

Parshas Vayigash

Is My Father Still Alive?

At the moment that Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, he asks if his father Yaakov is still living. This question seems out of place for a number of reasons. The following Sicha explores the true meaning behind Yosef’s words, and the reason he chose to express them at this pivotal time.

Rashi, the foremost commentator on the Torah, clarifies all possible queries found in the simple meaning of the Torah.

Just as one can learn from what Rashi does explain, one can learn from what Rashi doesn’t explain as well. If there is a difficulty found in a verse of the Torah which Rashi does not address, this is due to one of two possibilities:

- 1) He has already addressed a similar query earlier in the Torah. By understanding the manner in which he dealt with the similar question previously, one will inevitably understand the answer to the question at hand.
- 2) The question is not truly a question according to the simple way of learning the Torah.

In this week’s *parsha* (Torah portion), an example of the first possibility is found. There is a seemingly obvious question, which anyone who is learning the Torah with a simple approach would ask. Yet, Rashi does not address the question.

The reason for this is that a prior knowledge of an idea which Rashi explained earlier in the Torah allows the question to be answered on its own.

Yosef’s inquiry

Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, and informs them of who he truly is. In Yosef’s opening statement to his brothers, he asks; “Is my father still alive?”

The question is puzzling however, being that it seems clear that he already knew that his father Yaakov was alive, based on the dialogue he had just had with his brothers.

The following is the complete exchange between Yosef and his brothers, when he divulged to them that he was in truth their long lost brother.

Text 1

Now Yosef could not bear all those standing beside him, and he called out, "Take everyone away from me!" Thus no one stood with him when Yosef made himself known to his brothers. And he wept out loud, so the Egyptians heard, and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" but his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence. Then Yosef said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me," and they drew closer. And he said, "I am your brother Yosef, whom you sold into Egypt. But now do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me before you. For already two years of famine [have passed] in the midst of the land, and [for] another five years, there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And G-d sent me before you to make for you a remnant in the land, and to preserve [it] for you for a great deliverance. And now, you did not send me here, but G-d, and He made me a father to Pharaoh, a lord over all his household, and a ruler over the entire land of Egypt. Hasten and

go up to my father, and say to him, 'So said your son, Yosef: "G-d has made me a lord over all the Egyptians. Come down to me, do not tarry.'"

Bereishis, 45:1-9

Yosef asks if his father is alive, but he does not wait for an answer and proceeds to give instructions for bringing his father down to Egypt. Throughout the entire exchange it seems abundantly clear that Yosef knows that his father is alive. So, why did he ask?

Indeed, not only did Yosef not wait for an answer about whether or not his father was alive (as he apparently knew), but the brothers had essentially already answered this question, as they themselves had previously expressed that their father was living.

The entire conversation that led up to Yosef revealing his identity to his brothers revolved around the concern for Yaakov's well-being.

In fact, most recently, it was Yehuda's concern for the life of Binyamin and his father that brought Yosef to finally admit his true identity. Yehuda had already expressed that it was because his father was alive, and his life was strongly tied with his youngest son, that Yehuda was so concerned about Binyamin's welfare.

Yehuda states the following to Yosef in the beginning of the *parsha*:

Text 2

And we said to my lord, 'The boy cannot leave his father, for if he leaves his father, he will die.' And you said to your servants, 'If your youngest brother does not come down with you, you will not see my face again.' And it came to pass when we went up to your servant, my father, and we told him the words of my lord that our father

said, 'Go back, and buy us a little food.' But we said, 'We cannot go down; [only] if our youngest brother is with us will we go down, for we cannot see the man's face if our youngest brother is not with us...And now, when I come to your servant, my father, and the boy is not with us [since] his soul is attached to his (the boy's) soul, it will come to pass, when he sees that the boy is gone, he will die, and your servants will have brought down the hoary head of your servant, our father, in grief to the grave. For your servant assumed responsibility for the boy from my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him to you, I will have sinned against my father forever.' So now, please let your servant stay instead of the boy, as a slave to my lord, and may the boy go up with his brothers. For how will I go up to my father if the boy is not with me? Let me not see the misery that will befall my father!

Bereishis, 44: 22-34

Yehuda repeats time and again how his father is alive, and that if Binyamin does not return, he is concerned that his father will not be able to withstand the loss of a second son. This being the case, why does Yosef ask if Yaakov is alive? It seems he had already received the answer numerous times.

Furthermore, Yosef does not even wait for an answer to his question but instead goes on to instruct them on the next steps that they should take.

He immediately tells his brothers, "Please come closer to me," and then proceeds to say to them that they should not be upset that they sold him to Egypt, since it was all part of G-d's plan. Yosef ends his conversation with the instructions: "Hasten and go up to my father, and say to him, 'So said your son, Yosef: "G-d has made me a lord over all the Egyptians. Come down to me, do not tarry.'"

