of dire famine. Pharaoh was impressed with the interpretation as well as with Yosef and placed him in charge of preparing the land for the coming emergency. "Yosef was thirty years of age when standing before Pharaoh" (41:46), concluding a thirteen-year phase of life since being sold by his brothers.

During the years of plenty Yosef led Egypt to storing huge quantities of surplus; when the famine arrived Egypt was well stocked and even able to provide for neighboring lands, for the famine extended to the Land of Canaan. When the food shortage created a crisis for Yaaqob and his family the narrative shifted back to them. Besides the chapter on Yehudah, who is now rejoined with the family, the reader is not provided any information concerning Yaaqob or his other sons during the more than twenty years that had passed since the sale of Yosef.

"The whole land [of course including Canaan] came to Egypt to purchase food from Yosef..." (41:57). The next verse informs us that Yaaqob, having learned that food was available in Egypt, asked his sons a most revealing question, לָמָּה תִּתְרָאוּ, "why do you keep looking at one another?" (42:1, NJPS). Although heads of families, they were behaving abnormally in

an emergency, they were not going to Egypt to purchase food like everybody else, they were "looking at each other," doing nothing, hence Yaaqob's reprimand. He could not know that they were in a state of inertia, resistant to the idea of going to the land to which they had sold their brother as a slave, although over two decades had passed.

Perhaps the unusual construction of לָמָּה תִּתְרָאוּ, without the object פְּנִיָּם, may carry the meaning of "why are you fearful?" (Targum Yonatan), depicting Yaaqob as recognizing, but not understanding why, his sons are apprehensive about going to Egypt. Perhaps לָמָּה תִּתְרָאוּ is a double entendre highlighting the brother's reluctance from multiple angles.

Yaaqob raised the subject again (v. 2). Back-to-back וַיִּאמְרוּ statements by Yaaqob without an expected response in-between are an indication that the brothers were silent. In a subtle commentary on the aftereffects of unatoned sin, they are depicted as immobilized, possibly unconsciously, by their refusal to confront their past deed even indirectly. What if they came across the brother they sold into slavery? Yaaqob then virtually orders his sons down to Egypt.

On the previous occasion of interaction between Yaaqob, Yosef and the other sons, Yaaqob had sent Yosef to them, to check on their welfare, unaware that he was creating a problem. Now, to provide for their welfare, he sends them to him, unaware that he was advancing the solution.

In Yaaqob's last appearance on the textual scene before this his focus was on death; he entered a prolonged period of mourning for Yosef and refused consolation. The last words the Torah reported from him at that time were, כִּי אֶרְדּוּ אֵל בְּנֵי אָבִיךָ שְׂאֵלָה, "I shall go down to my son to *sheol* mourning" (37:35). But much had transpired since then; he had endured mighty chastisement for his deception of his father

and the stage is now set for a reversal of circumstances. His words on this occasion reflect a new outlook as he states, וְרָדוּ שָׁמָּה... וְנִחְיֶה וְלֹא נָמוּת, “go down there... so that we may live and not die.” He is revived, caring about living, and Providence was actively at work on his behalf. In an inversion of the situation that had prevailed, especially manifest in the Dina episode, he recovers his leadership role and overcomes his sons’ torpor.

The Torah informs us וַיֵּרְדוּ אֲחֵי יוֹסֵף עֶשְׂרֵה, “And Yosef’s brothers, ten, went down, to purchase grain from Egypt” (v. 3). It is understandable that all brothers must go to Egypt, as food was surely being sold in restricted quantities, according to families. (The oft-used word in this context עֶשְׂרֵה, which is possibly derived from the root that means “break,” that is, that which “breaks” the hunger, may thus indicate that only minimum quantities of food were being sold. A cognate Akkadian term means “subsistence grain portion.” Either way, rationing may be understood.) But use of the phrase “Yosef’s brothers” in this first mention of their going, in contrast to their formal designation of בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל that appears shortly afterwards (v. 5), is significant.

This term appears to acknowledge the momentous event that was occurring in their lives. Perhaps it may hint that in a vague way they sensed the connection between going to Egypt and Yosef. More likely, however, the locution points to Divine Providence and foreshadows the ultimate objective of their trip, signaling that this journey is ultimately to be defined as Yosef’s brothers going to him to advance the goal of reunification. Use of וַיֵּרְדוּ corresponds to the use of that same root in describing Yosef having been “taken down” to Egypt, וַיֵּרַד מִצְרַיִם (39:1) – they followed him.

