

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093 718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Miqes Part III Toward the Denouement

1. Preparing For the Frame-Up

The viceroy put the brothers at ease by arranging for them to dine with him, though at a separate table in accordance with Egyptian protocol. "They sat before him, the firstborn in accordance with his birthright, the youngest in accordance with his youth," that is, in age order, "and the men expressed astonishment to each other" (Gen. 43:33). Although the text does not mention how such a seating arrangement came about, it is unlikely that they organized themselves in such a manner on their own. Their standard grouping was apparently according to mothers, as previously implied (37:2), as Yaaqob divided them when meeting Esav, and as they are classified when they are counted. Yosef evidently instructed his steward to assign them seats in this configuration, but to do it as if randomly. The text hints at this, as their astonishment is mentioned after their being seated, apparently referring to it. The neutral syntax probably reflects Yosef's hidden hand behind it. (Subsequently, when the steward checks their bags, he also does it in age order.)

By imposing such a seating arrangement on eleven brothers, all of whom except Binyamin were born in the same seven year period from four different mothers, and most of whom were virtually the same age as some of the others, they were placed in a state of bewilderment. They were unable to comprehend how it came about. This situation transmitted a message to them, that private matters could somehow be revealed. But more important, the seating arrangement struck a blow for family unity; it emphasized the fact that they were all sons of the same father. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, all the brothers were being viewed as part of a single whole, in contrast to their cliques. In his youth, Yosef had been a victim of the snobbishness of Leah's sons

who had relegated him to an inferior status, to be associated with the sons of the handmaidens. The latter had apparently even treated him as secondary to them (37:2). That demeaning conduct may have been connected to the negative reports about his brothers that he brought to their father, which strained his relationship with them from early on.

The former espionage suspects were treated to a regal meal. The viceroy manifested a most cordial disposition toward them and expressed especially warm feelings toward Binyamin, sending more delights to him than to the others. They might have thought that it was his way of apologizing for the enormous trouble he caused them and for insisting that Binyamin leave his father to come to Egypt. "They drank and got drunk with him" (v. 34), feeling comfortable and in high spirits and could not but have observed the viceroy's silver goblet from which he drank.

All the while Yosef was focusing on the next step of his stratagem, to frame Binyamin with a charge of theft and feign great disappointment in the brothers' ungrateful behavior. He was preparing the way for his steward to find his "missing" goblet with Binyamin and be able to say, "Why did you repay evil for good, is this not that from which my master drinks and uses for divining?" (44: 4-5).

In the ancient Near East a method of divining – נְחֻשׁ – involved the interpretation of patterns that were perceived on the surface of certain liquids when drops of one liquid were poured on another of different density or those that formed in the dregs. In this manner, specialists in the art supposedly could foretell the future or reveal secret matters. This was later prohibited in the Torah together with many other practices that have idolatrous connections: לֹא תִנְחָשׁוּ

(Lev. 19:26); לא ימצא בך... מעוֹנֵן וּמְנַחֵשׁ וּמְכַשֵּׁף (Deut. 18:10).

Yosef, continuing the heritage of the patriarchs, was a believer in the one G-d. He had received prophetic messages from Him and he advocated belief in His supreme authority to reveal the future (Gen. 40:8, 41:16). He is never depicted as actually practicing *nihush*.

In this instance he feigned mastery of it so that the steward's words would convey several messages to the brothers to advance his purpose. They should know that the worth of the goblet to him is beyond its silver value since he uses it for divining, and stealing it is an extremely grave offense. In addition, they should take into account the possibility that the viceroy could uncover their supposedly secret acts, as he is a diviner. With these statements that the steward would say to them Yosef intended to stir their conscience. He wanted them to relate their current situation to their secret concerning selling of their brother. Shortly afterwards he personally transmitted that message in an expanded form as he reprimanded them: "What is this deed that you (plural) have committed, do you not realize that a man such as I can divine things?" (44:15).

We may further conjecture that Yosef, appearing as belonging to a foreign culture, presented himself as one who employed *nihush* as the vehicle for receiving messages that revealed hidden matters as a substitute for dreams. His purpose may have been to prompt his brothers to recall the dreams their visionary brother had dreamt concerning them. They should consider the possibility that those dreams were legitimate prophecies from G-d and they were guilty for dismissing them, for rejecting the dreamer and of course for their contemptible transgression of selling him.

