Yeshivas Toras Moshe
ישיבת תורת משה
Rabbi Moshe Meiselman
Rosh Yeshiva

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

תשפ"ג

The story of Yosef and the brothers is a very intriguing story. Yosef has dreams which he thinks are a form of nevuoh and he feels obligated to convey them to his brothers. Yosef's first dream only included his brothers, but his second dream included his father – so he told his father about it. Yosef knew it was forbidden for a novi to suppress his nevuoh and this is why he felt obligated to report them – regardless of the problems that it would cause him.

Yosef was the ben zekunim of Yaakov. Targum Onkelos translates this to mean Yosef was the wisest of his sons and therefore was singled out to receive all of Yaakov's Torah. The Ramban reveals to us that Avrohom gathered around him an entire community in Canaan who adopted his beliefs. The members of this community were all called Ivrim. They were outcasts in all other societies. The Egyptians absolutely despised them. They refused to even eat together with Ivrim to show how much contempt they felt for those who didn't worship idols. So when Yosef was about to be made the ruler over all of Egypt, Pharaoh had to consult with his advisers first. It would be such an insult to make a hated Ivri a ruler over all Egypt! He needed their permission to make such a drastic move.

Yosef is sold into slavery and is bought by Potifar who quickly sees his talents and makes him in charge of everything in his estate. But in addition to seeing Yosef's talents, he notices that Hashem is helping him and is making him successful. How did he notice this? It was because Yosef was constantly mentioning Hashem's name. It was only Hashem Who was making everything successful. Yosef was an Ivri in the truest sense. He doesn't care that everyone around him is worshipping idols. He has no problem telling the world that Hashem is giving him success – even if he will be hated and rejected because of it.

The incident with Potifar's wife is very complex. Yosef has a tremendous nisayon. On the one hand, he had his dreams of being the future leader of Klal Yisroel, but in the meantime, he sees he is going nowhere – he has been rejected by his brothers and is but a mere slave to an Egyptian. Potifar's wife is offering him the world on a platter – he will be a free man and also a nobleman in Egyptian high society! But ultimately Yosef refuses her advances. Why? Yosef tells her that it is a sin to be with her and Hashem will judge him harshly for it. There is reward and punishment for what we do in this world. But in her desperation, Potifar's wife grabs Yosef's cloak. The midrash describes how unbelievably difficult this moment was for Yosef to break free from her grip and run away. It took superhuman strength.

What helped him overcome this temptation?

Yosef saw that being with her in this world will mean being with her in the next world as well. He had to choose between success in olom hazeh and success in olom haboh. This is the way we all should frame our decisions. Which path with give me the maximum olom haboh which is forever and ever?

At that very moment, Yosef is struggling with every taavoh that there is – taavas noshim, taavas mommon, taavas kovod. She promises Yosef that he will be freed and made an Egyptian nobleman. But Yosef pulls himself free and doesn't trust himself to take an extra 30 seconds to get his cloak back. He is out the door – knowing he is leaving behind incriminating evidence in her hands. Why? It shows that even the greatest tzaddikim can never trust themselves – let alone we who are on a much lower level cannot afford to trust ourselves in the face of an overwhelming yetzer.

After Yosef leaves, Potifar's wife decides to frame Yosef for attempted rape – and she insults him for good measure. She complains to her husband that he bought this despicable Ivri into our household who tried to take advantage of her. Potifar throws Yosef in the jail pit. But, Yosef never stops talking about how Hashem is helping him. He eventually takes over the jail because he is so successful – even though he is one of the most hated people in Egypt. He remains an Ivri.

Then comes a very subtle nisayon – Yosef is faced with two inmates who look down and depressed. Will he just ignore them and flunk the test? Or will he notice and take the time to ask them what's wrong and try to lift their spirits? Yosef passes the test and tries to help them and he interprets their dreams. After realizing that the wine steward will be reinstated to his post in Pharaoh's palace, Yosef asks his help to get him out of jail. He is an Ivri and he wants to go back to his land of the Ivrim! He doesn't belong here in Egypt!

Then Pharaoh has his dream and Yosef interprets it. But again, Yosef takes absolutely no credit for his abilities. It all comes from Hashem.

Yosef is made the ruler of Egypt and now he has a confrontation with his brothers.

Yosef knows Hashem is running the world. He knows his father is suffering with every passing minute thinking Yosef is dead. But he spends all this time playing this elaborate, cruel game with his brothers – pretending they are spies and framing them for theft. Yosef is a tzaddik! What is he trying to achieve by tormenting his brothers? It surely couldn't be for revenge, because we read in Parshas Vayechi that Yosef reassures his brothers that he has no intention of taking revenge for what they did to him after Yaakov died. He tells them that he knows Hashem has arranged this whole series of events to work out for the good even though your intentions were bad. Hashem used your bad middos to bring about His desired result of bringing Klal Yisroel into golus under the most ideal circumstances. Yosef sees that it has nothing to do with him.

So why is he playing around with his brothers knowing his father is suffering?

What did Yehudah say to convince Yaakov to allow Binyomin to go back to Egypt with them? Yehudah took personal responsibility by saying he is putting his olom hazeh and olom haboh on the line as a guarantee for Binyomin's safe return. Yaakov sends them off with a tefilloh that they will find favor in the eyes of the Egyptian ruler and maybe they will find Yosef as well.

