

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XI: Vayigash (Gen. 44:18–47:27)

Essay 3. The recognition of Joseph

מדרש "ויאמר יוסף אל־אָחיו אָנִי יוסף העוד אָבִי נִכְוֵה" "כִּי נִבְהָלוּ" נִכְוֵה. אוֹי לָנוּ מִיּוֹם הַדִּין אוֹי לָנוּ מִיּוֹם הַתּוֹכְחָה, יוֹסֵף קִטְּנָן שֶׁל שְׁבָטִים "לֹא־יִכְלוּ אָחִיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנֵיו", לְכַשְׁבֵּא הַקֶּב"ה וְיִזְכִּיחַ פֶּלֶא אֶחָד וְאֶחָד לְפִי מַעֲשָׂיו עַל אַחַת כַּמָּה וְכַמָּה עֵבֶל.

There is a **Midrash**:

“Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers could not answer him, **so dumbfounded were they** on account of him.”¹ **Woe unto us, from the day of judgment. Woe unto us, from the day of the rebuke.** Balaam was the wisest of the gentiles, yet he couldn’t withstand his donkey’s rebuke. **Joseph was the youngest of the tribes, [but] “his brothers could not answer him, so dumbfounded were they on account of him.”** How much more so when the Holy One, Blessed be He, will come and rebuke each and every one according to his actions.

- Gen Rabbah 93:10

צָרִיד עֵינֵינוּ מֵהַ צוֹרֵר לְרֵאשִׁית נְכִי אִם לֹא הִיָּה מַעֲשֵׂה זֶה שֶׁל יוֹסֵף וְאָחִיו בְּעוֹלָם לֹא הִיָּינוּ אוֹמְרִים מִסְּבָרָא אוֹי לָנוּ כְּשִׁבְאָה הַקֶּב"ה וְיִזְכִּיחַ פֶּלֶא אֶחָד וְאֶחָד לְפִי מַעֲשָׂיו. וְהִלֵּא הוּא דְבָר פְּשׁוּט שֶׁהַשָּׂקֶל מְחַיִּיבוֹ, וְעַל פְּרֻתָּהּ לומר שֶׁהַמְדַרְשׁ רוֹצֵה לְלַמּוֹד מִפְּסוּק זֶה אִיזוֹ סְבָרָא חֲדָשָׁה.

Question 1: **We need to investigate what need there was for the proof** that the story of Joseph tells us we should worry about G-d punishing us for our sins. **If not for this incident of Joseph and his brothers, wouldn’t we still have said from our reasoning, “Woe unto us, when the Holy One, Blessed be He, will come and rebuke each and every one according to his actions”?** Isn’t this something obvious that is required by the intellect? It is necessary to say that the Midrash wants to learn some new wisdom from this verse.

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¹ Gen. 45:3.

ונעיר תחלה למה לו ליוסף לשאול "העוד אבי חי" תכף שאמר להם "אני יוסף", שנה נראתה כמי שבא להוכיחם על שגורמו צער לאביהם במכירתו, שלא היה לו לחיות. ופירוש זה כתבוהו המפרשים ולא יתכן, דאמא לגחומינהו וצעררינהו, ובתחלת דבריו לא היה לו להוכיחם. ועוד אם כבר אמרו לו "שלום לעבדך לאבינו עודנו חי" וכו', מה היה לו צורך לשאול, וכנאמר לעיל בסמוך. ועוד למה אמר "אבי" ולא אמר "אבינו", כנראה שהסיע עצמו מן האמנה. ובתחלת דבריו היה לו לדבר דברים טובים. ועוד מה תשובה היה להם ליתן שהכתוב נתן הטעם שלא יכלו לענות לפי נבדלו.

Question 2: We will remark first why Joseph asked, "Is my father still alive," immediately upon saying to them, "I am Joseph." He appears as one who comes to rebuke them because they caused grief to their father by selling him, that [Jacob] should not still be alive because of his grief. The commentators wrote this interpretation, but it is not correct. Instead, the case is that he came to comfort them but instead afflicted them; at the beginning of his words he did not mean to rebuke them.

Question 3: Also, as they had already said to him, "It is well with your servant our father; he is still alive,"² why did he need to ask, as it says above in the adjoining essay?³

Question 4: Also, why did he say "my father," and not say "our father," as it appears that he is excluding himself from the brotherhood?

