

The Tears of Yosef

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

The book of Bereishit ends with the death of Yosef (50:23-26). Yosef has grown old and seen grandchildren and great-grandchildren born (50:23). He informs his brothers that he is dying and that God will take them up from this land, from Egypt, to the Promised Land (50:24). After extracting an oath from the Children of Israel to take his bones with them, Yosef dies. He is embalmed and entombed in Egypt (50:26).

In fact, not only the last few verses of the book are about death. Nearly all of parashat Vayechi, the last segment of the book, devotes itself to describing the final days of Yaakov (47:28-50:13) and Yosef (50:23-26).

These two conceptual halves of the parasha match in more than just general theme. As a preface to the stories of their deaths, both Yaakov and Yosef have their lives described by the term "vayechi - and he lived," a term found only twice in the section of Bereishit devoted to the forefathers (47:28, 50:22). Both Yaakov and Yosef are portrayed by the Torah as closely connected with their descendents, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, shortly before their deaths. In blessing his grandchildren Ephraim and Menasheh (48:1-22), Yaakov claims that they are "his," akin to Reuven and Shimon (48:5). Similarly, Yosef's great-grandchildren are "born upon his knees" (50:23). Moreover, both Yaakov and Yosef demand an oath from their relatives before dying (47:28-31, 50:25). In both cases the oath relates to the treatment of their remains and transportation to Canaan (47:30, 50:25). Furthermore, just as Yaakov gathers his relatives and tells them of the future (49:1), "the blessings of Yaakov" (49:1-28), so too Yosef informs his "brothers," the Children of Israel, of God's plans for the future shortly before his death (50:24). Finally, in what might be thought of as the last element of the "deathbed and dying" scene, Yosef dies and is embalmed (50:26), just like his father Yaakov (49:33, 50:2).

The parallel between the two "halves" of the parasha, the death of Yaakov and the death of Yosef, should make us realize that

much is missing in the "death of Yosef." Whereas Yaakov gets approximately seventy-four verses (47:28-50:13), the death of Yosef is treated in a mere four verses (50:23-26). More strikingly, whereas Yaakov is "gathered to his people" (49:33), mourned extensively (50:3-4, 10) and given great honor in his death (50:7-11), Yosef is simply placed in a box (50:26). No mourning or honor, even by the Children of Israel, is recorded.

Moreover, Yaakov asks to be transported directly to Canaan and the Cave of Machpela in order to be buried with his fathers (47:30, 49:29-31). In pointed contrast, Yosef requests no more from his "brothers" and relatives than that when God remembers "you" (etchem), and takes you to the land sworn to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov (50:24), "Carry up my bones from here" (50:25). Yosef dares not hope for burial in Canaan and is in fact entombed in Egypt (50:26). It is not "us" that will be redeemed, but "you." His fathers and their land have become no more than distant formalized objects, names and not realities.

On some plane, these contrasts can easily be explained. Yosef is not Yaakov. He was never one of the patriarchs and hence his death is not given the same treatment as Yaakov's. Furthermore, much time has passed. Sixty-four years have slipped by in between the deaths of Yaakov and Yosef (see 41:46, 45:11, 47:28, 50:26). The political situation is undoubtedly different, and the fathers and their land have indeed become an abstract memory. In covenant terminology, the exile in Egypt is already in full swing. Yosef can hope for no more than the future redemption of his bones.

Nevertheless, this seems but part of the story. The juxtaposing and paralleling of the two stories, with no mention made of the time that has passed between them, seems to serve a particular purpose. The lack of personal connection to his "brothers," the lack of personal identification with his "fathers" and Canaan, the lack of mourning and the Egyptian burial are all highlighted by the contrast to Yaakov's death. Together they combine to create a particular picture. Even at the end of his life, Yosef remains separate from his brothers, family, heritage and nationhood. Though he may lead and be in charge, he will never be of Israel in the way that Yaakov was. He is alienated, a virtual existential outsider amongst his brothers and the Children of Israel.

This tragic theme is highlighted by the one section of the parasha that cannot easily fit into the dual death-scene structure outlined above, the segment that textually precedes the "Death of Yosef."

