

Parashat Vayigash 5776, 2015

“My Son Joseph is Still Alive!”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

And they [Joseph's brothers] told him [Jacob], saying, “Joseph is still alive,” and that he ruled over the entire land of Egypt, and his heart changed, for he did not believe them. And they told him all of Joseph's words that he had said to them, and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, and the spirit of their father Jacob was revived. And Israel said, “Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 45:26-28, all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own)

Our three *pasukim* (verses) are extraordinarily important in the history of our people. They form a crucial link in the chain of occurrences that eventuated in Jacob going down to Egypt, our nascent nation's servitude and redemption from there, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, our receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, and the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel. Given our passage's singular importance, let us review its major themes:

1. Jacob's sons encountered him on their return from Egypt and declared, “Joseph is still alive.”
2. Jacob's children shared with him what appeared to be amazingly good news, namely, Joseph was the ruler (*moshal*) over all of Egypt.
3. Jacob's heart changed, i.e. he simply was unable to accept his sons' message, “for he did not believe them.”
4. In an effort to convince their father, Jacob's children shared with him “all of Joseph's words that he had said to them.”

5. At this juncture, Jacob “saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him,” and consequently had visual, “facts on the ground” proof of the veracity of his sons’ statements.
6. It was only at this point that “the spirit of their father Jacob was revived,” (*va’tē’chi ruach Yaakov avihem*), i.e. Hashem’s Divine Presence rested upon Jacob once again (Rashi, 1040-1105), since he now knew that Joseph was alive. Hence the Torah’s next statement, “And Israel said, ‘Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.’”

In sum, our passage consists of the following order of events: Statements that Joseph was alive and the ruler of Egypt, Jacob’s disbelief, the repetition of Joseph’s words, Jacob’s viewing of the wagons that Joseph had sent him, followed by his recognition that, indeed, Joseph was still alive.

At this point in the explication of our passage, we may well ask, “Why did Jacob change his mind when he heard the repetition of Joseph’s words and saw the wagons ‘that Joseph had sent to carry him?’” Fortunately, Rashi provides us with a straightforward, midrashically-based explanation that addresses this question:

He (Joseph) gave them a sign regarding the topic he was engaged in [learning] when he (Joseph) separated from him (Jacob). [That was] the section dealing with the heifer that was to be beheaded (*Sefer Devarim* 21), and this is what [the Torah] says, “and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent,” and it (the Torah) does not say, “that Pharaoh had sent.” [*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 94:3] (Rashi translation with my emendations)

In short, the wagons (*agalot*; singular, *agalah*) reminded Jacob of the subject of the heifer that was to be beheaded (*eglah arufah*), that he and Joseph had been studying prior to his son’s involuntary journey to Egypt. This was not public knowledge; it was information known only to the two of them. Therefore, once Jacob comprehended the full meaning of

the *agalot*, and the play on words they represented in regards to the *eglah arufah*, he became convinced that Joseph was still alive.

We can gain further insight into Jacob's change of heart and acceptance that Joseph was still alive by looking more closely at the basis of his original incredulity. Let us turn to the masterful analysis of this subject by the great Chasidic sage and second Rebbe of Bobov, HaRav Ben Tzion Halberstam *zatzal* (1874-1941), as found in his posthumous work of Torah analysis entitled, "*Kedushat Tzion*." Rav Halberstam begins his examination of our problem by comparing Joseph's two dreams as found in Parashat Vayashev:

And he [Joseph] said to them [the brothers], "Listen now to this dream, which I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the midst of the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright, and behold, your sheaves encircled [it] and prostrated themselves to my sheaf." (*Sefer Bereishit 37:6-7*)

And he again dreamed another dream, and he related it to his brothers, and he said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream, and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were prostrating themselves to me." (37:9)

Rav Halberstam notes that in Joseph's description of his first dream he states, "my sheaf arose and also stood upright, and behold, your sheaves encircled [it] and prostrated themselves to my sheaf," whereas regarding the second dream he states, "the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were prostrating themselves to me." A careful reading of our verses reveal that the first dream contains the element of willful and voluntary acceptance, as suggested by the words, "your sheaves encircled [it]" – an idea that is entirely absent in the second dream. Therefore, according to Rav Halberstam, the Torah's testimony, "his father [Jacob] awaited the matter ['when the fulfillment would come,' Rashi]" (37:11) refers solely to the first dream, in which the metaphoric actions of the

brothers appear to be completely volitional. This exposition parallels the Torah's depiction of Jacob's reaction to Joseph's second dream: "... and his father rebuked him and said to him, 'What is this dream that you have dreamt? Will we come, I, your mother, and your brothers to prostrate ourselves to you to the ground?'" (37:10, underlining my own)

At this juncture, Rav Halberstam contrasts Joseph's charge to his brothers regarding what they were to tell Jacob with what they actually said to him:

Hasten and go up to my father, and say to him, "So said your son, Joseph": 'G-d has made me a lord (adon) over all the Egyptians. Come down to me, do not tarry.'" (45:9)

And they told him, saying, "Joseph is still alive," and [they told him] that he ruled (ki hu moshal) over the entire land of Egypt... (45:26, all parentheses and bolding my own)

Rav Halberstam interprets the singular difference between "*adon*" and "*moshal*" in the following manner: "[When the Torah employs] '*adon*,' this refers to a scenario wherein others willingly accept another party's rule over them. The '*moshal*,' however, is an individual whose dominion over others is acquired through force..."

Armed with these powerful insights, Rav Halberstam elucidates the connection between Joseph's dreams, the brothers' words to Jacob, and why the latter initially refused to believe his sons when they proclaimed that Joseph was alive and the *moshal* over all of Egypt:

Therefore, when our father Jacob heard his sons' words that he (Joseph) was the *moshal*, he (Jacob) did not believe them. This was the case, since he was proof positive that based upon his rebuke to Joseph [regarding the content of the second dream], he surely would have accepted and understood [that he could never be the *moshal* over his father and family. As a result, Joseph would] never rule over them with the staff of those who impose their authority over others – i.e., through violence and force.

Why, then, did Jacob suddenly change his mind and accept the validity of his sons' statements? Rav Halberstam offers the following concise answer:

When his sons, however, spoke all of Joseph's words to him, [including,] "G-d has made me a lord (*adon*) over all the Egyptians," that connoted, "I have been voluntarily accepted [as the *adon*]," then, and only then, did Jacob believe them "and the spirit of their father Jacob was revived." (All translations, brackets, parentheses and underlining my own)

Jacob now knew that Joseph acted in consonance with his first dream wherein he gained power through acclamation, rather than force. For Rav Halberstam, this was the moment when Jacob was absolutely convinced that his beloved son was alive and second-in-command of Egypt.

In my estimation, we can learn another significant lesson when we contrast the brothers' announcement concerning Joseph with that of Jacob's response. The brothers exclaimed, "Joseph is still alive," whereas Jacob said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive..." I believe that this subtle difference is truly pregnant with meaning. In my view, it was Jacob's epigrammatic way of stating that not only was Joseph's physical being intact, but he also continued to manifest those unique characteristics that stamped him unmistakably as an authentic *ben Yaakov* (son of Jacob). Little wonder, then, that the Midrash teaches us that Jacob's image appeared in Joseph's window when the advances of Potiphar's wife so powerfully challenged him. Joseph's subsequent flight from his master's wife teaches us that he decided to remain, forevermore, *Yosef ben Yaakov* (Joseph the son of Jacob) – not just by birth, but also by choice.

With Hashem's guidance, and our fervent desire, may each of us strive to live up to the Torah's standards of moral and ethical behavior so that we, too, can be true children of Yaakov. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.