At some point after the meal, apparently after the brothers had retired for the night, Yosef had his staff go to work. They loaded the brothers' donkeys with food to the maximum extent possible, returned their silver to "the mouths of their packs," where it will quickly be discovered during the forthcoming search, and planted the silver goblet in Binyamin's pack along with his silver. At daybreak they were sent off. Yosef gave them time to exit the city and begin their journey

home, surely feeling elated about the turn of events. He then had his steward pursue them and accuse them of stealing the goblet, the vessel his master uses for divining.

The tension is palpable as the action proceeds to the final steps of the test.

2. Caught in Yosef's Web

The steward searched all their sacks, beginning with the eldest and concluding with the youngest, surely again causing them to wonder how could he have known. But they now had more serious concerns on their minds. Undoubtedly, the search uncovered each brother's recently returned bag of silver as well as their other bag of silver, that which had been returned to them on their first trip, which they had brought back to correct the error, but were unable to do so. The steward passed over all this silver in silence as does the narrative, reflecting the intense focus on the goblet and the goblet alone, but the brothers must have been panic-stricken. When they had discovered the returned silver of their first trip, the effect on them was terrifying (42:28,35-36). Now, not only was their defense that they had brought back the silver to correct the error possibly irrelevant but this time they were departing with a double portion of extra silver, and who knows what that might portend!

With all the silver mysteriously coming to them – silver not rightfully theirs and which they had been unable to return – they also could not help but be reminded of the twenty silver pieces that they had received for the sale of Yosef. That wrongdoing was already weighing heavily on them (42:21-22) and the silver of that payment represented it. Would that they could undo that transaction and not have the silver!

Finally, the silver goblet was found in Binyamin's sack! From this low point forward, the brothers seriously begin proving to Yosef their contrition as well as their commitment to family unity. The latter includes their acceptance of Yaaqob's selection of Raḥel and her children for preeminence.

Before the search, the steward had rejected their statement of collective guilt and declared all to be innocent and free to leave except the one in whose pack the goblet might be found (44:10). Now, with

Binyamin apprehended, what were their options? They were powerless to help Binyamin against the mighty government that had its evidence against him. Secretly, they must have also been concerned about their own welfare, considering all the unexplained silver in their possession, the viceroy's personal disappointment in them after having treated them so well and perhaps also worried about the espionage accusation that might be reintroduced. They felt themselves caught in an inexplicable web of occurrences from which they could not extricate themselves. It was a situation that required them to search their consciences for what could have caused G-d to bring such a predicament upon them.

By having their silver secretly returned to them Yosef deepened the test by increasing their incentive to continue home (and abandon Binyamin). Their families were in dire need of provisions. They might have been thought justified in returning home while the window of opportunity to leave was open. Although that would mean leaving Binyamin behind to an unpredictable fate, they did nothing wrong and their consciences would be clear regarding their present behavior. True, it would be difficult to face their father, but, after all, they did it once before when they were guilty, whereas now they were innocent, victims of circumstances beyond their control.

The return of their silver the first time, besides stirring their consciences, had also created disincentive for them to return to Egypt; the fear of being seen as thieves on top of the espionage accusation more truly tested their resolve to redeem Shimon. It had also raised the ante in what was needed to persuade their father to allow Binyamin to accompany them. Yosef knew someone would have to make a prodigious commitment to accomplish that. But the famine was severe and it demanded a measure of realism even from Yaaqob, a consideration that Yosef understood must have played a role in his agreement to send Binyamin.

Now, only genuine concern for Yaaqob's situation, which included his preference for Raḥel and her sons, could impel them to remain in Egypt and try to do something for Binyamin. Such a disposition would also imply repentance for what they did to their brother long ago.

3. Facing the Charges

The brothers rend their garments, return to the city, come to Yosef's home and prostrate themselves before him. The narrative singles out Yehudah – וְיְהוּדָה וְאֶחָיו (“Yehudah and his brothers come,” 44:14), employing the singular of the verb – as he had assumed family leadership. It was him the brothers had listened to in selling Yosef, as stated וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת־יְוֹסֵף (37:27), it was upon his guarantee that Yaaqob relied in sending Binyamin and he would now take the lead in dealing with this crisis.*

It was a most positive sign that the brothers refused to abandon Binyamin and returned to the city instead of continuing home, but it still was not the precise and definitive proof Yosef was seeking.