Upon Yaakov's death, the brothers are gripped by the fear that Yosef will now hate them. Now he will pay them back for all the evil that they have done to him (50:15). Consequently they send a message to Yosef:

Your father commanded before his death as follows, "So you should say to Yosef: Forgive now, I pray you, the offense of your brothers and their guilt, for they have done evil to you, and now please forgive the offense of the servants of your father's God." (50:16-17)

Rashi (50:16) points out that Yaakov never suspected that Yosef would wreak revenge after his death and never commanded any such thing. The brothers' story is a fabrication. The prefacing of the brothers' message to Yosef by their "seeing that their father had died" and their "saying" that perhaps Yosef will hate them for the past and punish them (50:15) reinforces this interpretation. The brothers' message stems purely from their internal consultations and no more reflects reality than the last time the brothers "saw," "said" and "sent" (37:18, 19, 32). Just as in the case of the sale of Yosef their consultations led to "sending," in an attempt to trick Yaakov, so too here their consultations lead to "sending," in an attempt to trick Yosef.

But Yosef sees all too well through the transparent trickery of his brothers. He responds by crying (50:17).

These tears constitute the seventh time that Yosef cries (42:24, 43:30, 45:2, 14, 46:29, 50:1, 50:17). Unlike the tears shed over his father's Yaakov's corpse (50:1), or the joyous tears shed upon embracing Yaakov (46:29) and Binyamin (46:14), where Yosef "falls upon" someone else (46:14, 29, 50:1), these tears are shed upon no one. These are tears of absolute isolation and solitude. For that matter, these tears are not normal tears, the joy of reunification or the grief and mourning of death. Rather, these tears are the unique tears of Yosef. These are the solitary tears of anguish and alienation, the crying that welled up in Yosef when he had not yet revealed himself to his brothers, the mixture of sadness, love, desire and absolute distance that gripped Yosef when he cried alone in his room (42:24, 43:30). These are the tears he cried upon revealing

himself to his brothers, the bottled anguish of years spent alone (45:2).

Structurally, the last tears of Yosef complete a tragic pattern. The first three times Yosef cries (42:24, 43:30, 45:2), his tears are those of anguish and alienation, the unique tears of Yosef, the tears of the story of Yosef and his brothers. The next three times Yosef cries (45:14, 46:29, 50:1), his tears are related to his father and brother Binyamin. Yosef cries normal tears, the tears of a man enwrapped in a normal family existence. On the literary plane, the three sets of tears of reconciliation and mourning reverse the three sets of anguish and alienation. Yosef's relation with his father and maternal brother make up for his experience with his other brothers.

But all this is not to be. The last set of tears undoes the undoing. Yosef cries a seventh time, once again tears of anguish and alienation. His brothers fear him, imagine that he will take vengeance upon them, and can even face him directly. They hide behind messengers and fabrications. Despite the seventeen years of support and sustenance he has provided his brothers (47:28) - the same amount of time that he had spent with them in their father's house and aroused their resentment (37:2) - he is no closer to their hearts than before.

If so, we may think of the end of Sefer Bereishit as a disquisition on the tragedy of Yosef consisting of two parts. Immediately after Yaakov's death and burial, we are told of "The Tears of Yosef" (50:14-22), the story of Yosef's tragedy, his ongoing alienation from his brothers. This section concludes with the fact that Yosef and his father's household lived in Egypt and that Yosef lived to the age of one hundred and ten (50:22). His brothers lived with him in Egypt for seventeen years while their father was alive, culminating with their fear of Yosef's revenge and his words of consolation, and then remained with him in Egypt for another sixty-four years, culminating in Yosef's death. If seventeen years did not do the trick, perhaps the ensuing sixty-four years and the heartfelt words of consolation and forgiveness spoken by Yosef to his brothers (50:19-21) after their message, his tears and their offer of slavery (50:18) have worked the necessary magic? The answer seems to be no, or at the very least, not a full-throated yes. We are told the story of "The Death of Yosef" (50:23-26). Yosef is still not Yaakov. He is not the patriarch of the Children of Israel and still remains distant from his brothers. It is not even clear if he is mourned by them.

