

### **Parsha O's – Vavigash**

Genesis 45:1 “And Joseph was unable *lehit'apek* because of all those standing near him. He cried: “Remove every man from my presence”. (Therefore) no man was with him when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers”.

We will be focusing on the word “*lehit'apek*” (regarding which see 43:41), and on the reason for Joseph's clearing the room, in the hope that these issues will provide a window into Joseph's relationship with his brothers, and into his character generally.

I think that growing up I assumed that Joseph was overwhelmed by emotion, was too embarrassed to admit this in front of his Egyptian subordinates, and thus had them removed before revealing himself. This still seems to me a commonsense reading, but one that is hard to find in traditional commentaries.

For the sake of contrast, let us begin with Ramban and Meshekh Chokhmah. They translate *lehit'apek* as “to remain strong”, but suggest that he was overpowered not by emotion but rather by his inability to defend his cruelty to the Egyptian courtiers. Meshekh Chokhmah says that Joseph wanted to compel them to bring Yaakov down to Egypt so as to fulfill his dream, but realized that the Egyptians would never stand for it. (Bereshit Rabbah suggests that he was intimidated by the brothers, realizing that they would destroy Egypt rather than give up Benjamin. This requires a rather large leap of faith in the (starving) brother's military ability – Egypt is considerably larger and more powerful than Shekhem, and the Egyptians had no motive for mass circumcision.)

The problem with this explanation is why Joseph bothered removing everyone from the room if he was giving in anyway. Here one can graft the explanation offered by Rashi, that he did not wish to embarrass his brothers by publicly revealing their sale of him, but such consideration would be an abrupt turnaround. In any case, why could he not reveal himself to them without mentioning their culpability in his enslavement?

Bekhor Shor suggests that Joseph wanted the brothers to confess their sin, and feared that they would be too embarrassed to do so publicly. This fits better psychologically, but the difficulty with it is that Joseph then lets his brothers off the hook. When his revelation stuns them into silence, he takes the initiative, bring up their sin, and excuses it. Perhaps their stunned silence was sufficient for him, but this again seems psychologically unconvincing.

Seforno makes the peculiar suggestion that the people Joseph removed were other supplicants, and that he had them removed because he was unable to concentrate on their needs because of the family situation. This may well be true, but why bother mentioning it? R. Saadia Gaon's suggestion that Joseph was so hemmed in by the crowd that he was unable to move (presumably toward his brothers so as to engage in private conversation) faces the same difficulty.

I think all these readings take insufficient account of a possible redundancy in the verse. Joseph removes everyone from his presence, therefore “no man stood with him when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers”. Obviously!

Let me begin with a small suggestion. This line is included because of the subtle pronoun “him”, as opposed to “them”. No man stood with Joseph, but the brothers had each other. Perhaps this is because, when we meet people with whom we have an old but unsustained relationship, we tend to revert back to the person we were when the relationship last flourished. In relationship with the brothers – once they were acknowledged as brothers, and at least at the outset - Joseph was still the isolated child rather than the ruler of Egypt. Indeed, his treatment of them throughout is built on the assumption that if they know who he really is they won't simply follow his instructions.

Here it is worth noting, although we cannot explore this issue in depth, that so far as we know Joseph never dreamed of being the ruler of Egypt – only of being the ruler of his family. This problem is picked up on, and ingeniously solved, by Tim Rice's lyrics for the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. “Could it be that I was meant for higher things than you, a post in someone's government, a ministry or two?” In other words, the dreams imply that Joseph will be relatively more important than his family, not that he will rule over them. The solution is ingenious, but unconvincing in that it has Joseph offer this interpretation rather than the narrator – Joseph (and Jacob) seem clearly to read it as a portent of rule over the family.

Which leads us to the question – why do the dreams matter so much? When all is said and done, what about the history of the Jews would have changed had Joseph's father and brothers come to Egypt and not bowed to him? (We leave out for now the question of whether the dream of the moon bowing is ever fulfilled.

Let me close with a potentially more ambitious suggestion. Joseph is left alone to face his brothers, as Yaakov is left alone to wrestle with the angel representing his brother, or, as Nechamah Leibowitz suggests, with the Esav within him. Is Joseph, then, wrestling with the aspects of himself that mirror his brothers' in their relationship to him?