

Bar Mitzvah: The story of Yossef: why did he not contact his father during 22 years?

The understanding of the story of Yossef remains a conundrum, which is still puzzling the readers and students of the Torah, rabbis and scholars. Why did he not contact his father, at least when he became viceroy at the age of 30? Why did he wait for nine other years until the beginning of the third year of starvation and its fantastic and incredible events when Yakov's sons were obliged to journey to Egypt in order to buy wheat? The first famous commentator who addressed the problem was Ramban (1194-1270): He asks why Yossef let his father suffer 22 years and did not contact him to tell him that he was alive and healthy? Of course Yossef had not an iPhone but the distance did not exceed a week walk and he could have sent a message. Even if he had not the possibility to do during his imprisonment, he could have done it when he was at the head of the house of Potifar. There is certainly no justification for his neglect during the 9 years following his nomination as viceroy. When his brothers arrive in Egypt for the first time, during the 22nd year of absence, he asks if his father is still alive. He was thus well aware that his conduct could have prevented him to still see his father alive. It was a terrible sin to make his old father suffer and perhaps die without knowing that he was still alive. When we examine the different sources, rabbinical commentaries, medieval and more recent, whether in the original texts or, when not easily available, through indirect sources and through about 7 articles found on the Israeli web sites, we can classify the different possible readings of the story of Yossef in seven understandings. Of course the detailed analysis of each opinion requires a tremendous work that I did not undertake. There are also slight differences between similar opinions that I did not analyze.

First understanding. Ramban and Natsiv (in his commentary דבר העמק Noah Tsvi Yehuda Berlin (1817-1893, head of Yeshiva of Volozhin) understand that Yossef wanted to ensure the materialization of the dreams. Therefore he must gather the family outside Israel. Jacob could not bow down before Yossef in Israel (Ramban). Therefore he must avoid any contact with his father and manage that they follow him in Egypt.

Critics. 1) By contrast with some dreams, which are the apparent wrapping of a divine apparition or a prophecy the dreams of Yossef are plain dreams. Hakahamim and prophets are critic about dreams; dreams are not reliable.. זכריה י' ב'.. הבל ינחמו... זכריה י' ב'.. שמעתי את אשר אמרו הנביאים הנבאים בשמי שקר לאמור: חלמתי, חלמתי... ירמיה כ"ג, כ"ה. 2) When Yossef became viceroy he had already a track record in dream interpretation. It would allow us understanding Ramban's thesis. But during his function at the head of Potifar's house when Ramban considers that Yossef had a relative freedom to contact his father, the thesis of Ramban is unacceptable because Yossef had not yet any reason to trust his dreams.

Second understanding. R. Isaac Arama (Spain 1420 - Naples 1494) and R. Isaac Abrabanel (Lisbon 1437- Venice 1508). There is no mitsva to do one's utmost to succeed the accomplishment of one's dreams. On the contrary it is pure stupidity (Arama). I would personally add that it is self-conceit and self-satisfaction. It was a great sin to make the old father suffer for the uncertain and unjustified realization of these dreams.

They understand that Yossef did not want to be in contact with his father because he could then not avoid to informing his father of the true events. It would have split definitively the family and rejected the other brothers from the family. The father would have cursed the sons of Leah; the family would be destroyed. He wanted to avoid all this and to give his brothers the opportunity to repent. At this level the episode of the stealing of Yossef's cup was indeed such an opportunity. Binyamin, the second son of Rachel, who had been favored by Yossef in the same way as Yossef by his father, was in danger. How would the brothers, mainly the sons of Leah react?

Hint. Ramban on Bereshit 45, 27 writes that he thinks that Ya'akov never learned the truth about his selling. He was probably told that Yossef was kept and sold after he desperately wandered in the fields without finding his brothers. Yossef seems to have avoided singular meetings with his father.

Critics. 1) How can we compare the certain suffering of the old father with the hypothetical repentance of the brothers: would he have the occasion to meet them and would they have repented? Nothing is less certain. 2) Furthermore it would represent a radical and unexpected change of Yossef. In his youth he did not hesitate to tell on his brothers. Now he has an angelic behavior and wants to spare his brothers and the family at the cost of his isolation outside the family and his old father's suffering.

