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Center for Modern Torah Leadership



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## What did Yaakov Think, and When Did He Know that He Thought It?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

I had the privilege this morning of a long conversation with Rabbi Yair Kahn of Yeshivat Har Etzion. Among other things, we discussed his presumably since-released dvar Torah on Parashat Vayigash. Rav Kahn argued that Yaakov Avinu repeatedly lets slip that he retains hope that Yosef is alive. Thus in Genesis 43:14, finally acceding to the brothers' pleas to return to Egypt, Yaakov says:

וא-ל שדי יתן לכם רחמים לפני האיש  
ושלח לכם  
את אחיכם אחר  
ואת בנימיני  
ואני כאשר שכלתי שכלתי.

And may E-I Shaddai give you mercy before the man  
that he may send to you  
your brother-*acher* (=other),  
and Binyamin.

As for me, when I am bereaved, I will be bereaved.

The language *brother-other* is peculiar, especially as this anonymous brother is listed first, even before Binyamin.

Ramban suggests that the term *acher* refers to Shimon, whom Yaakov refuses to call by name following the massacre at Shekhem. The connection to Shimon seems straightforward, because he is in fact the "other brother" being held prisoner. but I'm not aware of any other Biblical cases where a person is called *acher* or left nameless as punishment for their transgressions. (Rabbinic texts use it that way, such as the story of the apparent sin that causes a woman of ill repute to declare that Elisha ben Avuyah is no longer himself.)

Midrash Rabbah adds a comma, so that Yaakov refers to three lost sons: your brother, *acher*, and Binyamin. The third brother is of course Yosef, whom he also cannot bring himself to name. Rashi frames this as "The Holy Spirit entered into him", meaning that Yaakov expresses this thought unconsciously. He is not willing to acknowledge his hope even to himself.

Similarly, in 44:27-28, Yehudah quotes Yaakov as saying:

אתם ידעתם  
כי שנים גלדה לי אשתי:  
ונצא האחד מאתי  
ואמר: "אד טרף טרף"  
ולא ראיתיו עד הנה.  
You know

that my wife bore two for me.  
One of them left from me  
and I said: "Surely he is torn up"  
and I have not seen him until now.

"I have not seen him until now" means that Yaakov has not seen Yosef's corpse, and therefore is not fully ready to acknowledge that he is dead.

Nonetheless, Yaakov refuses to believe the brothers when they report that in 45:26 that Yosef is alive:

ויפג לבו  
כי לא האמין להם  
His heart expired

because he did not believe them.

The upshot is that Yaakov lived in a state of constant torment. Indeed, 35:33 reports that he refused to accept any comfort. Hope can be debilitating as well as inspiring. Rav Kahn drew the analogy to the suffering of families of current (and past) hostages taken by Hamas. Yet it seems obvious to me, and to Rav Kahn, that we must support them in their hope so long as it is not plainly falsified.

A few hours later, I came across a Times of Israel article expressing the same powerful psychological insight as Rav Kahn. The article describes [how an unprecedented medical committee determines when a hostage held in Gaza is dead](#). Head of the committee Prof. Ofer Merin stated:

In these weeks, I learned the term 'ambiguous loss'. It's the continuous grief day after day of living with uncertainty, always with a slim hope that maybe their loved one is alive or just wounded or okay . . . There is a clear understanding that these people need the closure. If we know for sure that someone is dead, I think we're doing right by these families by telling them."

Rav Kahn is certainly correct that this should heighten our empathy for the families living without that closure, while praying that the story of their loved ones will have a Joseph-like denouement.

However, the truth and power of the insight do not necessarily make it the most compelling reading of our story. For a sharply contrasting read, consider Chatam Sofer in *Torat Mosheh*:

נראה שיעקב אבינו לא חשב שיוסף מת  
מדלא נראה אליו בשום פעם בחלום,  
וע"כ סבר שנטרף בדעתו והולך שובב בין החיות  
כי היה אחת ברדלס שמה שנשיכתה מטרת דעת האדם,  
והיינו דאמר טרף טורף - משום דלא ראיתו עד הנה.

It seems that Yaakov Avinu did not consider the possibility of Yosef being dead

because Yosef never appeared to him in a dream  
and therefore he held that Yosef had become “*torn in his mind*” and was wandering among the beasts  
because there is a beast known as the ‘bardelas’ whose bite  
rends the human mind.

