

Vayyechi:
“Jacob’s dying wish: truth or fabrication?”

Genesis 50:15-21

On Jacob's death, the brothers were seized with fear that Joseph would then feel free to avenge their treatment of him in his youth. No sooner had they returned from the burial than they sent a report to Joseph stating that their father had left a dying instruction that he should pardon them for all their hostility toward him (see 50:15-17). Given that there is not so much as a hint of such an instruction in the earlier narrative, this begs the question whether it was pure fabrication or a reality.

That it was a fabrication may be inferred from the fact that the Torah does not even hint at it during the two final meetings between father and son. There was clearly ample opportunity for Jacob to have made Joseph swear an oath to that effect when he visited his sick father (48:1) or when all the sons were gathered around his deathbed for a final blessing (ch.49). But Jacob makes no such demand.

Significantly, the brothers could not bring themselves to report this 'instruction' directly to Joseph during the entire period of forty days that it took to embalm their father (see 50:2-3), followed by the waiting period of seventy days while the Egyptians held their ‘period of wailing’ for national figures (see v.3), nor during the succeeding period when they were all together with him on the journey to Canaan to bury their father and on the return home. The brothers thus had some 5-6 months during which to approach Joseph and communicate their father’s supposed wish for him to forgive them!¹

Had Jacob truly given them that instruction to communicate to Joseph, they would assuredly have done so with confidence. However, the wording, *Vayy'tzavu el yosef* – ‘they instructed that Joseph *be told*’ (v.16) – is indicative of their having delivered it by means of an intermediary, and of their trepidation at the prospect of having to look Joseph in the eye and deliver it themselves.² Knowing Joseph’s ability to ferret out the truth, accurately interpret dreams, and determine the future – which he had displayed in the case of his youthful dreams back home which had so aroused their jealousy and hostility but which clearly had been fulfilled.– their fear of being unmasked was understandable.

I have argued elsewhere³ that the textual evidence betrays the fact that Joseph paid no more than a couple of visits to the family homestead in Goshen throughout the seventeen years of their sojourn in Egypt, and that his brothers, out of embarrassment and fear, would have made themselves scarce during those visits. This would explain why the aged and infirm Jacob did not recognize Joseph’s two sons – his own grandchildren – when they entered his room (see 48:8), also why there is no record of any exchange between Joseph and his brothers throughout that period, and why the Torah describes Joseph as having had to learn from someone outside the family, and not from his brothers, that his father was desperately ill, and on his deathbed. This may be inferred from the phraseology, *Va-yomer leyoseph hinnei avicha choleh*, ‘And *someone* told Joseph,⁴ “Behold your father is ill”’ (48:1), with its implicit reproof, “Don’t you think it’s time to pay dad a visit?”

We may assume that the two main and related reasons for his absence were the history of enmity between him and his brothers and his concern for his aged father. For, had he been a regular visitor to the family home, the astute Jacob would certainly have picked up on the discomfort felt by the brothers in the presence of Joseph. He would have probed its cause to the

full. He would certainly have demanded an explanation of how they came into possession of his torn and blood-stained coat and how he emerged unmaimed after having been torn in pieces by a wild beast. The truth could hardly have been suppressed.

The reason Joseph wished to avoid this disclosure at all costs was undoubtedly his love and concern for the welfare of his aged father. For, had it all come out, the relationship between the brothers and their father would have been irrevocably destroyed. Jacob could never have forgiven their heinous kidnapping of his beloved Joseph, and, equally, their callous hoodwinking of their own father – through their charade of the torn coat – into believing that Joseph had been killed. How, indeed, could they have stood back impassively and watched him tear his clothes, don sackcloth, and descend into abject misery and mourning (see 37:34)?

The result would have been that Jacob would have cut off all contact with them, leaving him lonely and with no caring family to attend to his needs. Joseph, with the numerous affairs of state that preoccupied him, could not have filled that gap, so he could never contemplate leaving his father devoid of support. The only solution was for him to remain apart from the family and to leave his father in ignorance of what he had suffered at their hands.

It may be argued, however, that when the sick Jacob gives his final blessing to all his children, and turns to refer to Joseph, his enigmatic reference to “archers [who] dealt bitterly with him, shot at him, and hated him” (49:23) was surely aimed at the action of his brothers. However, had Jacob been aware of everything the brothers had perpetrated, it would have been inconceivable that he would not have insisted on an immediate reconciliation between them.

