

Parashat Miqqeş Part II

1. Joseph's Strategy

As one reads of Joseph's rise to power and prominence, several significant questions concerning his behavior come to mind. What was his purpose in carrying out his deception of his brothers and insisting on their bringing Benjamin to Egypt? Why did he not send a message to his father that he was alive and well during the many years after his appointment to a position of authority? He surely knew that his disappearance and continued absence caused him great anguish. Was he not interested in learning of his father's welfare? What was his moral justification to subject his aged father to the additional distress of Simeon's incarceration to be followed by an obviously wrenching separation from Benjamin? And why cause additional pain to his brothers and father by secretly returning their silver in their packs?

Some commentators are of the opinion that Joseph felt constrained to do whatever was in his power to bring about fulfillment of his dreams. Following his several experiences with dream interpretation, and especially after fulfillment of his first dream concerning his brothers, he recognized his dreams as true prophecies. However, true prophecy emanates from G-d and reveals a sliver of the future if G-d chooses to bring it about. It is G-d's responsibility to bring the prophecy to fulfillment. It runs counter to logic to assume that Joseph would interpret a prophecy such that it demands he do the cruel and distasteful acts he did, and continue with them for an extended period of time, in order to promote dream fulfillment. The dreams Joseph interpreted for Pharaoh's cupbearer and for Pharaoh were fulfilled without the aid of human agency. And what purpose would fulfillment of Joseph's second dream concerning his brothers serve that he should participate in bringing it about?

Moreover, certain details of Joseph's stratagem, particularly returning the brothers' silver to their packs, served to discourage them from returning to Egypt and dream fulfillment. Finally, he continued with his plan well beyond the point that those dreams were fulfilled.

Surely, the explanation of Joseph's motives lie in a different realm.

We should not read the Joseph narrative independently of the larger context, namely, of what preceded it in the Torah. Specifically, G-d chose Abraham to found a new nation that would be dedicated to Him and the values that He desires man live by in order to bring blessing to the world. He established a covenant with Abraham that would be passed on through his children to advance that goal. G-d had confirmed His plans in prophecies granted to Isaac and Jacob. Although certain decisions of the patriarchs may have been driven by personal considerations, it is proper to assume that goals associated with their larger mission played a major role in their inner motivations. It is incomprehensible that recipients of G-d's communications regarding these lofty matters, individuals who were personally in alignment with them, did not take them into account in their actions and, to the extent possible, transmit the vision to their children.

Jacob's blatant favoring of Joseph, his grooming him for leadership of the expanding clan, appears associated with his recognizing this son as the one possessing the capacity and disposition for carrying on the family heritage. He himself had been acutely concerned in his younger years that his father did not acknowledge him as the son with the necessary potential and interest to be the appropriate conduit through which the covenant should pass. He risked his welfare to be the recipient of the blessing. Although he acted inappropriately, and received divine chastisement for his wrongful behavior, he did have his vision set on the noble goals of the family heritage. He did not want to repeat the mistake of not recognizing the son who possessed the vision and potential. Perhaps this was a fear he was obsessed with – human frailties and fallibility are part of the human condition and continually intermix with the finest motivations. Although mistakes were made we should not doubt that the continuation of Abraham's legacy remained of primary concern.

Joseph was deeply committed to the goals of the forefathers. Of course he was ever aware that fulfillment of the divine promises depends on the worthiness of the recipients. Genesis 39 describes his superlative behavior even under the most stressful conditions. He knew his brothers had committed abominable transgressions in throwing him into the pit, resisting his brotherly pleas and selling him into slavery.* As they stood before him, the most important issue for him was whether or not they were now worthy of being progenitors of the nation that was to bring blessing to the world. In other words, had they repented from their terrible behavior?

This was connected to a fundamental question that was at the root of the problem. Had they accepted the reality of their father's choice for leadership of the family? This meant Jacob's selection of Rachel's sons, specifically Joseph, regardless of whatever dissatisfaction they may have had with the decision and whatever disagreeable traits they perceived in their father's choice. Without the brothers having genuine remorse for their dreadful acts and acceding to the verities of the family situation there could be no true family unity and the family could not advance toward becoming the nation G-d had hoped it would be.

