

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Vayigash

### “A word in your ear, my lord” Yehuda’s Plea before Yosef

#### INTRODUCTION

Our parsha begins with Yehuda’s impassioned plea before Yosef on Binyamin’s behalf. With the silver goblet having been found in Binyamin’s sack, and facing the unbearable prospect of returning home to their father without him, Yehuda steps forward to offer a word “in Yosef’s ears,” in a desperate attempt to elicit some form of clemency from the Egyptian ruler.

#### REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS UNSAID

As we survey Yehuda’s review of the events that led to this point, it is most interesting – and somewhat baffling – to notice that a number of items in his account do not match up the events themselves as they occurred. This discrepancy begins with the very first thing Yehuda says. He recalls:

אֲדֹנָי שְׂאֵל אֶת עֲבָדָיו לְאֹמֵר הֲיֵשׁ לָכֶם אָב אוֹ אָח

*My master asked his servants, saying, ‘Do you have a father or brother?’<sup>1</sup>*

When we look back at the first meeting between Yosef and the brothers, we see that Yosef asked them no such question. All information regarding their family was volunteered by the brothers in order to clear themselves from the charge of being spies.<sup>2</sup> Why, then, does Yehuda open by describing a question that was never asked?

A further famous departure from events as they occurred is where Yehuda states that the brothers had originally said that one of their number was dead.<sup>3</sup> In actual fact, they said that one of the brothers was missing.<sup>4</sup> Why did Yehuda make this change? Rashi comments that he was afraid if he presented the original version, the ruler would tell him to bring the missing brother to him; therefore, he changed to say that the brother was dead. However, surely to actively deviate from the initial response as given would involve greater and more immediate risk than the potential concern that they might be asked to bring a brother who was, after all, missing! Why was taking this step of changing “missing” to “dead”

1 Bereishis 44:19.

2 Ibid. 42:9-13.

3 44:20.

4 42:13.

considered to be the more preferred option?

### **ENTRAPMENT AND THE MEANING OF THE WORD “LEIMOR”**

According to the Alshich Hakadosh, the key word in Yehuda’s opening sentence is the word “לאמר”. This word is commonly simply translated as “saying”. However, many commentators understand the word “לאמר” as the infinitive of the verb “אמר” and translate it as “to say.” Within the context someone asking a question, this word denotes that they are asking for the other person “to say” something back to them.<sup>5</sup> In this light, we understand that Yehuda is not stating that Yosef asked if they had a father or brothers, rather, he asked them something with the intent of them saying this.

To understand how this is so, let us consider Yosef’s opening question, which was: “מֵאֵין בָּאתֶם – *From where are you coming?*”<sup>6</sup> Although this enquiry appears simple enough, we note that no sooner had the brothers answered it, saying that they were from Canaan and had come to buy food, then Yosef proceeds to accuse them of being spies! Where in the exchange thus far could we possibly detect the basis for such an accusation? Were these the only people from the entire neighboring land of Canaan who had come to buy grain?

In truth, however, the question “From where are you coming?” is somewhat ambiguous, for since it does not simply ask, “Where are you from?”<sup>7</sup> it could be understood as also asking “and what brings you here.” This open-ended question, together with the harsh tone in which it was asked,<sup>8</sup> led the brothers to feel they should provide a full response, stating that they are from the land of Canaan and that they have come to buy food. With that response, they have already laid themselves open to accusation. For since Yosef did not actually ask them why they were here, to present the reason of buying food could be seen as volunteering *too much information*; for indeed, wasn’t that why everyone was there? Yosef was thus already able to put to them that their stating the obvious was in order to mask the real reason they were there – to spy out the land, and proceeds to accuse them of such. In this situation, the brothers feel compelled to establish their innocence, including full details of their family back home.<sup>9</sup> In light of Yosef’s apparent fixation on their family from that point on, Yehuda, looking back, is able to put to him that his question from the outset was purely “לאמר”, for them to say that they had a brother.

Indeed, Yehuda further asserts that, upon reflection, the accusation of them being spies was clearly a fabrication, seeing as Yosef proceeded to *send them home* to bring down their brother. If he really suspected them of being spies who had gathered information harmful to his country, the last thing he would do would be to allow them to return home, enabling them thereby to share their findings with the Canaanites! Clearly, says Yehuda, it was Binyamin who was the focus from the outset.

