

Parashat Mikketz - Yosef and his Brothers in Egypt by Yitzchak Etshalom

I

The story of the encounter between Yoseph and his brothers in Egypt is well-known; however, a closer look at the text reveals some seemingly strange behavior on the part of the brothers. I would like to begin by posing two questions. Through a careful look at some of the events which led up to the stand of the brothers in Yoseph's quarters, not only will we answer these questions - but we will gain a clearer understanding of the debate between Yoseph and his brothers.

Question #1: Why did all ten brothers go down?

When Ya'akov learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another? I have heard," he said, "that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." So ten of Yoseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. (B'resheet 42:1-3)

Why did Ya'akov send (nearly) all of his sons down to Egypt? From everything we have ever heard about this family - going back to Avraham's first "Aliyah" - it is a wealthy family. This family (Avraham-Yitzchak-Ya'akov-12 sons) has plenty of cattle, sheep - and slaves. Since Ya'akov was concerned that the way to Egypt was dangerous (which is why he didn't send Binyamin - see Beresheet 42:4), why did he send any of his sons? Why not send some of the servants of the household - or, at least, one or two sons with some slaves to carry back the grain?

Question #2: Why did the brothers insist on bringing Binyamin back?

When Yoseph's brothers came down to Egypt, they were brought to the great viceroy (their brother) - who was reputed to have great powers of clairvoyance. (44:5,15). The viceroy accused them - three or four times - of being spies (42:9-16). Finally, he agreed to allow them to come back to buy more grain (and to free their brother, Shim'on), only if they would return with the younger brother of whom they spoke.

The brothers knew that the viceroy was wrong about their being spies! As they averred, time and again, they were only interested in purchasing grain. Since the supposedly clairvoyant viceroy was so "off-base" about their motivations - how would he know if the "Binyamin" they brought back was really a younger brother? Why didn't the brothers find some young man, dress him up like a Canaanite (see Yehoshua Ch. 9) and give him enough information to play the role of Binyamin? The viceroy - whose reputed powers of insight were obviously "smoke and mirrors" - would never know the difference between this "shill" and the real Binyamin! Why put their father through the heartbreak of sending Binyamin - and delay their next trip to the Egyptian grain center - when they could have avoided all of it with this ruse?

II

SH'CHEM AND HEVRON

Before addressing these questions, let's look back at the events at the beginning of Parashat Vayeshev. There are two more questions I would like to ask about the brothers and their associations and location.

At the beginning of the Yoseph story, we are told that Yoseph had a special relationship with the four sons of Ya'akov's concubines. (Remember that Ya'akov's children were born of one of four mothers - Re'uven, Shim'on, Levi, Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun shared Leah as a mother; Yoseph and Binyamin were Rachel's sons; Gad and Asher were birthed by Zilpah, Leah's handmaid; Dan and Naphtali were born to Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid.):

This is the story of the family of Ya'akov. Yoseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Yoseph brought a bad report of them to their father. (37:2)

The third question: Why did Yoseph associate with the sons of the concubines? (Rashi explains that the sons of Leah degraded him and so he built an alliance with the “lesser” sons of Zilpah and Bilhah; see, however, Ramban’s response ad loc.)

The fourth question is one of location - since Ya’akov lived in and around Hevron (see Beresheet 37:1, 14) - why were his sons shepherding his flock in the vicinity of Sh’chem - approximately 30 miles to the north? (37:12) The mountain range which extends from south of Hevron northwards to Sh’chem includes plenty of good grazing land - why was his flock so far away?

III THE FINAL QUESTION

Although this may seem like a radical departure from the subject - I would like to address a seemingly unrelated question about a verse in Devarim. The book of Devarim is presented as Mosheh’s farewell address, presented to the B’nei Yisra’el in the plains of Mo’av during the fortieth year after the Exodus. (Devarim 1:1-5). In the second chapter, Mosheh describes the military and political history of the surrounding lands - including that of Se’ir (southwest Jordan):

Moreover, the Horim had formerly inhabited Se’ir, but the descendants of Esav dispossessed them, destroying them and settling in their place, as Yisra’el has done in the land that Hashem gave them as a possession. (Devarim 2:12).

It should be clear why this verse challenges our traditional approach to Revelation and to the Mosaic authorship of the Torah. Mosheh is describing what had happened in Se’ir to the B’nei Yisra’el - and is relying on an event they knew well to illustrate it. How could the Yehoshua-led conquest - which was a year in the future - serve as an illustrative model for them?