The second reference to their going, in which they are termed בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, envisions them as the microcosm of the nation they are destined to become in Egypt, foreshadowing the longer-range purpose of their trip. In the very next reference to them (v. 6) they are before Yosef and, in a reflection of the ironic, objective reality they are once again termed “Yosef’s brothers.”

Yaaqob did not send Binyamin, “Yosef’s brother” (v. 4), that is, his full brother, from Raḥel. “He said” –

which might mean “he thought,” but regardless, his decisive resolution speaks louder than words – that something may happen to him. (Raḥel had died on a journey and Yosef disappeared upon undertaking a journey.) Although Binyamin is a grown man with a family, Yaaqob is protective of him, much more concerned about him than of his other sons. With Yosef absent, his preference for Raḥel manifested itself in his relationship with Binyamin. The passage of time had not changed him in this respect; this is the way he believes things are to be and his other sons must be resigned to acknowledge the reality. The reader wonders: Do the other sons accept this situation? Has there been a change in their attitude toward their father’s favoritism for Raḥel’s sons?

The first statement the Torah relates regarding the brothers upon their arrival in Egypt is, “Yosef’s brothers came and bowed to him, faces to the ground” (v. 6b). They were now prostrating themselves to Yosef in a complete fulfillment of his first dream, that of the bowing sheaves. We are once again reminded that Providence was at work. It should be noted that the first dream undoubtedly did not include Binyamin. The latter, whom we assume at the time of that dream to be not more than five years of age,\* would not have been thought of as working in the field with his brothers binding sheaves.

As many people were coming to Egypt to purchase grain, it might be assumed that the viceroy of the land cannot personally observe all who come, but Yosef did notice and recognize his brothers. We may wonder, was it necessary for him, the man in charge, to be the one who dispensed the grain to the purchasers – וַיֹּסֵף הוּא הַשְּׁלִיט עַל הָאֶרֶץ הוּא הַמְשַׁבֵּיר לְכָל עַם – הָאֶרֶץ, as stated in the first part of the verse that informs of the brothers bowing to him? Did he intentionally place himself in the forefront, perhaps not consciously expecting his brothers to appear, but, at some level, looking for them? In any event, the stage was now set for him to act.

Immediately, “He acts the stranger to them and speaks harshly with them” (v. 7a), at this point not accusing them of anything. His initial utterance – prior to his recalling the dreams, which is only mentioned two verses later – may have been his natural, human reaction to their vile mistreatment of him and the agony they caused him; it may have reflected

emotions long subdued and “forgotten.” He had solemnized that state in naming his firstborn son **הַנְּשֵׂה**, which he explained to mean, “G-d has made me forget all my hardships and all my father’s house” (41:51).

Alternatively, especially if he is thought of as somewhat awaiting his brothers to arrive, his harsh speaking of verse 7a may be understood as a general description of the episode, followed by details, not a chronological occurrence.

Verse 8 repeats the detail that Yosef recognized his brothers, adding that they did not recognize him. The combination of these clauses allows the verse to serve as a dramatic signifier of the amazing situation that had just materialized, along with its enormous possibilities. Yosef now has the remarkable opportunity to deal with his brothers as he sees fit, to punish them, test them, educate them or to devise a plan for some objective that he may feel appropriate. The delay of action with the repetition of Yosef recognizing his brothers may also be a literary device to reflect his having taken a moment to contemplate exactly what to do.

Moreover, the repetition highlights the now-familiar key words that are central to these two verses, linking them with the series of relevant past deceptions. **וַיִּכְרֶם** and **וַיִּכַּר** followed by **לֹא הִכְרָהוּ** (vv. 7-8) are striking reminders of the perfidy perpetrated by the brothers.\*\* Their key phrase to their father regarding Yosef’s “found” ornamental tunic was **הִכָּר נָא** (37:32), while the pivotal word describing Yaaqob’s being deceived was **וַיִּכְרָה** (v. 33).

This concludes the string of thematically interlinked deceptions in which the **ה-כ-ר** root is most prominent: Yaaqob of his father (27:23); Raḥel of her father (31:32); Yosef’s brothers of their father (37:32-33); Tamar of her father-in-law (38:25) and Yosef of his brothers (42:7-8). In the larger picture they point to “measure for measure” and “poetic justice,” metaphors for the subtle workings of Divine Providence.

