



How Did Yaakov Not Know that Yosef Was Still Alive in Mitzrayim? The Neshamah of Yisrael that Left Yaakov when Yosef Was Sold Came to Yosef and Assisted Him to Overcome the Yetzer of the 600,000 People of Yisrael

This week's parsha is parshas Vayeishev. It is worthwhile to focus on the difficult ordeal Yosef HaTzaddik had to endure in Mitzrayim. To overcome the persuasions of his own yetzer, he required the assistance of his father's image. This is explained by Rashi (Bereishis 39, 11) and is based on the following Gemara (Sotah 36b):

”באותה שעה באתה דיוקנו של אביו ונראתה לו בחלון, אמר לו, יוסף עתידין אחיך שיכתבו על אבני אפוד ואתה ביניהם, רצונך שימחה שמך מביניהם... מיד ותשב באיתן קשתו... מידי אביר יעקב, מי גרם לו שיחקק על אבני אפוד, אלא אביר יעקב, משם רועה אבן ישראל, משם זכה ונעשה רועה, שנאמר רועה ישראל האזינה נוהג כצאן יוסף.”

At that moment, the visage of his father came and appeared to him in the window. He said to him, “Yosef, your brothers are destined to be inscribed upon the stones of the ‘eiphod,’ and you are among them. Do you want your name to be erased from among them?” . . . Immediately (Bereishis 49, 24), “his bow was firmly emplaced.” . . . “From the hands of ‘Avir Yaakov’ (the mighty power of Yaakov).” Who caused him to be engraved on the “eiphod” stones? None other than “Avir Yaakov.” The passuk concludes: “From there a shepherd, the stone of Yisrael.” From there Yosef merited becoming a shepherd (of the Jewish people), as it says (Tehillim 80, 2): “O Shepherd of Yisrael hearken, You Who leads them like the flock of Yosef.”

This Gemara although intriguing is enigmatic. How did the vision of Yaakov's likeness in the window assist Yosef in overcoming his yetzer? Without a doubt, this incident was not merely the product of Yosef's imagination. In fact, the Gemara states explicitly that the image of his father revealed to him by dint of prophecy that the names of the shevatim were destined to be inscribed on the stones of the ephod, with his name among them. The passuk cited attests to this fact: **“From the hands of ‘Avir Yaakov.’ Who caused him to be engraved on the “eiphod” stones? None other than “Avir Yaakov.”**

Now, we could posit that it was the neshamah of Yaakov that appeared to Yosef. For we know that the great tzaddikim are able to divest themselves of their physical constraints. If that were indeed the case, then Yaakov would have been aware of everything that happened to Yosef in Mitzrayim. That is not consistent, however, with the events described in the following pesukim (ibid. 45, 26): **”ויגידו לו לאמר עוד יוסף חי וכי הוא מושל בכל ארץ מצרים ויפג לבו כי לא האמין להם, וידברו אליו את כל דברי יוסף אשר דיבר אליהם וירא את העגלות אשר שלח יוסף לשאת אותו ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם.”** **And they (Yosef's brothers) told him (Yaakov) saying, “Yosef is still alive,” and that he is ruler over the entire land of Mitzrayim; but he (Yaakov) had a turn of heart, for he did not believe them. And they related to him all the words of Yosef that he had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him, then the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived.** From these

pesukim, it is apparent that Yaakov was unaware of the fact that Yosef was still alive, and the shevatim had to convince him that this was really true.

Yosef HaTzaddik Obligates Reshaim Who Are Besieged by Their Yetzers

We will also address another astonishing issue. The Zohar hakadosh and all of our sacred sefarim refer to Yosef as "צדיק יסוד עולם". This title lauds the fact that he withstood the influence of his yetzer hara and maintained his kedushah in Mitzrayim. In Pardes Rimonim (Sha'ar 23, Chapter 10), the Ramak writes that Yosef is the paradigm of the midah of "yesod." This is evident from the fact that he provided for his father's entire household, and he had the Egyptians circumcised. The Ramak also explains that the midah of "yesod" sustains and feeds the world.

Yet, we learned from Chazal above that Yosef only managed to overcome his yetzer after the image of his father appeared to him in the window and warned him sternly that his name would be removed from the stones of the "eiphod," if he failed to maintain his level of kedushah. This begs the question: How did Yosef earn the lofty status of being the paradigm of "yesod tzaddik" and the one who sustains the entire world?

