

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## SENSE AND SENSIBILITIES

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Some readers of Tanakh see contradictions as bothersome distractions; other readers see them as alluring opportunities. This difference of sensibility probably has at least as large an impact on overall understanding as professed allegiance to specific schools of *peshat* or *derash*. When readers with opposed sensibilities reach strikingly similar conclusions, albeit by different means, we must consider the possibility that an underlying textual truth has been uncovered. The opening of *Genesis* 42 affords an opportunity to see these sensibilities in action:

וירא יעקב כי יש שבר במצרים . . . ויאמר הנה שמעתי כי יש שבר במצרים

*Yaakov saw that there was grain in Egypt . . . He said: "Behold I have heard that there is grain in Egypt"*

Careful readers will note at once the change of sense: did Yaakov "see" this, as the narrator reports, or did he "hear" this, as he tells his sons?

Rabbeinu B'Chayeh takes a completely pedestrian approach to this question: "וירא יעקב"

אין זה ראיית עין אלא ראיית לב  
והראיה: "הנה שמעתי", ולא אמר: הנה ראיתי  
"Yaakov saw" –

*This refers not to vision of the eye but rather to vision of the heart, and the proof: "Behold I have heard", and it did not say 'Behold I have seen'*

Radak is perhaps even more matter-of-fact and literalist:

כי ראה אנשי הארץ באים עם תבואה  
ושאלם מאין יביאו התבואה  
ואמרו ממצרים  
זהו שאמר הנה שמעתי

*Because he saw the people of the land coming with wheat*

*and asked them where they brought the grain from  
and they said 'from Egypt'*

*This is the meaning of his saying "Behold I have heard".*

Ibn Ezra flatly denies the meaningfulness of the

contradiction: בעבור היות ההרגשות נחברות במקום אחד

יחליפו זו בזו

כמו ראה ריח בני (ברא' כז, כז)

ומתוק האור (קהלת יא, ז)

וכן וירא יעקב, כי אחריו כתיב הנה שמעתי (ברא' מב ב)

*Since the sense-perceptions are all unified in a single place  
they interchange with one another*

*as for example "See the aroma of my son" (Genesis 27:27)*

*"and sweet is the light" (Kohelet 11:7)*

*and similarly "Yaakov saw", which is followed by "Behold I have heard"*

Chizkuni is equally reductive, but in the process cites an example which opens the door slightly:

"וירא יעקב כי יש שבר"

שמע כי יש שבר במצרים כמו שכתוב בסמוך הנה שמעתי כי יש

שבר במצרים

דוגמא וכל העם רואים את הקולות

"Yaakov saw that there was grain in Egypt" –

*He heard that there was grain in Egypt,*

*as Scripture writes nearby "Behold I have heard"*

*on the example of "All the people saw the voices/sounds"*

The last line is a reference to *Exodus* 20:15 and the Revelation at Sinai. While Chizkuni seems to intend that the words "see" and "hear" can be interchanged, others suggest that this refers to a synesthetic experience, in which an audial stimulus was processed by the brain into a visual perception.

All this is by way of introduction to Rashi's reading:

"וירא יעקב כי יש שבר במצרים"

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## ומהיכן ראה

הלא לא ראה אלא שמע, שנאמר "הנה שמעתי וגו'", ומהו וירא  
ראה באספקלריא של קדש שעדיין יש לו שבר במצרים  
ולא היתה נבואה ממש להודיעו בפירוש שזה יוסף

*"Yaakov saw that there was grain in Egypt"*

*From where did he "see" this?*

*Actually he didn't see but rather hear, as it says "Behold I have heard",  
so what is meant by "saw"?*

*He saw via the Holy Speculum that he still had hope (=SEBER) in  
Egypt.*

*But this was not actual prophecy that would tell him explicitly it was  
Yoseph.*

Rashi seizes on the contradiction to radically transform the whole narrative. In his reading, Yaakov sends the brothers to Egypt not because he needs the food, but because he has an instinct that something good is coming to him from there.

