

Yehuda leads the way and challenges Yoseph, not wanting to return to Yaakov without Binyamin in hand. After the plea, Yoseph responds.

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הֲעוֹד אָבִי חַי וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת  
 אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפָּנָיו:

“And Yoseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Yoseph. Does my father still live?’ And the brothers could not answer him, because of their terror facing them.” (Genesis 45:3).

This is an oft quoted passuk of how Yoseph was challenging Yehuda and his brothers. They worried that if Binyamin was not returned to their father then Yaakov would die. (Ibid 44:34). Yet, Yoseph challenges them saying, in effect, *I was put in a pit, kidnapped, and sold into slavery—perhaps not by your hand directly but because you put me in the pit—and yet you did not worry about Yaakov’s fate at that time.*

While this is a stirring challenge and may move the learner, it cannot be the entire meaning of the verse. Yoseph would be short-sighted to pose this challenge to Yehuda. Yehuda would have several responses. First, *when we put you in the pit we did not realize how devastated our father would take the news. Now that he has suffered for twenty-two years we know that confining Binyamin will kill him.* Second, *losing one son is one thing, and we were justified because you wanted to lord over us. However, losing the innocent and blameless Binyamin would be fatal to Yaakov.* To add to this second thought, it is taught in Gemara Baba Basra 17a that Binyamin died without sin. Third, *if you also care about Yaakov’s well-being, why did you not reach out to us for the nine years you have been a royal here?*

These challenges back to Yoseph make Yoseph’s rhetorical question look silly. If so, what was his challenge, and why were the brothers terrified?

The Gemara Chagigah 4b relates: *When Rabbi Elazar reached this verse, he cried: “And his brethren could not answer him, for they were affrighted at his presence” (Genesis 45:3). He said, in explanation of his emotional reaction: If the rebuke of a man of flesh and blood was such that the brothers were unable to respond, when it comes to the rebuke of the Holy One, Blessed be He, all the more so. When Rabbi Elazar reached this verse, he cried: “And Shmuel said to Shaul: Why have you disquieted me, to bring me up” (I Samuel 28:15). He said: If Shmuel the*

*righteous was afraid of judgment when he was raised by necromancy, as he thought he was being summoned for a Divine judgment, all the more so that we should be afraid.*

According to the Chachomin, Yoseph reminded the brothers of something that terrified them to their core. Just as Shmuel being brought up through necromancy reminded Shmuel of divine judgment, what Yoseph said reminded the brothers of something equally terrifying.

Likewise, Rashi says, they were afraid in his presence because of shame. They felt shame and guilt for how they treated Yoseph.

Sforno says that Yoseph actually asked, *how can Yaakov have survived so many years after worrying for me?* Even though Yehuda talked about Yaakov and told Yoseph that Yaakov was alive, Yoseph pondered how that can be. Perhaps Sforno is saying that Yoseph was agreeing to Yehuda, saying, ‘my father barely lived after my tragedy, how can he survive if Binyamin is jailed. Surely, you would put him in the grave if Binyamin would not be returned. The brothers then realized that Yaakov’s precarious health was their fault.

Tur HaAruch has a similar approach. He says, *Even though Yoseph had asked them the same question already (ibid 44:27) and the brothers had answered in the affirmative, his question now concerned the state of Yaakov’s health, not the mere fact that Yaakov was still alive. The word ׀ therefore has to be equated with אׁב, healthy. It is also possible that he did not really ask this question in order to receive additional information, but merely to have an opening to speak to the brothers, instead of as until now, about “your father,” but about “my father,” i.e. their common father. This was a ploy to establish close personal contact with his brothers.*

Chizkuni and Birkat Asher say that they were terrified of what Yoseph might do to them. He had twenty-two years to harbor his grudge and he was now in a position of power.

This explanation does not fit well. The reading of the verse is that they were terrified because of what Yoseph said, not the fact that he was Yoseph. The passuk could have said, Yoseph revealed himself and they were terrified. Then it would fit that they were scared of his reprisal. (See next passuk where such a mention of fear would fit well if this was the reason).

Gur Areyeh interprets Rashi, that “their faces fell” was not simple embarrassment or shame. *It is not possible to interpret this to say they were frightened of what Yoseph would do to them. It should then have said “frightened of him.” Instead it says, they had frightened faces. This means they were frightened of the shame they felt.*

They felt shame and were frightened by what it may have meant.

The brothers could not answer Yoseph. Daas Zekeinim says, *Rabbi Yoseph Kara, explains this line as follows: the brothers on the one hand believed him when he said that his name was Yoseph; however they could not believe that he was the Yoseph whom they had sold into slavery, and that in the interval he had risen to such an exalted position, ruler over mighty Egypt.*

Daas Zekeinim seems to take the opinion that the brothers could not believe that Yoseph rose from the pit to become a powerful royal in the most powerful kingdom of Mesopotamia.