Question 5: At the beginning of his words, he should have said pleasant things, instead of asking, "Is my father still alive."

Question 6: Also, what answer should they have given, for which the Scripture gives the reason that they weren't able to answer because they were dumbfounded?

ויש לומר דאיתא בכתובות (דף כ"ז) מרי בר איסק, איתא ליה אחא מבי חוּזא, אמר ליה: פלוג לי בנכסי דאבא. אמר ליה: לא ידענא לך. איתא לקמיה דרב חסדא. אמר ליה: שפיר קאמר לך, דכתיב: "ויבר יוסף את-אחיו והם לא הפרהו", מלמד שישא בלא חתימת זקן ובא בחתימת זקן. וכתבו התוספות שפיר קאמר לך, זה שבא גולד פאן והלך עם אביו למדינת הים ועמה בשחור ואמר לא ידענא לך מיהזא פשיקרא, כי היה לו לידע אם הוא אחיו אם לאו פיון שמפירו קודם, להכי קאמר רב חסדא דשפיר קאמר ליה שאינו מפירו כדאשכחן ביוסף עכ"ל.

It can be said that it's brought in tractate Ketubot, page 27:

[There was the case of] **Mari bar Isak**, and some say [it was] Chana bar Isak, [where someone claiming to be his] **brother came to him from Bei Choza'a** [a district located far from the Jewish population centers in Babylonia]. [This brother] **said to him: Apportion me [a share] in my father's property.** [Mari] **said to him: I do not know you.** [The brother] **came before Rav Chisda** [seeking a legal remedy]. [Rav Chisda] **said to him: [Your brother] is speaking well** [and his response is well founded], **as it is written:** "For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him."⁴ **This teaches that [Joseph] left [home]**

² Gen. 43:28.

³ Chapter X, Mikeitz, the end of Essay 3.

⁴ Gen. 42:8.

without the semblance of a beard and came [to meet his brothers] with the semblance of a beard.

- Ketubot 27b

The Tosafists wrote to explain Rav Chisda's comment:

“[Your brother] is speaking well.”—The one who came now [from Bei Choza'a] was born here [in Babylon], but [then] went overseas with his father. Now, when he returned and [Mari] said, “I do not recognize you,” it appeared to be a lie [at first glance], for [Mari] should have known whether or not it was his brother, since he knew him beforehand. Therefore, Rav Chisda said that it was proper that he said that he did not recognize him, as we find regarding Joseph. [I.e., by citing Joseph, Rav Chisda was explaining to the returning son that Mari was not necessarily lying, but that just as Joseph's brothers didn't recognize Joseph after 22 years apart, it's possible that Mari truly didn't recognize his brother].

- Tosafot on Ketubot 27b

וְכֵן כִּבְרַת הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ יוֹסֵף שְׂאֵחָיו לֹא הָיוּ מְכִירִים אוֹתוֹ, שְׂכֵמָה פְּעָמִים הָיוּ לְפָנָיו וְלֹא הִכִּירוּהוּ. וְחָשַׁב בְּדַעְתּוֹ שְׂגָם כְּשִׂיאֵמֶר לָהֶם שֶׁהוּא יוֹסֵף לֹא נִאֲמִינוּהוּ, כְּעוֹבְדָא דְמָרִי בַר אִיסָק. וְלָכֵן מָה עָשָׂה, תִּכְרַף שְׂאֵמֶר לָהֶם "אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הַעוֹד אָבִי חַי", כְּלוֹמֵר כְּשִׂאֵנִי אוֹמֵר לָכֶם שְׂאֵנִי יוֹסֵף. יֵשׁ לָכֶם לְהַכִּירָנִי הוּאֵיל שְׂרָאִיתֶם אוֹתִי קוֹדֵם לָכֵן, כְּסִבְרַת הַתּוֹסְפוֹת, וְנִאֲפִילוּ אִם אֵין אַתֶּם מְכִירִים אוֹתִי "הַעוֹד אָבִי חַי", שֶׁהוּא יָבֵא וְיִכְרַנִּי אוֹ מִצַּד הַטְּבַע אוֹ מִצַּד הַרוּחַ הַקּוֹדֵשׁ, וְהָיָה מִמֶּתִין שִׂיאֵמְרוּ לוֹ שְׂעֵתָה דְרָמָו אֲנִפְשִׁיָהוּ הָיוּ מְכִירִים אוֹתוֹ. וְהֶאֱמַת שְׂעֵתָה הִכִּירוּהוּ תִכְרַף וּמִיָּד אָבֵל לֹא יִכְלוּ לַעֲנוֹת כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנֵי הַבוֹשָׁה שֶׁהָיָה לָהֶם שֶׁלֹּא יָדְעוּ לְהַכִּיר אוֹתוֹ בְּתַחֲלָה.