Rashi is actually toning down his midrashic source. Midrash Rabbah connects our verse's שבר/SEBER to *Tehillim* 146:5: "אשרי שאל יעקב בעזרו שברו על ה' א-להיו":

"וירא יעקב כי יש שבר במצרים"

"... (איוב יב) "הן יהרוס ולא יבנה

, משהרס הקדוש ברוך הוא עצתן של שבטים עוד לא נבנה,

"יסגור על איש ולא יפתח . . ."

אלו עשרת השבטים שהיו נכנסין ויוצאין למצרים ולא היו יודעים  
שיוסף קיים

וליעקב נתגלה שיוסף קיים

, שנאמר וירא יעקב כי יש שבר במצרים,

כי יש שבר זה הרעב, כי יש סבר זה השבע

כי יש שבר "ויוסף הורד מצרימה", כי יש סבר "ויוסף הוא השליט"  
כי יש שבר "ועבדום וענו", כי יש סבר "ואחרי כן יצאו ברכוש גדול"

*"Fortunate is the one whom the Divinity of Yaakov aids; whose  
hope/SBR is toward Hasbem his G-d".*

*"Yaakov saw there was S(H)BR in Egypt"*

*"Indeed when He destroys it will not be rebuilt . . ." (Iyov 12:14)*

*Once The Holy Blessed One destroyed the plan of the tribes (to eliminate  
Yoseph) it would not be rebuilt*

*" . . . when He encloses a man, there will be no reopening"*

*This refers to the ten tribes who would enter and exit Egypt without  
knowing that Yoseph still existed*

*but to Yaakov it was revealed that Yoseph still existed*

*as it says ""Yaakov saw there was S(H)BR in Egypt"*

*"that there was SHBR" = famine, that there was SBR" = plenty*

*"SHBR" = "Yoseph was brought down to Egypt", "SBR" = "Yoseph,  
he is the dominant"*

*"SHBR" = "they will enslave and afflict them", "SBR" = "afterward  
they will leave with great wealth"*

In the midrashic reading Yaakov senses more than Yoseph's presence. He senses the whole sweep of Jewish history in Egypt. All this is built on the play-on-words SHBR/SBR = grain/hope. What I find fascinating is that Rabbeinu Bechayeh – yes, the same Rabbeinu Bechayeh who refused to see any meaning in the shift from sight to hearing – reaches the same conclusion on the basis of a different play-on-words. He argues that one need not resort to reading the consonants against the vowels – SBR – but rather can rely on the two meanings of SHBR = both grain and destruction.

ומה שהוציא התבואה בלשון שבר

לפי שלשון שבר כולל התבואה והבר, וכולל ג"כ השוד והשבר

ולכך הוציא הענין כולו בלשון שבר

וכל זה כדי שיכלול בלשונו ענין התבואה לשעה, ולרמז בתוכו ענין

הגלות לעתיד

*The reason Yaakov uses the word SHBR for grain instead of tevnah  
is that the term SHBR includes grain and also includes destruction  
and therefore SHBR is used throughout this section  
in order to include in its language grain for the short term, and to hint  
within it at the future exile*

Rabbeinu Bechayeh and the midrash are each picking up on a literary device known as the "directing word," in which a word or phrase is repeated to give it structural as well as semantic significance. SHBR appears 7 times in 7 verses.

However, the midrash thinks the sense of the word is optimistic; in the midst of famine and need-for-grain, Yaakov senses that something wonderful is coming. Rabbeinu Bechayeh thinks the sense of the word is pessimistic: the grain they are buying is actually the seed of exile.

I prefer to combine the midrash with Rabbeinu Behchayeh and suggest that S(H)BR has three meanings: grain, destruction, and hope, and all are intended here. If Yaakov had sensed only impending destruction, he would never have sent the 10 brothers; if he had sensed only hope, he would never have resisted sending Binyamin.

The underlying truth that I am arguing for here is that in the aftermath of the Covenant Between the Pieces, with its promises of exile and redemption, the Forefathers lived their lives on a different axis than the one modern analysis sees as defining the human condition. They did not seek to impose meaning on absurdity, but rather to transform fate into destiny. The question for modern readers of the Covenant is whether it makes sense to strive to regain their sensibility.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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