

Parsha Ponders

Vayeishev | December 22, 2022 | 29 Kislev 5783

Sin leads to foolishness, which leads to blindness¹

...ויצא לבם ויחרדו אל אחיו לאמר מה זאת עשה אלוקים לנו

...They went out of their minds and trembled amongst themselves, saying: "What is this that Hashem has done to us!"²

All of the interactions between Yosef, the disguised viceroy of Egypt, and his brothers, is astounding. How is it that the brothers didn't recognize Yosef? How did they not realize that he was the brother they had sold, and that he had risen to be the second command of Egypt? If we are exacting with the verses and how our Sages interpret them, we'll find literally a dozen reasons why they should have realized who they were interacting with.

(1) Our Sages tell us³ that Yaakov's ten sons were careful to enter Egypt separately, through different gates. They were a large group, and if they entered together to look for food, they might arouse suspicion. Nevertheless, the Egyptian police immediately arrested them and took them to viceroy Yosef. Yosef had appointed guards at all the entrances to Egypt who recorded the visitors. He saw all of his brothers' names and knew they had come to Egypt seeking food⁴. That's how Yosef knew they had arrived, but why didn't the brothers wonder how they were caught? Shouldn't they realize that only one person in Egypt could know they were all related?

(2) Yosef, upon reuniting with his brothers, under the guise of a cruel viceroy, accused them of coming to Egypt on a spy mission. Some say⁵ that the reason that he did this was so the police would bring them straight to him. If they were arrested for theft or robbery, they would have been brought to a lower level of administration. Still, this isn't sufficient to explain what happened. Even if they were indeed suspected of espionage, why would they be brought immediately to the highest of officials? Why not first have some interrogation or a trial? The brothers should have realized something was unusual, to be brought to such a prominent member of the royal household so quickly, especially when there was zero basis for their arrest.

(3) Yosef claimed to use sorcery to know all kinds of secret details no one could have known. He revealed to the brothers he knew that two of them had previously destroyed the city of Shechem⁶. He told them he knew that they had sold their brother to Arab nomads⁷. He even told them he knew what kind of wood all of their beds were made of⁸. This is all astounding, as the children of Yaakov didn't believe in the power of sorcery and magic, for the Torah tells us that they were shocked by his level of knowledge⁹. How could they not figure out what was going on? Furthermore, if Yosef really did have these magical powers, why couldn't he figure out that they weren't really spies¹⁰?

(4) How could they not put two and two together that the two times that they bowed to him exactly match up with the two dreams Yosef had when they were younger that they would all bow to him? (5) Yosef told his

¹ Based on MiShulchan Rabbi Eliyahu Baruch parshas Mikeitz s.v. פגישות השבטים עם יוסף

² Genesis 42:28

³ Bereishis Rabbah 91:2, brought by Rashi to v. 5

⁴ Ibid § 4, brought by Mizrachi on Rashi to v. 12

⁵ This is brought in the name of the Beis HaLevi

⁶ Ibid § 6 and Midrash Tanchuma Mikeitz § 8, brought by Rashi to v. 14

⁷ It's not clear to me Rav Eliyahu Baruch's source for this. Perhaps he was referring to Bereishis Rabbah 93:8, where Yosef (still in disguise) mentions the sale to Yehuda. Rav Eliyahu Baruch also mentions Rashi to v. 24, who explains that Yosef imprisoned Shimon because he was the one who mocked Yosef when they were younger. I didn't read Rashi this way, but he seems to understand that Rashi is telling us that Yosef told his brothers this fact, which is another reason to suspect the viceroy is really Yosef

⁸ Bereishis Rabbah 91:10, brought by Rashi to Genesis 43:7

⁹ Genesis 43:33

¹⁰ Although, I would think they felt he was merely trying to frame them

brothers that he feared G-d¹¹. Wasn't this a strange thing for a supposedly idol worshipping viceroy to say? Even Yosef's attendants invoked G-d's name¹². This wasn't a normal occurrence...

(6) Yosef let his brothers go to bring food to their ailing father and younger brother. If the viceroy really suspected them of espionage, would he really be so quick to let them go? Would he really care about the wellbeing of their family members? He even gave them extra food to bring back! (7) The second his brothers returned with their brother Binyamin, the viceroy inquired about the wellbeing of their elderly father¹³. Why would the viceroy be interested in these supposed spies' father's wellbeing? Wouldn't he be concerned what the Egyptians might think if he's getting too friendly with potential threats to their national security?

(8) Before sending off his brothers home with food, he kept Shimon behind as collateral. The Torah says that he imprisoned him "before their eyes"¹⁴, to teach us that the second they left, Yosef let Shimon roam free¹⁵. Shouldn't this have appeared strange to Shimon? Furthermore, when he reunited with his brothers, surely he would have told them. They weren't suspicious why the viceroy was treating Shimon so nicely? They weren't confused why the viceroy wasn't concerned what this would look like to the Egyptians?

(9) Our Sages tell us¹⁶ that when Yosef served his brothers meat that he showed them that the animal was properly slaughtered. Shouldn't this have shown the brothers that Yosef came from their family, as he knew their traditions? (10) Yosef sat his brothers according to their ages, and according to their mothers¹⁷. He mentioned how he knew that Binyamin's mother had died. The Torah tells us that the brothers were astounded by what they were seeing. Yet still, they didn't even consider that perhaps this viceroy was Yosef.