Third understanding. Or ha-Hayyim on Bereshit 45, 26. (R Hayyim ben Attar, 18th century). This third reading is, I think, very similar to the former one. However in the former understanding the emphasis was put on the consequences on the guilty brothers and on the cohesion of the family of the father's anger. Here the emphasis is put on the shame of the guilty brothers when Yossef will enter the family circle again. Or ha-Hayyim speaks of the disgrace of the brothers to their father and the risk that he curses them. Thus this understanding is very similar to the second understanding. We could also differentiate this understanding from the second one and consider the disgrace of the brothers to Yossef even if Ya'akov did not learn the truth.

Hint. When Yossef reveals himself to his brothers he moves away any stranger spectator in order avoid them the shame of the situation. In Midrah Tanhuma Va-Yigash it writes:

לסכנה גדולה ירד יוסף [כשאמר הוציאו כל איש מעלי] שאם הרגוהו אחיו אין בריה בעולם מכירו. ולמה אמר הוציאו כל איש מעלי? אלא כך אמר יוסף בליבו: מוטב שאהרג ולא אבייש את אחי בפני המצרים.

Yossef took a great risk when he moved away all the strangers. His brothers could have killed him. Yossef thought that it was better to take this risk but not to shame his brother.

Critics. This angelical attitude of Yossef is striking. In his youth he did not hesitate to tell on his brothers. Now he is moved by the highest moral and halakhic standards.

Fourth understanding. The theory of the conspiracy. This theory is now popular in Israel thanks to R. Joel Bin Nun, a contemporary Rabbi, who wrote an involved paper in 1986 to which many other articles on the web refer. However thanks to the erudition of Professor Spiegel of Bar Ilan we learn that this theory is not new and was in fact propounded by Shafan ha-Sofer in the mid nineteenth century in a complementary note at the end of the first volume of the Talmud Yerushalmi edited by Romm in Vilnius. Now let us say a few words found on Israel Wikipedia about this exceptional man, forgotten in the encyclopedia Judaica. His name was שרגא פייבוש פייגנוון hence שפ"ן הסופר an abbreviation of his name with a wink to the secretary of King Josiah, Shafan, who found with Hilкия the high priest the book of Deuteronomy in a shed of the Temple. His son was Ahikam, who saved Jeremia from the execution of his death sentence and his grandson was the famous Gedalia, whose death we still mourn the day after Rosh ha shannah. Feigensohn was born in 1836. At the age of 30 he became director and head editor of the editing company Widow and brothers Romm of Vilna. He remained 55 years in this function and his master works were the Talmud Bavli (Shas Vilna) in 20 volumes and then the Talmud Yerushalmi. He wrote important bibliographical notes. He retired at 85 and wrote then about the corruption of the printed Jewish books resulting from the inquisition and the censorship. He died at 96 in Vilnius in 1932.

Feigensohn notes in a short piece that Yossef in Egypt did not know and imagine that his brothers had hidden the truth to their father and had disguised his selling in an accidental death due to a savage animal. Yossef knew the love of his father for him. His father was a

mighty man, who could later send his 10 sons to Egypt. He was persuaded that his father would do the necessary researches to find and redeem him. As time passed and nothing happened, Yossef began to think and he asked himself if his father was not simply part of a plot against him. It would have been the consequence of his dreams and the anger of his brothers. His father had also quarreled with him because of his dreams and his bragging. This would explain why he sent him to his brothers to Dotan. The more time passed, the more he became persuaded. From one side he understood that his father had fallen out with him, from the other he was much disappointed and finally angry. He was not ready to contact home. When 9 years after he became viceroy his brothers came to buy wheat, he placed them, 3 days in prison and the Egyptian FBI scrutinized them. They came indeed to buy wheat and they had not the mission to find the lost brother. It was another disappointing. In order to clear the matter up, Binyamin must come; it was the last chance. Apparently their meeting did not learn him more; Binyamin was certainly not aware of any detail. Now Yossef feared for Binyamin on the way back. Maybe they would take the opportunity and eliminate the last son of Rachel. Therefore he organized the setting of the cup and now during the plea of Yehudah the truth appeared. Yossef lived 22 years in mistake: his father was not part of the plot; he thought that Yossef was dead and he had suffered so deeply and therefore his eagerness to bring his father near to him.