Let us turn to the question of the cause of the tragedy of Yosef. Why indeed are Yosef's brothers still distant from him? Why indeed do anguish and alienation accompany him to the very end?

In part, Yosef's tragedy is inherently tied up with his destiny. In order to fulfill his role as caregiver and sustainer, he must live the life of the second-in-command to Pharaoh.

Yosef first promises to provide for his brothers upon revealing himself to them (45:11). Yet another five years remain to the famine. It is imperative that they all hurry down to Goshen in order to survive, where they can be "close" to Yosef and he can provide for them (45:10-11). Strangely enough, this role seems to continue even after the end of the seven years of famine. When reassuring his brothers after the death of their father, Yosef promises to continue to provide for his brothers and their children (50:21). It seems that the Children of Israel were never economically self-sufficient, even after the end of the famine.

This role may very well involve more than economic components. It is precisely after the death of Yosef that a new king "who knew not of Yosef" and who plotted against the Children of Israel rose over Egypt ([Shemot 1:8-11](#)). The passing of Yosef and his influence proved a harbinger of a major change in the social and political condition of the Children of Israel. Without the protection of Yosef and his voice at court, the Children of Israel were left at the mercy of their hosts and quickly enslaved.

In sum, Yosef lived the life of an Egyptian noble for far longer than the nine years until his brothers arrived, or the twenty-six years until his father died. Even after his father's death, Yosef continued in the Egyptian capital, living the life of an Egyptian court official, physically and culturally separate from his brothers in the land of Goshen (see 45:10, Ramban 45:10, 46:33-47:6). While Yosef may see his brothers and family upon their meetings, the brothers and family see something altogether different. With the passage of time, Yosef becomes for them ever more their Egyptian protector and ever less their brother. Hence the distance and alienation, hence the tragedy of Yosef.

However, this geographic, social and cultural dynamic comprises at most a partial explanation. We must also pay attention to the personal dynamic, the relationship of Yosef and his brothers. Let us return to the text and action of the section referred to above as the "The Tears of Yosef."

As emphasized above, Yosef cries in response to his brothers' sending a message containing a fabricated deathbed command by Yaakov to forgive his brothers and refrain from vengeance (50:16-17). Apparently, he does not send any message in return nor respond to his brothers. In response to the absence of any return message, and obviously fearing the worst, the brothers come personally before Yosef (50:18). Just as they did seventeen years earlier upon finding the cup in the bag of Binyamin, the brothers prostrate themselves and offer themselves as slaves to Yosef (44:14, 16, 50:18). To complete the parallel, just as Yosef had previously cried in response to, but not in front of his brothers (42:24, 43:30), so too here he cries in response to, but not in front of his brothers (50:17-19). Finally, just as the previous offer of slavery had been motivated by guilt, a perception of the appropriate punishment for the sin of selling Yosef (44:16, Rashi), so too the later offer of slavery is motivated by the very same guilt (50:15).

At this point Yosef responds.

And Yosef said to them: Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? Although you might have meant evil (ra'a) against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about this day the keeping alive (lehachayot) of many people. And now do not be afraid; I will sustain (akhalkel) you and your children. (50:19-21)

Yosef's response precisely echoes his words seventeen years earlier, when he had revealed himself to his brothers. Immediately after revealing himself as the one they sold to Egypt, Yosef told his brothers "not to be grieved nor angry with yourselves" since "God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5). After a quick mention of the famine, Yosef once again told his brothers that "God has sent me before you" and that the higher purpose of all that had transpired was to "keep you alive" (lehachayot lakhem, 45:7). Yosef even goes so far as to say that "it was not you but God that sent me here" (45:8), and closes his speech with one last promise to "sustain (lekhalkel)" his family through the years of famine (45:11).

The point of this dual parallel seems to be that despite Yosef's words seventeen years earlier, his complete forgiving of his brothers, his attribution of all that had transpired to God's hand and his caring for his brothers for seventeen years, nothing has really changed. The brothers are still racked by guilt, still believe that Yosef must desire vengeance and still feel the need to offer themselves as slaves. In response, Yosef can do no more than cry and wearily repeat his previous words. He bears no grudge, it was all God's plan, and he will take care of his family.