### **A SHIFT IN VISION**

A basic question that arises is: What brought on this sudden change in approach on Yehuda’s part, prompting him to reappraise the entire situation and confront the Egyptian viceroy with his findings? We might be inclined to respond simply that this was the product of desperation in the face of the prospect of returning home without Binyamin. However, the Alshich explains that a more fundamental shift was taking place at this time. As we can see from the verses, already early on in this saga, the brothers related to their predicament as punishment for their actions toward Yosef. As such, they were not inclined to ascribe too much significance per se to the individual in front of them or to his unpredictable ways, for they saw him essentially as an instrument of Divine retribution.

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5 See Rashi Bamidbar 12:13.

6 Bereishis 42:7.

7 [Compare Yaakov’s question to the shepherds at the well (Bereishis 29:4).]

8 [“And he spoke with them harshly, and asked them ‘From where do you come?’” – 42:7]

9 See Beis Halevi, Parshas Miketz.

All of this came to a sudden crash when the silver cup was found in Binyamin's sack, resulting in the viceroy stating that Binyamin alone would stay with him as a slave while the rest of them were free to return home. This new development completely undermined their interpretation of events; for now, the only one who was to endure punishment at the hands of this Egyptian ruler was specifically the only brother who was not involved in the sale! With their prior understanding of their situation lying in shattered pieces before them, they finally began to take a closer look at the viceroy himself, and Yehuda felt it was warranted to shift from a compliant and submissive stance to assuming a more proactive role in confronting him in terms of his behavior.

In fact, it is even possible that, upon fundamentally reappraising his understanding of the viceroy's actions toward them, and exploring an alternative explanation for them, Yehuda actually began to consider the unthinkable...

### **YEHUDA IN SEARCH OF YOSEF**

One of the great Torah sages of 16th century Tzfat, R' Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz,<sup>10</sup> has a stunning comment regarding this episode. He states that at this stage, taking stock of everything that had happened, Yehuda actually started to suspect that this viceroy before them was in fact Yosef. Although he looked very different than when the brothers last saw him, and was speaking a foreign dialect – and even then, not directly to them – nevertheless, Yehuda could not dismiss the notion that it might be Yosef. The question was, what to do? He could hardly confront him and ask him outright if he was Yosef. This would be too dangerous a move in case he was wrong and, in any case, Yosef could simply deny it. Therefore, Yehuda took a different strategy – the first part of which was asking for the interpreter to be removed.

According to the Midrash,<sup>11</sup> when Yehuda asked that he be able to speak a word “in my master's ears”, he was requesting to be able to address the ruler and put his case before him directly, a request that he hoped would be granted to him on compassionate grounds. On the face of it, this idea seems like a complete waste of this crucial opportunity, as in using a translator until this point, the ruler has clearly indicated that he does not speak their language! However, based on the approach of Rav Alkabetz, we can understand that this was Yehuda's very intention – to reveal that this ruler really did understand his language, with further revelations hopefully following on from that. This gives us a completely different picture of this confrontation, for it effectively entailed Yehuda pleading before Yosef, laying out their innocence and their father's anguish in full detail, with Yosef, for his part, doing his best to maintain an appearance of not understanding a word Yehuda was saying!

Is there anything Yehuda could say, beyond his impassioned portrayal of their father's grief, that would force Yosef to reveal that he understood what was being said to him? Perhaps we can now understand Yehuda's motive in shifting the original version where they said that Yosef was missing to saying that he was dead. Since his primary goal was to provoke a reaction from Yosef who officially did not understand his words, there was no more likely way to do so than to tell him he was dead! On the other hand, if this ruler was not actually Yosef and really did not understand Yehuda's words, then there was no risk anyway, as the change would go unnoticed.

In the event, Yehuda's words found their mark, and by the time he was finished, Yosef could no longer withhold his identity from the brothers, and the time for revelation had arrived, as the ensuing verses proceed to describe.

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10 Famous as the author of the song Lecha Dodi. Rav Alkabetz's words are cited by R' Shmuel Laniado in his commentary Kli Chemdah to our parsha.

11 Cited in Torah Sheleimah sec. 65. See also Haamek Davar.