

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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## Parashat Vayhi Part II On Genesis 50

### 1. On Guilt

Upon their return from Jacob's burial, "Joseph's brothers saw that their father had died" and verbalize their fears: "Joseph may be spiteful to us and repay us for all the evil we did to him!" (Gen. 50:15). They were concerned that it might have been their father's presence that shielded them from their brother's wrath during the many years since reunification and now he would take revenge on them. These unresolved fears had obviously lurked beneath the surface all these years; with the mourning period over, they now surfaced.

At first sight, their trepidation appears irrational. True, accounts of long-delayed acts of revenge abound as well as cases of grudges that are carried for a lifetime. And waiting for the death of a father before acting (Esau's statement of Gen. 27:41 comes to mind) is not unusual. But this case is very different.

Thirty-nine years had passed since they sold Joseph, seventeen years since they were reunited. Joseph had tested them at that time with the most trying measures and found them fully repentant. He was genuinely brought to tears, embraced them with sincerity and clearly was elated at the positive outcome. He exhibited keen interest in the family's unity and well-being and wholeheartedly assured them that he harbored no grudge. He urged them to focus on the favorable outcome G-d brought about and forget their iniquitous role in what transpired, to consider themselves facilitators toward a beneficial end. He amply provided for them and their families from the moment they arrived in Egypt. The Torah account of the mature Joseph depicts an individual of the highest moral and religious caliber, a person of sterling

character, one who can be fully trusted. Surely taking revenge would be a violation of his principles; it would also dishonor his father's memory and scandalize his family in the eyes of Egypt.

Did the brothers not realize that their contrite disposition was clearly manifest to Joseph? Did they not realize he had been testing them? No other explanation of his actions – particularly his stubborn insistence that they bring Benjamin, knowing it was causing his father additional suffering, and then accusing him of stealing the goblet – would have made sense. Is it that they cannot believe he truly forgave them, judging him by the standards they assumed most people live by? Is it their acknowledgment of how vile their behavior was, considering it unforgivable? In any event, they could not recognize their brother's nobility, could not appreciate his superlative qualities or believe his profuse, good faith assurances. Instead they impute to him the possibility of base motives; thus they fear reprisal. It is a profound commentary on guilt and the potent aftereffects of sin that lurk in the depths of the sensitive human psyche.

At that point the brothers sent representatives to Joseph (unwilling to risk bringing up the subject themselves), saying, "Your father commanded before his death, saying, 'thus say to Joseph: Please forgive the offense of your brothers and their sin, for they have done evil to you'" (Gen. 50:16-17a). Attached to this message was their personal request for forgiveness. They included a religious appeal, speaking of themselves as עֲבָדַי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ, "the servants of the G-d of your father," thus reminding him of the family spiritual heritage that they were all committed to. This is the first time we are informed of the

brothers specifically requesting Joseph's forgiveness; previously, he extended it freely and they were passive recipients. But Joseph now learns that neither at the time of reunion, nor through the intervening years, had there been catharsis and closure.

Joseph weeps as the intermediaries speak to him. He had not the slightest intention of revenge and had considered the subject closed from seventeen years before. He must have felt sorrow and pity for his brothers and disappointment in their not having trusted him. (We learn, together with Joseph, how difficult it is for a victim to convincingly transmit a feeling of full forgiveness to penitents who had caused him serious harm.)

The brothers had been watchfully waiting in the background. As they discover Joseph is emotionally moved, they come forward, prostrate themselves before him and declare themselves prepared to be his slaves (v. 18).

## 2. Did They Fabricate?

Did Jacob leave instructions to communicate the message they sent to Joseph? Some commentators assume that would have been highly unlikely, for had he wanted Joseph to extend an extra measure of forgiveness he would have requested it himself rather than arrange a posthumous behest. Some commentators assert that Jacob never discovered that the brothers kidnapped and sold Joseph (a topic we will discuss shortly) so the brothers necessarily were dissembling.

