



**Why didn't Yosef send his father a sign of life?** by Rabbi Yoel Ben Nun

①

Why, during all his years of servitude and his rise to power, did Yosef not send a letter to his father telling him that he was still alive? What could possibly justify the anguish he caused his aged and loving father?

I would like to propose a solution which accounts for many perplexing aspects of the story. Our entire outlook on this story changes if we accept the fact that **YOSEF DID NOT KNOW THAT HIS BROTHERS HAD FOOLED HIS FATHER** with the coat, the blood, and the lie that Yosef had been devoured by wild animals. Such thoughts never occurred to him! Hence it was Yosef who spent thirteen years of slavery in Egypt and the following years of greatness wondering: "Where is my father? Why has no one come to look for me?"

All the factors are now reversed, when seen from Yosef's point of view. Egypt is, after all, close to Canaan, and Yaakov was a rich, important and influential man, with international familial and political connections. The Midianites or Yishmaelites who brought Yosef to Egypt were his cousins; is it possible that no one from that caravan could be located in all those years? Yishmael, Medan and Midian were all children of Avraham; even after they had migrated to Eastern lands, they certainly could be located. Yaakov had manpower enough to marshal herds and flocks as

a gift for Esav; surely he had manpower to search for Yosef. We know that Yaakov does not search for his son, as he thinks Yosef is dead, but Yosef has no way of knowing this. Yosef's wonder at his father's silence is joined by a terrible sense of anxiety which grows stronger over the years, as seasons and years pass by and no one comes. Yosef's anguish centers on his father: the voice inside him asking "Where is my father?" is joined by another harsh voice - "WHY DID MY FATHER SEND ME TO MY BROTHERS THAT DAY? Why did they strip off my coat the moment I arrived and throw me in the pit? Didn't he know how dangerous Shimon and Levi are, especially since I had brought him negative reports about them? What did my brothers tell him when they returned? Can he really have had no idea at all of what they had done?"

RAMBAN ②

וַיֵּאמֶר אֲנִי אוֹמֵר שֶׁכֵּל הָעֵנִינִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה  
 בְּיוֹסֵף מִחֻקְמָתוֹ בְּפִתְרוֹן הַחֲלוּמוֹת, כִּי  
 יֵשׁ לְחֵמָה אַחֵר שֶׁעָמַד יוֹסֵף בְּמִצְרַיִם יָמִים  
 רַבִּים וְהָיָה פְּקִיד וְנֹגֵיד בְּבַיִת שֵׁר גָּדוֹל  
 בְּמִצְרַיִם, אִיךָ לֹא שָׁלַח כָּתָב אֶחָד לְאָבִיו  
 לְהוֹדִיעוֹ וּלְנַחֲמוֹ, כִּי מִצְרַיִם קָרוֹב לְחִבְרוֹן  
 כְּשֵׁשָׁה יָמִים, וְאֵלּוּ הָיָה מִהֲלֹךְ שָׁנָה הָיָה  
 רָאוּי לְהוֹדִיעוֹ לְכָבוֹד אָבִיו, וְנִקְרַר פְּדִיוֹן  
 וּנְפִשׁוֹ וַיִּפְדָּנוּ בְּרַב מָמוֹן. אָבֵל הָיָה רוֹאֶה  
 כִּי הַשְׂמִתְנוּת אָחִיו לוֹ וְגַם אָבִיו וְכָל זְרַעוֹ  
 אִתּוֹ, אֲגַ אֶפְשֶׁר לְהִיּוֹת בְּאַרְצָם, וְהָיָה מְקַנְהָ  
 לְהִיּוֹתוֹ שֶׁם בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּרֵאוּתוֹ הַצְּלָחַתוֹ  
 הַגְּדוּלָּה שֶׁם, וְכָל שֶׁכֵּן אַחֲרֵי שֶׁשָּׁמַע חֲלוֹם  
 פְּרַעֲהַ שֶׁנִּתְבָּרַר לוֹ כִּי יָבֹאוּ כָּלֶם שָׂמָה  
 וַיִּתְקַיְמוּ כָּל חֲלוּמוֹתָיו:  
 וַיֵּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מְרַגְלִים אַתֶּם. הַעֲלִילָה  
 הַזֹּאת יִצְטָרֵךְ לְהִיּוֹת בָּהּ טַעַם אוֹ  
 אֲמֵתְלָא, כִּי מֵה עָשׂוּ לְהִיּוֹת אוֹמֵר לָהֶם

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## RABBI SACKS

By contrast, three of the most significant post-war psychotherapists were not merely Jewish by birth but profoundly Jewish in their approach to the human soul. Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Auschwitz, developed on the basis of his experiences there, an approach he called Logotherapy, based on "man's search for meaning". Though the Nazis took away almost every vestige of humanity from those they

consigned to the death factories, Frankl argued that there was one thing they could never take away from their prisoners: the freedom to decide how to respond.

