

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

ברשות מורי ורבותי

The understanding of the story of Yossef remains a conundrum. Why did Yossef not contact his father, at least when he became viceroy at the age of 30? Why did he wait for nine other years, seven years of abundance and two years of starvation?

The first famous commentator who addressed completely the problem was Ramban (1194-1270): He asked why Yossef let his father suffer 22 years and did not contact him to tell 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 arrived in Egypt for the first time, during the 22nd year of absence, he asked if his father is still alive. He was thus well aware that his conduct could have prevented him to still see his father alive. According to Ramban, all the conduct of Yossef was dictated by his will to ensure the materialization of his dreams, which he considered as true prophecies. This will would then explain the complete story: absence of any contact with his family and after that 10 of his brothers came in Egypt and bowed before him he must do the necessary in order to bring them back with Benjamin and ultimately his father in order to fulfill the dreams.

Critics. When Yossef's brother arrived for the first time in Egypt in order to buy wheat, the text mentions in 42: 6 that they bowed before him and then **ויזכור יוסף את החלומות אשר הלם להם**. The text of the Torah indicates clearly that he had completely forgotten these dreams during these 13 years of suffering and 9 years of glory and only now, when he saw them at his feet, did he remember the dreams. The thesis of Ramban that during these 22 years he was always convinced of the prophetic character of his dreams and therefore his silence seems difficult to accept because the text testifies that Yossef did not think about his dreams before he met his brothers. And even if he thought, it is not likely that he suffered 13 years for utopic dreams and then waited for another 9 years until the brothers would appear.

A second classical understanding: the theory of the unity of the family. R. Isaac Arama (Zamora Spain 1420 - Naples 1494) and R. Isaac Abrabanel (Lisbon 1437- Venice 1508) argued that there is no mitzva to do one's utmost to succeed the accomplishment of one's dreams. On the contrary, says R. Arama, it is pure futility and vanity. They write further that it would have been a great sin to make the old father suffer for the uncertain and unjustified realization of these dreams. According to them Yossef, actually was afraid that renewing contact with home would have awakened the ancient wounds and split the family.

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. Yossef would then have sacrificed himself for the sake of the unity and peace of the family until he could note a moral improvement of the brothers.

Hint to this theory. 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 suffering of the old father with all these moral considerations, the hypothetical repentance of the brothers and the hypothetical occasion to meet them once. 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 got an angelic behavior

and wanted to spare his brothers and the family at the cost of his own isolation and suffering outside the family and at the cost of his old father's suffering.

A third theory, the theory of the conspiracy. This theory is now popular in Israel thanks to R. Joel Bin Nun, a contemporary Rabbi and now in the seventies, who wrote a long paper in 1986 in the Israeli journal Megadim. In fact this theory was already sketched by R. Shraga Feigensohn, the editor of the printing company Romm from Vilna on an empty page of the first volume of Talmud Yerushalmi issued in 1917.

This theory was proposed in answer to the difficulties of the classical theories outlined above. According to this new theory, Yossef could not imagine that his brothers had completely hidden the truth to their father and had disguised his selling in an accidental death due to a savage animal. He was thus certain that his father knew about his selling in Egypt. Yossef knew the love of his father for him. His father was a mighty man, with connections and means. 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 Ya'akov sent him to his brothers. The more time passed, the more he became persuaded and he became 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 but they had not the mission, as Yossef hoped, to find the lost brother. It was another disappointing. In order to clear definitively the matter up, Binyamin his true brother must come; it was the last chance. Apparently their meeting did not learn him more; Binyamin was too young and he was certainly not aware of any other detail. Now Yossef feared for Binyamin on the way back. Maybe the sons of Leah 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 the eagerness of Yossef to bring his father near to him.

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

Critics.

The main critic against this theory is that it is completely based on the naïve conviction of Yossef that the brothers had recognized the truth and that Ya'akov knew that Yossef had been sold to Egypt. Yossef was thus mistaken during 22 years. According to this theory Yossef could not imagine that the brothers had forged another story. Even if he did not imagine their cynicism he could have suspected them telling that they did never meet him. After all he had looked for them in Schekhem and they were in Dotan.

A last theory by R. Joseph Bekhor Shor. The theory of the threat of death. Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor, pupil of R. Tam, belonged to the biblical tradition of R. Joseph Kara and Rashbam (Northern France, Orleans, born in about 1140-1150 and thus about 50 years older than Ramban). He proposed the following assumption. When on Yehuda's initiative the brothers granted Yossef an assurance that his life would be spared, they swore him in under death's threat that he would never come back home, that he would never establish any contact with his father and never reveal the name of his father and family. Of course he accepted the deal and swore and he will abide by this oath all his life.

Hints. The biblical text writes explicitly that the brothers wanted to kill him. The assumption is thus likely and realistic. Now we understand why Yossef did not inform his father during 22 years: indeed he was under oath. When Yossef met his brothers, the first time in Egypt, he was still under oath and he couldn't undertake anything. But 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. It was indeed a calculated risk because it must happen without any external attendant because of his oath. The brothers could have killed him but they could not have escaped. 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. As Ramban noted, we don't find him alone with his father anymore. This less known explanation is in fact the oldest solution and it seems to me the best. It is realistic and psychologically plausible and likely. Unfortunately it does not fit the understanding of Rashbam about the circumstances of Yossef's selling. Finally I would like to mention an aphorism, probably of Spanish origin, which shows the contempt towards the French biblical exegesis but also the respect and admiration towards Rashi and Rabbi Yossef bekhor Shor.

כל פירושי צרפתה השלך לאשפתה חוץ מפרשנדתא ובן פורתא

Thus: throw away in the garbage all the French commentaries of the Torah, except those of פרשנדתא Rashi, the commentator "par excellence" and בן פורתא likely Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor, who is supposed to be the ancestor of the celebrated family Shor.

Thank you for your interest or for your patience.