Yosef had still not heard the confirmation that his father was alive, yet he already had a message for them to deliver to him!

From all the above, it is certain that Yosef discerned that his father was living. There must therefore be another meaning to his inquiry. Why indeed did he ask if his father is still alive and what could possibly be the intent of his question?

Rashi, however, does not comment on this basic question, which would be raised by anyone learning the Torah. This must be because the question has already been answered by something that Rashi has explained elsewhere.

An ice-breaker

There are commentators¹ who explain that Yosef asked about the well-being of his father as a way of breaking the ice after having not seen his brothers for 22 years.

He knew that the announcement that he was Yosef would cause his brothers to be stunned by the fact that their brother whom they had sold into slavery, had become the viceroy of Egypt and was now in control of their destiny. He therefore intended to discuss his father's well-being, and possibly others in the family, as a means to lighten the mood. (In the end, we find that the conversation didn't continue, being that the brothers "could not answer him because they were startled by his presence.")

Text 3

And for this reason he said to them, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" He was not asking if he was still alive, since they had already told him that he was alive...rather, he said this to them in order to begin a conversation with them. For, he

primarily intended that they should not become embarrassed about what they had done—that he should not remind them about the incident of selling him. Rather, he thought to speak to them concerning other matters. This is why he began with his father, [asking] if he was still alive...and he had in mind to ask them afterwards concerning all of their wives, their children, their livestock, and all of the household matters, but since they were overwhelmed and did not answer him [he didn't continue].

Abarbanel, Bereishis 45:3

Yosef was not asking a question that he didn't know the answer to. He was directing the conversation to familial matters, in order to make his brothers more comfortable.

According to this, it is understood why Rashi did not feel the need to explain anything at this place in the Torah.

Rashi had already explained this concept previously: that it is normal to ask a question that one knows the answer to, in order to begin a conversation.

The first example of such an instance is found after Adam sinned and ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam hid from G-d amongst the trees in the garden, and G-d called out to him, asking where he was.

Text 4

And the Lord G-d called to man, and He said to him, "Where are you?"

Bereishis, 3:9

¹ See Abarbanel and Tur Ha'Aruch.

Surely G-d knew where Adam was to be found and had no need to ask him where he was. Rashi therefore explains the meaning of the question as follows:

Text 5

He knew where he was, but [He asked him this] in order to enter into conversation with him, lest he be frightened to answer if He should punish him suddenly.

Rashi, ibid

Similarly, after Kayin kills Hevel, there too, G-d asks Kayin a question of which He is already aware of the answer. The verse says as follows:

Text 6

And the Lord said to Kayin, "Where is Hevel your brother?" And he said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Bereishis, 4:9

There as well, Rashi explains that G-d asks Kayin a question that he already knew the answer to, for a specific intent:

Text 7

To enter with him, using mild words. [For] perhaps he would repent and say, "I killed him, and I sinned against You."

Rashi, ibid

In the case of Adam and Kayin, G-d asks both of them questions of which He is already aware of the answers, in order not to overwhelm them with what He was going to say.

It is therefore possible, that since here in Parshas Vayigash, in the instance of Yosef having just made a shocking revelation to his brothers, one can understand that the reason he asked, "Is my father still alive?" was not because he needed to know, but because he wanted to enter the conversation with them in a mild manner.

Consequently, it can be assumed that the reason Rashi was not bothered by this question was because he relied on his previous explanations about Adam and Kayin, and presumed that anyone who was learning the Torah would draw the same conclusion as found in those instances.

The difficulty

In our case, however, this does not seem to be an adequate explanation.

Yosef and his brothers had already been speaking at length about his father during the detailed conversation regarding Yaakov's hesitation to send Binyamin, and it was already quite clear that his father was alive. It is therefore difficult to explain that this subject would serve as a conversation starter.

If he was merely looking for an ice-breaker, why use a question that his brothers had already answered? If indeed he was looking for a mild way to begin the conversation, he should have done so with another topic, rather than a subject which they had already been discussing at length.

It is therefore safe to assume that the meaning of his question, "Is my father still alive?" had some other intent, which too, was already clear from an earlier place in the Torah, and therefore Rashi saw no need to mention the question.

A wonder

While Yosef's words are usually translated to mean, "Is my father still alive?" and are expressive of a question, in their original Hebrew form, the structure of the phrase can be interpreted with a variant meaning. It is possible to explain that Yosef was not actually asking a question but was merely stating his astonishment at the possibility that his father was alive.

In certain instances, when a word is prefaced with a letter "hei," as with the initial Hebrew word of Yosef's statement, "*Ha-od avi chai?*" (העוד אבי חי), rather than expressing an actual question, its meaning takes on an expression of surprise.

