

# Parsha Ponders

Mikeitz | Dec 13, 2023 | 2 Teves 5784

## *Clever collateral incarceration*<sup>1</sup>

וַיִּקַּח מֵאֵתָם אֶת-שִׁמְעוֹן וַיֹּאסֶר אֹתוֹ לְעֵינֵיהֶם...

...[Yosef] took Shimon from them and imprisoned him in front of their eyes<sup>2</sup>

Yosef, disguised as the viceroy of Egypt, demanded from his brothers that they bring their remaining brother Binyamin to Egypt. Yosef wanted to see if they would abandon Binyamin just as they abandoned him<sup>3</sup>. The brothers, knowing their father Yaakov would never let Binyamin out of his sight, pleaded with the viceroy to spare their brother. As collateral to ensure their compliance, Yosef imprisoned Shimon, and set the others free to fetch Binyamin.

This is the simple understanding of the story. However, one can ask, what was the point in imprisoning Shimon? Sure, it was an incentive to fetch Binyamin. However, the whole reason Yaakov's brothers went to Egypt in the first place was because there was a famine. Only Egypt, controlled by Yosef, had food available for purchase. The family's supplies were running thin, and the brothers had to retrieve food to survive<sup>4</sup>. Even without imprisoning Shimon, Yosef had the upper hand. If they didn't bring Binyamin, he would simply withhold food from them. Why then did he need to imprison Shimon? The brothers were motivated in any event to bring Binyamin!

One suggestion is that Yosef was covering his bases. He knew his brothers would have a hard time bringing Binyamin. Considering Yaakov's concerns regarding his youngest son, his only remaining son from Rochel (or so he thought), they would be hard pressed to convince Yaakov to let Binyamin go to a dangerous viceroy in a distant land. Yosef was worried that as a result of the difficulty of the mission, the brothers would try to pull a ruse on him. How so?

Yosef's brothers, while they would have difficulty fetching Binyamin, they would have no difficulty hiring someone to accompany them to Egypt. They would pretend this stranger was Binyamin, and be done with this episode. How could the viceroy know whether this was their real brother or not<sup>5</sup>? Yosef was worried this plan of theirs would succeed. Considering how

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Teshuvos Binyan Shlomo parshas Mikeitz, by Rav Shlomo HaKohen of Vilna, also known as the Cheishek Shlomo, one of the editors of the Vilna Shas, in the name of his father

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 42:24

<sup>3</sup> See Ramban to ibid 42:9

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 42:1

<sup>5</sup> Although, as explained by Rashi to Genesis 42:14 (quoting Bereishis Rabbah 91:6 and Midrash Tanchuma Mikeitz § 8), Yosef demonstrated divination abilities to his brothers, that he was aware of their past deeds. I wouldn't be surprised if Yosef's brothers would be afraid of pulling a ruse, lest the viceroy divine that this isn't their brother (perhaps the Binyamin Shlomo's father was explaining according to the *peshat* of the verses, whereas this Rashi admits this is *derash* and not *peshat*)

young Binyamin was when Yosef was sold as a slave<sup>6</sup>, there's no way he would recognize him<sup>7</sup>, over twenty years later.

As a preemptive measure, Yosef imprisoned Shimon. This was to ensure that his brothers couldn't pull a fast one on him. When they would bring someone named "Binyamin", Yosef could simply show this fellow to the imprisoned Shimon, and ask if they know each other. Shimon, unaware that his brothers hired a stranger, would say the truth that they don't know each other. Yosef would catch the brothers red handed, securing the retrieval of the real Binyamin.

Due to Yosef's genius plan, his brothers were forced to abandon all ruses, and bring the real Binyamin to Yosef. The rest is history...

Good Shabbos

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<sup>6</sup> If we do the math, we can approximate their age difference. It says that when Yosef was born, Yaakov wanted to leave his father-in-law Lavan (Genesis 30:25). He then worked for Lavan an additional 6 years as a form of payment (ibid 31:41). It then took him two more years to finally return to his father Yitzchak (see Rashi to ibid 33:17 and 28:9). Sometime within those final two years, Rochel gave birth to Binyamin and died. That means Yosef was between 6 and 8 when Binyamin was born. Yosef was sold when he was 17 years old (ibid 37:2), making Binyamin between 9 and 11 when they were separated

<sup>7</sup> Shalal Rav parshas Mikeitz cites this piece from Binyan Shlomo, although somewhat inaccurately. It says that Yosef never met Binyamin, so how would he recognize him? This is false, as Binyamin was already born when Yosef was sold. This is besides the fact that Binyan Shlomo doesn't say this detail. In truth, the Binyamin Shlmo simply says that Yosef couldn't refute the brothers and say this isn't Binyamin. Shalal Rav assumes this is because Yosef wouldn't recognize if this was truly Binyamin or not, and it is indeed plausible. There's also the possibility the Binyan Shlomo means that Yosef couldn't refute them, as it would give away his identity. However, this isn't likely, as Yosef already showed them he has supernatural knowledge about their family, and this didn't ruin his disguise