(11) Our Sages tell us that Yosef looked identical to Yaakov. How did they not recognize him? True, our Sages tell us¹⁸ that Yosef was sold by his brothers into slavery before he grew a beard, and now he grew a beard. However, Yaakov also had a beard. How could they then not recognize him¹⁹? They were so unaware it was Yosef that when he finally revealed himself, they were speechless²⁰. (12) Finally, the Torah tells us that the Egyptians couldn't eat together with the Hebrews, as they abhorred their diet²¹. The Egyptians knew that Yosef was a Hebrew, and therefore didn't eat with him. Why didn't the brothers pick up on this?

This whole episode demands to be expounded. With all these indications that the viceroy was Yosef, how could the brothers be so clueless? Even when Yosef revealed himself, it took them a bit to believe him²². We have no choice but to say that there was some specific Divine intervention that took place here. Hashem engineered it that the brothers wouldn't notice that the viceroy was Yosef. However, this doesn't fully address the problem. Very nice that the brothers' intelligence was compromised, but how could Yosef have known that would be the case? How could Yosef take such a difficult gamble, and make it so obvious that he was their brother, when his whole goal was to remain undercover?

¹¹ *Ibid* 42:18

¹² *Ibid* 43:23

¹³ *Ibid* v. 27

¹⁴ *Ibid* 42:24

¹⁵ *Bereishis Rabbah* 91:8, brought by *Rashi ad. loc.*

¹⁶ *Chullin* 91a, based on *Genesis* 43:16

¹⁷ *Ibid* 43:33

¹⁸ *Yevamos* 88a; *Kesubos* 27b; *Bava Metziah* 39b; *Bereishis Rabbah* 91:7; *Targum "Yonasan"* to *Genesis* 42:8; *Rashi ad. loc.* brings this

¹⁹ I always said, half-jokingly, that this is proof that Yaakov didn't have a beard

²⁰ *Genesis* 45:3

²¹ *Ibid* 43:32

²² See *Bereishis Rabbah* 93:10, brought by *Mizrachi* to *Genesis* 45:4, and *Rav Chaim Paltiel ad. loc.*, that they didn't believe the viceroy was Yosef until he showed them that he was circumcised

The answer lies²³ in a *gemarra*²⁴. Rabbi Yochanan ran into the son of Reish Lakish. The latter was studying the verse in Proverbs: “A man’s foolishness distorts his path, and his heart is upset towards Hashem”²⁵. Rashi explains²⁶ that when a person sins, they cause difficulties to come their way. What happens? They get upset at Hashem and ask, “why is this happening to me?” Rabbi Yochanan asked this boy that surely there must be some allusion to this concept in the Torah itself. The boy responded with a verse about Yosef’s brothers: “they went out of their minds and trembled amongst themselves, saying: “What is this that Hashem has done to us!”²⁷ This verse occurs right after the brothers realize they’ve been framed with stealing money from the viceroy’s palace. Now, even though they sinned with selling their brother Yosef into slavery, still, when this tragedy befalls them, they didn’t put the blame on themselves. Maybe they made a mistake? No, instead they were surprised that Hashem did this to them. Rabbi Yochanan was very pleased with the boy’s response.

We learn from here that our Sages describe the brothers in one of the harshest terms: foolish, in a way that distorts their path. If they hadn’t said it, we wouldn’t have been allowed. The word for foolishness, אולת, is a branch of פתי, simpleton²⁸. It could be that the root of the word אולת is אולי, a reference to someone who always has doubts. Even if they see a hundred proofs against them, they won’t be able to see the truth.

The same is true with Yosef’s brothers. They had an *a priori* premise that Yosef was wicked, and was out to get them. They understood from his dreams that he intended to lord over them, when they knew of their lofty stature as the sons of Yaakov. As such, they took it to be impossible for his dreams to come true. They relied on this premise when they sold Yosef to slavery. Now, if they were to come to Egypt and accept that this viceroy is Yosef, then it would mean that Yosef’s dreams had come true. Their sale of Yosef would be shown to be highly mistaken, for they sold someone righteous, not someone wicked. They would realize that they pained their father for no reason. There was no way they could accept this conclusion. It subconsciously forced them to close their eyes to the truth that was so plainly in front of them.

It makes us shutter to think that this could happen even to the Tribes of G-d, the holy sons of Yaakov. Their need to maintain their paradigm so strongly blinded them to the truth. They were so set with their worldview that their foolishness distorted their path. Even as painful difficulties befell them, they didn’t once think they made a mistake with selling Yosef²⁹. Their ruling was so clear in their eyes that to them, all they could ask is, “Why is Hashem doing this to us”?

Yosef, who was very wise and understanding, figured out why his brothers sold him. He knew very well their mental state. He therefore had no concern that all of his actions, efforts, and speeches would give himself away. He was confident they would never admit that his dreams had come true. Yosef knew that bias can bring a person to complete blindness, with the inability to see the true for what it is.

Good Shabbos

²³ Rav Eliyahu Baruch cites this from his uncle, the *mashgiach*, Rav Chaim Ze’ev Finkel *zt”l*

²⁴ Ta’anis 9a

²⁵ Proverbs 19:3

²⁶ *Ad. loc.*

²⁷ Genesis 42:28

²⁸ Vilna Gaon to Proverbs 10:14

²⁹ I’m not sure how this fits with Genesis 42:22, where Reuven tells his brothers that “I told you not to touch the boy!”, and that is why this is happening to us. I guess Reuven failed to convince them?