This same structural form is found as well in the above verse regarding Kayin. After G-d asked Kayin, "Where is Hevel your brother?" Kayin responded with, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

When Kayin told G-d, "*Ha-shomer achi anochi?*" (השומר אחי אנכי) he was not actually asking a question, but was stating his astonishment that he should be responsible for his brother's fate, and was attempting to absolve himself of any responsibility.

Rashi explains this idea in regard to Kayin's response, as follows:

Text 8

This is a question asked in astonishment...

Rashi, ibid

A similar language is found regarding Avraham as well, in his response to hearing about the future birth of Yitzchak.

Text 9

And Avraham fell on his face and rejoiced, and he said to himself, "Will [a child] be born to one who is 100 years old, and will Sara, who is 90 years old, give birth?" [*Ha-I'ven mei-ah shanim yulad?* (הלבן מאה שנים יולד)]

Bereishis, 17:17

Rashi comments on the above verse:

Text 10

There are questions which are positive assertions, like²: הנגלה נגליתי, "Did I appear?" [Meaning: "of course I appeared!"]; and³: הראה אתה, "Do you see?" [Meaning: "of course you see!"] This too is a positive assertion, and so did he say to himself, "Was such kindness done to anyone else, that the Holy One, blessed be He, is doing for me?"

Rashi, ibid

Avraham was not asking a question of whether it was possible that someone who is 100 years old could give birth, as he knew that the Almighty was capable of doing anything He wished. Instead, he was expressing his astonishment at the amazing miracle that the Almighty was doing for him.

So too, Yosef did not have a question of whether or not his father was alive, and he therefore did

² Shmuel I, 2:27

³ Shmuel II, 15:27

not wait for the answer to his query. He was merely expressing his astonishment that this was indeed so.

Rashi did not find it necessary to ask the question as to why Yosef said, “(Ha-od) Is my father still alive?” being that if one had learned the above previous verses, he would know that a question prefaced by the letter “*hei*” (ה) is not an actual question, but rather an expression of astonishment.

Questions

However, in understanding Yosef’s astonishment concerning the fact that Yaakov was still living, the following questions arise:

- 1) At that time, Yaakov was a mere 130 years old, an age considerably younger than those of his father and grandfather at the times when they passed on. Avraham passed away at 175 years old, and Yitzchak, at 180 years. Why was it so surprising that Yaakov was still alive?
- 2) By Yosef’s statement, “I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?” it implies that there is a connection between the first half of the sentence and the second. What is the connection between stating who he was, and (according to the above explanation) the amazement that his father was still living?
- 3) Why was this surprise that his father was still alive the *first* thing that Yosef expressed, *immediately* after he revealed his identity? (According to the explanation that holds that Yosef was indeed asking a question here and not merely expressing his surprise, it is understood why it was the first thing that he spoke of, as his father’s life was of paramount importance. In the case of the statement being one of

astonishment however, why did it need to be the first thing that he expressed?)

Being Consoled

When Yosef’s brothers had sold him to the Midianites, they needed to somehow explain Yosef’s whereabouts to their father. They dipped Yosef’s special coat into goat’s blood, and presented it to Yaakov—letting him know that they found it, in order to cause him to assume that Yosef had died.

Upon receiving the coat, Yaakov announced⁴, “[it is] my son’s coat; a wild beast has devoured him. Yosef has surely been torn up.”

Yaakov rent his clothes and mourned for many days; however, he refused to be comforted.

Text 11

And all his sons and all his daughters arose to console him, but he refused to be consoled, for he said, "Because I will descend on account of my son as a mourner to the grave"; and his father wept for him.

Bereishis, 37:35

On this verse Rashi explains, that the reason that Yaakov was not able to be comforted was because Yosef was, in truth, still alive and that a person can only be consoled over an individual who is truly dead.

Text 12

No one accepts consolation for a person who is really alive but believed to be dead, for it is

⁴ Bereishis, 37:33

decreed that a dead person should be forgotten from the heart, but not a living person.

Rashi, ibid

It is because of this phenomenon that the Torah tells us⁵, Yaakov “mourned for his son many days.” Rashi explains this period of time as the “twenty-two years from the time he (Yosef) left him until Yaakov went down to (meet him in) Egypt.”

Yaakov was in a constant state of mourning from the moment that he learned of Yosef’s death until the moment that he learned that Yosef was alive and well in Egypt.

Yosef’s shock

This is what Yosef was expressing in his shock of his father Yaakov still being alive.

Yosef inferred, that given the fact that “I am Yosef,”—meaning, that *he* was alive—it must be that my father is still mourning my death. He therefore asked, “Is my father still alive?!” For, if Yosef was alive and Yaakov was still mourning for him, he therefore understood that his father had been suffering for all this time. He therefore asked in shock: how can it be that my father is still alive after his twenty two years of tremendous emotional pain?!

