

## **PARASHAT MIKETZ**

### **Reuven's Attempt to Save Yosef**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### COMPARING PARASHAT MIKETZ WITH PARASHAT VAYESHEV

When Yosef demands of his brothers that "one of your brothers will be imprisoned" (Bereishit 42:19) as a hostage in order to ensure that the youngest brother will be brought, some profound soul-searching is heard among the brothers:

"And they said to one another, Behold, we are guilty for our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he begged us and we did not listen; therefore this trouble has befallen us. And Reuven answered them saying, Did I not speak to you saying, 'Do not sin against the child,' and you did not listen, and so behold - now his blood is required." (42:21-22)

Both the brothers and Reuven make mention of the terrible event described at the beginning of parashat Vayeshev (chapter 37) when Yosef is thrown into the pit and sold. The text here employs the literary technique known as "flashback," taking us back to a previous episode. Since the flashback is placed in the mouths of the characters themselves, it reveals to us not only details about the original story, but also discloses the state of mind of the speakers themselves at the current moment, and especially how they relate now to the events of the past.

The words of Reuven and his brothers reveal details which were not known to us from the narrative of the story when it took place, such as the fact that Yosef pleaded with them to spare him. The reason why this is brought only here, and not in its rightful place from a chronological point of view, is explained by the Ramban (and others have suggested additional reasons for this). But there is a significant discrepancy between what Reuven says here and what he tells his brothers in chapter 37:21-22. True, Reuven did attempt there to save Yosef from the other brothers, but he did this by suggesting that Yosef be thrown into the pit; we do not hear him asking the brothers to refrain from sinning towards the child. The Torah does testify that the intention behind his suggestion was "in order to save him from their hand, to return him to his father" - in other words, it is the narrative itself that reveals to us Reuven's true intentions, since we could not deduce this from his words. But he did not reveal his intention to the brothers at the time. On the contrary, his suggestion appeared to them a way of killing Yosef indirectly without actually having to commit the act. As the Rashbam interprets it, the intention of his suggestion was that Yosef should "die by himself" in the pit, alone in the desert. Thus Reuven is quoting not what he said to the brothers but rather what he thought.

The brothers indeed did exactly as Reuven had suggested: "And they took him and threw him into the pit" (37:24) - the same pit that Reuven had indicated. So how can Reuven complain afterwards that they did not listen to him? How were they to guess what his secret intentions were and to act accordingly?

The Ramban (37:22) addresses this question, providing the same solution he gives for the brothers' words, "Behold, we are guilty...":

"The text recounted what Reuven said to them and they did listen to him, BUT HE TOLD THEM SOMETHING ELSE AT FIRST, WHICH THEY DID NOT ACCEPT, as he said to them: 'Did I not speak to you saying, Do not sin against the child, and you did not listen.' When he saw that they were not listening to him, he said, 'If so, then [at least] do not kill him with your hands.'"

According to this explanation, it is not what he said and what is recorded in chapter 37 that Reuven hints to in his speech in parashat Miketz; rather, it is something else that he said which is not written. Thus we must ask once again why the Torah fails to record his words ("Do not sin against the child") and his brothers' refusal at the appropriate place in the narrative, and reveals this information only later in Reuven's speech in parashat Miketz. The Ramban does not pose this question nor does he offer any explanation, although he offers a few alternatives to explain the similar phenomenon with regard to the brothers' words.

In fact, the explanation offered here by the Ramban is extremely problematic. A superficial comparison of Reuven's words in parashat Miketz with what he says in parashat Vayigash gives rise to a sense of contradiction between them, which immediately disappears when we learn from the brothers' words that Yosef beseeched them. In order to avoid this seeming contradiction, the text in parashat Vayeshev should have brought - or at least hinted at - Reuven's first words to his brothers and his brothers' refusal to heed what he said.

Indeed, an accurate study of the text in parashat Vayeshev reveals that all of these ideas are in fact to be found there - both Reuven's suggestion to his brothers that Yosef not be harmed at all, and also their disregard for his words. But in order to clarify this, some familiarity with a certain biblical stylistic phenomenon is first required.

'AND HE SAID... AND HE SAID'

There is an interesting phenomenon that occurs about a hundred times in the Torah, whereby a speaker is quoted directly and the narrative interrupts the speech with the word "vayomer" (and he said). The flow of speech is thus broken without any external party interfering. What is the point of this textual device?

Meir Shiloach z"l made an almost comprehensive collection of all of such instances in the Torah (Sefer Korngreen, Tel Aviv 1964), demonstrating that this technique

indicates "a pause in the speaker's words; since thereafter he starts his words anew, the Torah needs to write again 'and he said,' as it would in the case of a person who has just started speaking." Shiloach divides all the instances which he collects into seven groups, the first of which is when the speaker pauses because he "awaits a response or an action hinted at in the first part of his words." He lists eleven instances of "and he said... and he said" that occur for this reason, heading the list with the words of the tribes of Gad and Reuven to Moshe when they request that they be permitted to settle on the eastern bank of the Jordan (Bamidbar 32:2-5), and thereafter a remarkably similar occurrence: the words of Yosef's brothers to Pharaoh when they request permission to settle in the land of Goshen (Bereishit 47:3-4). In both instances, the speakers expect that the listener will fulfill their request without their having to make it explicit, and when their hints receive no response, they go on to make their request explicit.