Furthermore, that vague allusion to Joseph's "archers" may have been to any of a host of difficulties – dangers, robbers, and kidnappers – that anyone, especially a youth travelling around the countryside alone, might have encountered. Furthermore, even if Joseph did not disclose to his father what they had done, we may assume that Jacob would have questioned him regarding what had prevented him from returning home immediately after having fulfilled his mission to ascertain how the brothers and their flocks were faring in the distant pasturages (see 37:13-14), and, more so, why he never returned or made contact for so many years.

It is also most surprising that Jacob never questions Joseph regarding how the brothers came to be in possession of his torn and blood-soaked coat and how he had been able to survive that attack by 'a wild beast.' That would surely have been the very first question to put to Joseph at their reunion! This also supports the contention that Joseph never breathed a word to his father of what the brothers had done to him.

So, by alluding to "the archers" who shot at Joseph, he may well have been referring obliquely to the many other dangers that Joseph had encountered during his lengthy absence, culminating in his fame and fortune in Egypt. Specifically, to the attempt of Potiphar's wife to seduce Joseph and her false allegation of his attempted sexual assault on her, his two-year imprisonment, and to the many jealous courtiers who must have envied the success of that Hebrew alien – as did the king's butler who 'forgot Joseph' (40:23). It is not inconceivable that news of these had leaked out, from the courtiers and prison guards to their families, and from them to the rank and file, until it reached Jacob's ears shortly after his arrival at Goshen.

Chief among those "archers" might have been the common citizens who had to surrender all their money, livestock, and harvests during the seven years of famine in accordance with

Joseph's survival plan which, finally, included the acquisition of nearly all private land – other than that owned by the priests – by the crown (see 47:13-26). Animosity toward him must have been especially keen on the part of the influential Egyptian soothsayers who, when called upon by Pharaoh, proved unable to interpret the import of his dreams. Any of those malcontents might have fulfilled the symbolic role of hostile “archers” as foreseen by Jacob in his death-bed vision. There is no proof, therefore, that he had any knowledge of the actions of the brothers, on account of which he might have been constrained to prevent Joseph from taking any revenge against them.

Let us consider the wording of the brothers’ message:

“Your father gave orders (*tzivah*) before his death, saying: ‘This shall you say to Joseph: Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father” (50:17).

What sounds particularly suspicious about the brothers’ allegation is why Jacob would have wished his sons to delay petitioning Joseph for a reconciliation until after his death. Surely, Jacob’s own moral and family authority could have secured that reconciliation long before, providing him with the relief and satisfaction of enjoying a family unity that had hitherto been denied to him.

Furthermore, a comparison of Joseph's initial assurance, on disclosing his identity to his brothers, with his final reassurance after the funeral and mourning for their father, is revealing:

Initial assurance
(Gen. 45:1-2, 5-8)

Joseph could no longer control himself in the company of all his attendants. He cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So, no one else was with Joseph when he

revealed himself to his brothers. He wept so loudly that the Egyptians could hear him, and the news reached Pharaoh's palace...

Joseph said to his brothers, "*I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now, do not be distressed or angry with yourselves that you sold me here, for God sent me ahead of you to save lives. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for another five years there will be no ploughing or reaping. So, God sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival in the land, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So, then, it was not you who sent me here, but God...*"

Final reassurance
(50:16-21)

They sent word to Joseph, saying, "*Your father left this instruction before his death: This is what you are to say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.*" And Joseph wept as they spoke to him.

Then his brothers went and threw themselves down before him, and said, "We are prepared to be your slaves." But Joseph said to them "Have no fear! Am I in place of God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, to bring about the present result – the survival of many lives. And so, fear not. I will provide for you and your children." Thus, he reassured them and set their minds at ease (*va-yedabber al libbam*).

Joseph's words beg the question, however, that, if he truly bore no grudge against his brothers, and believed beyond doubt that it was God alone who had orchestrated his kidnapping and sale at their hands, why then did he remain aloof from them all the years and not initiate any reconciliation in all their interests? Why keep them in agonizing suspense until the eleventh hour before assuring them that he had no intension of exacting any retribution, and why wait until they had to come groveling before him if they were, indeed, innocent agents of a divine plan?