This seems even more astonishing in light of the following Gemara (Yoma 35b). Due to his extreme level of kedushah, Chazal labelled him: "יוסף מחייב את הרשעים". Here is the passage from the Gemara:

רשע אומרים לו, מפני מה לא עסקת בתורה, אם אמר נאה הייתי וטרוד ביצרי הייתי, אומרים לו כלום נאה היית מיוסף. אמרו עליו על יוסף הצדיק, בכל יום ויום היתה אשת פוטיפר משדלתו בדברים, בגדים שלבשה לו שחרית לא לבשה לו ערבית, בגדים שלבשה לו ערבית לא לבשה לו שחרית.

אמרה לו השמע לי, אמר לה לאו, אמרה לו הריני חובשתך בבית האסורין, אמר לה ה' מתיר אסורים, הריני כופפת קומתך, ה' זוקק כפופים, הריני מסמא את עיניך, ה' פוקח עורים, נתנה לו אלף ככרי כסף לשמוע אליה לשכב אצלה להיות עמה, ולא רצה לשמוע אליה לשכב אצלה בעולם הזה, להיות עמה לעולם הבא."

To the wicked person they say, "Why did you not engage in Torah-study?" If he says, "I was handsome and occupied with my yetzer," they will answer him, "Were you any more handsome than Yosef?" They said about Yosef HaTzaddik: Each and every day, the wife of Potiphar would attempt to

seduce him with words. Clothes she wore for him in the morning she would not wear for him in the evening; clothes she wore for him in the evening she would not wear for him in the morning.

She said to him, "Surrender yourself to me." He answered her, "No." She threatened him, "I shall confine you in prison." He answered her, "Hashem releases the imprisoned." She said, "I shall bend your proud stature." He replied, "Hashem straightens the bent." She threatened, "I will blind your eyes." He replied, "Hashem gives sight to the blind." She gave him one thousand silver bars, so that he would consent "to lie beside her, to be with her"; but he did not want to consent. He did not consent "to lie with her" in Olam HaZeh, because he did not want "to be with her" in Olam HaBa.

But if it is true that Yosef HaTzaddik was incapable of overcoming the influence of his yetzer hara until the image of his father appeared to him in the window, how could Chazal go so far as to say: **Yosef obligates the reshaim?** For then every rasha would have a strong and valid rebuttal; they could argue that the image of Yaakov did not come to save them from committing a sin.

The Sale of Yosef Was an Example of a "Terrifying Act Orchestrated from Above" to Inspire Yosef to Pave the Way for Yisrael in Mitzrayim with His Kedushah

We will begin to shed some light on these matters by introducing an important concept related to "mechiras Yosef" taught by our blessed sages. I believe that it will illuminate for us and clarify several enigmatic and obscure issues. They teach us that the entire episode was orchestrated from above. This is taught in the Midrash Tanchuma (Vayeishev 4) related to the passuk (ibid. 39, 1):

"And Yosef was taken down to Mitzrayim." In reference to this, it is written (Tehillim 66, 5): "Go and see the works of G-d; He is terrifying in His acts toward the children of man." . . . HKB"H wished to fulfill the decree (Bereishis 15, 13): "Know with certainty that your offspring shall be sojourners in a land not their own," but He resorted to subterfuge in

every instance to accomplish it. He made Yaakov love Yosef, so that his brothers hated him; and as a result, they sold him to the Yishmaelim, who took him down to Mitzrayim. When Yaakov heard that Yosef was alive in Mitzrayim, he descended there with the shevatim; they were subsequently enslaved there. This is the implication of: “And Yosef was taken down to Mitzrayim.” But do not read the word as “הורד”—“taken down”—but rather as “הוריד”—“he caused” his father and the shevatim “to come down” to Mitzrayim.

Not only was the sale of Yosef by his brothers—a seemingly heinous act—orchestrated from above—an instance of “נורא עלילה על בני אדם”—but the entire difficult ordeal he was subjected to in Mitzrayim was also orchestrated from above. By maintaining his kedushah and passing the test admirably, he paved the way for all of Yisrael to do the same, as taught in the Midrash (V.R. 32, 5): “יוסף ירד למצרים וגדר עצמו מן הערוה ונגדרו ישראל בזכותו. אמר רבי חייא בר אבא, כדאי היה גדור ערוה בעצמו שנגאלו ישראל על ידו—Yosef went down to Mitzrayim and guarded himself against immorality and, in his merit, Yisrael guarded themselves against immorality. Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said: The guarding against immoral behavior was itself sufficient to warrant Yisrael being redeemed on its account.

