

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

VAYIGASH 5785

In the Yosef narrative, one of the most climactic and deeply emotional scenes is the moment the brothers reveal to their father, Yaakov, that Yosef is alive. "And they told him, 'Yosef is still alive, and that he is ruler over the entire land of Egypt...' (45:26). The Ohr HaChayim (45:26, s.v. VAYAGEID) observes that by relating such news, they were opening themselves up to a thoroughly disgraceful confrontation with their father. Yaakov certainly remembered the brothers having showed him Yosef's ripped garment of many colors, and traumatically concluded that "An evil beast devoured him. Yosef has surely been torn to bits" (37:32-33). If the brothers had reported that Yosef was killed, how then does he mysteriously reappear in Egypt and rise no less to the august status of viceroy over the entire land?

The above, of course, begs the question whether Yaakov ever knew of his sons' complicity in the tragic events that transpired after Yosef met his brothers in Dotan? (37:18-28). From the "blessing" of Yaakov to Shimon and Levi where, according to Rashi, there was a clear allusion to their central role in Yosef's sale (49:7, s.v. U'VIRTZONAM), to his blessing of Yosef when he states: "And they

embittered him and were numerous and the archers were hostile to him" (49:23, see Rashi, s.v. VAYEMARARU), to the brothers plaintively appealing to Yosef after Yaakov's death, claiming that their father had commanded them to tell him: "Please forgive the spiteful deed of your brothers and their sin for they have done you evil..." (50:17) - all of these references clearly suggest that Yaakov was quite aware of what happened to Yosef.

If, then, Rashi and the Ohr HaChayim were of the view that Yaakov indeed did know, Ramban contends otherwise (45:27, s.v. VAYDABRU). He argues that the brothers were fearful that with the discovery of their dreadful behavior, Yaakov would curse them mercilessly. Moreover, Ramban asserts that if Yaakov deemed proper that Yosef should forgive his brothers, why wouldn't he have told his sons directly to do so prior his death? That he did not, suggests that he truly knew nothing, and what the brothers said in 50:21 was a lie to elicit Yosef's clemency. Other sources would seem to support Ramban. In the Midrash (Pesikta Rabati 3:10, Da'at Zekeinim), Chazal point out that a messenger had to tell Yosef (48:1), "Behold, your father is ill." Apparently, Yosef was unaware of his father's illness. Why? Because he purposely refrained from visiting too often, fearing that while alone,

Yaakov would ask probing questions about his kidnapping, forcing him to tell his father what had actually happened. Moreover, Sefer Chasidim (Brit Olam 575) states that all the brothers, including Yosef, Yitzchak, and even HaShem Himself, were foresworn, on pain of cherem, from divulging the truth.

Many contemporary commentators have argued in favor of one position or the other, each pointing out flaws or discrepancies in their opponents' proofs. Let us try to suggest an approach which attempts to do justice to both views. Our point of departure will be to frame our solution with Rav Soloveitchik's understanding of the well-known Chazal (Tanchuma, Lech L'cha 9), quoted by Ramban (B'reishit 12:6, s.v. VAYA'AVOR) that "Jewish history is predetermined by the activities of the patriarchs - MAASEH AVOT... As the Rav proceeds to explain: this "symbolic etiology into Jewish history" does not preclude the exercise of man's free will, one of Judaism's central ethical principles. While HaShem has a master plan as to how Jewish - and world history - will eventually - eschatologically - play out, the decision as to how mankind will arrive at that destination is a function of each person's own choices. The general symbolic patterns may well have been foreshadowed by our Avot; however, how

we choose to interpret and implement these signs is for us to determine. The path from point A to point B may be a smooth direct one, or it can be strewn with all sorts of obstacles and challenges - the ups and downs of failures and defeats, successes and triumphs - the reaction to each, a function of our individual choices, but, in any event, one way or another, point B will be realized, prefigured in broad strokes by the events in B'reishit, for that is HaShem's ultimate will! Moreover, even in B'reishit itself, episodes in the early stories of Avraham are also elusively predictive of future happenings in the lives of his immediate descendants.

With this perspective, let's return to our original question: Did or did not Yaakov ever discover the facts of Yosef's fate after they parted from one another? The prophetic vision to Avraham foretelling "that your offspring shall be sojourners in a land not their own", there to be enslaved and then ultimately redeemed (B'reishit 15:13-14) - that vague prophecy had been transmitted to Yitzchak and Yaakov, both never quite knowing exactly how, when or where the vision would come to pass. When Yaakov was told by his sons the shocking news that Yosef obviously had been killed by a beast, Yaakov was devastated, but refused to accept the tragic news. What now to

make of the Abrahamic vision, what about Yosef's prophetic dreams, what of the future of his family as promised by Gd? And so, for 22 years, dark clouds of painful doubt and numbing confusion shadow Yaakov, his RUACH HAKODESH (spirit of prophecy) departs, and he mourns, "And I will go down to the grave grieving over my son" (37:35).