Hints. The names that Yossef gives to his sons and their explanations show that he wants to cut with his father and forget his home.

Critics. 1) The relation with his father was very strong and the theory of the plot is not convincing. 2) During the 3 days in prison, the FBI could have found out all what Yossef wanted to know. 3) Yossef had never an intimate relation with Binyamin, 8 years younger. When they separated they were 17 and 9! How could he hope complicity with him?

Fifth understanding. The dictatorial state.

Your obedient servant had proposed, before undertaking this research, that Egypt was a dictatorship similar to today North Korea. Even ministers were under strict supervision and would not take the risk to have contacts with abroad.

Hints. After the death of his father, Yossef must ask Pharaoh the authorization to travel abroad to bury him. The journey is accompanied by troops.

Sixth understanding. We read in Megila 17a :

. יוסף שפירש מאביו כ"ב שנה, כשם שפירש יעקב מאביו כ"ב שנה. Yossef was 22 years away from his father in the same way Jacob was 22 years away from his own father. The long chronological Rashi at the end of Toldot is a free quotation of this gemara.

This quotation has a deeper meaning than usually admitted. When Jacob was working for Rachel the text tells us that these years were for him a few days 'כימים אחדים'. When man works and puts all his head in his work, he doesn't realize how times flies. By contrast when Jacob and Laban did not more understand each other, then suddenly he realized that he had spent 20 years working for him, that he had lost 20 years and suddenly he remembered his parents: לולי אלכי אבי אברהם ופחד יצחק היה לי כי עתה ריקם שלחתני.

The story of Yossef is probably the repetition of Jacob's story. All his life he had to struggle in order to survive, among his brothers: in the house of Potifar, then he became entangled with the latter's wife, then he was in the royal prison. Then he was at the head of Egypt when he was preparing a land against starvation. It is finally when his brothers appeared that he remembered his home and his father. Despite all the harm that he had endured because of them, it is now for the first time that he could not hold back his emotion and his tears.

Both of them will experience that it is longer for an idle to wait for the beloved being than for a busy one to be expected. This is probably the meaning of the initial quotation.

Seventh understanding. The threat of death. Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, pupil of R. Tam, belonging to the biblical tradition of R. Joseph Kara and Rashbam (Northern France, Orleans, 12th century and thus before Ramban) proposed the following assumption. I found it in a quotation of Bekhor Shor in the book Sha'arei Aaron available in my schule. The brothers wanted to kill Yossef but on Yehuda's initiative they granted him an assurance that his life would be spared. Therefore they swore him in under death's threat that he would not come back home, not establish any contact with his father and not reveal the name of his father and family. Of course he accepted the deal and swore.

Hint and critics. The biblical text writes explicitly that the brothers wanted to kill him. The assumption is thus likely and realistic. When Yossef met his brothers, the first time in Egypt, he was under oath and the situation was not mature. He used the pretext of Binyamin to manage the next meeting. Thanks to the setting of the cup he turned the situation to his advantage because he must imprison Binyamin and the brothers were desperate. He took then the risk to reveal himself during Yehuda's defense. But it must happen without any external attendant because of the oath. On this way, Yossef had the upper hand on his brothers and it was finally his brothers who brought the news to their father, without him transgressing his oath. Later Yossef would never tell the details happening in Dotan about his selling because he was never released from his oath. This nearly unknown explanation and in fact the oldest solution seems to me the best. It is realistic and psychologically plausible and likely and it does not require high and moral standards for Yossef.

The patrons of our Bar Mitzvah Professor Fromer and Arnaud Ajdler commissioned me to examine this question connected to the Torah reading of today and of the two next weeks. Apparently it puzzled them and they thought that it would be a good subject to talk with you: why didn't Yossef inform his father that he was alive. They challenged me at the last moment, as usual, to find out a plausible explanation. The number of considered solutions found surprised me.