Upon further reflection, it is apparent that Yosef paved the way for all of Yisrael to maintain their sanctity in Mitzrayim—both when they were downtrodden and when they were enjoying prosperity and greatness. After all, Yosef’s ordeal with his master’s wife occurred while he was still a slave and downtrodden. Subsequently, when he rose to greatness and was appointed the viceroy, he also maintained his kedushah, as it is written (ibid. 49, 22): “בן פורת יוסף בן פורת עלי עין בנות צעדה עלי שור”—a son of grace is Yosef, a son of grace to the eye; girls stepped up to gaze. The Midrash expounds on this passuk (B.R. 98, 18): **When Yosef became the ruler of Mitzrayim, the daughters of kings peeked out at him through the lattices. They would throw bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and finger-rings at him to draw his attention** (so that he would lift up his eyes and look at them). **Nevertheless, he did not look at them.**

This explains very nicely what Yosef said to his brothers to put their minds at ease that he did not seek revenge for them selling him into slavery (ibid. 50, 19): “ויאמר אליהם יוסף אל תיראו כי התחת אלקים אני, ואתם חשבתם—Yosef said to them, ““Fear not, for am I in place of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good, in order to do as it is today, to preserve the lives of a great people.” With these words, Yosef hinted to them that his being sold was orchestrated from above “to preserve the lives of a great people” by paving the way for Yisrael to maintain their kedushah and to maintain the status of being alive—as opposed to reshaim, chas v’shalom, of whom it is said (Berachos 18b): “רשעים שבחייהו קרויין—**the wicked, even while they are still alive, are considered as if they are dead.**

The Powers of the Collective Yetzer HaRa of the 600,000 Members of Yisrael Joined Together to Cause Yosef to Sin

We can now reconcile the complex issue of Yosef HaTzaddik. As explained, the kedushah of the 600,000 members of Yisrael in Mitzrayim depended on his kedushah. Therefore, the forces of their collective yetzer hara joined together to cause Yosef HaTzaddik to sin. For, they realized that if they succeeded in tripping him up, they would also be able to cause all of the members of Yisrael in Mitzrayim to sin. Conversely, if he succeeded in maintaining his kedushah, he would pave the way for all of Yisrael to withstand their yetzers. Even Yosef HaTzaddik could not overcome the combined forces of the 600,000 yetzer haras of Yisrael alone; therefore, he required the assistance of his father’s image in the window.

Accordingly, Yosef HaTzaddik—the paradigm of “yesod”—fought with all his might to maintain his kedushah. Undoubtedly, he would not have had any trouble overcoming his own personal yetzer; for this reason, he merited becoming the paradigm of the midah of “yesod tzaddik.” Nevertheless, we have learned in the Gemara (Kiddushin 30b): “יצרו של אדם מתגבר—עליו בכל יום ומבקש המיתו... ואלמלא הקב”ה עוזרו אין יכול לו”—**man’s yetzer overwhelms him every day and attempts to kill him . . . and if HKB”H did not help him,**

he would be unable to withstand it. If this is the case for all normal human beings and their individual yetzer haras, imagine how much more so this applied to Yosef HaTzaddik, who was tasked with paving the way for all of Yisrael. Therefore, all the yetzers of Yisrael joined forces to combat Yosef; he was incapable of defeating them alone; hence, he required special heavenly assistance.

Seeing what a difficult, terrible ordeal Yosef HaTzaddik had to endure—not on his own account but on account of the 600,000 members of Yisrael—HKB”H sent the image of his father, Yaakov, to appear to him in the window. The rationale for this phenomenon was that Yaakov Avinu, with his incredible kedushah, merited becoming the root of all the neshamos of Yisrael. As such, he merited fathering G-d’s twelve shevatim that comprise the entire people of Yisrael. For this reason, we are called **Bnei Yisrael—the Children of Yisrael**—because we are the descendants of Yaakov, who is also named Yisrael. Since Yaakov is the root of all the neshamos of Yisrael, he possessed the power to subjugate the yetzer haras of all 600,000 members of Yisrael.

It is worth mentioning what the Toldos Adam brings down in the name of the Gra, zy”a. In his own, unique, sacred way, he interprets the teaching cited above: **”יצרו של אדם מתגבר עליו בכל יום ומבקש המיתו... ואלמלא הקב”ה עוזרו אין יכול לו.”** Chazal are teaching us that HKB”H only intervenes after a person has done everything within his powers to overcome his yetzer hara. Once he has exhausted the limits of his abilities and can do no more, HKB”H steps in with his holy assistance to help the person defeat his yetzer hara.

We can now begin to appreciate Chazal’s profound statement: **Yosef obligates the reshaim.** On the one hand, it is true that Yosef successfully overcame his own personal yetzer when HKB”H appeared in the window in the likeness of Yosef’s father, Yaakov. However, this divine assistance did not occur until after Yosef first fought valiantly like a mighty lion with all his power against the collective yetzer of all Yisrael as well as his own personal yetzer. When he exhausted all that was humanly possible, HKB”H intervened in the guise of Yosef’s father. He assisted Yosef to defeat his

yetzer, so that he could pave the way for all of Yisrael to maintain their kedushah in Mitzrayim.