## 2. Recalling the Dreams (Gen. 42:9)

After their bowing and, as mentioned earlier, apparently after his first remarks to them, “Yosef recalled the dreams that he dreamt regarding them”

(42:9a). With the first dream just having been fulfilled he was encouraged to focus on the larger picture and devised a complex plan for proceeding. He accused the brothers of being spies (v. 9b), a not uncommon concern in ancient Egypt. Perhaps he chose the spy accusation since it was somewhat similar to their crime and might stir their conscience. They had acted treacherously in a brother-to-brother relationship; nationals of one nation spying on a friendly, neighboring nation, possibly for a nefarious purpose, violate the brotherly relationship between nations. The ascendancy of the Asiatic Hyksos in Egypt (mid-17<sup>th</sup> to mid-16<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) must have been a salient topic in the education of the leading classes in Egypt, and would be called to mind in educated Near-Eastern circles. It might be assumed that in the course of their ordeal the brothers would be informed of it.

In any event, the narrative states that the spy accusation resulted from Yosef’s recalling his dreams. It did not result from his recalling their hatred of him, their casting him into a pit or their selling him, or, on the other hand, from his recalling the immense suffering he endured through the years because of their deed. From this we understand that he was not acting out of malice or a desire for revenge.

Of course the dreams had magnified the jealousy and hatred of him and prompted the brothers’ plotting to rid themselves of him, as portrayed in their derisive reference to “the master of dreams” at that critical moment when they saw him approaching (37:19-20). However, in Yosef’s consciousness the dreams surely stand in too indirect a connection to their feelings to be used as the signifier of their hostile behavior. Their hatred of him and inability to speak to him peacefully preceded the dreams and were explicitly attributed to their seeing that their father loved him more than he did them (v. 4), that he had made a *ketonet pasim* – a token of leadership – only for him, that they could not tolerate the thought of his becoming ascendant over them. Even if recalling the dreams refers to the image of ascendancy, a status highlighted in the dreams, such recollections only point to Yosef’s visionary disposition, his special gifts and potential, as well as his responsibilities, and have nothing to do with thoughts of vengeance.

Also, interpreting Yosef’s plan of action as based on revenge is inconsistent with his steadfast commitment

to it. How would he not have abandoned it, or at least modified it, upon having overheard their remarks of contrition after three days of incarceration and experiencing an emotional urgency to leave their presence to cry (42:24)? It would be unnatural for a son to devise a scheme of revenge that would necessarily subject his aged father, with whom he had been so close, to continued and extensive suffering and to so stubbornly stand by it. And why would he subject the totally innocent Binyamin to the tremendous ordeal he placed on him? Furthermore, motives of revenge are incongruent with everything we detect of Yosef's character and all that he says to and does for his brothers when he finally reveals himself and in his subsequent behavior.

In addition, the dreams possess too rich a context of their own, pointing toward the future, for the text to utilize them as a substitute for the brothers' sinful actions. "Recalling the dreams" surely indicates that Yosef's motivation in implementing his plan was connected to the deeper meaning of the dreams, which has now become his focus. By the Torah stating that he recalled *הַחֲלֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם* "the dreams he dreamt for them," and not employing the more normal personal possessive term *חֲלֹמוֹתָיו*, "his dreams," it depicts him as thinking of the dreams in an objective mode. It informs us that it was his recognizing the dreams that were now being fulfilled as a prophecy that inspired him to devise his strategy. Further, *לָהֶם*, "regarding them," or "for them," indicates that the dreams were, indeed, for them, that the brothers had a responsibility to respond to them positively, that they had to acknowledge Yaaqob's selection of Yosef for the primary family and national leadership role as legitimate. It was their rejection of what now proved

to be a prophetic vision that is weighing heavily on Yosef, guiding him in acting as he does. In our next study we will elaborate upon Yosef's motive's and his strategy for acting as he did toward his brothers.

### Endnotes

\* At the time of the Shechem episode the reader presumes Dina, the seventh-born of Leah, to be not less than eleven or twelve years of age. Yosef, born in Yaaqob's fourteenth year with Laban, was about the same age as her or slightly older, as it is possible that her birth was after that fourteenth year but included with the account of the births of her brothers to conclude the section of Leah's childbearing (30:21). (After all, Yaaqob married Leah in the beginning of his eighth year by Laban.) Binyamin was not born until after the Shechem episode, thus perhaps twelve years younger than Yosef. Yosef was seventeen at the time of the dream. See the discussion on chronology in our *Vayishlah Part III* study.

\*\* Some consider the reflexive verb *נִיחַנְכַר* (v. 7), rendered by NJPS "he acted like a stranger," located in the midst of the cluster of the three attestations of the *י-כ-ר* (recognize) stem, to also be a derivative of the same underlying root, translating "made himself unrecognizable." Going further, the Mandelkern Concordance (entry: *נכר*), while acknowledging the view that we are dealing with two distinct meanings, conjectures that the root *נ-כ-ר* may originally have denoted "strange" and subsequently, because that which is strange occasions much attention, it was extended to "recognize."

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