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My Father is Still Alive

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1.

MY FATHER IS STILL ALIVE?

As discussed frequently, Rashi, in his commentary on the Torah, preempts **every** question or difficulty that can be raised when learning Scripture according to *pshat*.¹ If Rashi does not address an apparent difficulty, this indicates that he has already forestalled this difficulty in an **earlier** comment. (Alternatively, the question actually presents no difficulty at all according to the *pshat*.)

On this basis, we must clarify the following difficulty in our *parshah*: In the narrative describing how Yosef disclosed his true identity to his brothers, when the verse describes that Yosef told them, “I am Yosef; is my father still alive?”² the question immediately arises (as several Torah commentaries indeed ask):

The **content of the *parshah*** up until this point concerns Yehudah advising Yosef that Yaakov had not wanted to send Binyamin to Egypt (due to the concern that “if he leaves his father, he might die”³). Additionally, the *parshah* describes how Yehudah was concerned that if Yosef would keep Binyamin back, Yaakov would not be able to survive it — “When he sees that the lad is not there, he will die.”⁴ Yosef **internalized** all these messages **deeply**; they affected him to the point that “Yosef was unable to contain himself....”⁵ So how could it be that after all that, Yosef would ask, “Is my father still alive?”

The following also needs to be clarified: We do not find that Yosef waited for a response from his brothers to his question of “Is my father still alive?” As soon as he saw their reaction, that “his brothers could not respond, because they

¹ {The plain meaning of Scripture.} For in the places where a simple explanation is unavailable (to Rashi) — though there is an explanation at the homiletic level — he writes, “I don’t know {the explanation},” and the like. (Listed in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 5, pg. 1, fn. 2 and the sub-footnotes there.)

² *Bereishis* 45:3.

³ *Bereishis* 44:22.

⁴ *Bereishis* 44:31.

⁵ *Bereishis* 45:1.

were startled,”⁶ he continued speaking to them — “Please, come close to me,’... he said, ‘I am Yosef’”⁷ — and he told them that he had become ruler over the entire land of Egypt, and he concluded with “Hurry, go up to my father...”⁸ and bring him to Egypt.

We must therefore say that Yosef certainly knew that his father was alive, and the question “Is my father still alive?” means something different.

2.

SMALL TALK

According to Abarbanel,⁹ Yosef asked this question (not to confirm that Yaakov was alive, but) “to open a conversation with them”: Knowing that his brothers would become ashamed when he disclosed his identity, he also sought a way to change the subject, at first, to steer the conversation to the subject of their father. (Yosef intended to also ask about the other family members, and so on. But this was not possible because, “His brothers could not respond, because they were startled.”)

On this basis, we could say that Rashi also understood the meaning of the verse in this way, and he did not need to explicitly say so, since he had already made a similar point **earlier**. On the verse, “He {Hashem} said to him {Adam}, ‘Where are you?’”¹⁰ {Rashi comments} — “He knew where he was, but {He asked him this} in order to enter into conversation with him, lest he be scared to answer....” Similarly, on the verse, “Where is Hevel, your brother?”¹¹ {Rashi comments} “{He said this} in order to enter into conversation with him with mild words....” So Rashi now relies on his earlier commentary on those verses.

⁶ Bereishis 45:3.

⁷ Bereishis 45:4 ff.

⁸ {Bereishis 45:9.}

⁹ {Abarbanel’s commentary on Bereishis 45:1 ff.}

¹⁰ Bereishis 3:9.

¹¹ Bereishis 4:9.

However, this explanation is not completely adequate **in our context**, for after Yehudah's lengthy speech about the negative effect that Binyamin being held back in Egypt would have on Yaakov, Yosef would not have needed to **ask about** his father's wellbeing in order to initiate a conversation. Rather, he could have immediately opened by inquiring about their families, etc.

3.

NOT A QUESTION; A STATEMENT OF ASTONISHMENT

Seemingly, we could resolve this in the following manner: The expression “הַעוֹד אֲבִי חַי / **is my father still alive?**” (with the prefix “הַ”) is not meant as a question (**whether** “my father is alive”), but it is an expression of astonishment. Rashi has already explained this usage of the prefix “הַ” a number of times {for example} — “הַשׂוֹמֵר אֶחָיו אֲנִי / *Am I my brother's keeper*”¹² — this syntax denotes astonishment,” and other such instances.¹³ The same is true here; Yosef was astonished and amazed that “my father is still alive.”

(The difference is only that in the aforementioned case (and in most cases), the astonishment **negates** the supposition, i.e., Kayin believed that he was **not** “my brother's keeper.” Whereas in our case, the astonishment exists {and is not intended to negate the supposition}: Yosef knows that Yaakov is alive, yet this elicits astonishment from him — as Rashi explained **earlier** (on the verse, “Will a child be born to one who is a hundred years old?”):¹⁴ “Astonishment may be expressed about matters that exist”).

However, we need to clarify:

- a. At that point, Yaakov was “130 years old”¹⁵ (much younger than the ages to which Avraham and Yitzchak lived)¹⁶ — so why was it astonishing that

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Rashi's commentary to *Bereishis* 18:25; 27:36, 38; 29:15, et. al.

¹⁴ *Bereishis* 17:17.

¹⁵ Ibid. 47:9.

¹⁶ They lived to the age of 175 years (*Bereishis* 25:7) and 180 years (*Bereishis* 35:25) respectively.

Yaakov was still living?