Hence, we can conclude that if every Jew follows the example of Yosef to the best of his abilities, combatting his yetzer with all of his strength, he is assured that HKB”H will come to his aid to help him overcome his yetzer. He might do so by arousing one to perform teshuvah by the appearance of the image of one’s father or by the appearance of some other image that would inspire teshuvah. This is the implication of the Gemara’s statement: **”Man’s yetzer overwhelms him every day and attempts to kill him . . . and if HKB”H did not help him, he would be unable to withstand it.”**

The Neshamah of Yisrael that Abandoned Yaakov when Yosef Was Sold Appeared to Yosef in the Window to Give Him Strength

Following this line of reasoning, we can now proceed to reconcile another enigma. Seeing as HKB”H dispatched the neshamah of Yaakov Avinu to assist Yosef in his time of need, how could he possibly not have known that Yosef HaTzaddik was alive in Mitzrayim for all those years? To answer this question, we will introduce an enlightening teaching from the illustrious Ohr HaChaim hakadosh (Bereishis 47, 28). He asserts that Yaakov Avinu had two neshamos. He was born with the neshamah of Yaakov; hence, he was originally named Yaakov. Subsequently, when he became more meritorious, he was awarded a more prestigious neshamah, akin to a “neshamah yeteirah,” befitting his higher level of kedushah, namely the neshamah of Yisrael; hence, he was given the more prestigious name of Yisrael.

Now, the neshamah of Yisrael emanates from a lofty source where there is only joy. As such, it cannot tolerate worries and sadness. Consequently, whenever Yaakov was burdened with worries and sadness, the neshamah of Yisrael left him, leaving him only with the neshamah of Yaakov. If this was true regarding all his worries, it must have been all the more so when his most beloved son, the “son of his old age,” Yosef, was taken away from him. On account of Yaakov’s extreme grief and sadness, the neshamah of Yisrael abandoned

him, leaving him with only the neshamah of Yaakov. Yet, upon learning that Yosef was still alive and well, the neshamah of Yisrael returned to him immediately.

He goes on to say that you can be certain that wherever he is called Yaakov, it is related to a situation involving sadness and agony. For example, when Rachel passed away and he placed a monument on her grave, the passuk (Bereishis 35, 20) refers to him as Yaakov. Yet, when the time of grieving ended, Hashem called him Yisrael (ibid. 21 and 22).

In fact, we find that from the time Yosef was sold, the Torah only refers to him as Yisrael on three occasions (ibid. 43, 6; ibid. 8; ibid. 11). We must conclude that it is because on those occasions, he addressed his sons forcefully and authoritatively, because he felt that they were insensitive to his sorrow. So, he impressed this upon them. Then, when they informed him about Yosef, Yaakov's spirit was revived (ibid. 45, 27), and the Torah immediately refers to him as Yisrael (ibid. 28; ibid. 46, 1; ibid. 2). This concludes the sacred insight of the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh.

I would like to point out that this precious insight from the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh concurs magnificently with the comments of the Alshich hakadosh in Toras Moshe related to the passuk (ibid. 47, 29): "ויקרבנו ימי ישראל למות"—**the time approached for Yisrael to die.** He says that only the neshamah of Yisrael died and left Yaakov's body; the neshamah of Yaakov remained in his holy body forever. This prompted the famous statement in the Gemara (Ta'anis 5a): "יעקב אבינו לא מת"—**Yaakov Avinu did not die.** Accordingly, whenever the term death is associated with Yaakov, it only applies to the name Yisrael but not to the name Yaakov.

The Neshamah of Yisrael Appeared to Yosef to Help Him Defeat His Yetzer

Let us embellish this thought by explaining why HKB"H specifically sent the neshamah of Yisrael to Yosef. Now, we know that Yaakov was only awarded the neshamah of Yisrael after defeating the guardian angel of Eisav in their nocturnal wrestling match. In defeat, the malach announced to Yaakov (ibid. 32, 29): "לא יעקב יאמר עוד שמך כי אם ישראל כי שרית עם אלהים ועם אנשים"

—**your name will no longer be Yaakov, but rather Yisrael; for you have engaged the Divine and men and you have triumphed.** This attests to the fact that the neshamah of Yisrael is so holy and powerful that it is able to defeat the yetzer hara.

