

# THE LITERATURE OF SCRIPTURE

Vayiggash 5779

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## I.

I CANNOT THINK OF A NARRATIVE in the Torah more dramatic and more emotional than the scene that opened our *parashah* this morning. Were the story of Yosef a movie or tv show this scene would make it Oscar- or Emmy-worthy. Unfortunately, our familiarity with the story numbs our sensitivity to its beats, but, nonetheless, here's a recap. Yosef, as we learned last week, has made a new life for himself in Egypt since being sold as a slave by his brothers. He has a wife, he has children, he is second-in-command to the throne. But all of that is for naught after he sees his brothers in Egypt needing food. For whatever reason, since seeing them he has been playing a psychological game with them, making them question everything.

He's in the endgame now, having framed Binyamin for theft. The brothers don't know what to do. Yaakov has told them that without Binyamin he would have nothing, that they have to ensure his safety in Egypt. And so Yehudah begs Yosef for mercy. He tells him how his elderly father has already lost his beloved wife and one beloved son, how hesitant Yaakov was to send Binyamin – he is the last remaining connection to the wife he loved and lost – and that, should Binyamin remain in captivity, Yaakov will lose the will to live, grief-stricken at having lost all he has loved.

This is when Yosef breaks. Sobbing, screaming, he turns to his brothers:

אָנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי

I am Yosef! Is my father still alive? (Gen. 45:3)

This is the scene we have been waiting for all these weeks. Yosef's walls falling down. The reveal. The shock of the brothers.

But there's a nagging question: *Yosef knows his father is alive*. Yehudah has just been talking about Yaakov. And it's not the first time he's been mentioned. The brothers spoke of him on their first trip (42:9), and Yosef asked about his well-being the moment the brothers turned up a second time (43:28). Why is Yosef asking after Yaakov when he already knows he's well? It doesn't make any sense!

## II.

I came across a fascinating answer to this question in an essay by Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun – one of the most prominent and influential teachers of Tanakh in Israel – in which he is answering a slightly different oft-asked question: why doesn't Yosef ever contact his father?

It's a question that bothers many commentators. While he was a slave and imprisoned it makes sense why he couldn't contact his father, but once Yosef is second-in-command, why not take advantage of his position and resources and let his father know he is well and what happened. Why,

instead, does Yosef make a completely new life for himself and forget his past? Though the commentators offer a variety of answers, R. Bin-Nun makes a provocative, yet fascinating and compelling suggestion: *Yosef suspects that it was Yaakov who orchestrated his sale to Egypt.*

Think about it for a moment. Yosef has grown up in the covenantal family, hearing about God's charge to his great-grandfather Avraham. He knows that his grandfather Yitzchak had a brother, Yishmael, who was not chosen to carry on the covenant and was thus cast away. His uncle, Esav – whom Yosef met when he was a child *en route* to the Land of Israel – was similarly rejected in order for his father Yaakov to assume his role in the covenantal chain. The story of his family has been one of rejection and confirmation, in which the rejected child receives his own inheritance and land but is no longer part of the covenant.

Now imagine you are seventeen-year-old Yosef. You are one of twelve sons and, right now, it's unclear which of you is going to become the covenantal child, but such a decision must be made at some point. You've started having dreams – which you've eagerly told your father – which you think mark you as the covenantal child. Moreover, your father has given you alone a special cloak, again marking you as different from your siblings. But then he tells you to go find your brothers for some unknown reason and, before you know it, you're in a pit and being taken by Yishmaelim (or Midianim) to be sold as a slave in Egypt.

Here's the kicker: not only did your father instruct you to find your brothers who were hanging out on a trade-route, but you were taken down to Egypt by a tribal clan your father would know. The Yishmaelim (and, for that matter, the Midianim) are, after all, the children of Yaakov's uncle – they're family! It can't have been hard for Yaakov to send word to his cousins about the plan – a plan they themselves would have understood having grown up with their own story of covenantal rejection.

That Yosef ends up in Egypt as second-in-command only furthers his belief that he is the rejected son. Just as his great-uncle Yishmael made a life for himself, just as his uncle Esav inherited Seir and his own great wealth, so, too, does Yosef effectively inherit Egypt. Egypt is to be his land and inheritance.

### III.

But all that changes when Yehudah speaks. Because, for the first time in thirteen years, Yosef learns that his father was never involved in his sale. That he was not rejected like his uncle and great-uncle. His destiny will not follow those of his ancestors. His father Yaakov was duped. And so, when Yosef asks his question *ha-'od 'avi chai*, “is my father still alive?” our focus should not be on Yaakov's health but Yosef's relationship: *'avi*, “my father.” After all these years of feeling rejected, after over a decade of thinking he had been cast away, he has a father once again. His questions about Yaakov were, until this point, merely small-talk and fact-seeking: is this man who cast me away still living? But now it's personal: *ha-'od 'avi chai*, is my father – the man who has been dead to me for thirteen years – still okay? I want to be with him!

#### IV.

I think there are several important messages that emerge from this understanding of the story, chief among them a phrase I often tell people: never claim someone's actions are nefarious when they can be more easily chalked up to incompetence or ignorance. But there's a broader issue I want to highlight, something that I have learned about myself these past few years and our Jewish community, too, that has been amplified by teaching *Sefer Bereishit* at Maimo this year: our woeful ignorance of Tanakh.

I don't mean here a general knowledge of Tanakh, confusing our Eliyahu's with our Elisha's (as I almost did this past week) nor knowing our Shmuel's from our Shaul's, nor our Rechav'am's from our Yerav'am's. While this kind of ignorance is a problem, I think it pales in comparison to our literary knowledge of Tanakh: our inability to read Biblical stories properly. Part of what makes R. Yoel Bin-Nun's solution so amazing to me is how obvious and elegant a read of the story it is. But why did no one else think of that? Why didn't it occur to me? Because I don't read the stories of *Sefer Bereishit* properly. I neither note the themes nor the word-choices, I don't pay attention to the development of the characters found within, I don't connect the various narratives.

Too often, I read Tanakh solely as Scripture, *forgetting that it is also literature*. It may be Scripture first, and it may be Divine literature, but that doesn't excuse my ignorance.

And so, I want to end by issuing you all a challenge. We begin *Sefer Shemot* in just a couple of weeks. There is no story more familiar than this. The Exodus, the plagues, Moshe – it's all in there. But therein lies the problem. Because, just as with the Yosef story, our familiarity with the story numbs our sensitivity to its beats. And so, I want to encourage you to read the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* not broken into its *parshiyot* nor its chapters (which are a Christian innovation) but just as a story. It's holy. It's Scripture. But it's also God's literature – and read it accordingly. Read it with fresh eyes. Read it with the same enthusiasm you would read your favourite books or binge-watch your favourite tv-series. What strikes you? What didn't you ever notice before? What are your theories about the story?

If you read *Sefer Shemot* like this, you may just find yourself appreciating the story in ways you had never thought possible.