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בס"ד

Parashat Miqes Part II

1. Yosef's Strategy

As one reads of Yosef's rise to power and prominence, several significant questions concerning his behavior come to mind. What was his purpose in carrying out his deception of his brothers and insisting on their bringing Binyamin to Egypt? Why did he not send a message to his father that he was alive and well during the many years after his appointment to a position of authority? He surely knew that his disappearance and continued absence caused him great anguish. Undoubtedly, he was also interested in learning of his father's welfare. Perhaps most troubling, what was his moral justification to subject his aged father to the additional distress of Shimon's incarceration to be followed by an obviously wrenching separation from Binyamin?

Some commentators are of the opinion that Yosef felt constrained to do whatever was in his power to bring about fulfillment of his dreams, which he recognized as true prophecies after his several experiences with dream interpretation. However, it appears to run counter to logic to assume that a prophecy may impel one to act as Yosef did, and for an extended period of time, to promote its fulfillment. G-d grants prophecies. Why should Yosef feel required to do the cruel and distasteful acts he did? G-d will bring the prophecy to fulfillment. The dreams Yosef interpreted were fulfilled without the special aid of human agency. And what purpose would fulfillment of Yosef's dreams serve that he should participate in bringing it about? Finally, certain details of Yosef's stratagem served to discourage the brothers from returning to Egypt and dream fulfillment, and he continued with his plan beyond the point necessary to bring dream fulfillment about.

Surely, the explanation of Yosef's motives lie in a different realm.

We should not read the Yosef narrative independently of the larger context, namely, of what preceded it in

the Torah. Specifically, G-d chose Abraham to found a new nation that would be dedicated to Him and the values that He desires man live by to bring blessing to the world. He established a covenant with Abraham that would be passed on through his children to advance that goal. G-d had confirmed His plans in prophecies granted to Yishaq and Yaaqob. Although critical decisions of Yishaq and Yaaqob appear to have been driven by personal considerations, it is proper to assume that national goals played a major role in their inner motivations. It is incomprehensible that recipients of G-d's communications regarding these lofty matters, individuals who were personally in alignment with them, did not take them into account in their actions and, to the extent possible, transmit the vision to their children.

Yaaqob's blatant favoring of Yosef, his grooming him for leadership of the expanding clan, appears associated with his recognizing this son as possessing the capacity and disposition for carrying on the family heritage. He himself had been acutely concerned in his younger years that his father did not acknowledge him as the son with the necessary potential and interest to be the appropriate conduit through which the Covenant should pass. He risked his welfare to be the recipient of the blessing. Although he acted inappropriately, and received Divine chastisement for his wrongful behavior, he did have his vision set on the noble goals of the family heritage. He did not want to repeat the mistake of not recognizing the son who had the vision and potential. Perhaps it was a fear he may have been a bit obsessed with. Mistakes were made but we should not doubt that the continuation of Abraham's legacy remained of primary concern.

Yosef was deeply committed to the goals of the forefathers. Of course he was ever aware that fulfillment of the Divine promises depends on the worthiness of the recipients. As his brothers stood before the viceroy of Egypt without recognizing him, the most important issue for him was whether or not they were now worthy of being progenitors of the

nation that was to bring blessing to the world. In other words, had they repented from their horrific deed of selling him into slavery? This was connected to a more fundamental question that was at the root of the problem. Had they accepted the reality of their father's choice for leadership of the family? This meant Yaaqob's selection of Rahel's sons, specifically Yosef, regardless of whatever dissatisfaction they may have had with the decision and whatever disagreeable traits they had detected in their father's choice. Without the brothers' genuine remorse for their dreadful act and acceding to the verities of the family situation there could be no true family unity. The family could not advance toward becoming the nation G-d had hoped it would be.

Yosef resisted the tremendous temptation to contact his father prematurely. This must be considered from his superlative achievements, requiring ongoing discipline. Under normal circumstances, no caring son who possessed the wherewithal to relieve his suffering father from his anguish by merely sending him notice of his satisfactory condition would resist doing so.

However, he knew that had Yaaqob discovered that his missing son was viceroy of Egypt he would surely have shared such joyous information with his sons, for he had no reason not to do so. Surely Yosef's brothers did not give their father reason to suspect them of foul play. There would then have been no likelihood of discovering their true position toward the powerful viceroy of Egypt who may harbor feelings of revenge toward them.

In addition, Yosef may have feared that notifying his father of his situation might possibly have caused a falling-out between father and sons. If Yaaqob would have made some inquiries as to how Yosef got to Egypt and rose to a leadership position, he might have discovered that he had been in slavery for a number of years, since some background information on the Egyptian viceroy may have been available. Of course Yosef realized that withholding information about his being alive was causing his father continuing agony, and insisting on Binyamin coming to Egypt was going to add to it. But he also realized that at that point there was no immediate solution to the problem and that his father's primary interest was in achieving true family unity.

