

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Vayeshev

“And behold he was lost in the field” Yosef’s Encounter with the Ish

וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַּעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאֹמֶר מַה תִּבְקֹשׁ.
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת אַחֵי אֲנֹכִי מִבְקֹשׁ...
וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמָרִים נִלְכָּה דַתְּיָנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֲרָיו וַיִּמְצָאֵם בְּדֹתָן

A man found him, and behold, he was lost in the field. The man asked him, saying, “What do you seek?”

He [Yosef] said, “I seek my brothers; tell me, please, where they are shepherding.”

The man said, “They have journeyed on from here, for I heard them saying, ‘Let us go to Dosan.’ And Yosef went after his brothers and found them in Dosan.”¹

BACKGROUND

Within the Torah’s relating the events leading up to the sale of Yosef, we find a couple of verses which are seemingly purely practical or logistical in nature: Yosef arrived in Shechem, didn’t find his brothers there and someone – whom the Torah refers to as “ish” (a man) – told him where they had gone. Yet as we will see, this brief meeting contains a great deal, and touches on deep and profound concepts that were at play in this episode.

MESSAGES FOR YOSEF

Our Sages inform us that this “ish” was actually the angel Gavriel. Indeed, the midrash² further states that each mention of the word “ish” in the verse denotes a separate message to Yosef. According to this, the very first thing the angel told Yosef – as reflected by the first mention of the word “ish” – was that “he was lost in the field.” Understandably, Yosef did not need an angel to appear in order to tell him this, nor was informing him that was lost of any assistance in directing him towards his brothers! What, then, was the meaning of that first “message”?

¹ Bereishis 37:15-17.

² Bereishis Rabbah 75:4.

Before addressing this question, let us consult some of Rashi's comments to these verses.

נסעו מזה: הסיעו עצמן מן האחוה
נלכה דותינה: לבקש לך נכלי דתות שימיתוך בהם

"They journeyed on from here" – They have moved themselves away from brotherhood

"Let us go to Dosan" – to seek concerning you legal pretexts by which they may put you to death.

The background to these comments is quite clear: The words "נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה" literally translate as "they have journeyed on from this." While it is true that one can explain it to mean "this place," nevertheless, the Torah did not simply use the word for "here" which is "כאן". Therefore, Rashi explains that it means they have moved away from this concept you just mentioned – "my brothers." Likewise, the Hebrew word for "to Dosan" is "דִּתְנָה", while this Ish added the letter yud – "דִּתְיִנָּה"! Hence, Rashi explains that they were looking not only to change location, but to find a legal pretext to kill Yosef.

In light of this, let us ask some simple questions:

1. According to Rashi, the angel was seeking to inform Yosef that his life was in danger. Presumably, that information would be urgent enough to warrant being stated explicitly, not merely alluded to with a nuanced word-change or extra letter. This is especially so in light of the fact that Yosef clearly did not get the message of danger at all, simply continuing on his way and very nearly getting himself killed in the process! Had that happened, could the angel meaningfully have said, "Don't say I didn't warn you"?
2. If the angel was tasked with removing Yosef from potential danger to his life, there was a far easier way to accomplish this than by means of various allusions – namely, simply to not turn up! Yosef, as the verse states, did not know where the brothers were, and he would not have found them had the angel not told him where they were. In other words, but for the angel's appearance, Yosef would have returned home. It turns out that instead of *saving* him from danger, the angel actually ended up *leading* him to it, by directing him to the brothers while at the same time failing to effectively warn him of their intentions!

BETWEEN DESTINY AND FREE WILL

The Alshich Hakadosh explains that this conversation between Yosef and the angel was intended to address a very fine balance, namely, between that which is ordained from Heaven and the decisions people make through the Divinely bestowed faculty of Free Will. On the one hand, the time had come for the implementation of the next stage of the Covenant Between the Pieces, whereby the Bnei Yisrael would undergo slavery in a foreign land. The way this was to occur was by Yosef being sold down to Egypt, with the ensuing events in the years that followed paving the way for his family to join him.³ On the other hand, tensions between Yosef and the brothers had reached the point where there was a very real concern that they would actually decide to kill him. The Alshich is of the view that had the brothers indeed wanted to kill Yosef, the principle of Free-Will states that they could have done so, notwithstanding the fact that Heaven had

3 See Rashi to verse 14, s.v. *me'emek*.

ordained him for greatness.⁴

In light of all this, we can appreciate that Yosef is in a very delicate situation: he needs to meet up with the brothers in order that he be sold down to Egypt, but he also needs to do so in a way that does not get him killed! Indeed, says the Alshich, the danger to Yosef was infinitely more pronounced when we consider that he was going out to meet his brothers in a field...

FIELD THEORY AND YOSEF'S DREAMS

When Yaakov summons Yosef to go and check on his brothers, Yosef responds by saying “הִנְנִי – here I am.” This term denotes one who is prepared for what is to come. In this instance, Yosef was expressing his preparedness, not only for meeting his brothers, but for a great deal more.