When Yehudah pleads with Yosef to allow Binyomin to come back, he says his poor father will suffer – and then he slips – he admits that he put himself as a guarantor! "Take me as a slave instead of Binyomin so at least I'll still have an olom haboh!" At this point, Yosef couldn't retrain himself. He reveals himself to his brothers that he is really Yosef, and then he asks the strangest question – "is my father still alive?" How could it be that Yosef doesn't know if Yaakov is alive? They have been talking non-stop about how much Yaakov has been suffering!

The midrash to this posuk makes a puzzling observation: How difficult it will be to endure the Yom Hadin and the Yom of Tochocho. If Yosef, the youngest of his brothers, could deliver such a scathing rebuke which made them speechless, how more so will we be humiliated by Hashem's rebuke on the day of judgment!

What was this rebuke that Yosef is giving when he asks if his father

is still alive? And how will it parallel Hashem's rebuke on the day of judgment?

The Beis HaLevi gives an incredibly powerful explanation of this midrash.

Every time a person does an aveiroh, or neglects to do a mitzvah, he invariably makes some kind of excuse for himself. He tries to explain why it was too difficult to avoid it or it was really a mitzvah. But then, Hashem will turn around and ask us: if that is the case, why wasn't it too difficult to overcome those same obstacles when it came to doing something you wanted to do?

Similarly, Yehudah is professing that he cares so much for Yaakov and can't bear to see him suffer the loss of a beloved son. Yosef asks, do you really care about your father? Are you really incapable of causing him pain for the loss of a son? Where was all this care and compassion for Yaakov when you sold me into slavery 22 years ago? Yes, the brothers had concocted a whole rationale to convince themselves that they were really justified. But deep down in their hearts, the Torah testified that they were jealous of Yosef. That was the real motivation. So you don't really care about your father – you really care about yourself.

Yosef realized that the biggest favor he could do for Yaakov was to get the brothers to recognize their failure and to do teshuvoh for it. Without correcting this mistake, they couldn't go further. They were stuck in their rationalization that Yosef wasn't fit to be one of the shevotim, and this prevented them from becoming the Shivtei Koh. So Yosef arranged for this whole drama to bring out the point that they were living a lie this entire time and at the core it was just jealousy.

The brothers were forced to realize their 22 year-long mistake and they were speechless. If the brothers couldn't answer Yosef, how can we stand up to Hashem when He shows how much we have lied to ourselves? When a person isn't honest with himself, he can't move forward in life. He has constructed a web of self-serving excuses and rationalizations that prevent him from really growing and living up to his true potential.

I sometimes talk to bochurim and discuss their future. Hashem has given our generation incredible gifts. One of them is the opportunity to take limud haTorah very seriously. We need to ask ourselves – how seriously do we really take limud Torah?

There is one more point: the brothers come back and tell Yaakov the good news – Yosef is still alive! But there is one problem. Yosef is that monster that has been tormenting our family this entire time! Yaakov is justifiably worried. What has happened to Yosef during this past 22 years in Egypt?

Yosef sends agolos. There is an important message in these agolos. He wanted to convey to Yaakov that he was able to hold on to who he was the entire time he was away from his family. He was a slave, a prisoner, a ruler – all in this foreign, morally corrupt country where they despised Ivrim. How was Yosef able to hold on? He kept learning the same Torah that his father taught him. He held on to Torah. This is the only way you can hold on and withstand all the nisyonos and not get swept away.

The Greeks, the Romans, they were very insightful. They knew very well that the only way to get Klal Yisroel to give up their separate identity and to integrate them into their empires is to forbid them from learning Torah. Taking away their connection to Torah is the key to controlling their identity and making them loyal citizens with no other allegiances. The Russians also knew that in order to integrate the Jews into Russian society, they had to shut down Yeshivas Volozhin. As long as they keep learning Torah, nothing is going to work. You have to keep that connection throughout your life, otherwise you will get swept into the crazy, stupid culture that the world is steeped in. And just when you think it can't get any crazier, it does.

We have to be honest about the dangers we face when we leave the protected walls of the beis midrash. We need to take the Torah seriously or otherwise we will lose our connection to Hashem.

There is a machlokes between the Ran and the Rambam about the basic mitzvah of Talmud Torah. The Ran says you are obligated to learn Torah whenever you aren't occupied with something necessary. That is bittul Torah. The Rambam says the basic obligation to learn is a little during the day and a little during the night. So what is the definition of bittul Torah in the Rambam's view? It is much worse than the Ran's bittul asei. When you have an opportunity to learn Torah and you decide to do something less important and you make Torah into a lower priority – you make Torah #2 and something else #1. This is an insult to the Torah – not just a bittul asei. It is a demonstration that you despise the word of Hashem and it is chayav koreis according to the Rambam.

We need to develop a sense of honesty and confront the truth about how important Torah is in our lives. Then we can move forward. People make cheshbonos about how they want to live their lives, but Hashem runs the world. These stories in Chumash are for us to learn from. Yosef held on to his limud haTorah and that was what allowed him to persevere with his connection to Hashem through everything he went through. The brothers fooled themselves and made all kinds of complicated cheshbonos and rationalizations in order to justify their jealousy and they couldn't move on. Until Yosef showed how they were living a lie and then they did teshuvoh and became the Shivtei Koh.