We shall quote at length the third instance in his list:

"'And they said, Stand back. And they said, This person came [only] to sojourn; will he then judge? Now we will deal worse with you than with them' (Bereishit 19:9). The men of Sodom hint to Lot that he should move aside and allow them a free hand to 'deal with' his guests. It is only after Lot displays unwillingness to desert his guests, and they realize after a certain pause that he truly means to protect the people who have come under his roof, that they burst out: 'And they said, This person came to sojourn; will he then judge?... and they approached to break the door.'"

## REUVEN'S TWO UTTERANCES

Let us now return to Reuven's words to his brothers at the point where they were planning to kill Yosef:

"'And Reuven heard them and he saved him from their hand; AND HE SAID, 'Let us not kill him.' AND REUVEN SAID TO THEM, 'Do not spill blood; throw him into

this pit that is in the desert, but do not set your hands upon him.' [He said this] in order to save him from their hand, to return him to his father." (37:21-22)

What we have here is clearly an instance of "And he said... and he said...", with an unusually long introduction to the second part, emphasizing the discrepancy between his two utterances. What is the meaning of this pause between the two parts of what he says?

It appears that here, , we are witness to someone pausing while he waits for his conversation partners to respond to his first words (although Shiloach, in his article, categorizes it differently). The lack of response in this instance should be interpreted as a lack of agreement which, although not expressed in words, must certainly have been expressed in other ways such as facial expression, shrugging of shoulders, a stormy silence of disagreement, etc. (This aspect of the situation is similar to the instance quoted above involving Lot and the men of Sodom - there, too, Lot does not provide any verbal answer to their first demand). How do we deduce this? By comparing Reuven's first utterance with his second. Anyone unfamiliar with the stylistic phenomenon of "And he said... and he said" reads Reuven's speech as a single unit, ignoring the pause indicated by the Torah by means of the words, "And Reuven said to them." Such a reading would understand Reuven's words, "Do not spill blood... do not lay your hands upon him" (verse 22) simply as an expansion and explanation of his earlier suggestion: "Let us not kill him." But someone who is aware of the pause and its significance in terms of interpretation, will attempt to discover what separates the first utterance - before the pause - from the second.

Reuven's first suggestion is absolute in its rejection of the brothers' plan: they said, "Let us go and kill him," and he responds: "Let us not kill him." He does not propose any alternative plan for bringing about Yosef's death; he rejects the idea altogether. The phrase which introduces these words, "And he saved him from their hand," is not a testimony of the text with regard to any hidden intention on his part; rather, it bears clear testimony to his overt and explicit intention to save Yosef's life.

Reuven's second utterance, on the other hand, does not openly reject the idea of causing Yosef's death; he opposes only direct and outright murder, to which he

proposes the alternative of indirectly causing his death by throwing him into a pit. What causes Reuven to change his line of argument to his brothers (even though his own intention remains unchanged)? The brothers' reaction to his first words. When Reuven realizes that his first words are given a cold reception by the brothers and are rejected, he makes a tactical change in his absolute demand and in its place offers a suggestion which matches in principle the brothers' plan for Yosef's death. They are then prepared to consider and implement his new suggestion: "And they took him and they threw him into the pit...."

A linguistic confirmation for the clear distinction which we have drawn between Reuven's two utterances is to be found in the fact that the first suggestion is formulated in the first person plural, "Let US not kill him," whereby Reuven includes himself together with them in the avoidance of causing any harm to Yosef. The second utterance, on the other hand, is formulated in the second person plural: "Do not spill blood.. throw him... do not lay your hands upon him." This is strengthened by the fact that only in his second utterance does the text read, "And Reuven said TO THEM." As if to say, "If you are not prepared to go along with my opinion, then at least YOU should do what I am suggesting; but I myself will have no part of it."

Thus it turns out that Reuven's claim is quite true: after twenty-two years he reminds his brothers that he said to them, "Do not sin against the child" - in any way at all; he is also correct in stating, "And you did not listen." (There are a number of possible reasons for Reuven not quoting his own original words verbatim; briefly, he appears to wish to emphasize their sin and Yosef's youth and innocence, as well as to exclude himself from what was done.) All of this is in fact to be found in the text in the proper place, if we just read it carefully.

[The Abarbanel and Rav S.R. Hirsch explain chapter 37 in a similar manner, though they do not connect it to chapter 42. Rav David Zvi Hoffmann, Rav J.H. Hertz and A.S. Hartom (chapter 37) all make the connection.]

## THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF REUVEN'S UTTERANCES

In conclusion, we should take note of the literary structure of Reuven's utterances and its significance in both places where he speaks.

In chapter 37, there is a clear parallel between verses 21 and 22:

(21) a. And Reuven heard, AND HE SAVED HIM FROM THEIR HAND.

b. AND HE SAID, "LET US NOT KILL HIM."