He was not asking a question, but was expressing that his father must be going through tremendous emotional pain.

It is now also understood why Yosef expressed this surprise specifically when he did, immediately after revealing himself.

Being that his father was going through such an extensive period of mourning, he therefore told his brothers that the time had come for them to bring their father to Egypt. His statement, “I am

Yosef. Is my father still alive?” served as a preface to his next statement, that they bring their father to Egypt.

Yosef continued and instructed them, “*Hasten* and go up to my father, and say to him, 'So said your son, Yosef: "G-d has made me a lord over all the Egyptians. Come down to me, do not *tarry*.'" Hence, Yosef’s previous statement was not *merely* a statement of shock, but also a preface that they rush and bring their father to Egypt.

The reason they needed to hurry was that every moment that they did not inform Yaakov of Yosef’s well-being, Yaakov was experiencing tremendous pain, which was also dangerous to his health—especially after the 22 years of mourning Yosef’s loss.

The questions above are consequently answered:

- 1) Yosef’s shock was not that Yaakov was alive at such an old age, but rather, that he was still alive despite the tremendous emotional pain of his mourning.
- 2) The beginning of his statement, “I am Yosef,” was an introduction to the end of his statement, “Is my father still alive.” Being that he was Yosef, and alive, it was therefore shocking that his father, having been in a state of constant mourning, and tremendous pain for all those years, was also alive.
- 3) Yosef therefore expressed these words right at the beginning of his conversation with his brothers. He did not want any unnecessary time to pass, during which his father would, G-d forbid, be in more pain, and his health would be endangered.

Destined Mission

⁵ Bereishis, 37:34

The above explanation sheds light on another puzzling detail in Yosef's words that do not seem to fit in the rest of his conversation. Yosef tells his brothers the following:

Text 13

"...I am your brother Yosef, whom you sold into Egypt. But now do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me before you. For already two years of famine [have passed] in the midst of the land, and [for] another five years, there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And G-d sent me before you to make for you a remnant in the land, and to preserve [it] for you for a great deliverance. And now, you did not send me here, but G-d, and He made me a father to Pharaoh, a lord over all his household, and a ruler over the entire land of Egypt.

Bereishis, 45:4-8

As was explained, the beginning of Yosef's words expressed an astonishment that his father was still alive, and that the end of his statement let them know that they must go and inform their father of Yosef's presence in Egypt very quickly.

The above sentences which come in the middle, however, seem to be a tangent. Why was it pertinent right then, to explain at length, the reason that G-d sent him to Egypt?

However, in truth, this statement of Yosef's was a response to a question that the brothers could have posed to him.

Once Yosef expressed his shock that his father was still living, and expressed the urgency of bringing him to Egypt, one could naturally ask: if it was so important that Yaakov see Yosef, and if

every moment that he did not see him his life was endangered, why then did Yosef not return to his father himself?!

Yosef answered this in his explanation concerning his G-d-given mission to be in the land of Egypt, and his statement that he was placed there "for a great deliverance."

Yosef could not return to Yaakov, since G-d had sent him to Egypt for a reason. He was not there by any choice of his own, but it was his *destiny* to be there. It was therefore imperative that they bring his father to him in Egypt and not vice versa.

A reason to rush

There is an additional reason for the importance of not tarrying in bringing Yaakov to Egypt, to once again be together with his son.

Rashi explained previously in the Torah, that the 22 years that Yaakov suffered the pain of not seeing his son Yosef, were a punishment for the 22 years that he did not see his father, Yitzchak.

Text 14

...Here are 22 years, corresponding to the 22 years that Yaakov did not fulfill [the *mitzvah*] to honor his father and mother: 20 years that he was in Lavan's house, and two years that he was on the road when he returned from Lavan's house—one and a half years in Succos and six months in Beis-el. This is what he [meant when he] said to Lavan⁶, "This is 20 years for me in your house." They are for me, upon me, and I will ultimately suffer [for 20 years], corresponding to them.

Rashi, Bereishis, 37:34

⁶ Bereishis, 31:41

Yaakov did not see Yosef for 22 years, as a consequence for not serving his own father for 22 years. As a punishment for not honoring his own father, his son consequently was not able to honor him.

This is another reason that Yosef rushed to bring Yaakov down to Egypt. Once the time for punishment passed, he wished to bring his father to Egypt immediately, and end his pain.

The lesson

Yosef's actions can serve as a lesson for us as well. Although there are times when a person needs to employ measures of strictness and punishment, he must make sure to use these

methods with care, and not use severity more than is necessary.

At the moment that the time of punishment has been fulfilled, one must immediately act with kindness, and do so *quickly*, as did Yosef.

May we see only revealed kindness from the Almighty, and experience the ultimate revelation of Moshiach, *speedily!*

(Based on Likutei Sichos 15, Vayigash 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel.

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