When, 22 years later, Yaakov hears the startling news from his sons that Yosef is alive and rules over Egypt (45:26), he is utterly dumfounded. Initially, he simply cannot believe what he hears. But even as the wagons manage to convince him that his son lives, suddenly, Yaakov also begins to "connect the dots" and somehow pieces things together: the bloody tunic, the cruel deception of his sons, the famine, the revelation of Yosef alive and elevation to power, and the impending descent to Egypt. Much like the brothers' immediate grasp of it all, upon hearing Yosef cry out: "I am Yosef..." (45:3), Yaakov, as well, experiences a similar flash of recognition. As Chazal state: "The Immanent Presence of Gd that had previously left him 22 years earlier, had now once again rested upon him." Although perhaps not completely clear as to all the details of the past event, this much Yaakov now realizes: that the bitter rivalry, the animosity and jealousy among the brothers, precipitated a terrible unthinkable crime.

How though should he react? Of course, he could have grilled his sons, demanding to know exactly what happened. He could have, as their father, justifiably rebuked them harshly, remonstrated with them and made them feel intensely guilty. But it would appear Yaakov said not a word. Why? Possibly for two very important and different reasons.

The first, as insightfully explained by the Ohr HaChayim (45:8, s.v. V'ATA): "The only argument that would reconcile Yaakov and his sons with what had happened was that it had become evident that Gd's plan had been executed step by step. There was no point in second-guessing why and how Gd had brought all this about. Chazal (B'reshit Rabba 86:1) have already said that Yaakov had originally been meant to descend to Egypt in chains, but that the sale of Yosef enabled him to arrive in Egypt in style, i.e., riding in Par'o's chariot." Indeed, "the brothers had merely been Gd's agents, though they did not realize it at the time." As Yosef later similarly attempts to console his brothers: "But now, do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that Gd sent me before you" (45:5). Could it be that with Yaakov's astute perspicacity, born of wisdom and experience, he now perceived the beginnings of the fulfillment of HaShem's enigmatic prophecy to

Avraham generations earlier? If so then, it was "all for the best". Why then to rage against his sons?

But there is a second possible reason for Yaakov's reticence. It certainly had to be clear that his sons were deeply remorseful for their delinquency. These feelings of shame and regret come across - subtly and not so subtly - in the text in many places, especially, and most poignantly, in Yehuda's passionate and imploring appeal to Yosef on behalf of Binyamin (44:18-34). If so, what could be gained by accusing them of their wrongdoing? Indeed, in the wake of such indictments, the blaming among the brothers would begin in earnest, fracturing and perhaps permanently scarring their fraternal bonds. Paramount in Yaakov's mind had to be the overriding and critical importance of family peace and unity, especially as his offspring prepared for an Egyptian exile which would severely try and test their very survival as a future people! While Yaakov's fury and utter disappointment in his sons' behavior would have been perfectly defensible, could such a rather self-serving reaction on his part ever reconcile - and truly be consistent with - his noble attribute of Yisrael, one who can transcend his immediate circumstances and desires, and heroically act with much greater and destiny-filled purpose?

And so, Yaakov says very little. True,

17 years later, in his blessing to his sons prior to his death, he certainly alludes to their misdeed. But, much like Moshe, who waits until his final blessings to the Tribes, and only then chooses only to hint at their many sins in the desert, "to mention them through intimation because of the honor of Israel", so too, Yaakov behaves likewise. The mutual forgiveness and compassion displayed by his sons was enough for a loving father to accord his children the respect and dignity that such repentance deserved. No need to reproach and "put salt on a wound" that had already healed. Indeed, Yaakov must have been so immensely proud of his sons' sincere reconciliation that, as the Torah relates upon the conclusion of Yaakov's blessings of his sons: "...and he blessed them, each according to his blessing, he blessed them" (49:28). Whereupon the Midrash states (B'reishit Rabba 13:8, Tanchuma 16) that Yaakov happily blessed all of his sons with the blessings of each!

There is a powerful dual message in Yaakov's extraordinary reaction to the discovery of what happened to Yosef. In a word, often, the "sounds of silence" are louder and more precious than the sounds of speech. By an act of enormous self-restraint, and patient, agonizing "waiting", Yaakov first demonstrated his faith "that [the sale of Yosef] had been part of an overall design [point A to

point B] orchestrated by Gd (Ohr HaChayim ibid), and that we would be well and wise to believe similarly in the Almighty's inscrutable orchestration notwithstanding the many inexplicable hatreds and horrors we are currently experiencing. And second, that by prioritizing his family's harmonious union, Yaakov taught us all why the supreme value of shalom must transcend and trump any and all desire for vengeful recrimination or, Gd-forbid, worse.

If these two essential lessons were ultimately responsible for our redemption from Egyptian, may they be our salvation as well! 🙏