Radak says, *Yoseph was crying. (Ibid 43:2). After that he said to them, 'I am Yoseph! Is my father still alive?' The brothers were dumbfounded, remembering that they had sold him and now being utterly ashamed, unable to face him.*

Kli Yakar explains what they were frightened of. He asks, *why did Yoseph ask again if their father was alive if Yehuda kept saying Yaakov was alive. Yoseph thought that perhaps Yehuda was lying about Yaakov being alive. Perhaps he only said it so that this ruler in Egypt would believe that the younger son was tied to the life of their old father and have mercy on them. Therefore, he asked again. To the brothers, when Yoseph asked the question they realized, he said 'is my father still alive' and not 'is our father.' They knew immediately that he meant, you did not care enough to help your father come over the grief of twenty-two years to tell him I was alive. They were frightened by what they had done.*

Rabbeinu Bechaya says, "עוד אבי חי" *Yoseph's very first words concerned the well-being of his father and the concern if he was still alive. ולא יכלו אחיו לענות אותו כי נבהלו מפניו, "emoceb dah yeht sa mih rewsna ot elba ton erew srehtorb sih"*, *frightened before him.*" *They were dumbstruck realizing that they had sold him into slavery and now he wielded the authority of a king. They were also scared that he would take revenge on them now. The expression ונבהלו צירים וחב emocrevo ,dnA" לים יאחזון, (Isaiah 13:8). According to Tanchuma, (Vayigash 5), Yoseph said to them: "did you not say: 'this one's brother is dead?' I shall call upon him now and he will come to me." Thereupon he started calling: "Yoseph, son of Yaakov, come to me!." The brothers looked at each of the four corners of the room and nothing happened. Then Yoseph said: "what are you looking for? I am your brother Yoseph!" When the brothers heard that they lost consciousness. This is why they could not answer him. As the*

*Gemara says (as quoted earlier) Rabbi Yochanan used this experience of Yoseph's brothers to exclaim "woe to us on the day of our death, woe to us when we will be called upon to answer for our sins." If the brothers were so stricken when they heard Yoseph reveal himself to his them, how much more will we be frightened when we stand before HaShem to be judged! This is what is meant by the verse in Isaiah 10:3: "What will you do on the day of punishment, when the calamity comes from afar?" Another verse on the same theme is found in Maleachi 3:2: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can hold out when he appears?"*

Yoseph could not contain this charade anymore, could not deal with his brothers without revealing himself to them. (Ibid 45:1). He cried so loudly that the entire house of Pharaoh heard the news of Yoseph's revelation. (Ibid 45:2). It was not literally that Pharaoh heard but he heard of the incident, despite the room being cleared. (Ibid). The Torah is telling us he cried during the revelation and the revelation was in private. The crying—unlike what Radak said—was not necessarily before he revealed himself. It was after his revelation. The Torah goes on to explain how he revealed himself to them. (Ibid 45:3-13). He then embraced his brothers—and here he cries. (Ibid 45:14-15).

Yoseph's question was not rhetorical because, as we pointed out, Yehuda would have easy answers. Yoseph had another challenge to Yehuda, though, that Yehuda could not answer. That is, 'you said your other brother was dead. (Ibid 44:27). Yet, *I am Yoseph*.

*The brothers could not answer Yoseph*. They were shocked. Their self-righteous indignation, all their justifications and theories on their correct behavior at the pit and afterwards, including not knowing what happened to him for twenty-two years, came before them suddenly. In their mind they considered Yoseph dead or missing. Remember, Reuven had gone back to the pit and found it empty or that Yoseph was not responding. (Ibid 37:29-30). They spent twenty-two years convincing themselves he was dead so when they answered he was dead, they believed it.

The brothers were also faced with one piece truth that struck them and knocked away their cognitive dissonance to their hatred of Yoseph: Yoseph was a ruler and they bowed to him. The very reason for their hate—the dreams—came true. The brothers were 'faced' with terror. They felt terror in their face, or by facing Yoseph. Yoseph was alive and well and *king*. This was the exact horror of the past that shocked the brothers. They indeed were eleven sheaves of grain—eleven brothers seeking food—bowing down to Yoseph; exactly as his dreams predicted.

They were eleven stars, and those that worship the sun and the moon (pagans) also bowed down to Yoseph. Now they realized that for twenty-two years they were wrong about Yoseph.

*I am Yoseph.* They could not answer him. What can they say to a person they wronged and left to die, and left alone in a foreign country, and to a brother who they wronged who proved that he was right the entire time? They remembered saying to him, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.” (Ibid 37:8). And they further plotted against him at the pit saying, “Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!” (Ibid 37:20).

His dreams turned out to be true. They could not answer him. *I am Yoseph, the ruler of these lands and the governor of the grain.* The brothers could not answer him.

*Does my father still live?* My father, the one who watched the matter and knew it might come true. (Ibid 37:11). My father, who you did not consult before you plotted against me, is he still alive? My father, who watched over me, who you should have consulted to before you acted, is he still alive? You are afraid that Binyamin’s confinement will cause him to go down to the grave. I was just as innocent as Binyamin. You hated me for my dreams but my dreams came true. Not only that, but the fortune in the dreams is to your benefit, to help sustain you. (Ibid 45:4-13). *Does my father still live?* You care so for his opinion and health *now*. He was my father then, too. Yet, in righteous indignation you were judge and jury and executioner against me; regardless of his presence.

*Does my father still live?* My father. You hated me because my father favored me. (Ibid 37:4). It was not my fault that my father favored me. Yet, you hated me and did not complain or bring your agitation to him. You divorced him as children. You made him *my* father. He loved me so you ran away to the north. He sent me to look for you but you plotted against me. You became brothers, and left me and Binyamin as his children. Yet, now you talk about his health and well-being. When did he become your father again? After you made him suffer by the news of me being missing or dead? He was *my* father then. He is *my* father now.

*They were frightened facing him.* The brothers were not necessarily frightened of retaliation—although Yoseph was clever to first invite them to dine with him (Ibid 43:32) and then frame them with his goblet (Ibid 44:2). He then threatened to confine Binyamin. (Ibid 44:17). They had good reason to be frightened of Yoseph and his power. They were, however,

more frightened of themselves. They felt shame for their error and realized now how wrong they were. They felt great terror at the fact of how mistaken they were.