If so, we have uncovered the core of the tragedy of Yosef. The brothers are not able to get past what had transpired all those years ago. Although Yosef claims it was all God's doing and for "good" (50:20), they are stuck upon the "evil" they did to their brother (50:15). They cannot believe he forgives them completely. Rooted in the past and unable to escape it, the brothers remain ill at ease with Yosef, fearful and distant. They are, in part, the perpetrators of the tragedy of Yosef.

But why can't the brothers believe Yosef? After all, he has told them repeatedly that he doesn't blame them. It was all God's doing. Part of the answer may be guilt. Despite their true repentance, their confession (42:21) and their refusal repeat their sin, to "sell" Binyamin into slavery (44:18-34), the brothers are still racked by guilt. Just as they view themselves as guilty and still deserving of punishment, so too they assume that Yosef views them as guilty and still deserving of punishment. Their point of view, that of the guilt-racked sinner and penitent, prevents them from truly accepting Yosef's words.

But there is more to it than this. In forgiving his brothers, Yosef demonstrates an unusual degree of righteousness. They sold him into slavery. Forget the hostility, resentment and alienation he was subject to back in his father's house (see 41:51). His brothers caused him to spend thirteen years as a slave in a foreign land, most of them in prison. Yet nevertheless, Yosef forgives his brothers completely, bears no grudge and dedicates the remainder of his life to supporting and caring for the very people who caused his suffering. He repeatedly states that it was God's doing and all meant for the purpose of helping his family make it through difficult times. His personal anguish and suffering are all of no account. It is precisely these astounding acts of self-negation and righteousness that the brothers cannot imagine. Surely Yosef bears some grudge. Surely he resents them. Yet he does not. He only wishes to be their brother.

This brings us to a final point. Yosef's righteousness consists of far more than his self-sacrificing dismissal of his past suffering. Among the numerous riddles inherent in the story of Yosef and his brothers, the problem of when Yosef decides that "God has sent me before you to preserve life" (45:5) constitutes one of the harder ones. At what point did Yosef reach the conclusion that all his suffering was for the purpose of providing for his family? When did he decide that Egyptian grain czar was his true destiny?

In discussing parashat Miketz I alluded to two possibilities. The first is that this constitutes a revolutionary occurrence. Until almost the moment he announced his conclusion, Yosef has worked to make the dream of the bundles come true and plans to move on to the dream of the sun, moon and stars.

Alternatively, Yosef views himself, and the children of Rachel in general, as expelled. He plans to keep Binyamin with him in Egypt. Either way, in a lightning-quick paradigm shift, Yosef discards his previous interpretation of dreams, history and destiny and shifts to a new interpretation.

According to the second possibility, the decision occurs not in parashat Vayigash, but somewhere back in parashat Miketz. From the moment that his brothers appear before him to buy grain or shortly thereafter, Yosef concludes that his family needs him. He must work for reconciliation, he must bring his family to Egypt, he must care for them. This is his true destiny.

Either way, wherever and however the shift occurs, Yosef rereads his destiny in accord with the needs of his family. The righteousness of Yosef is about elevating his family - the human needs of his father and brothers - above any destiny or any previous interpretation of his destiny. In place of his youthful vision of rulership, or some other later interpretation, Yosef fashions a vision of caring and support. These are acts of self-sacrifice and morality that the brothers cannot fathom. They are part of the cause of their worries, their distance, and the tragedy of Yosef.

IV

Before closing, I would like to make a final point about righteousness, destiny and the overarching structure of Sefer Bereishit. The main body of the book consists of the stories of the forefathers. As of Chapter Twelve, the book turns from the universal to the particular, focusing in on Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the forerunners of the nation of Israel. This raises an obvious problem. By all logic, as the story of the forefathers, Sefer Bereishit should terminate around Chapter Thirty-seven, at the beginning of parashat Vayeshev and the termination of the cycle of Yaakov stories. At most, the book should skimp on the story of Yosef and his brothers, including only the material relevant to Yaakov, and move quickly to report his death (49:33). This certainly constitutes the logical endpoint of the book. In other words, how does the extensive story of Yosef and his brothers fit into the conceptual organization of the Sefer? We have here a story of four generations, rather than three forefathers.

