

Parsha Ponders

Vayigash | January 2, 2020 | 6 Teves 5780

Surprising growth¹

ויאמר יוסף אל-אחיו אני יוסף העוד אבי חי ולא-יכלו אחיו לענות אתו כי נבהלו מפניו: ויאמר יוסף אל-אחיו גשו-נא אלי ויגשו ויאמר אני יוסף אחיכם אשר-מכרתם אתי מצרימה

Yosef said to his brothers: "I am Yosef; Is my father still alive?" They weren't able to respond, as they were dumbfounded in front of him. Yosef said to his brothers, "Please come close to me", and they came close. He said: "I am Yosef, your brother, whom you sold² to Egypt"³

After fooling his brothers into thinking he was a tyrannical Egyptian viceroy, Yosef finally revealed his identity. He had risen to power after his brothers sold him as a slave, and he was in a position to save his family from the regional famine. Upon revealing himself, the brothers were dumbfounded. They weren't able to respond, as they were embarrassed⁴. They saw the error of their ways, and felt terrible. They started to back away⁵, and Yosef tried to comfort them. He told them to come close. What words of comfort did he choose? He reminded them that they sold him as a slave. How can that be comforting? They were embarrassed enough, and now he has to remind them of their misdeed⁶?

The brothers were shocked by the revelation that Yosef was their brother. They finally understood the events that had transpired to them in Egypt, and could sense Yosef's righteousness. He meant them no harm. In fact, he had attained an amazing level of purity of mind and soul. He was no longer the seemingly immature teenager that they had known growing up. With this realization, they were tremendously upset. What a wasted opportunity! Yosef became such a great person, in such a repulsive environment. If they hadn't sold him, he could have become so much more! Growing up in a positive, spiritual environment could have produced an even more righteous Yosef. This awareness upset them deeply.

Yosef sensed that this is what was upsetting them. He told them that their conclusion was mistaken. "I am the Yosef you see *because* you sold me as a slave." He only attained his level of perfection because of the trials and tribulations he endured in Egypt. Had he been safely at home, he wouldn't have been challenged⁷. Rabbi Frand says⁸ that this is a good demonstration of a fundamental lesson in education. People grow through adversity. Yosef became as great as he was because of his difficult life. It would be mistaken to think that had he had the easy life he could have had as much success. That's the paradox of education. We want our children and students to have an easy time, yet we know that they will grow only through challenge⁹.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on Sefas Emes year 5636 to Genesis 45:3, 4

² I'm not sure how to translate the word אותי in verse without it being awkward

³ Genesis *loc. cit.*

⁴ Rashi to v. 3

⁵ Rashi to v. 4, quoting Bereishis Rabbah 93:10

⁶ See Bava Metzieh 4:10

⁷ The Sefas Emes year 5643 to v. 4 suggests אשר מכרתם could be read as Yosef saying כחך יישר, similar to how Chazal interpret אשר שברת (Exodus 34:1) as יישר כחך (Shabbos 87a)

⁸ Heard in a *shiur* given at Yeshivas Ner Yisroel in 5778

⁹ Heard from Rabbi Gidon Shoshan, former *mashgiach ruchani* of Yeshivas Darche Noam/Shapell's