The is the meaning of Yaakov saying “*he is surely torn (in his mind)*” –  
because “*I have not seen him (in a dream) since.*”

The specifics of Chatam Sofer’s reading depend on empirical claims about wildlife and dreams that I don’t subscribe to, and I’m not sure whether “torn” has the connotation of “insane” in Biblical Hebrew, let alone that it is the best reading in this context. But I’m taken by his assertion that Yaakov was not unsure at all; rather he knew that Yosef was alive. Is there another way to account for his certainty? If there is, why does he not believe the brothers’ later report?

What seems to me the most likely alternative – although Rav Kahn utterly rejected this suggestion – is that Yaakov never believed the brothers’ initial report. Perhaps, as a veteran shepherd, he could easily tell the difference between human and goat blood; perhaps the robe was torn or intact in all the wrong places; perhaps he knew one or more son’s “tell” for when they were lying. Maybe he thought the other brothers would go along with anything Shimon and Levi insisted upon.

On this reading, perhaps what Yaakov disbelieves is the brothers’ report that Yosef is ruler of all Egypt, not that he is alive. He doesn’t believe that the brothers are genuinely willing to admit that Yosef is alive, and is afraid that the report is intended to trick him into *yeridah*.

Once trust breaks down, and especially once an apparent conspiracy theory is proven true, everything in life is shadowed, and nothing good can ever be taken at face value. This is true in personal relationships and in politics. It is not only the liar who suffers when his truths are not believed.

Americans and Israelis, and American Jews and Israeli Jews specifically, are living in the aftermaths of epic breakdowns of political trust, with the occasional conspiracy theory seeming true to boot. These breaches are not likely to heal. This doesn’t mean what we can afford to ignore them; it just means that we need to recognize up front that the work will be long and difficult.

Thus far, however, the tie of trust between American Jewry and Israel has largely held. The rally in Washington stands as a potent symbol of this on the American side. I think it is vital

for both communities to recognize how vital this tie is, and also that - like almost all ties of trust – it has points of grave vulnerability. A good indicator of fraying is when you can’t accept the others’ support without suspicion, or support the other without qualifiers to protect you in case they disappoint.

Here as often I fail as a darshan. The relationship between Yaakov and his sons is not healed, certainly not fully, and Yaakov cannot bring himself even to fully trust Yosef. It is a *madreigab* to trust someone’s sworn word, but the healthiest relationships don’t require oaths for trust. Some commentaries on next week’s parshah wonder whether the brothers, or at least some of them, are afraid that Yosef will renege on his commitments to them after Yaakov dies, and so invent an ethical will for their father. *Yeridah* in fact leads to exile and then slavery. I don’t have the skill to weave a clear prescription for rebuilding trust out of this tangle.

This failure has consequences in at least one other area. In a public forum in Tekoa on Wednesday night, I challenged – as I always do, and intend to continue doing – the use of Amalek as a metaphor for any contemporary events. There was a lot of pushback.

On reflection, and after discussing this Thursday night with a wonderful group of SBM alums, I realized that good people legitimately need a Torah way to say that what Hamas did on October 7 stamped them as evil and not just as enemies. Many of them are therefore willing to accept the halakhic baggage of Amalek – the implicit relaxation or elimination of our moral code in war; which too often become explicit as the emotional temperature of the conversation rises, which makes one worry about its effect in the emotional heatstorm of war. This rhetoric in turn erodes the trust of those whose support is not solely a matter of *ahavat Yisrael* but also of faith in the ethical commitment of *am Yisrael*. When the limits of support become visible, trust erodes in the other direction.

So I need a way to embody in Jewish language the idea that evil is real, and that we have the right and obligation to fight for its eradication, without those implications. Note for example that nobody in Chazal suggested that it would be a mitzvah to wipe out the population of the Seleucid empire, despite the depredations that led to Channukah. Historically, it may be obvious why – they were a lot bigger than us, and asserting such a mitzvah would have seemed ridiculous. Regardless, I don’t think the Hellenists are the right model for Hamas. So I ask for your indulgence, and your suggestions.

Shabbat shalom from Yerushalayim. *Shahu et shlomah.*

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