Joseph resisted the tremendous temptation to contact his father prematurely. This must be considered from his superlative achievements, requiring considerable ongoing discipline. Under normal circumstances, no caring son who possessed the wherewithal to relieve his suffering father from the anguish of having lost his beloved son by merely sending him notice of his satisfactory condition would resist doing so.

However, he knew that had Jacob discovered that his missing son was viceroy of Egypt he would surely have shared such joyous information with his sons, for he had no reason not to do so. Surely Joseph's brothers did not give their father any reason to suspect them of foul play. Had they discovered the authoritative position their hated brother was in there would then have been no likelihood of ascertaining their true position toward him, especially given their dread that he may harbor feelings of revenge toward them.

In addition, Joseph may have feared that notifying his father of his situation might possibly have caused a falling-out between father and sons. If Jacob would have made some inquiries as to how Joseph got to Egypt and rose to a leadership position, he might have discovered that he had been in slavery for a number of years, since some background information on the Egyptian viceroy may have been available. Of course Joseph realized that insisting that Benjamin come to Egypt was going to add to the continuing agony his father was enduring. But he also realized that at that point there was no immediate solution to the problem and that his father's primary interest was in achieving true family unity.

Since Joseph's concerns were on determining his brothers' true stance regarding the critical matters of contrition and family, his thoughts also focused on what he could do to prompt them to move forward in these areas. Thus, he devised a decisive test of character, while at the same time prodding his brothers to introspection. Having Benjamin in Egypt was a critical element in his plan. No matter how trying it would be on Jacob, it constituted the choicest method of achieving his precious goals.

In not alleviating his father's suffering in order to promote a larger goal, was Joseph not engaging in an "ends justify the means" policy, the type of behavior for which Jacob, in deceiving his father, was so thoroughly censured? There is a critical difference. Jacob had no right to impersonate his innocent brother who had done him no harm, and deny him a blessing from his father. He also had no right to deceive his father to subvert his plans, for his own goals. He had inserted his machinations into a situation that he had no right to enter.

Joseph, on the other hand, was thrust into a "situation," a grave one indeed. He was a victim of a criminal act perpetrated by his brothers to eliminate him from the family. His father was suffering on account of his sons' act (which Joseph undoubtedly realized he was deceived about), and the family was hopelessly split. Many years passed and the state of affairs threatened to become permanent if Joseph did not do something creative to resolve the predicament. Accordingly, he now assumed the responsibility of trying to find a way to bring about family unity and integrity and provide his brothers a chance at repentance, and/or, as the case may be, the occasion to prove that they had achieved that status. Squandering that opportunity would be a far greater violation of Jacob's true welfare than the agony he was enduring. In any event, if true reconciliation was not achieved Jacob was going to suffer terribly, particularly because the family that was to continue the covenant with G-d would fail in its mission.

In the light of Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's interpretation of them we can more fully appreciate Joseph's machinations. Although G-d brought the dreams to fulfillment, human action was required to realize the intent of the divine message. Pharaoh's assessment of Joseph, that he was a man "that the spirit of G-d was within him" (Gen. 41:38) was the obvious and general description of Joseph. The dreams that Joseph dreamt concerning his brothers – which turned out to be prophetic – provided an opportunity that also called for action to realize the ultimate purpose of the message.

Deception is generally prohibited and the Torah makes that point time and again. But it is not an absolute value regardless of circumstances. In the Dinah episode it was called for, but not for the purpose Simeon and Levi ultimately employed it. When Tamar had no option to correct a wrongful situation but to engage in the deception of Judah, he who caused the wrongful situation and refused to correct it, she was rewarded. Under certain circumstances it is not considered a violation of the moral principle that the ends do not justify the means.

2. Persuading Jacob to Send Benjamin (Gen. 42:37–43:11)

Jacob's sons made it absolutely clear to him that Simeon would not be released without Benjamin's appearance before the viceroy. Nevertheless, Jacob was determined not to send his youngest son to Egypt, just as he did not send him the first time, fearful that a tragedy (*ason*) may befall him. Simeon's freedom would just have to wait. The continued favoritism for Rachel's children became more manifest.

Reuben, obviously sensing his responsibility as the firstborn, makes the first attempt to persuade his father. He said, "My two sons you may kill if I do not return him to you" (42:37).** Although a preposterous proposal and undoubtedly stemming from desperation – it is unimaginable that any father or grandfather would consider such an outrageous action – it does reveal the underlying attitude the sons had. Compared to Benjamin, they felt that they and their children did not count for much in Jacob's scheme of things; offering two for one makes their sentiment palpable.

