

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



YOSEPH'S JOURNEY PAST SHEKHEM Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

ויאמר לו לך נא ראה את שלום אחיך ואת שלום הצאן והשבני דבר
וישלחהו מעמק חברון ויבא שכמה
וימצאהו איש והנה תעה בשדה
וישאלהו האיש לאמר מה תבקש
ויאמר את אחי אנכי מבקש הגידה נא לי איפה הם רעים
ויאמר האיש נסעו מזה כי שמעתי אמרים נלכה דתינה
וילך יוסף אחר אחיו וימצאם בדתן

Yaakov said:

*"Please go and see the peace of your brothers, and the peace of the
flocks, and return word to me"*

He send him from the Chevron valley, and he came to Shekhem.

A man found him (Yoseph) blundering about in the field.

The man asked him: What do you seek?

*He replied: It is my brothers that I seek. Tell me, please, where they
are shepherding?*

*The man said: They have left here, for I heard (them) say: Let us
go to Dotan.*

Yoseph followed his brothers and found them in Dotan.

This entire episode seems superfluous. What matters is that Yoseph followed Yaakov's orders and reached his brothers. Why should we be interested in his need to ask directions along the way?

Rashbam suggests that the Torah here emphasizes Yoseph's virtues.

להגיד חשיבותו של יוסף נכתב זה
שלא רצה לחזור לאביו כשלא מצאם בשכם
אלא בקשם עד שמצאם
ואעפ"י שהיה יודע שמתקנאים בו
To inform us of Yoseph's worth

*that he did not wish to return to his father after failing to find them
in Shekhem*

*rather he sought them until he found them
even though he knew they were jealous of him . . .*

This suggestion seems to me inadequate to explain the extent and detail of the Torah's report of this episode.

Ramban follows Rashbam but then adds a very different approach.

ויאריך הכתוב בזה

להגיד כי סיבות רבות באו אליו שהיה ראוי לחזור לו

אבל הכל סבל לכבוד אביו

ולהודיענו עוד, כי הגזרה אמת והחריצות שקר

כי זמן לו הקדוש ברוך הוא מורה דרך שלא מדעתו להביאו בידם
ולזה נתכונו רבותינו (ב"ר פד יד) באמרם כי האישים האלה הם

מלאכים

שלא על חנם היה כל הסיפור הזה

להודיענו כי עצת ה' היא תקום

Scripture expands its presentation here

to tell that many things happened to him that made it proper for

Yoseph to return to Yaakov

but he endured them all in order to honor his father.

And to inform us additionally

that the Decree is true and diligence is false

*for The Holy Blessed One prepared for him a guide unbeknownst
to him to bring him into their hands*

*This is the intent of the Rabbis when they say these men were
angels . . .*

Akeidat Yitzchak (Bereishit Gate 28) takes Ramban one step further.

לא רצה האל-יתעלה לדחות זה המעשה ולהרחיק תקלתו

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

מעלהם

אדרבא הזמינו לפניהם אם זה האיש כמדרשו

*The Divine did not wish to push off this deed or to distance its
stumbling from them*

*On the contrary – he brought Yoseph before the brothers, if “man”
means what midrash says (=angel)*

I agree that the presence of angels indicates Divine guidance/orchestration, but why was it important for the brothers to carry out their plots at this time and in this way?

One might suggest that emphasizing the Divine role deemphasizes Yaakov's role in sending Yoseph into danger, but this seems to me irrelevant – Yaakov thought Yoseph would find the brothers easily and nonetheless sent Yoseph. But Rosh here introduces a fascinating plot twist:

תימה גדולה

יש איש חכם ונבון כמו יעקב אבינו שלח יוסף החביב עליו כנפשו

בין אחיו אשר מכירם שהיו שונאים אותו שנאת מות

וי"ל

כי יעקב לא לחנם שלחו

וכי אמר הלא אחיך רועים בשכם

אמר שכם מקום מוכן לפורענות הוא ואי אפשר שום זמן שלא

יכשלו

את מי אשלח ומי ילך לנו שיאמינו בו ללכת ולברוח מן המקום הרע

ההוא

אם לא לילך בן החביב עלי

על הספק אשלחנו

כי ודאי יכשלו אם יעמדו שם שעה אחת

והודאי מוציא מספק

This is greatly astonishing:

*Would a man as smart and wise as our forefather Yaakov send
Yoseph, dear to him as his life*

*amongst his brothers, whom he recognized hated him with deadly
hate?!*

It can be said in reply:

That Yaakov did not send him for no purpose

*When he said “Behold, your brothers are shepherding in Shekhem”
He meant ‘Shekhem is a place ready for disaster, and they cannot
be there any time without stumbling*

*Whom can I send, and who will go for us, that they will believe,
and flee that evil place*

if not the son who is dear to me?

*I will send him despite the chance (that they will harm him)
because they will certainly stumble if they remain there a moment*

and the certain takes precedence over the possible.

Rosh's contention that Yaakov is aware of the extent of the brothers' hatred is interesting, but my point is that in the end Yoseph is sent into danger unnecessarily, because the brothers have already left Shekhem, and Yoseph is actually violating his father's wishes when he pursues them to Dotan.

We can read the story according to Rosh as one of Divinely orchestrated ironies, in which the good intentions of both Yaakov (who wishes to save the brothers from sin) and Yoseph (who wishes to fulfill his understanding of his father's wishes) lead to exile. The brothers sin not because of their location in Shekhem, but because Yoseph pursues them, and thus by pursuing them Yoseph caused them to sin, frustrating his father's purpose in sending him.

This sends us back to Ramban – why would G-d wish to ensure their sin?

We can read Rosh very differently, however, if we drop the assumption that Yoseph is motivated only by filial piety. What if Yoseph understands that his father's instruction relates to Shekhem and Shekhem only, but pursues them anyway? (For that matter, what if the brothers on their own recognized the spiritual miasma in Shekhem, and moved away precisely because they wished not to sin?)

In this reading, Yoseph has his own motives for following his brothers. Perhaps he had more dreams he wished to share; perhaps he enjoyed simply being around them and watching them envy his multicolored dreamcoat. These motives were sufficient to cause him to hang around them despite knowing the risk, and despite knowing that his father would not wish it.

More likely, I suspect, Yoseph could not accept that the brothers' enmity was that real and that deep, and he follows them because he needs to prove to himself that they don't really hate him. Moreover, perhaps he needs to prove that to himself because he does not want to believe that he is the kind of person who could provoke such hatred.

G-d makes sure that he learns he is wrong, because klal yisroel cannot afford leaders who are dangerously unaware of the emotional as well as practical consequences of their behaviors.

Shabbat Shalom!

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