The answer lies clearly in an appreciation of what store Joseph put by what he believed was God's revelations to him through the medium of his dreams. Hence, his initial prescient dreams had made the most powerful impression on him to the extent that he couldn't restrain

himself from sharing them with his father and brothers (see 37:5-11). This was followed by his interpretation of the dreams of the butler, the baker and King Pharaoh, to all of whom he emphasized that it was God revealing their import to serve His purpose (See Gen. 40:8; 41:16, 25). His initial dreams – of the brothers’ sheaves of corn bowing down to his, and of the sun, moon and eleven stars, bowing down to him – were unquestionably emblematic of his attainment of a position of prestige and authority with the ability to determine the destiny and security of his entire family. Joseph could not have been a partner, therefore, in any act of reconciliation until the divine promise of those dreams was fulfilled and he had succeeded in bringing his entire family to Egypt.

In Joseph’s initial assurance, he is overcome by emotion before he can speak and disclose his identity to his brothers. In doing so, he expresses a shared family identity: “I am your brother, Joseph.” Although this is immediately followed by the bomb-shell phrase, “whom you sold into Egypt,” Joseph had no other choice but to identify himself in that way if he was to convince the brothers of his identity. After all, no one in Egypt – or anywhere else as far as they knew – could possibly have known what they had perpetrated, other than the victim himself.

Furthermore, on an earlier occasion, when the brothers had visited Egypt to secure food and were charged by Joseph (whom they did not recognize) with having been spies, they muttered to each other,

“Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us.” Then Reuben spoke up and said to them, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy?’ But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood” They did not

know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them (see 42:21-24.).

Thus, Joseph would have felt assured that their shock at hearing him refer to that occurrence would have been mitigated somewhat by the fact that it was a subject that had already been in the forefront of their minds and consciences.

It is also telling that, in Joseph's 'initial reassurance' he is clearly conciliatory, introducing himself by the associative words, "I am *your brother*, Joseph," whereas, in the final reassurance, the brothers describe Jacob as "your father," not as "*our* father," as if placing a familial distance between them. At the outset, Joseph is at pains to persuade them that he bears no grudge against them for having sold him, emphasizing his certainty that it was all part of God's plan and, by implication, the fulfilment of his divinely predictive dreams that he would be the instrument of their survival.

In the 'final re-assurance,' however, Joseph assumes a self-righteous air, refusing to act 'in place of God' by dispensing the punishment they clearly deserved, and referring to 'the harm [they] intended,' but which was 'converted by God into good.' Even his reassurance to them, "Fear not, I will provide for you and your children" – which Joseph had already been doing generously since they had all settled in Egypt and amid the current years of the famine – had a strong touch of irony. That he felt the need to dispel their fear that he might now suffer them all to starve, was also indicative of the fact that Joseph appreciated that their fear of him presented an impregnable psychological barrier to any chance of full reconciliation. Not surprisingly, therefore, any discussion of what had occurred between them was taboo, rendering any social interaction highly inadvisable.

What emerges from our analysis is that the evidence is strongly suggestive of the fact that the brothers had fabricated that death-bed message from their father. Also, that their deep-seated fear and suspicion of Joseph had prevented them until after their father's death from taking the initiative to seek an audience with him to acknowledge their guilt, seek his pardon, and beg for the creation of the brotherly relationship that had eluded them till then.

The final appraisal of Joseph's reassurance – *va-yedabber al libbam* (50:21) – is unclear. It literally translates as 'he spoke to *their hearts*,' prompting many translations to paraphrase it as 'he spoke kindly to them.' However, in the light of the less-than-'kind' emphases we have highlighted on the part of Joseph, we have preferred the literal sense – which also evokes the English idiom, 'heart-to-heart [talk]' – and, as with some other translators, and have rendered it as, 'he set their minds at ease.' This would suggest that, while Joseph and his brothers lived out their lives harmoniously, a loving relationship was sadly never achieved.

NOTES

1. The total round trip from Goshen to Canaan and back is approximately 400 miles, a journey, by slow caravan, calculated to take approximately two months.
2. Rashi, quoting *Midrash Tanhuma* 96 [7], suggests that the brothers made use of the sons of Bilhah for this mission to Joseph, as they alone had remained close to him from their childhood onward (see Gen.37:2), and had free access to him.
3. See Jeffrey M. Cohen, "Joseph's self-imposed estrangement," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 46:1 (January- March 2018), pp.25-32.

4. On the phrase *va-yomer l'yosef*, 'And *he* said to Joseph,' which leaves the speaker unidentified, Rashi comments that the phrase is elliptical for '*someone* said to Joseph.' Rashi then quotes a Midrashic tradition (Mid. *Tanh.* on Gen. 48:1) that the one who reported it to Joseph was his son, Ephraim. He is credited with having spent much time studying with his grandfather, and, when he took ill, Ephraim rushed to alert his father.