Furthermore, we find the following in the Agra D'Pirka (HashMatos 4): Until Yaakov succeeded in transforming the yetzer hara into a force for good, his name remained Yaakov. Once he accomplished this formidable feat, the name **יעקב (182)** was added to the name **שט"ז (359)**; their sum equals **ישראל (541)**. This alludes to the fact that after Yaakov's nighttime victory, the Satan also helped him serve Hashem. We find a similar explanation based on this gematria in the Panim Yafos on parshas Vayishlach (Bereishis 32, 28).

This explains nicely why HKB"H sent Yosef the image of his father—namely, the neshamah of Yisrael that abandoned Yaakov when Yosef was sold into slavery. For, as we have learned, this neshamah is capable of not merely withstanding the yetzer hara but of actually converting it into a force for good to help a person serve Hashem. Therefore, it appeared to Yosef, imbued him with its kedushah, and enabled him to defeat his yetzer and transform it into a positive, helpful ally.

With what we have learned, we can now understand why Yaakov was unaware that Yosef was alive and well in Mitzrayim even though his image appeared to Yosef. For, it was the neshamah of Yisrael—that had left Yaakov when Yosef was sold—that appeared to Yosef. Hence, Yaakov down below on earth, who possessed only the neshamah of Yaakov, knew nothing of this. Additionally, we can suggest that this explains why the heavenly forces did not prevent Yaakov from becoming sad and unhappy. This emotional state caused the neshamah of Yisrael to abandon him thereby enabling it to go help Yosef maintain his kedushah.

When the Neshamah of Yisrael Returned to Yaakov It Was Revealed to Him that Yosef Had Remained Righteous

Now, let us behold the wonders of the Torah. Based on what we have discussed, it illuminates for us the language employed in the following pesukim (ibid. 45,

”ויגידו לו לאמר עוד יוסף חי וכי הוא מושל בכל ארץ מצרים ויפג לבו כי : (26) לא האמין להם, וידברו אליו את כל דברי יוסף אשר דיבר אליהם, וירא את העגלות אשר שלח יוסף לשאת אותו ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם, ויאמר ישראל רב עוד יוסף.” **They (Yosef’s brothers) told him (Yaakov), saying, “Yosef is still alive,” and he is ruler over the entire land of Mitzrayim; but he (Yaakov) had a turn of heart, for he did not believe them. And they related to him all the words of Yosef that he had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him, then the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived. And Yisrael said, “How great! My son Yosef still lives! I shall go and see him before I die.”**

Note that this narrative initially employs the name Yaakov—”ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם”—but concludes with the name Yisrael: ”ויאמר ישראל רב עוד יוסף בני חי”. Additionally, it behooves us to examine what they expounded in the Midrash on this last passuk (B.R. 94, 3): **And Yisrael said, “How great! . . .”** By this he meant, **“The strength of my son Yosef is great; he has experienced many hardships, and yet he remains righteous.”** In other words, Yaakov remarked that Yosef was considered alive—”חי”—because he remained righteous; as opposed to reshaim, who are considered dead even while they are still living. But this begs the question: How did Yaakov know that Yosef had remained righteous?

We can answer this question based on what we learned from the Ohr HaChaim hakadosh. When Yosef was sold, the neshamah of Yisrael abandoned him. As explained, that neshamah was the image of Yaakov that appeared to Yosef to help him overcome his yetzer.

Thus, until the neshamah of Yisrael returned to Yaakov, he had no way of knowing that Yosef had remained righteous. Yet, the moment it returned to him, after visiting Yosef, Yaakov knew from the neshamah of Yisrael that Yosef was still a tzaddik.

Accordingly, the precise language of the narrative can be explained wonderfully: **“They told him, saying, ‘Yosef is still alive,’ and he is ruler over the entire land of Mitzrayim; but he had a turn of heart, for he did not believe them.”** Yaakov had been shown Yosef’s bloody garment, so he still believed that Yosef had been eaten by a wild animal; hence, he did not believe what these sons told him. **“And they related to him all the words of Yosef that he had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him.”** Here Rashi comments: **He (Yosef) gave them (his brothers) a sign indicating which topic he was studying when he departed from him (Yaakov), in the passage of the “eglah arufah.”** This sign convinced Yaakov that Yosef was indeed still alive in Mitzrayim.

He was so elated! Hence: **“The spirit of their father Yaakov was revived”**—his spirit was revived by the return of the neshamah of Yisrael; it informed him that Yosef had remained righteous. It knew this firsthand, since it had been with Yosef and had helped him overcome his difficult ordeal and defeat his yetzer. Therefore, the narrative goes back to calling him Yisrael, as it states: **“And Yisrael said, ‘How great! My son Yosef still lives! I shall go and see him before I die.’”**

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