In his response, Jacob addressed all his sons – Reuben's proposal did not deserve an individual answer – and confirmed his position. This time he referred to Benjamin as "my son" and adds, "for his brother died" and "he alone remains" (42:38). He did not provide the latter statement a qualifying clause such as "from his mother," as if only he counts as his son. (Many have wondered if this was not a manifestation of a streak of obduracy, a characteristic Scripture often associates with Israel's national make-up, a trait that required great effort to achieve mastery over.)

Under the pressure of the severe famine and depleted provisions Jacob eventually asks his sons to return to Egypt for more food, ignoring the stipulation regarding Benjamin. Judah vigorously tries to compel him to face reality but Jacob reverts to recriminations: "Why did you cause ill to me by telling the man that you have another brother?" (43:6).

Finally, arguing that if Jacob does not agree to send Benjamin they all will die, Judah makes a proposal. He will personally guarantee Benjamin's return. He makes a solemn pledge that if he does not bring him back he will consider himself a sinner to his father all the days of his life. This means that in such an eventuality he will live day-in and day-out with the consciousness of the burden of guilt. This is a levelheaded commitment that appears to derive from acknowledgment of the inviolable bond between Jacob and Benjamin – of course, associated with the Jacob-Rachel connection. It articulates the understanding that not doing everything in his power, at all times, to assure that Benjamin returns safely would be iniquitous beyond measure.

Thus, Judah exhibits a degree of maturity and devotion to his father's decisions that we have not hitherto seen any sign of. Although not necessarily a complete transformation, as there remains the unresolved issue of the selling of Joseph, and perhaps not yet fully conscious, this new found maturity may also incorporate a measure of contrition for his – and, as their leader, his brothers' – treatment of Joseph. It is tangible progress. Jacob is convinced by Judah's sincerity and finally consents to Benjamin's going.

The intense focus on the necessity to send Benjamin overshadowed a lingering concern that undoubtedly was on everyone's mind, namely, what was the explanation of the silver that had been returned in the packs of all the brothers. When it was discovered upon their return from Egypt it had appropriately caused great consternation to the family, but had not been mentioned since. Were they suspected in Egypt of being thieves? Jacob now alludes to this problem in his instructions for the return visit.

3. Preparing to Return: Subtle Signs

Jacob instructs his sons to prepare a *minha* (tributary-like gift) for the viceroy. He selects six highly desirable items that happen to include the three that were being transported by the caravan that took Joseph to Egypt, גומא וזרני ונלם, (NJPS: “gum, balm and ladanum”). These items were used for perfumes, cosmetics and medicines. Perhaps they could be seen as symbolizing a desire for friendly relations and healing. (The other three items – according to NJPS – were honey, pistachio nuts and almonds.)

The text that narrated the brothers' sale of Joseph (37:25) had mentioned the items that the Ishmaelite caravan was carrying in a matter-of-fact manner, implying that it was known information. Now, the brothers will have to travel in the trail of that caravan carrying the reminders of their transgression. G-d's hand is at work in multiple, subtle ways. He gently stokes the consciences of the sinners while having them, albeit unwittingly, present an appropriate tribute offering to Joseph, symbolically recalling and apologizing for their transgression while setting the stage for reconciliation.

Jacob also tells his sons, “take double silver (מִשְׁכָּר מִשְׁכָּר) in your hands plus the silver returned in your packs” (43:12). Why double plus the basic amount? It does not appear Ibn Ezra is correct in translating מִשְׁכָּר מִשְׁכָּר as merely “a second silver,” especially as in verse 15 the term for the “double silver” they took was מִשְׁכָּר כֶּסֶף, which appears to be another way to say מִשְׁכָּר מִשְׁכָּר. It also does not appear that Jacob's intention was that they should take three times the standard amount in case the price has doubled, as Rashi, following the Midrash, suggests, for they only take a total of double the original amount (v. 15 and vv. 21-22).