Yosef had recently had two dreams in which the brothers accepted his dominion over them. As we see later in Chumash Bereishis,⁵ the repetition or reiteration of a dream is generally an indication that the realization of its contents will come to pass shortly thereafter. In the event, we can see that this turned out to be true by the sale of Yosef to Egypt beginning the process which led to those dreams ultimately being fulfilled. We can appreciate, however, that Yosef was probably anticipating a fulfillment of a more direct and immediate nature. Add to this the fact that the first dream involved *the brothers bowing down to him in a field* and we will realize that Yosef was now heading out with the expectation of that first dream being fulfilled this very day!

The gaping disparity between Yosef's expectations regarding what was waiting for him in the field and the reality of the brothers' disposition could only escalate the danger he was in. If he were, on top of everything else, to approach them in a field far from home and demand they all bow down to him, those could very well be the final words he would ever utter – with what may have started as him going to meet his destiny ending with him simply meeting an accident! On the other hand, notwithstanding the potential danger he was in, the solution could not be anything that might cause him to head back home; after all, he needed to get to the brothers so as to bring about his journey down to Egypt. For this reason, he could not simply be informed of the reality of how dangerous his situation was. Yosef, too, had Free Will, so that if he would choose, in light of this information, to avoid all danger and return home as quickly as he could, Heaven could not force him to choose otherwise! This, then, is the question: How could it be arranged for Yosef to be delivered to the brothers without placing him in certain danger at their hands?

Enter the angel Gavriel.

ANGELIC DISSONANCE

The delicate mission of the angel was to guide Yosef towards the brothers while at the same time modifying his attitude from one that might get him killed to one that would allow him to be sold down to Egypt. To this end, while the angel is telling Yosef where the brothers are, although he is not explicitly telling him he is in danger, he is nonetheless feeding him messages of a more subtle nature to that effect.

This begins with the very first message which, as we have noted from the midrash, was to inform Yosef that he was “blundering in the field”. We asked, this information seems entirely redundant, for did Yosef not know he was lost? However, once we appreciate that Yosef was harboring notions of dominion over his brothers based on the field in his dream, the angel's opening

4 See, regarding this, the comments of the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh to verse 21 and of the Netziv in Harchev Davar ibid. See also concerning this question Sefer Hachinuch mitzvah 241 and Rabbeinu Bachye to Shemos 21:13.

5 41:32.

words, “*You are blundering in the field,*” had the effect of beginning to sow doubt in his mind as to whether his expectations from that field were accurate.

Likewise, when informing Yosef about the brothers’ change of location, the angel employed phrases such as “they have moved on *from this*” and “let us go to *Dosoin*.” These phrases, while not actually wrong per se, nonetheless were also not phrased entirely accurately. The goal of these curious anomalies was specifically not for Yosef to *decipher* them, but for him to *carry* them. For while officially he had not been told of any danger, in the back of his mind he would be mulling over these words which did not sound exactly right; and while he did not consciously decipher those messages of danger, he unconsciously responded to them. The result of all this was that by the time he arrived at his brothers in Dosan, for reasons that he could not fully account for, his mood was somewhat more subdued and he was no longer thinking of telling them to bow down to him. And thus was the angel’s mission accomplished.

“Behold, the dreamer is coming”

What is most fascinating in this regard is to follow through and see Yosef’s arrival at Dosan from the brothers’ perspective. Verses 18-19 describe their reaction upon seeing him from afar:

בְּטָרִם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַכְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו הֲגַה בְּעַל
הַחֲלָמוֹת הַלְזָה בָּא

*When they had not yet approached them, they conspired against him to kill him.
They said one to the other, “Behold, the dreamer is coming.”*

The brothers here refer to Yosef as “the dreamer,” because they are convinced that it is on account of his dreams that he has come. Of particular interest is the word “הַלְזָה”, which although it contains the letter lamed, is nonetheless commonly translated as “this”. However, the Alshich sees the *lamed* as denoting “for”, with the *heh* at the beginning of the word signaling a question, translating “הַלְזָה בָּא” as saying: “Is it for this that he has come,” i.e., to fulfill his first dream? As we have seen, this was in fact Yosef’s intention when he set out.

All this, however, was the brothers’ appraisal when seeing him from afar, before they could detect any mannerisms indicating to the contrary. As he approached, however, they saw that his demeanor somehow did not express such expectations. It is amazing to consider this situation, where everyone present expected Yosef to demand the brothers bow down to him, and yet, for reasons that no one could really explain – including Yosef himself! – he did not do so. As the Torah informs us, this was the result of his meeting with the angel, and it set the climate for a potential recalibration of the brothers’ plan to kill him, with it ultimately ending up being replaced by him being sold to Egypt, as Divine Providence had ordained.