- b. Most importantly: What connection does this question of astonishment have with the first part of his statement, “I am Yosef”?
- c. For what purpose, in the first place, did Yosef share his astonishment with his brothers, and moreover, why did he do so **right** after he unmasked himself to his brothers — “I am Yosef; is my father still alive?”

(Had this been posed as a question, then, in fact, we could have explained that he was primarily interested in knowing his father’s condition, and therefore, Yosef immediately asked them, “Is my father still alive?” However, if he knew that Yaakov was alive, and the question, “Is my father still alive?” was merely a rhetorical expression of astonishment, as explained, why was it timely to express **this sentiment** right after announcing, “I am Yosef?”)

4.

THE CORE EXPLANATION: IT WAS URGENT!

The explanation for this is straightforward:

Rashi already explained on the verse, “And he refused to be consoled”¹⁷ that “a person is not consoled over the loss of a living person whom he believes to have died, because it was decreed that a dead person should be forgotten from the heart, but not a living person.” Therefore, “{Yaakov} mourned for his son for **many days.**”¹⁸

Yosef was conveying this point to his brothers: “I am Yosef” (and therefore, he was perplexed:) “Is my father still alive?!” Since “I am Yosef” — Yosef is alive — it turns out that Yaakov mourned Yosef for **twenty-two consecutive years**

¹⁷ Bereishis 37:35.

¹⁸ Ibid. 37:34.

— compounded by the fact Yaakov was mourning for a child that he loved more “than all his sons”¹⁹ — a shocking degree of pain, which was extremely uncommon. It was astounding how Yaakov could have endured such tremendous pain over so many years, and yet remain alive.

Now it is clear why Yosef had to express his astonishment to his brothers — because this was a prelude to his future emphasis on the urgency of **bringing** Yaakov to Egypt: It was urgent not only to “**quickly, go up** to my father”²⁰ in order to share with Yaakov the good news — that Yosef was alive (and that consequently, Yaakov would cease mourning for him) — sooner. But also in order to they should urge Yaakov, “come down to me {Yosef}; **do not** tarry,”²¹ “**you shall hasten** and bring my father down here.”²² The reason for this haste was that it was a **matter of life and death**: after enduring such anguish — even while “Yaakov’s spirit was revived”²³ by hearing that Yosef was still alive²⁴ — it was imperative that also Yaakov’s wish that to be reunited with Yosef²⁵ should materialize quickly.

5.

“HASHEM SENT ME!” — I CANNOT LEAVE

On this basis, the verbosity of Yosef’s statement will be understood, in that before saying to his brothers “quickly, go up to my father,” he repeated the idea {of Hashem sending him to Egypt} **three times**: “It was to preserve life that **Hashem sent me** before you”; “**Hashem sent me** before you”; “You did not send me here, but **Hashem**”:²⁶

¹⁹ Ibid. 37:3.

²⁰ Ibid. 45:9.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. 45:13.

²³ Ibid. 45:27.

²⁴ Ibid. 45:28.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. 45:5-8.

Since Yaakov's life was potentially at risk every moment that he did not meet and see Yosef, the question arises: How could Yosef have been content to tell his brothers to “quickly, go up to my father” — that they should go to the land of Israel and bring Yaakov from there to Egypt. He ought to have **immediately** traveled to the land of Israel quickly **himself** to see Yaakov, for —

[In addition to the fact that owing to {the *mitzvah* of} honoring one's father, he ought to have traveled to Yaakov (first),²⁷ especially since the journey had to be done swiftly and Yaakov was old {and unable to travel quickly}.]

— then they would have met each other much sooner! But Yosef anticipated this by prefacing and emphasizing — multiple times — that his presence in Egypt was (not of his own choice and desire, but) “Hashem sent me” — he was **on a mission from Hashem** to be the “provider (of grain) to all the people of the land,”²⁸ and consequently he had no right to leave.

6.

QUICKLY — NO EXTRA PUNISHMENT

Another point explaining the necessity of the utmost haste:

Rashi already explained earlier²⁹ that the length of time that Yaakov mourned for his son Yosef corresponded to the twenty-two years that Yaakov had not honored his parents. Therefore, knowing that the twenty-two years of Yaakov's punishment were now complete, Yosef urged the brothers to “**quickly**, go up to my father”: Since the period of punishment was over, there needed to be {an approach analogous to} “{Hashem} did not keep them {even} as long as the blink of an eye.”³⁰

²⁷ {I.e., he should not wait for Yaakov to come to him.}

²⁸ Ibid. 42:6.

²⁹ Ibid. 37:34.

³⁰ Rashi (citing *Mechilta*) to *Shemos* 12:41.

[On this basis, Yosef's words, "Quickly, go up to **my** father" — and not "our father" — has greater meaning. For (in addition to the fact that Yaakov's pain was tied to Yosef) in this way he alluded that the urgency was connected with Yosef's ability to practice the *mitzvah* of honoring one's father ("my father"), since the twenty-two years of punishment for Yaakov's failure to honor his father had already passed.]

This also provides us with a lesson in our Divine service:

There are times when the approach of "the left repels"³¹ — discipline and punishment is called for. We must know, however, that we are expected to be extremely careful not to overuse this approach. The **moment** that discipline and punishment is no longer required, we must act **quickly** and switch to the approach of kindness and closeness — "the right draws closer."³²

From a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Vayigash*, 5734 (1973).

³¹ *Sotah* 47a.

³² *Ibid.*