

בס"ד

# THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

# Parshas Vayigash

7 Teves, 5780 – January 4, 2020

Compiled from the works of  
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**An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi  
Parshas Vayigash**

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**Rashi in His Own Words**

**בראשית מ"ה, ג':** וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הֲעוֹד אָבִי חַי וְלֹא יָקְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אִתּוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו:

**Bereishis 45:3:** And Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" However, his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence.

**Synopsis**

This week's Parshah, Vayigash, begins by telling us that Yehudah approached Yosef and spoke harshly to him, demanding his brother's release. Yehudah said to Yosef that their father, Yaakov, did not want to allow his youngest son, Binyomin, to accompany his brothers to Egypt. He feared for Binyomin's life. Nevertheless, Yaakov did give in and let Binyomin go. The reason he allowed his youngest son to go was that Yosef had told them that otherwise, he would not meet with them. Yehudah said to Yosef that he had accepted responsibility for Binyomin. Yehudah could not face his father if he returned without Binyomin. Yosef, no longer able to maintain the charade, told his brothers who he was. He said,<sup>1</sup> "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" What sort of question was that? They had just been discussing his father. Rashi explains every difficulty which a beginning student encounters. Yosef's question posed such a problem. Yet Rashi remains silent, and does not explain!

The explanation is that Rashi answered this question earlier. They showed Yaakov Yosef's bloody coat. The sight of his son's bloodied coat convinced him that a wild animal must have devoured him<sup>2</sup>. At this point, the Torah tells us that<sup>3</sup> "Yaakov mourned for his son many days." Rashi explains there that it means that he mourned for his beloved son for *twenty-two years*! The Torah goes on to tell us that<sup>4</sup> "he (Yaakov) refused to accept consolation." Yosef was not asking whether his father was still alive. Instead, it was an exclamation. Can my father possibly remain alive after twenty-two years of constant anguish, which he experienced from a loss of this magnitude?

**Rashi's Explanation**

Yosef and Yehudah had been discussing Yaakov. Suddenly, Yosef can no longer control himself. He

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1. Our Parshah, Bereishis 45:3.  
2. Parshas Vayeishev, Bereishis 37:33.  
3. Parshas Vayeishev, Bereishis 37:34.  
4. Parshas Vayeishev, Bereishis 37:35.

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blurts out, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" Of course, Yaakov is still alive; they had just been discussing him! Yet Rashi fails to comment on this obvious question.

Here the Rebbe is explaining why Rashi remains silent and does not answer this question. We know that Rashi *always* explains whatever the beginning student needs to know to understand the Torah's simple meaning. We can see this by the instances in the Torah that Rashi writes, "I do not know<sup>5</sup>." He writes this regarding questions that other commentaries *do* explain. What Rashi means to say by "I don't know" is that he doesn't know an explanation, according to Peshat.

If we encounter something which seems to be challenging to understand and Rashi does not comment, it must mean one of two things. Either in there is no difficulty, or Rashi answered the question earlier.

### **Difficulties in Understanding Rashi**

This week's Torah portion, Vayigash, begins with Yehudah confronting his brother Yosef. They have a long conversation, in which Yehudah tells Yosef that their father had not wished to allow them to return to Egypt with Binyomin, his youngest son. Finally, Yehudah prevailed upon his father. He accepted responsibility for Binyomin's welfare.

The Torah goes on to tell us how Yosef finally revealed his identity to his brothers. Twenty-two years earlier, they had thrown him into a pit. They had no idea what had become of him. They were not aware that he ultimately became the ruler of Egypt. When they came to Egypt to request provisions from the ruler during the years of famine, they were not aware that they were speaking to their brother. It reached a point that Yosef could no longer maintain the charade. The Torah tells us that<sup>6</sup> "Yosef could not bear all those (Egyptians) standing beside him, and he called out, 'Take everyone away from me!' He removed everyone else from the room so that no one stood with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers." When he finally told them who he was, he said,<sup>7</sup> "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?"

Up until that point, Yosef and Yehudah had been discussing Yaakov. Why would Yosef suddenly ask whether or not he was alive? It seems to be such a strange, inappropriate question. Yet Rashi does not offer a glimmer of explanation to the beginning student!

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5. See for example Parshas Vayishlach, Bereishis 35:13, Parshas Terumah, Shemos 25:29, Parshas Terumah, Shemos 26:24, Parshas Terumah, Shemos 27:10, Parshas Tzav, Vayikroh 8:11, Parshas Shemini, Vayikroh 10:15, Parshas Tazriah, Vayikroh 13:4, Parshas Chukas, Bamidbar 21:11, Parshas Pinchos, Bamidbar 26:13, Parshas Pinchos, Bamidbar 26:16 and Parshas Berochos, Devorim 33:24.

6. Our Parshah, Bereishis 45:1.

7. Our Parshah, Bereishis 45:3.

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The Abarbanel explains in his commentary that Yosef meant to engage his brothers in conversation. Due to the way they parted ways twenty-two years earlier, he knew that his brothers would be embarrassed to meet him. He was “making conversation” to give them a chance to regain their composure.

The beginning student already encountered two instances where Rashi gave a similar explanation:

1. After Adam and Chavah sinned by eating from the forbidden fruit, Hashem appeared to them. The Torah tells us that<sup>8</sup> “the Lord G-d called to man, and He said to him, ‘Where are you?’” Rashi explains<sup>9</sup> that “Hashem knew where he was, but He asked him this to enter into conversation with them so that they should not be frightened to answer if He should punish him suddenly.”
2. After Kayin (Cain) killed his brother Hevel (Abel), Hashem approached him and said the following<sup>10</sup>. “The Lord said to Kayin, ‘Where is Hevel your brother?’” Here Rashi cites the words “where is Hevel your brother,” and explains that Hashem wanted “to enter with him into mild terms, perhaps he would repent and say, ‘I killed him, and I sinned against You.’”