Although only Binyamin was deemed guilty, Yosef surprisingly reprimanded his brothers collectively, “What is this deed that you (plural) have committed, do you not realize that a man such as I can divine things?” (44:15). He capitalized on an opportunity to stir their consciences, to think about their own past culpability, while implying that actions even performed in secret are subject to being discovered.

Yehudah responds for all. He admits that they had no justification for their behavior and recognizes that G-d had discovered their (collective) sin. All deserved to be slaves to the viceroy. Knowing that they were innocent of the current accusation but could do nothing about it, from his point-of-view and that of his beleaguered brothers, his statement has another meaning. It is a confession regarding what he thinks only he and the co-conspirators in the sale of Yosef understand, namely, the sin of that deed. On behalf of all, he finally officially acknowledges it as the ultimate cause for their present predicament. He accepts the validity of punishment, that they will all be slaves, a fitting punishment since they sold their brother into slavery.

Declaring their acceptance of slavery for their punishment was not a mere superficial expression, an opening statement tacitly understood by all to be nothing more than protocol, an exaggerated formality. It is not similar to Ephron's opening offer to give Abraham the field containing *me'arat hamakhpela* as a gift, as some have maintained. For all they knew

their confession might convince the viceroy that all the brothers conspired to steal the goblet; it may be viewed as a confession often is, as a plea for merciful treatment. In confessions, it is axiomatic that every word is carefully weighed.

How could they offer themselves as slaves, considering their responsibility to their father and families? This proposition reflects a characteristic of genuine penitents. When a sincere individual realizes his culpability for a heinous crime, especially when he recognizes that what he deserves as retribution is being presented to him, in his contrition he concentrates on his reduced spiritual condition and personal requirements for repair. At that moment it is of no concern how burdensome the consequences as he is focused on an issue of cosmic importance to the exclusion of other considerations. Afterwards, he addresses his other responsibilities. In this case, Yehudah realized the appropriateness of the retribution that was at hand and felt compelled to accept it.

But on the providential plane, this “measure for measure” punishment leaves an opening for Binyamin’s freedom, since he was not involved in the sale of Yosef. Although Yehudah included all the brothers with the “already-proven-guilty” Binyamin as deserving of slavery, he undoubtedly was poised to request special consideration to allow Binyamin to return home, to fulfill his pledge to his father. Divine justice would be on the innocent Binyamin’s side.

Yosef fully comprehends the deeper significance of what was being said. The declaration of deserving slavery was an impressive demonstration of contrition for the act of selling their brother into slavery. However, it did not prove their commitment to their father’s decision of choosing Raḥel’s sons for special status. He now seeks the final, decisive proof on that ultimate issue. Even were they to plead for Binyamin’s freedom – which he surely assumed they

would, given that they knew he was innocent of the crime they believe they were being Divinely punished for – it would not prove the point, for they lose nothing by such pleading. With all the brothers offering themselves as slaves, there was nothing further Yosef could expect them to sacrifice to prove deep feelings of loyalty to their father’s choice.

Consequently, he reconfigures the elements of the case. He eliminates the similarity between the present situation and the brothers’ deserved retribution for their collective transgression and highlights a different feature of congruence. He insists that all the brothers should go in peace to their father and only the one in whose possession the goblet was found is to remain as a slave. They have now been presented with a situation that requires they leave Binyamin behind reminiscent of the previous time when they returned home without a son of Raḥel.

Endnote

* Yehudah, through his progeny, remains in a leadership role well into the future, as does Yosef. Reuben had forfeited firstborn rights from the moment of his impetuous act with Bilhah (35:22; see Yaaqob’s statement, 49:4), which may have represented his crude attempt at establishing leadership, in accordance with ancient Near Eastern symbolism. His inability to implement his good intention to save Yosef (37:22) illustrates that he did not command his brothers’ respect. They sold Yosef when Reuben was not present. When he returned to the pit and bemoaned Yosef’s absence (v. 30), the text is silent about whether they informed him. Indeed, they may never have told him about it. When in the three-day detention he recalled the sin committed with Yosef he appears not to know about it (42:22). His attempt at persuading Yaaqob to send Binyamin (v. 37) was pathetic.

©2007 Sephardic Institute