

I Am Joseph -- Is My Father Still Alive?

Introduction

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayigash*, Joseph, viceroy of Egypt, is visited by ten of his brothers, who sold him into slavery in Egypt. They “bow low to him” and wish to buy food, as the famine is ravaging the Land. Joseph knows who they are, but they do not recognize him. He toys with them: “You are spies. Go back and bring me your brother Benjamin, whom you left behind. I am keeping Simeon as hostage.” They do so and come back with Benjamin.

Joseph greets them and says: “How is your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still in good health?” They reply: “It is well with your servant our father; he is still in good health.”

Joseph then accuses Benjamin of stealing a special goblet and threatens to enslave him as punishment. Judah defends Benjamin and offers to take his place. [Gen. 42:1-45:2]

At that point, Joseph finally reveals his identity to his brothers, saying:

אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי? -- “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?”

And his brothers could not answer him, for they were startled by his presence.
[Gen. 45:3]

This is a strange question for Joseph to ask, right after he reveals himself, especially since he had just asked that very question. One would think he would start by explaining to his startled brothers how he got to where he is.

Interpretations

-Sforno: Joseph was pretentiously incredulous: How could my father have survived so many years of worry over my fate after what you did to me?

-Tur HaAroch: Joseph's question was just to start a conversation, make his brothers feel at ease, and make personal contact with them. Also, to reinforce his identity: He did not say "your father", as he had so far, but "my father".

-Joseph is overwhelmed with emotion and thinks of his father first. Judah offers himself as a substitute slave for Benjamin in an impassioned speech that mentions Jacob "our father" fourteen times. Then, the Torah says:

Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!"... His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace. [Gen. 45:1-2]

-Bet HaLevi: Joseph is saying: "You hypocrites! You tell me you are concerned my father will die if Benjamin does not return. But when you disposed of me, why were you not concerned he might have died when I did not return? Isn't my father still alive, even though he knows Benjamin is with you and may never return to him?"

-Torah Temimah: Joseph knew his brothers had a habit of lying, as when they lied to Jacob about his death, so he asked again: "Is my father *really* alive?"

-Kli Yakar: Depends on the point of view:

-From Joseph's point of view, he thought his brothers first told him Jacob was alive hoping he would take pity on an old man and not cause his death over the possible loss of Benjamin. So he asked again: "Tell me *as your brother*. Is my father really still alive?"

-From the brothers' point of view, Joseph was reminding them of their sin. He said: "my father", meaning: "He is my father and not your father because you did not take pity on his suffering, as if he were not your father." So they were terrified and unable to speak.

Builds on Midrash:

They were "startled by his presence" because they were embarrassed. [Midrash Tanchuma, Vayigash 5]

When Joseph realized this, he spoke again: "I am Joseph, your brother" (אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֶחָיְכֶם), not just "I am Joseph".

Why didn't Joseph notify Jacob that he was still alive?

If Joseph loved his father so much, why did he let him mourn for him for 22 years instead of notifying him he was alive and viceroy of Egypt?

-Midrash: It was God's plan:

[The brothers] decided: "Let us make a vow to excommunicate any one of us who tells our father, Jacob, that Joseph is alive." Judah said: "Reuben is not here, and a vow of excommunication cannot be executed unless ten witnesses are present." So what did they do? They included the Holy One, blessed be He, in their pact of excommunication [and God agreed]. [Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev 2:5]

So God agreed that Jacob must not be told, because it suited His plan.

-Another Midrash: Isaac knew prophetically that Joseph was alive, but said nothing. The Torah says:

And all of Jacob's sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him [for the loss of Joseph]. But he refused to be comforted and said: "No, I will go down to the grave mourning for my son." And his father wept for him. [Gen. 37:35]

This does not refer to Jacob weeping for Joseph, but Isaac weeping because of Jacob's deep pain... And why did Isaac not reveal to Jacob that Joseph was alive? Because Isaac thought: If the Holy One, blessed be He, has not revealed it to him, who am I to reveal it to him? [Genesis Rabbah 84:21]

-The Lubavitcher Rebbe: [Likutei Sichot 10 p 129ff] Joseph followed the same logic. If God didn't want Jacob to know Joseph was alive, he was not going to inform Jacob either.

-Some say Joseph was determined to forget the past and move on.

-Iturei Torah (20th-century Israel): Joseph was afraid God would punish his brothers for selling him. He wanted them to repent. Since they sold him into slavery out in Egypt out of jealousy, he resolved to test whether they still had feelings of jealousy. So he gave his brothers gifts, but gave Benjamin even bigger gifts; he framed Benjamin as a thief and said he would enslave him to see the brothers' reaction. Would they tacitly applaud the move because they envied him as his father's favorite and the other son of his beloved Rachel? No! They argued passionately in favor of Benjamin and Judah even offered himself as a slave in place of Benjamin. Then Joseph knew they had repented. He could then reveal himself and tell his brothers to let Jacob know that he was still alive.

-Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, citing others: Joseph was not sure Jacob would welcome finding out he was alive. He wondered: Does *my* father still love me? He was afraid his father stopped caring about him even before they parted. Why? Because:

-Jacob held grudges. He held grudges against his three eldest sons: Shimon and Levi (for killing the people of Shechem) and Reuben (for allegedly sleeping with his concubine Bilhah), even severely criticizing them on his deathbed. That is how the fourth son, Judah, became the key figure.

-Jacob was mad at Joseph for his dream and rebuked him:

What is this dream of yours? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground? So his brothers were jealous of him *and his father kept the matter in mind*. [Gen. 37:10-11]

So he could very well have written off Joseph.

-Before the brothers acted against Joseph, the Torah says:

Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem... Go and see how they are and how the flocks are faring, and bring word back to me." [Gen. 37:12-14]

Jacob knew the brothers were jealous of Joseph, yet he sends Joseph alone to meet them far from home? Jacob knew the power of sibling jealousy from his own brother Esau planning to kill him. Did he not suspect that might happen to Joseph? Joseph later wondered why his father sent him on this mission.

-The point when Joseph could no longer control himself and revealed his identity to his brothers was when Judah, in his impassioned defense of Benjamin, said:

Your servant my father said to us, "As you know, my wife [Rachel] bore me two sons. But one [Joseph] is gone from me, and I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast, and I have not seen him since. If you take this one [Benjamin] from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to Sheol in sorrow." [Gen. 44:27-31]

Joseph finally knew that his father grieved for him and still loved him! His question "Is my father still alive?" meant he wanted further reassurance that he would soon be reunited with him.

-Ramban (Nachmanides): [on Genesis 42:9] The Torah says:

Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Joseph said to [his brothers]: "You are spies". [Genesis 42:9]

How does it follow? Joseph believed his dreams were prophetic and will be fulfilled in order. In his first dream, his eleven brothers bowed down to him. In the second, his father was included too. If he had told Jacob he was alive, Jacob and his clan would have come to see him and the second

dream would have come true before the first. He therefore waited until after all eleven of his brothers, including Benjamin, had come to him.

Conclusion

Ramban's interpretation is the one I prefer: It neatly explains the entire chain of events, including why Joseph wanted Benjamin there.

Shabbat shalom.