Aaron T. Beck was one of the founders of what is widely regarded as the most effective forms of psychotherapy: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Among patients suffering from depression, he found that their feelings were often linked to highly negative thoughts about themselves, the world and the future. By getting them to think more realistically, he found that their mood tended to improve.

Martin Seligman is the founder of Positive Psychology, which aims not just to treat depression but actively to promote what he calls "authentic happiness" and "learned optimism". Depression, Seligman argued, is often linked to pessimism, which comes from interpreting events in a particular kind of way that he calls "learned helplessness". Pessimists tend to see misfortune as permanent ("It's always like this."), personal ("It's my fault.") and pervasive ("I always get things wrong."). This leaves them feeling that the bad they suffer is inevitable and beyond their control. Optimists look at things differently. For them, negative events are temporary, the result of outside factors, and exceptions rather than the rule. So, within limits, you can unlearn

pessimism, and the result is greater happiness, health and success.

What links all three thinkers is their belief that (1) there is always more than one possible interpretation of what happens to us, (2) we can choose between different interpretations and (3) the way we think shapes the way we feel. This gives all three a marked resemblance to a particular kind of Jewish thought, namely Chabad Chassidut, as developed by the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady (1745-1812). The word Chabad stands for the initial letters of the three intellectual virtues; chochma, bina and da'at, "wisdom, understanding and knowledge", which influence the more emotional attributes of chessed, gevura and tiferet, "kindness,

That is what makes me think that the work of Frankl, Beck and Seligman is Jewish in a way that Freudian psychoanalysis is not. At the heart of Judaism is the idea of human freedom. We are not prisoners of events but active shapers of them. To be sure, we may be influenced by unconscious drives, as Freud thought, but we can rise above them by "habits of the heart" that hone and refine our personality.

Yosef's life shows that we can defeat tragedy by our ability to see our life not just as a sequence of unfair events inflicted on us by others, but also as a series of divinely intended moves, each of which brings us closer to a situation in which we can do what God wants us to do.

Note what Yosef is doing here. He is reframing events so that the brothers will not have to live under an unbearable burden of guilt for having sold Yosef as a slave and deceived their father, causing him years of undiminished grief. But he is only able to do so for them because he has already done so for himself. When it happened, we cannot be sure. Was Yosef aware, all along, that the many blows of misfortune he suffered were all part of a divine plan, or did he only realize this when he was taken from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, and then made Viceroy of Egypt?

The text is silent on this point, but it is suggestive. More than any other character in the Torah, Yosef attributes all his achievements to God. This allows him to do what, in secular terms, Frankl, Beck and Seligman would all have advised him to do if he had been one of their patients: think of a mission he was being called on to fulfill (Frankl), reinterpret misfortune as possibility (Beck) and see the positive elements of his situation (Seligman). Not only was Yosef freed from a physical prison; he

freed himself from an emotional prison, namely resentment toward his brothers. He now saw his life not in terms of a family drama of sibling rivalry, but as part of a larger movement of history as shaped by Divine providence.

יב. (ב. כ) 'אין אסתר מגדת מולדתה' מלמד שתפשה  
 שתיקה בעצמה כרחל זקנתה שתפשה פלג שתיקה עמדו  
 כל גדולי זרעה בשתיקה רחל תפשה פלג שתיקה ראתה  
 סבלונותיה ביד אחותה ושתיקה בנימין בנה תפש בשתיקה  
 תדע שאבנו שהיתה בחשן היתה ישפה לומר יודע היה  
 במכירת יוסף ושתיקה ישפה ישפה ושתיקה שאול בן בנה  
 (ש"א י טו) ואת דבר המלוכה לא הגיד לו אסתר אין  
 אסתר מגדת מולדתה ואת עמה.

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MIDRASH  
 ESTHER RABA  
 CHANAN PORT 13  
 GOLD 5/15

39 And Joseph had been brought down to Egypt; Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh, the chamberlain of the butchers, a promi-

nent Egyptian, purchased him from the hand of the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. <sup>2</sup> HASHEM was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; and he remained in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup> His master saw that HASHEM is with him, and all that he would do HASHEM would make successful in his hand. <sup>4</sup> Joseph found favor in his eyes, and he attended him; he appointed him over his household, and all he had he placed in his custody.

<sup>5</sup> And it happened, that from the time he appointed him in his house and over all that he had, HASHEM blessed the Egyptian's house on Joseph's account, and HASHEM's blessing was in all that he had, in the house and in the field. <sup>6</sup> He left all that he had in Joseph's custody and he did not know anything that was with him except for the bread he ate.

