

Parshas Vayigash

The Neuroscience of "Ani Yosef"

וַיִּכְרַ יוֹסֵף אֶת אֶתְיוֹ וְהֵם לֹא הִכְרָהוּ: (בראשית מב, ח)

"And Yosef recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him." (Genesis 42:8)

When I was studying in yeshiva, a Tanach teacher of mine once bemoaned the prevalence of what called the "kindergarten effect." Because many of us in the Jewish community and broader Western world have been exposed to stories in the Torah since we were quite young, we have a tendency to accept and gloss over aspects of Biblical narratives that, if we would approach them with fresh eyes, would present very serious questions.

One of those questions is about Yosef and his brothers. It's a question that's bothered me for over ten years, and I recently came across a cartoon which captured this problem quite strikingly, and I'd like to share it with you today.

But first a bit of context:

When the Land of Israel was plagued by a terrible famine and the Shevatim, Yaakov's other sons, first came to Mitzrayim – Egypt - to purchase food, they were brought before their brother Yosef who was now viceroy of the country.

The Torah says that the brothers did not recognize Yosef, and they did not realize that this fully grown adult was actually their long-lost brother whom they had sold as a young teenager year back.

Having heard this story many times before, we often just accept it at face value. And for a while I did too. But about 10 years ago, I simply couldn't do it anymore. Let me show you why:



Why didn't the brothers realize that the Semitic person in front of them looked a lot like their brother?!

Now in fairness, the gemara appears to be bothered with this as well and¹ explains that Yosef had grown a beard during the 22 years he was away. But that actually just question even stronger. Granted this grown man doesn't look like the 17-year-old boy that they had thrown into a pit, but now he should look even more like them!²

¹ Yevamos 88a

² See Ramban ad loc who asks a similar question.

Moreover, the real clincher is that the midrash says that Yosef resembled his father Yaakov.³ So now fully grown with a beard, why didn't one of the 11 people standing in the room even stop and think to themselves for just a minute, "you know, he looks like a younger version of Dad?!"⁴

If we're going to try to explain the Shevatim's apparent lack of deductive skills, we first need to focus on how the human brain reasons. There are two parts to reaching to a conclusion: One is the observation. The sensory information we take in through our eyes, ears, mouth, etc.

But that information is just raw, unprocessed data. It gets stored away in our short-term memory (in the temporal lobe), and only then do we decide how much attention to give to that information. The second step takes place in a completely different part of our brains (prefrontal cortex) when recall that data and try to put it all together and make sense of it by comparing it to the way we see the rest of the world.

This two-step process happens so quickly every instant in our lives that it appears to be one thing. When we step outside and get wet, we automatically reason that it's raining (or that someone water on our heads from the second story window).

But those are two separate steps. And sometimes, the second one doesn't always happen. Because as I said before, the brain reaches conclusions by integrating our observations with the way we see the rest of the world. And if it doesn't fit in - we just unconsciously dismiss it.

³ Breishis Rabbah 84:8

⁴ See Sifsei Tzaddik (R' Yustman) who raises the possibility that the Shevatim didn't know what their father looked like at that age (as they were born when Yaakov was much older) so they didn't instinctively notice the resemblance.

The same was true with Yosef's brothers. They were so sure that Yosef's dreams of kingship were false, that even though this bearded man in front of them looked a whole lot like a younger version of Yaakov in an Egyptian headdress, and all their observations led to that inevitable conclusion, they couldn't entertain the notion that this viceroy was their brother!⁵ It simply didn't compute with the way they saw the world.⁶

And that, Rav Pam explains⁷ was ultimately Yosef's rebuke⁸ to the brothers: "Ani Yosef." I am Yosef. It took you that long to figure it out?!

"The only reason why you couldn't fathom it was me is because you had written me off! You were so sure of your own assessment of my potential that you couldn't entertain the possibility that my dreams would come true."

Much like the brothers, it is often easy to be blinded in the land of Mitzrayim, the world of exile, the world of *golus*, and shortchange the tremendous potential that every Jew possesses. To write someone off because we are so sure of who they really are. That's what we can learn from Yosef's brothers. What we can learn from the Ani Yosef. And I don't want to minimize that.

But there's something else we can learn from the Ani Yosef. Something that we can learn from Yosef himself. Because it was very possible for Yosef to blind himself. To write off his dreams

⁵ See midrash that Yosef knew birth order

⁶ See Radak, Ramban, and Ohr Hachaim ad loc, Likkutei Sichos 1, 88; and Ateres L'melech 47-48.

⁷ Ateres L'melech id.

as adolescent fantasies. To write himself off as a Jew and consign his fate as an Egyptian.⁹ Even after he became viceroy, he still saw himself as Yosef despite the pressures and temptations that came along with the job.¹⁰ He never lost sight of who he was and who could become.

As human beings, we have the unfortunate tendency to write off people in life. But all too often, the first person we write off is ourselves. As we walk the well-trodden path of *golus* like Yosef did before us, it's crucial to remember the bracha that Yaakov gave him. "*Ben poras Yosef alei ayin.*"¹¹ That Yosef's greatness was guarding his eyes. Not only eschewing lewdness,¹² but protecting the way he saw the world. A world in which Yosef becoming viceroy of Mitzrayim and still remembering the Torah he studied with his father 22 years later¹³ wouldn't seem like an impossible feat.

⁹ See previous chapter "Know Thyself."

¹⁰ See Genesis 41:40-45; Genesis Rabbah 94:3.

¹¹ Genesis 49:22

¹² Breishis Rabbah 98:18

¹³ See Breishis Rabbah 94:3 and 95:3 that Yosef sent wagons to symbolize the commandment of *eglah arufa*. When a person is found murdered on the road between cities with no leads as to the culprit, the members of the Sanhedrin Hagadol arrive with the elderly sages of the nearest city to conduct a ceremony where a calf is beheaded and the sages declare "Our hands have spilled this blood" (See Deuteronomy 21:9). While it is perfectly evident that the elderly sages did not kill the traveler, there is an element of culpability of the entire town for not escorting the traveler or at the very least demonstrating kinship so as to not leave him as vulnerable prey on the wild roads (See Sotah 46a). Such a situation has many parallels to Yosef and his relationship with his brothers, but in light of the above, it most saliently reflects the fact that like the townsfolk, the brothers had written off a brother.

May we be *zoche* to guard our eyes to protect and treasure the way we see the world. A world in which each one of us – ourselves and the ones we love – has the potential to accomplish great things.