By themselves, these explanations are insufficient. It is very possible that Jacob did discover that the brothers sold Joseph but had decided to leave final reconciliation up to the principals themselves. He may have felt that had he intervened during his lifetime to impose a solution it would have been superficial or temporary. It is more likely, however, that he would have been convinced by Joseph's compelling test of the brothers that they had fully repented and would have trusted that his forgiveness of them was sincere and permanent. Joseph's brotherly comportment through the years would have reinforced his position. Hence, he would not have felt a need to speak to Joseph about it through the years.

But close to death people often respond to emotional entreaties and make special requests of their children. It is possible to conceive of a scenario that shortly before Jacob's death his sons made a heart-rending appeal for his intervention to which he acquiesced. He might have instructed them to request forgiveness from Joseph and to command him in his name that he forgive them, a plan that the brothers were not able to carry out before his death.

However, a careful reading of the two relevant verses (15-16) indicates that the brothers did, indeed, fabricate the story of their father's instructions. The first of these verses – several months after Jacob's passing away, when activities related to his death were concluded – begins with *וַיִּרְאוּ אֶחָיו יוֹסֵף כִּי מֵת אָבִיהֶם* (“Now Joseph's brothers saw that their father had died”). It describes decisive psychological developments that occurred within the brothers, they “saw” that their father was now dead, meaning they realized things were now different without him. Prompted by that realization, the verse continues, “and they said, Joseph may be spiteful to us and repay us for all the evil we did to him!” This smoothly segues into the following verse, *וַיִּצְווּ אֵל יוֹסֵף*, relating that they sent their representatives to Joseph. This linkage informs us that the idea of conveying a request in their father's name was concocted after his death in response to their fears described in the previous verse. Had Jacob truly left such instructions they would have been bound to transmit them regardless of these considerations.

In other words, their fright overwhelmed them to such an extent that they resorted to a lie to pressure Joseph to forgive them.\* Indeed, the brothers' apprehension was so great that Joseph sensed it was not enough merely to deny any hostile intentions toward them. He went to great lengths relieving, consoling and persuading them (vv. 19-21).

## 3. Did Jacob Know?

Did Jacob ever discover that his sons were responsible for Joseph's disappearance? The Torah does not explicitly comment on this. Some have adduced evidence from his sons' fabrication of the message in his name that they knew that he knew, or at least assumed that to be the case; otherwise, they would

have been risking getting caught by Joseph in a lie. This is not a convincing explanation. They could have thought that Joseph would assume that they confessed to their father before he passed away. After all, his purported instructions were supposedly conveyed shortly before his death when it was impractical for him to speak directly to Joseph.

Some commentators assume Jacob never discovered what the brothers did, for had he known, he would surely have condemned their act in his final testament, just as he did Reuben's moral lapse with Bilhah and Simeon and Levi's violent behavior at Shechem.

However, it is difficult to imagine how Jacob would not have found out. What would Joseph have told him regarding the circumstances of his disappearance and the bloody *ketonet passim*? How would he have explained not sending a message for many years to inform his father that he was alive and well, despite his having long been the viceroy of Egypt? How would he have explained the harsh treatment he gave his brothers – the spy accusation, placing Simeon in detention, insisting on their bringing Benjamin – and the extra suffering he undoubtedly knew he was causing his father? It is implausible to assume that Jacob never discovered that the man who gave the brothers a hard time, whom they described as “the lord of the land” (42:30, 33), was Joseph. Surely he would have put two and two together.