The Bible critics have a field day with this verse. Various traditionally oriented solutions - (e.g. S’forno, Hizkuni) usually associated with the conquest of the lands on the East Bank of the Jordan (which had already happened) - have been proposed; but they are all relatively weak since that land was never considered “**the** land”. This is a troubling verse that awaits a comfortable and traditional resolution.

IV YA’AKOV AND B’NEI LE’AH SETTLE THE LAND

A careful reading of the activities of Ya’akov and his children, beginning after the successful reunion with Esav, reveals that this family had already begun realizing the promise given to their great-grandfather (Avraham), grandfather (Yitzchak) and father. Avraham was promised that his descendants - who would return after four generations - would inherit the Land (Beresheet 15:16). The divine promise to Avraham of the Land was not an immediate gift - rather, it was a commitment that the Land would eventually become the property of his descendants. By virtue of Yitzchak never having left the Land (see Beresheet 26:1-4), G-d’s promise to him was, similarly, one of potential and not to be actualized in his life. (Note that throughout their lifetimes, both Avraham and Yitzchak are considered *sojourners, strangers* - and never settle anywhere within the Land. Note especially Avraham’s self-description in his negotiations with Ephron - Beresheet 23:4) Ya’akov was given a similar promise on his way out of the Land (Beresheet 28:13) - but from the wording in G-d’s promise to him upon his return (35:12), it seems that the time had come for the promise to be realized.

Excluding Avraham’s purchase of a (necessary) burial plot, Ya’akov was the first of our ancestors to actively try to settle the land. Immediately after his successful rapprochement with Esav, he purchased land in Sh’chem (33:19). As a result of the Sh’chem-Dinah episode, Shim’on and Levi, two of B’nei Le’ah, conquered the town of Sh’chem (34:25).

We then come to an anomaly in Chapter 37. When the brothers (how many of them?) debate what to do with Yoseph, Re’uven speaks up and implores them not to kill him (37:22). It is reasonable that Yehudah, who later spoke up about the possible profit to be made from the sale of Yoseph (v. 26), was not present when Re’uven made his plea - else, why didn’t Yehudah speak up then? Although the text is not clear about Yehudah’s presence, Re’uven certainly “disappeared” while Yoseph was in the pit. (v. 29: *And Re’uven returned to the pit and behold - Yoseph was not in the pit...*) Where did Re’uven go?

In the next chapter, we read about Yehudah’s “separate” life away from his brothers. There is a serious chronological problem with

this story. If it took place immediately after the sale of Yoseph (which is one way to read 38:1 - see Rashi there), we have seemingly irreconcilable information, as follows:

The text clearly tells us that from the sale of Yoseph until the reunion with his brothers was no more than 22 years. (Yoseph was at least 17 when sold; he was 30 when brought before Pharaoh; there were 7 years of plenty and then, after 2 years of famine, the brothers were reunited.) In Chapter 38, Yehudah began a business relationship with a local K'na'ani man, married a local woman, had three sons with her (and the third son was significantly younger than the second - see 38: 11), the oldest son married Tamar and died, the second son refused to fulfill his obligation to his dead brother and died - and the younger son finally grew up (see 38:14). Tamar had relations with Yehuda and gave birth to Peretz and Zerach. In Beresheet 46:12, we are told that the **children** of this Peretz were among the group that came down to Egypt - no more than 22 years after the sale of Yoseph! It boggles the imagination to suppose that within 22 years, Yehuda would marry and have children, marry those children off - and then have his own children with Tamar within 22 years.

For this reason, Ralbag (among others) concludes that the Yehudah story occurred concurrently with the events in Ch. 37. In other words, while the brothers were still tending their father's flock as young men (early 20's), they (or at least Yehudah) were also entering into independent business relationships.

We know that Shim'on and Levi had already conquered the city of Sh'chem - and that Yehuda's business took him as far north and west as K'ziv (see 38:5; K'ziv is understood to be located in the foothills of Har Hevron; note the similarities between Ch. 38 and the story of Naval [שמעון ורחל], specifically the celebration associated with the sheep-shearing), along with settling in the area of Timnah (which would eventually become the territory allotted to his descendants - see **V'shinantam** 5/3). If Re'uven was able to be away from the brothers (to tend to his own affairs) while they were in Dotan (near Sh'chem) and return to them, he must have also had some land and/or business in the north.