*** In discussing parashat Vayeshev, I posited a tripartite structure for Sefer Bereishit in order to resolve this problem. Only the second part of the book (12:1-36:43) should be thought of as the story of the forefathers. The remaining material (37:1-50:26), the story of the fourth generation, the story of Yosef and

his brothers, constitutes an independent third part of the book. It is the story of covenant fulfillment, rather than covenant contraction. Consequently, it details the descent to Egypt and deals with the crucial historical issue of leadership, foreshadowed in the focus on Yosef and Yehuda.

Alternatively, we may focus on continuity rather than disjunction. Much of Sefer Bereishit can be construed as dealing with the themes of destiny and morality. Often these themes coexist in tension. The book expresses this tension with a series of stories pitting prophecy and vision on the one hand, against family relationships on the other. In the first generation, Avraham faces the challenge of choosing between his prophecy and his sons. Twice God commands him to separate from a son. He sends away Yishmael and is told to sacrifice Yitzchak. In the second generation a similar challenge is posed. Rivka has heard the oracle of "Ve-rav ya'avod tza'ir," and the older shall serve the younger. She knows destiny's decree that Yaakov must be the chosen son. But this entails the moral horror of arranging the theft of the blessings and, as she herself acknowledges, forever sundering her relationship with her older son Esav (27:45). Once again, vision vs. family, destiny vs. morality.

The story of the third generation, the saga of Yaakov, constitutes an extension of the same conflict. As argued in the shiur on parashat Vayishlach, the crucial question in reading the story of Yaakov is how will Yaakov treat Esav? Will he stand confident in his destiny, in his mother's prophecy and his blessings, or will he turn against the grain, choose to patch things up with Esav and in the short run choose family, relationship and morality over destiny?

In this light, the story of the fourth generation, Yosef and his brothers, the story of Yosef and Yehuda, constitutes an extension of the book-long discourse. Both Yosef and his brothers operate with visions: Yosef has his dreams and the brothers their confidence and heritage. Who will rule and how will they treat each other? How will they negotiate the tension between destiny and morality? In the end, both Yehuda and Yosef choose a radical solution. Yehuda's plea on behalf of Binyamin constitutes an offer to excise himself from the future nation of Israel. For the sake of his father and his familial responsibility, Yehuda offers to remain alone as a slave in Egypt. He not only gives up leadership of the family and future nation, but even membership. This too in the end constitutes Yosef's solution. In the choice between his dreams, vision and destiny on the one hand and his family's needs on the other, Yosef chooses his family, reinterpreting his dreams and destiny as necessary.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 45:2-3 and 45:14-15. What is the brothers' immediate reaction to Yosef's surprising revelation? How does this foreshadow their actions after their father's death?
2. Read 48:1-8. Why does Yaakov mention the death and burial of Rachel? See Rashi 48:7 and 47:28-48:1. Why are these verses problematic for Rashi's claim? Think of an alternate explanation connected to the shiur above. Why does Yaakov say (48:8), "Who are these?" See Ibn Ezra 48:8. For alternative ideas see 27:18 or 48:15, 21-22 and the first two parts of the shiur above.
3. Linking up the four generations of Sefer Bereishit as suggested above may lead to the following conclusion. Each successive generation tilts more clearly towards the family-morality pole of the vision-prophecy-destiny vs. family-morality dialectic. In some sense, Avraham and Yehuda-Yosef occupy opposite ends of a spectrum. Think about whether this is correct or not. Examine the context of each of the four cases of the tension mentioned above. Can we formulate criteria for when to follow vision-destiny and when to prefer morality? What are the unique circumstances of the sending away of Yishmael and the Akeida? What light, if any, does this shed on how to interpret Rivka's actions?
4. See 15:13. Reread 44:16, 44:13 and 50:18 in light of the God's promise to Avraham. Might this suggest a completely different reading of Yehuda than the one proposed in this week and last week's shiur? Do we know for certain that the succeeding generations know about 15:13?

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