In the passage concerning Joseph in Jacob's final testament, it appears that the patriarch did allude to his other sons' maltreatment of their brother. He stated: וַיִּמְרְרוּהוּ וַרְבוּ וַיִּשְׁטְמֵהוּ בַּעֲלֵי הַצִּיִּים וַתִּשָּׁב בְּאַיְתוֹ קִשְׁתּוֹ (“They dealt bitterly with him, they shot at him, they hated him, the archers, yet his bow remained firm” [49:23-24]). Commentators have pointed out that a message spoken in the prophetic mode such as this could theoretically apply to the future Ephraim, the mighty tribe descended from Joseph. But the metaphors and diction do not appear to refer to enemies of the tribe as there is no relevant scriptural reflection of circumstances that fit the verse. The most straightforward explanation is that these terms and phrases are directed, in the first instance, to Joseph and his brothers. Potiphar's wife cannot be the subject of these verbs since they are in the plural and reflect a prolonged duration of enmity while her hostility

toward Joseph was her private matter and was a one-time event.

Jacob's following words, attributing Joseph's success in withstanding the hatred and hostility toward him to G-d having been with him, reinforce understanding these clauses as referring, in the first instance, to Joseph.

If Jacob discovered the brothers' transgression why did he not include an explicit reprimand in his final testament as he did for Reuben's impetuosity and Simeon and Levi's anger? There are critical differences. Reuben, although undoubtedly personally regretful for his failing, may still have aspired to the rank and rights of the firstborn. Moreover, children often revive such claims in future times. Many commentators have understood Dathan and Abiram's ambition for political leadership, which drove them to join Korah's rebellion against Moses (Num. 16), as linked to their having descended from the “firstborn” tribe of Reuben. Jacob wanted to emphatically explain, for present and future generations, why that status was not to be the case.

Simeon and Levi were possibly still unrepentant for their behavior at Shechem. At the time, Jacob mildly censured them, from the practical perspective of security (34:30), but they rejected his censure on that occasion by getting the last word in anyway. In his testament, Jacob recognizes the evil and danger in their wrath. Evidently, anger was still deemed to be a major failing of theirs and Jacob chose to denounce it, expressing the need for these two brothers to be separated and scattered throughout the future nation.

Concerning the brothers' behavior toward Joseph, however, they surely are presumed to have fully repented, as they convincingly proved through passing Joseph's formidable test of them. The occasion of Jacob's testament, just prior to his death, was a time at which he stressed national unity and future potential. It would not only have been irrelevant but counterproductive to criticize almost all his sons by dredging up old animosities and jealousies that had presumably been resolved many years before.

In his praise of Joseph, however, making reference to his brothers' treatment of him was a different matter.

Jacob was engaged in a prophetic vision with implications for blessing. In such a setting, it would have been inappropriate to deny Joseph the benefit that a focus on his extraordinary qualities in preserving family unity and acknowledgement of G-d's intervention on his behalf would foster. Accordingly, Jacob obliquely referred to the tremendous troubles the brothers had caused him, which point to Joseph's qualities and which the brothers could now look at as history, to serve as a cautionary reminder for the future.

Why did the narrative not provide any explicit statement regarding Jacob's discovering what had happened to Joseph? Perhaps, as the brothers were fully transformed and merited being part of the future nation, indeed, comprising its rank and file, it was unbecoming to dwell openly on their sin. Similarly, the Torah refrained from explicitly mentioning Esau's hostile designs toward Jacob when he was traveling toward him with four hundred men (32:6). Since he renounced those intentions, they are best minimized.

As we pointed out in our *Parashat Vayeshev Part I* study, such a motive may explain why the Torah did not mention in context Joseph's brothers hearing and ignoring his pleas when they cast him into the pit (37:24). This information is only gleaned from the brothers' self-recriminations while in detention in Egypt, when they began to sense their guilt (42:21). Since they eventually repented, it is best not to portray their merciless behavior to its fullness by dwelling on all the brutal details of their act in the context of its performance.

### **Endnote**

\* In commenting on this verse, the sages recognized that the brothers were untruthful in this matter. They fixed it as a "proof-text" – an *asmakhta* (a type of mnemonic device) – for a principle they wished to establish: "It is permitted to "modify" one's words for the sake of peace" (*b. Yebam. 65b*). For another application of this maxim see our *Parashat Vayera Part I* study.