As Yosef's concerns were on ascertaining his brothers' true stance regarding the critical matters of

contrition and family, his thoughts focused on what he could do to prompt them to move forward in these areas. Thus, he devised a decisive test of character, while at the same time prodding his brothers to introspection. Having Binyamin in Egypt was a critical element in his plan. No matter how trying it would be on Yaaqob, it constituted the choicest method of achieving his precious goals.

In not alleviating his father's suffering for the sake of a larger goal, was Yosef not engaging in an "ends justify the means" policy, the type of behavior for which Yaaqob, in deceiving his father, was so thoroughly censured? There is a critical difference. Yaaqob had no right to impersonate his innocent brother who had done him no harm, and deny him a blessing from his father. He also had no right to deceive his father to subvert his plans, for his goals. He had inserted his machinations into a situation he had no right to enter.

Yosef, on the other hand, was thrust into a "situation," a grave one indeed. He was a victim of a criminal act to eliminate him from the family. His father was suffering on account of his sons' act (which Yosef undoubtedly realized he was deceived about), and the family was hopelessly split. Many years passed and the state of affairs threatened to become permanent if Yosef did not do something creative to resolve the predicament. Accordingly, he now assumed the responsibility of trying to find a way to bring about family integrity and unity and preserve for his brothers a chance at repentance. Squandering that opportunity would be a far greater violation of Yaaqob's welfare than the agony he was enduring. In any event, if true reconciliation was not achieved Yaaqob was going to suffer terribly. When Tamar had no option to correct a wrongful situation but to engage in the deception of Yehudah, who caused and refused to correct the wrongful situation, she was rewarded.

2. Persuading Yaaqob (Gen. 42:37-43:11)

Yaaqob's sons made it absolutely clear to him that Shimon would not be released without Binyamin's appearance before the viceroy. Nevertheless, Yaaqob was determined not to send his youngest son to Egypt, just as he did not send him the first time, fearful that an "ason" may befall him. Shimon's freedom would just have to wait. The continued favoritism for Rahel's children became more manifest.

Reuben, obviously sensing his responsibility as the firstborn, makes the first attempt to persuade his father. He said, “My two sons you may kill if I do not return him to you” (42:37).^{*} Although a preposterous proposal and undoubtedly stemming from desperation – it is unimaginable that any father or grandfather would consider such an outrageous action – it does reveal the underlying attitude the sons had. Compared to Binyamin, they felt that they and their children did not count for much in Yaaqob’s scheme of things; offering two for one makes their sentiment palpable.

In his response, Yaaqob addressed all his sons – Reuben’s proposal did not deserve an individual answer – and confirmed his position. This time he referred to Binyamin as “my son” and adds, “for his brother died” and “he alone remains” (42:38). He did not provide the latter statement a qualifying clause such as, “from his mother,” as if only he counts as his son. (Many have wondered if this was not a manifestation of a streak of obduracy, a characteristic Scripture often associates with Israel’s national make-up, a trait that required mastery over.)

Under the pressure of the severe famine and depleted provisions Yaaqob eventually asks his sons to return to Egypt for more food, ignoring the stipulation regarding Binyamin. Yehudah vigorously tries to compel him to face reality but Yaaqob reverts to recriminations, “why did you cause ill to me by telling the man that you have another brother?” (43:6).

Finally, arguing that if Yaaqob does not agree they all will die, Yehudah makes a proposal. He will personally guarantee Binyamin’s return. He makes a solemn pledge that if he does not bring him back he will consider himself a sinner to his father all the days of his life. This means that in such an eventuality he will live day-in and day-out with the consciousness of the burden of guilt. This is a levelheaded commitment that appears to derive from acknowledgment of the inviolable bond between Yaaqob and Binyamin – of course, associated with the Yaaqob-Rahel connection. It articulates the understanding that not doing everything in his power, at all times, to assure that Binyamin returns safely would be iniquitous beyond measure.

Thus, Yehudah exhibits a degree of maturity and devotion to his father’s decisions that we have not hitherto seen any sign of. Although not complete, as

there still is the unresolved issue of the selling of Yosef, and perhaps not yet fully conscious, this new-found maturity necessarily incorporates a measure of contrition for his – and, as their leader, his brothers’ – treatment of Yosef. This is tangible progress. Yaaqob is convinced by Yehudah’s sincerity and finally consents to allowing Binyamin to go.

The intense focus on the necessity to send Binyamin overshadowed a lingering concern that undoubtedly was on everyone’s mind, namely, what was the explanation of the silver that had been returned in the packs of all the brothers. When it was discovered upon their return from Egypt it had caused great consternation to the family, but had not been mentioned since. Were they suspected in Egypt of being thieves? Yaaqob now alludes to this problem in his instructions for the return visit.