Since the sons took only “double silver” with them (v. 15) it is clear that they understood their father's instructions (v. 12) to have contained imprecise syntax. They realized that after instructing them to take double silver, he interpreted himself with the immediately following phrase of “the silver returned in your packs,” although technically it sounded like he meant an additional measure of silver. In verbal discourse such imprecision,

uttering ambiguous and grammatically incorrect phrases, is a frequent occurrence. People speak spontaneously and as they continue clarify and modify their intention. However, it is significant that the Torah recorded his words as it did, seemingly referring to more silver than was called for, double plus the original, and requires an explanation.

This may be another sign that a providential thrust is manifesting itself in many ways without the awareness of the protagonists. The Torah may be pointing to the connotation in Jacob's words as touching on the sensitive matter of the silver the brothers had received as payment for selling Joseph. They are now coming to the realization that it was that sale that was their undoing. In their father's words to them they hear a hint that it would be proper for them to return that silver, to undo the effects of that sale. They wish they could return that silver!

The silver they received for the sale of Joseph is representative of their sin. Eventually, silver comes to haunt and test them. They are constantly fearful because their silver was returned. They try to return it but cannot. There is no superficial solution to their predicament. The silver goblet becomes their problem. Finally, after reconciliation, Joseph gives Benjamin a gift of three hundred silver weights and none to them.

In the first attestation of the word *keseif* (silver) in the Joseph narrative the brothers received twenty silver weights for selling Joseph (37:28). The word *keseif* is not attested again until Joseph instructs his steward to return the brothers' silver to their bags (42:25). At that point it becomes a most prominent word. The final deployment of *keseif* in the saga is when Joseph gives a gift of three hundred pieces of silver to Benjamin and no silver to the brothers, denying them a share in what they had sinned with (45:22), which concludes their "silver" retribution. There are exactly twenty attestations of the word *keseif* in the retributive phase of the narrative beginning with verse 42:25,*** corresponding to that single other, early, attestation of *keseif* in the Joseph story, the *twenty keseif* associated with their transgression (37:28).

In instructing his sons to return the silver of the first grain purchase, Jacob says אֲוֹלֵי מִשְׁקָהּ הָיָה ("perhaps it was an error" [43:12]). But that silver definitely should not have been in his sons' possession (not "perhaps"). If not an error the situation is much worse as it might imply that someone was framing them! We must understand Jacob's meaning to be: "perhaps it was *only* an error [and nothing more]."

Jacob concludes with a prayer that G-d should grant them mercy before the man and (presumably speaking of "the man") "he should send to you אֶת אֲחֵיכֶם אֲחֵר וְאֶת בְּנֵימִין" ("your other brother and Benjamin"). This is a strange locution. Unexplainably, Simeon is not explicitly mentioned but only alluded to. "Other brother" could also carry the meaning of the missing Joseph. Due to the peculiarity of the syntax, the subject who will do the "sending" could technically be construed as G-d. We may again suspect that the dialogue is recorded as it is to call the reader's attention to a possible underlying interpretation not consciously intended by Jacob. It may be another signal that providence is at work (cf. *Gen. Rab.* 92:3). Alternatively, it may be that after all that transpired, the brothers were now starting to think of Joseph. With their guilty consciences gnawing

away at them, they are hearing hints regarding their long-missing brother, whom they now hope, without daring to articulate the thought, will somehow turn up.

Endnotes

* There is some ambiguity in the text whether it was the brothers who sold Joseph. In 37:25-27, we read that upon sitting to eat after casting Joseph in the pit the brothers saw a Ishmaelite caravan and Judah then convinced them to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. The next verse states, "Midianite traders passed, and they drew and raised Joseph from the pit and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites." Who is the subject of the latter three verbs? Are the Midianites associated with the Ishmaelites and did they raise Joseph as part of the transaction with the brothers? Or are they a third group, and they raised Joseph and sold him on their own behalf while the brothers were eating at some distance away? However, there are many subtle indications that it was the brothers who sold Joseph, and that was Joseph's opinion. Years later, in reconciling with his brothers, Joseph requests that they not be distressed that they sold him (45:5).

**At a time not long after his proposal, four sons are attributed to Reuben (Gen. 46:9). Possibly the last two were not yet born. Alternatively, it may be that his words should be understood as "two of my sons," offering to "pay" double – in accordance with certain legal prescriptions for punishment – if he does not succeed in bringing Benjamin back.

*** Gen. 42:25, 27, 28, 35, 35; 43:12, 12, 15, 18, 21, 21, 22, 22, 23; 44:1, 2, 2, 8, 8; 45:22.