(22) b. AND REUVEN SAID to them, "DO NOT SPILL BLOOD.

Throw him into this pit which is in the desert, and do not set your hands upon him."

a. In order TO SAVE HIM FROM THEIR HAND, to return him to his father.

This parallel underscores the DUAL nature of Reuven's means of saving Yosef (i.e., the two utterances) and the DIFFERENCE between his two attempts, with the second attempt on a lower level than the first in all its aspects (nevertheless, it is only the second which is acceptable to his brothers).

Let us explain this in more detail:

- i. The text introduces Reuven's first words by saying, "And he saved him from their hand." By this the Torah means that the following words clearly are meant to save Yosef. In contrast, the meaning of the second utterance is illuminated by the text AFTER he says it, since these words do not mean what they say and they require some clarification. These are not words of salvation like the first utterance, but their eventual purpose is nevertheless "IN ORDER to save him from their hand" in the future.

- ii. The first utterance is preceded in the text by "And he said," while the second utterance is preceded by "And Reuven said to them." The first utterance conveys firmness; Reuven's appeal is succinct and to the point. He does not address his brothers; rather, he speaks in the name of them all. In his second utterance, in contrast (following the brothers' refusal), Reuven tries to appeal to their conscience.
  
- iii. Reuven's first utterance rejects the idea of killing Yosef as previously planned by the brothers – "Let us go and kill him." The second utterance, on the other hand, rejects only the actual act of spilling blood (here he does not say "Do not spill HIS blood," but merely "Do not spill blood"), and he explains himself further on as suggesting that they cause Yosef's death.
  
- iv. Reuven includes himself in the first statement by using the first person plural, but excludes himself from the second by using the second person plural.

It would seem that all these elements of comparison reinforce the thesis that Reuven made two completely separate attempts at saving Yosef, and that the second attempt came about only as a result of the failure of the first.

What Reuven tells his brothers in Egypt in 42:22 parallels what they said "each to each other" in the preceding verse. Let us examine them together:

Verse 21: THE BROTHERS' WORDS Verse 22: REUVEN'S WORDS

They said to each other: Reuven answered them, saying:

See, we are guilty Did I not speak to you saying,

For our brother, the anguish Do not sin against the child  
of whose soul we saw when he  
begged us

And we did not listen And you did not listen

Therefore this trouble has And now behold, his  
befallen us. blood is required.

This parallel, too, comes to emphasize specifically the differences between what the brothers say "to each other" and what Reuven "answers:"

- i. They accuse and he accuses. They accuse themselves – "But WE are guilty," while he accuses them – "Did I not speak TO YOU" – absolving himself of responsibility for the act.
- ii. They remember a situation in which "WE did not listen," and he reminds them of a situation in which "YOU did not listen." Their memory gives rise (at least in retrospect) to a strong feeling of sorrow and mercy – "for our brother, the anguish of whose soul we saw when he begged us" - while Reuven reminds them of an earlier stage – a fruitless debate between him and his brothers, who were bursting with rage against Yosef.
- iii. They see what has befallen them as a punishment "measure for measure," and Reuven too sees their situation as what they deserve. But they accuse themselves not of bloodshed but of hardening their to the distress of their

brother. The punishment is no more than "distress" which has befallen them. Reuven, in contrast, goes much further in his accusation and sees the present situation as avenging the child's blood. If this is in fact the case, there is no hope for their being delivered of this distress.

## TWO RESPONSES TO DISTRESS

It seems that the Torah is presenting us with two types of response to trouble. On one hand we see the religious, positive response of the brothers, who, when trouble befalls them, engage in soul-searching and repentance. Yet, in the face of the disaster which confronts them, they do not despair of possible deliverance. In contrast we see Reuven's negative response: he accuses his brothers of bearing responsibility and exaggerates the description of the sin to the point where he leaves no glimmer of hope. When confronted by trouble, he hurries to declare that he has not brought about this misfortune. The brothers' flashback reflects their present remorse and soul-searching, while Reuven wishes to absolve himself of any responsibility (and therefore of the need for self-examination, remorse and guilt) and therefore returns to the past to justify himself.

In all his speeches in our story, Reuven fails to achieve his aim. In his first utterance in chapter 37, he cannot persuade the brothers to accept his view. In his second utterance there he manages to persuade them, but where does this get him? He fails to achieve his objective of delivering Yosef from the pit and returning him to his father. And in his final utterance in chapter 42 he once again misses the mark. Indeed, this trouble has befallen the brothers in order to remind them of the distress of their brother and to soften their hearts, but this is not the "vengeance of Yosef's blood." Just as his first words in chapter 37 did not find an echo in the hearts of the brothers, similarly his last words in chapter 42 are met with silence and do not arouse them to any additional repentance and regret. The effect of his words seems to be felt principally by Yosef, who deduces that his brothers consider him dead, which causes him to weep. Yosef learns from Reuven's words how great the rift in the family is, and he understands how great their astonishment will be when he reveals himself to them and says, "I am Yosef."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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