3. Preparing to Return: Subtle Signs

Yaaqob instructs his sons to prepare a *minḥa* (tributary-like gift) for the viceroy. He selects six highly desirable items that happen to include the three that were being transported by the caravan that took Yosef to Egypt (37:25), נְכֹאֵת וַצָּרִי וְלֶט, – “gum, balm and labdanum” (resins for perfumes, cosmetics and medicines). The other three were honey, pistachios and almonds (all choice items). Since the brothers had dealt with the caravan, they could not but have known what it was carrying. The fact that the text had then mentioned them implies that it had become known information. Now, they will have to travel in the trail of that caravan with those reminders of their transgression and they will deliver them to Yosef! G-d’s guidance is at work in multiple, subtle ways, gently stoking the consciences of the sinners while having them, albeit unwittingly, present an appropriate tribute offering to Yosef, symbolically recalling and apologizing for their transgression while setting the stage for reconciliation.

Additionally, Yaaqob tells his sons, “take double silver (וְכֶסֶף מִשְׁנָה) in your hands plus the silver returned in your packs” (43:12). Why more than double? It does not appear Ibn Ezra is correct in translating וְכֶסֶף מִשְׁנָה as merely “a second silver,” especially as in verse 15 the term for the “double silver” they took was כֶּסֶף מִשְׁנָה, which appears to be another way to say וְכֶסֶף מִשְׁנָה. It also does not appear that Yaaqob’s intention was that they should take

three times the standard amount in case the price has doubled, as Rashi, following the Midrash, suggests, for they only take a total of double the original amount (v. 15 and vv. 21-22).

That the sons took only “double silver” with them (v. 15) indicates that they understood their father’s instructions (v. 12) contained imprecise syntax. After instructing them to take double silver, he interpreted himself with the immediately following phrase of “the silver returned in your packs,” although it sounded like “plus.” Of course in verbal discourse such imprecision, uttering ambiguous and grammatically incorrect phrases, is a frequent occurrence, as people speak spontaneously and may clarify and modify their intention at any point. However, that the Torah recorded his words as it did, seemingly referring to more silver than was called for, double plus the original, requires an explanation.

This may be another sign that a providential thrust is manifesting itself in many ways without the awareness of the protagonists. The Torah may be pointing to the connotation in Yaaqob’s words as touching on the sensitive matter of the silver the brothers had received as payment for selling Yosef. They are now coming to the realization that that sale was their undoing. In their father’s words to them they hear a hint that it would be proper for them to return it, to undo the effects of that sale. They wish they could return that silver!

The silver they received for the sale of Yosef clearly represents their sin. Eventually, silver comes to haunt and test them. They are constantly fearful because their silver was returned. They try to return it but cannot. There is no superficial solution to their predicament. The silver goblet becomes their problem. Finally, after reconciliation, Yosef gives Binyamin a gift of three hundred silver weights and none to them.

They received twenty silver weights for selling their brother in the first attestation of the word “*keseḥ*” in the Yosef narrative (37:28). The word “*keseḥ*” is not again attested until Yosef instructs his steward to return their silver to their bags (42:25), at which point it becomes a prominent word. The final deployment of “*keseḥ*” in the saga is when Yosef gives a gift of three hundred silver to Binyamin and no silver to the brothers, denying them a share in what they had sinned with (45:22), which concludes their “silver”

retribution. There are exactly twenty attestations of the word “*keseḥ*” in the retributive phase of the narrative beginning with verse 42:25**, corresponding to that single other, early, attestation of “*keseḥ*” in the Yosef story, the “twenty *keseḥ*” associated with their transgression (37:28).

In instructing his sons to return the silver of the first grain purchase, Yaaqob says אולי מִשְׁעָה הוּא (‘‘perhaps it was an error,’’ 43:12). But it definitely is silver that should not normally be in his sons’ possession. If it was not an error but purposefully returned, it might imply that someone was trying to frame them and the situation is much worse! Yaaqob may mean, perhaps it was only an error and nothing more.

Yaaqob concludes with a prayer that G-d should grant them mercy before the man and (presumably “the man,” should) “send to you אֶת אֲחֵיכֶם אֲחֵר וְאֶת בְּנֵימִן וְאֶת אֲחֵיכֶם אֲחֵר וְאֶת בְּנֵימִן” (“your other brother and Binyamin”). This is a strange locution. Unexplainably, Shimon is not explicitly mentioned but only alluded to. “Other brother” could also carry the meaning of the missing Yosef. Due to the peculiarity of the syntax, the subject of the “sending” could technically be construed as G-d. Here, we may again suspect that the dialogue is so recorded to call the reader’s attention to a possible underlying interpretation not consciously intended by Yaaqob. It may be another signal that Providence is at work (cf. Ber. Rabbah, 92:3). Alternatively, it may be that after all that transpired, through their guilty consciences gnawing away at them, the brothers are hearing hints regarding their long-missing brother, whom they now hope, without daring to articulate the thought, will somehow turn up.

Endnotes

*At a time not long after his proposal, four sons are attributed to Reuben (Gen. 46:9). Possibly the last two were not yet born. Alternatively, it may be that his words should be understood as “two of my sons,” offering to “pay” double – in accordance with certain legal prescriptions for punishment – if he does not succeed in bringing Binyamin back.

** Gen. 42:25, 27, 28, 35, 35; 43:12, 12, 15, 18, 21, 21, 22, 22, 23; 44:1, 2, 2, 8, 8; 45:22.