חמישי יוסף

הוּרַד מִצְרַיִם וַיִּקְנֶהוּ פּוֹטִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרֹעָה שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים אִישׁ

מִצְרַיִם מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים אֲשֶׁר הוּרְדוּ שָׁמָּה: וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי אִישׁ מַצְלִיחַ וַיְהִי בְּבֵית אֲדֹנָיו הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי יְהוָה אִתּוֹ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהוָה מַצְלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ: וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חֵן בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּשְׂרַת אֹתוֹ וַיִּפְקְדוּהוּ עַל-בֵּיתוֹ וְכָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל נָתַן בְּיָדוֹ: וַיְהִי מֵאֵז הַפְּקִיד אֹתוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ וְעַל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת-בֵּית הַמִּצְרַיִם בְּגַלְל יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי בְרַכַּת יְהוָה בְּכָל-אֲשֶׁר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּבֵית וּבְשָׂדֵה: וַיַּעֲזֹב כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ בְּיַד יוֹסֵף וְלֹא יָדַע אֹתוֹ מֵאוֹמָה כִּי אִם-הִלָּחֵם אֲשֶׁר-הוּא אוֹכֵל

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VAYESHEV

<sup>21</sup> HASHEM was with Joseph, and He endowed him with appeal, and He put his favor in the eyes of the prison warden. <sup>22</sup> The prison warden placed all inmates that were in the prison in Joseph's custody, and everything that was done there, he would do. <sup>23</sup> The prison warden did not scrutinize anything that was in his custody, because HASHEM was with him; and whatever he would do HASHEM would make successful.

<sup>1</sup> And it happened after these things that the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and the baker transgressed against

וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶת-יוֹסֵף וַיֵּט אֵלָיו חֶסֶד וַיִּתֵּן חֵן בְּעֵינָיו שֶׁר בֵּית-הַסֵּהר: וַיִּתֵּן שֶׁר בֵּית-הַסֵּהר בְּיַד-יוֹסֵף אֶת כָּל-הָאֲסִירִים אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית הַסֵּהר וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עֹשִׂים שָׁם הוּא הֵיחָה עֹשֶׂה: אִין שֶׁר בֵּית-הַסֵּהר רָאָה אֶת-כָּל-מֵאוֹמָה בְּיָדוֹ בְּאֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אִתּוֹ וְאֲשֶׁר-הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהוָה מַצְלִיחַ: א שָׁבִיעוּ וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה חָטְאוּ מִשְׁקָה מִלֶּקְה-מִצְרַיִם וְהָאֵפָה

VAYESHEV  
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'Go back, buy us some food.' <sup>26</sup> We said, 'We cannot go down; if our youngest brother is with us, then we will go down, for we cannot see the man's face if our youngest brother is not with us.' <sup>27</sup> Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two [sons]. <sup>28</sup> One has left me and I said [to myself]: Alas, he has surely been torn to pieces, and I have not seen him until now! <sup>29</sup> And should you take this one, too, from my presence, and disaster befall him, then you will have brought down my hoariness in evil to the grave.'

<sup>30</sup> "And now, if I come to your servant my father and the youth is not with us — since his soul is so bound up with his soul — <sup>31</sup> it will happen that when he sees that the youth is gone, he will die,

and your servants will have brought down the hoariness of your servant our father in sorrow to the grave. <sup>32</sup> Because your servant took responsibility for the youth from my father saying, 'If I do not bring him to you then I will have sinned to my father for all time.' <sup>33</sup> Now, please let your servant remain in place of the youth as a servant to my lord, and let the youth go up with his brothers. <sup>34</sup> For how can I go up to my father if the youth is not with me, lest I see the evil that will befall my father!"

<sup>1</sup> Now Joseph could not endure in the presence of all who stood before him,

כו שבו שברו לנו מעט אכל: ונאמר  
לא נוכל לרדת אם ייש אחינו  
הקטן אתנו ויירדנו כי לא נוכל  
לראות פני האיש ואחינו הקטן  
כז איננו אתנו: ויאמר עבדך אבי  
אלינו אתם ידעתם כי שנים ילדה  
כח לי אשתי: ויצא האחד מאתי  
ונאמר אך טרף טרף ולא ראיתיו  
כט עד הנה: ולקחתם גם את זה  
מעם פני וקרהו אסון והורדתם  
ל את שיבתי ברעה שאלה: ועתה  
כבאי אל עבדך אבי והנער  
איננו אתנו ונפשו קשורה בנפשו:  
לא שני והיה פראותו כי אין הנער ומת

VAYIGASH

(7)

והורידו עבדיך את שיבת עבדך  
לב אחינו ביגון שאלה: כי עבדך  
ערב את הנער מעם אבי לאמר  
אם לא אביאנו אליה וחסאתי  
לב לאבי כל הימים: ועתה ישבנא  
עבדך תחת הנער עבד לאדני  
לד והנער יעל עם אחיו: כי איה  
אעלה אל אבי והנער איננו  
אתי פן אראה ברע אשר  
ה א ימצא את אבי: ולא יכל יוסף  
להתאפק לכל הנצבים עליו