The picture that emerges is quite clear. The children of Le'ah were beginning to settle the Land (in the north). Because of this, they shepherded their father's flock (evidently in rotation) near their own holdings - in Sh'chem. Before going further, we can provide a clear and reasonable explanation to the enigmatic and troubling verse in Devarim (2:12):

Moreover, the Horim had formerly inhabited Se'ir, but the descendants of Esav dispossessed them, destroying them and settling in their place, as Yisra'el has done in the land that Hashem gave them as a possession. (note the mention of Esav, Ya'akov's brother)

The first conquest of the Land which G-d gave us was initiated not by Yisra'el the Nation - but by Yisra'el the man (Ya'akov). During the life of Ya'akov, he and his children (B'nei Le'ah) began purchasing and/or conquering land in Eretz K'na'an in order to fulfill the promise given to their family. Moshe's illustration is indeed one from a familiar past - and is therefore instructive and enlightening.

V

B'NEI ZILPAH AND B'NEI BILHAH

Why, then, is Yoseph described as associating with the children of the concubines? Why aren't they also spreading out, building their families and their estates?

In order to understand this, we have to look at the different visions for the family held by Ya'akov and Yoseph. Ya'akov clearly held that the sons were not to be treated equally or seen as a unit; witness his request to return to K'na'an upon the birth of Yoseph; witness his allowing/encouraging only the children of Le'ah to build their own fortunes and witness the special treatment he accorded to Yoseph and Binyamin.

Ya'akov had every reason to adopt this approach. In his family, only one son (Avraham, Yitzchak, Ya'akov) was the torch-bearer of the tradition, while the other brothers (Nachor, Yishma'el, Esav) were rejected and given other destinies and legacies. Ya'akov reasoned that he would also have to choose one son who would be the next patriarch - and that the other sons would be given sep-

arate inheritances. The sons of Le'ah, being the children of a proper wife, were given the opportunity to conquer and settle the Land - as it was promised to their father and his children. The sons of Rachel - who would be the true heirs - would directly inherit Ya'akov's holdings. The children of the concubines, coming from "second-class" wives, would not inherit anything - rather, they would remain workers for the estate of Ya'akov - as he worked for his father-in-law. Ya'akov's vision - based on his family's experience - includes no "Am Yisra'el" - just "B'nei Yisra'el".

This is why Yoseph associated with B'nei Zilpah and B'nei Bilhah; as Ya'akov's workers, they would naturally stay close to home. Yoseph was also close to home as he stood to inherit Ya'akov's holdings.

Yoseph had a different perspective on the destiny of the family. His dream of the sheaves (Beresheet 37:7) carried two messages which were offensive to his brothers - one explicit and the other implicit. Explicitly, the dream indicated that Yoseph would be their ruler. Implicit in this vision is a united family/nation with one king. Following the vision of Ya'akov, there could never be a ruler over the brothers - because they would not comprise a political unit which could be governed. Yoseph's dream implied that they would eventually be united and share a common destiny.

VI THE BROTHERS IN EGYPT

Returning to Mikketz, let's look at the family's status and fortune. At the beginning of chapter 42, we are told that Ya'akov asked all of his sons (except Binyamin) to go down to Egypt - *that we may live and not die*. Clearly, two major changes had taken place as a result of the famine. First of all, the sons had moved back to their father's house (or extended household) - such that he could address them all at one time. Second, they were in danger of starvation. Their fortunes must have been lost (since they were shepherds, it stands to reason that the famine hit them especially hard) causing them to move back to the "empty nest" - and they likely had no slaves left to send! This was the first (of many) cycles of conquest and loss of the Land.

When the brothers came before Yoseph, we are told that:

Although Yoseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Yoseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" (Beresheet 42:8-9).

What was it about his dreams that caused him to accuse them of being spies?

When he saw Gad and Asher standing side by side with Re'uven and Shim'on, he understood that one of two changes had taken place in his family. Either Ya'akov had been persuaded that the Yosephian vision of "Am Yisra'el" was correct and had unified his sons and convinced them that they had a common destiny - but, if so, where was Binyamin? He reached the only other reasonable conclusion - that they had lost their fortunes and had been drawn back together.

Here is where Yoseph's brilliance and insight came into play. A person who has never known wealth is not enraged and made jealous by exposure to opulence. On the other hand, someone who had wealth and power - and lost it - has great difficulty in accepting the other's fortune with equanimity. He knew that the brothers would feel jealous of his wealth - and that of Egypt - and would at least be contemplating military action, if not as an outright conspiracy, then at least as internal considerations.

When Yoseph accused them of being spies, that charge must have hit a resonant chord inside of their minds and hearts. This **פַּעַם אֶתְּ** (Yoseph) must really be insightful to read our minds so adroitly! When he then took Shim'on (one of the two "activist" brothers - Beresheet 34:25) from them, they must have been convinced that his "second sight" was legitimate and worthy of consideration. When he demanded that Binyamin be brought down, they had no choice but to fully comply, as this viceroy could see their thoughts, read their minds - and properly identify Binyamin!