Here, Joseph already knew that his brothers did not recognize him, for they had been before him a few times and did not recognize him. He thought in his mind that even when he told them that he was Joseph they would not believe him, as with the incident of Mari bar Isak. Therefore, what did he do? He said to them without delay, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive,” as if to say that “I say to you that I am Joseph. You can recognize me since you saw me prior to this, per the view of the Tosafists.⁵ Even if you don't recognize me, I ask ‘Is my father still alive,’ for he will come and recognize me, either naturally or through divine inspiration.” This answers question 5, why Joseph didn't begin talking with his brothers by saying pleasant things, but rather immediately asked if his father was still alive. It also answers question 2, that Joseph hadn't mentioned his father in attempt to rebuke his brothers. It also answers question 3, that Jacob's mention of his father wasn't intended as a question, as that would have been redundant, as they had already told him that Jacob still lived, but rather it was intended as a statement that, “My father would recognize me.”

⁵ I.e., from the Gemara, one might have thought that Mari had never met his brother, and perhaps didn't even know that he had a brother. The Tosafists explanation is that he had known his brother long ago, but now didn't recognize him due to his changed appearance.

He was waiting for them to say to him that now that they are careful to look at him closely, they recognize him. The truth is that now they knew him right away, but they could not answer because they were dumbfounded, because of the shame they had for not recognizing him in the first place. This answers question 6, what answer Scripture thought they should have given, had they not been dumbfounded.

ועל זה קאמר המדרש אזי לנו מיום הדין וכו', שלא די שיש לנו לומר אזי לנו מיום הדין מחמת העונש, אלא אף מחמת הבושה שתהיה לנו, שבעולם הזה העבירות אינם דומות בעינינו לעבירות, אמנם ביום הדין כשנפיר בעצמנו העבירות שעשינו כמה נהיה מבוהלים על מה שלא ידענו להפירם בעולם הזה, דומיא למאי דאמרינן רשעים נדמה להם כחוט השערה . . . ובוכים איך לא יכולנו לכבוש וכו'.

For this reason, the Midrash said, “Woe unto us from the day of judgment. Woe unto us, from the day of the rebuke.” I.e., question 1 said that our fear of G-d’s rebuke for our sins was obvious based on our intellect, and asked what the Midrash added. **It was not enough to say “Woe unto us from the day of judgment” because of the punishment, but also because of the shame we will have. For in this world, the transgressions that we have committed are not similar in our eyes to the transgressions that we will recognize in the World-to-Come. But on the day of judgment, when we recognize in ourselves the transgressions that we committed, a few will be dismayed that we failed to know to recognize in this world. This is similar to what was said:**

For the righteous, [the evil inclination] appears to them as a high mountain, and **for the wicked it appears to them as [a mere] strand of hair.** These weep and those weep. The righteous weep and say: How were we able to overcome so high a mountain? **And the wicked weep and say: How were we unable to overcome this strand of hair?**

- Sukkah page 52a

הקא נמי לפי שהיה דיוקנו של יוסף דומה לשל אביו אמר להם "אני יוסף", ואם אין אתם מכירים אותי לפי שיצאתי בלא חתימת זקן "העוד אבי חי" שתוכלו לזכור דיוקנו שגם הוא עומד בחתימת זקן כמוני, והיה להם לאחיו לומר פן אנו זוכרים אבך "לא יכלו" וכו' "כי נבדלו" וכו'.

Here too, since Joseph’s appearance was similar to that of his father, he said to them, “I am Joseph, and if you don’t recognize me because I left without the semblance of a beard, I ask “is my father still alive,” that you should be able to remember his appearance, for he also stands with the semblance of a beard like me. This answers question 4, why Joseph said, “my father” instead of “our father.” It was because he and his father had a very similar appearance. Again, as noted above, **his brothers should have said, “Yes, we recognize [you],” but “his brothers could not answer him, so dumbfounded were they on account of him**

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