Having learned these two explanations of Rashi earlier, the beginning student would understand why Yosef asked his brothers whether his father is still alive. Rashi already explained it twice. He knew that they would be embarrassed before him because of the way they treated him in the past. Therefore, he began by engaging them in conversation to lighten the tension and help them remain calm.

However, here, according to Peshat, this answer is untenable. Yosef and Yehudah had already spent quite some time discussing his father. They had spoken about how Binyomin’s imprisonment would affect his father’s health. If Yosef wanted to calm them down by beginning a conversation with them, why did he choose to ask whether their father is alive? Why did he not ask them about their families?

There is another explanation which Rashi gave earlier, which could perhaps also serve as an answer to the beginning student’s question. It is possible to explain Yosef’s words as a statement of wonder rather than an issue which he asked to ascertain information. We find a similar explanation from Rashi earlier. When G-d approached Kayin and asked where his brother is, he responded,<sup>11</sup> "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" There Rashi

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8. Parshas Bereishis, Bereishis 3:9.

9. *ibid.*

10. Parshas Bereishis, Bereishis 4:9.

11. *ibid.* For similar explanations of Rashi, see also Parshas Vayeiro, Bereishis 18:25, Parshas Toldos, Bereishis 27:36, Parshas Toldos, Bereishis 27:38 and Parshas Vayetzai, Bereishis 29:15. This is not a complete list.

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explains that “This is a question asked in astonishment, as is every “hey” prefix vocalized with a “chataf pattach<sup>12</sup>.”

However, this explanation does not work either. For one thing, at that time, Yaakov was 130 years old, far less than the life span of both his father Yitzchok and his grandfather Avrohom. Based on that, there was no reason for Yosef to have been astonished. Secondly, what is the connection between this statement and the words with which he began, namely, “I am Yosef?”

Additionally, what was Yosef’s point in sharing with his brothers his surprise that his father was still alive? It certainly does not seem to have been appropriate at this point, at the exact time that he was revealing to his brothers his true identity. If, however, Yosef was indeed asking a question that would have been the perfect time to ask it!

### The Explanation

There is, in fact, a straightforward explanation to all of the above questions. After Yaakov’s children showed him Yosef’s bloodied coat, he was sure that someone killed his favorite son. The Torah tells us that<sup>13</sup> “all his sons and all his daughters arose to console him, but they could not console him.” As a result of this<sup>14</sup>, “he mourned for his son many days.” Rashi explains that “many days” means twenty-two years. He explains that this was a punishment for the twenty-two years that Yaakov neglected to honor his father<sup>15</sup>.

It seems strange that he was able to continue mourning for all of the twenty-two years that he thought his son was dead! Rashi explains, “No one accepts consolation for a person who is alive but believed to be dead. Hashem decrees that a dead person should be forgotten from the heart, but not a living person.”

Knowing all of this, the beginning student understands Yosef’s words were a declaration of shock that his father was still alive. The student learned how beloved Yosef was to his father. He, therefore, grasps the sort of grief and pain which Yaakov felt. It is indeed surprising that he was able to endure so much constant pain for twenty-two consecutive years, yet remain alive!

Based on this, we can also understand why Yosef was so focused on telling his brothers to return to their father quickly. He also emphasized that they should bring him back to Egypt quickly. He told them to “*Hurry* and

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12. The Hebrew letter “Hay – ה” when used as a prefix usually means “the.” However, the letter “Hay – ה” at the beginning of a word together with the vowel “Chataf Pattach” (ֿ) indicates either a factual question or, as Rashi states here, a question which serves as a declaration of surprise.

13. Parshas Vayeishev, Bereishis 37:35.

14. Parshas Vayeishev, Bereishis 37:34.

15. He spent twenty years at Lovon’s house, and it took him two years to return home. Hence, he was not home, and therefore was unable to honor his father for twenty-two years. Despite the fact that he was physically incapable of honoring his parents, a Tzaddik of Yaakov’s caliber is held to a very high standard.

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go up to my father and say to him that this is what your son Yosef said. ‘G-d has made me a lord over all the Egyptians. Come down to me, *do not tarry*.’” Yosef was concerned that any delay could endanger his father’s life!

Yosef’s shock that his father remained alive despite his tortuous suffering explains why Yosef said “my father” and not “our father.” Hashem punished Yaakov for not fulfilling the Mitzvah of honoring his father. Throughout those twenty-two years, Yosef could not fulfill this Mitzvah.

### **A Deeper Lesson from Rashi**

There was another reason for Yosef’s haste to be reunited with his father. Yosef knew that the twenty-two years with which Hashem punished his father came to an end. His punishment was complete. That being the case, he wanted to assure that his father would not suffer for even one moment longer than necessary.

We know that there are two approaches to education. Our Sages tell us regarding education<sup>16</sup> that one must push away with the left hand<sup>17</sup>, and draw near with the right<sup>18</sup>. One must make sure that at the very moment that there is no longer a need to inflict punishment, it ceases. One’s focus must be one raising students with the attribute of kindness.

*(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Vayigash, 5734)*

**I hope that you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.**

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16. See Talmud Sotah 47, a and Sanhedrin 107, b.

17. The left hand is the weaker of the two. Even when a punishment is necessary, it should be kept to a minimum.

18. The stronger hand must be used to reward students, and to demonstrate kindness to them.

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Mr. **Sholom Moshe** ben Reb **Shlomo Meir** Hacoהן ע"ה **Cohen**

Passed away on Shabbos Parshas Beshalach, 13 Shevat, 5779

May His Soul be bound in the Eternal Bond of Life

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