

ב ס"ז

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

Week of

# Parshas Vayigash

7 Teves, 5786 – December 27, 2025

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## THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

# An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Rashi Parshas Vayigash

Likkutei Sichos Volume 15, Pages 387 – 390

### Rashi in His Own Words

בראשית מ"ה, ג': ניאמר יוסף אל אחיו אני יוסף קעוז אביכי כי ולא יכולו אחיו לענות אותו כי נבעהו מפניהם:

**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, tells us that Yehudah approached Yosef and spoke harshly to him, demanding the release of his brother. Yehudah said to Yosef that their father, Yaakov, did not want to allow his youngest son, Binyomin, to accompany his brothers to Egypt. Their father feared for Binyomin's life. Nevertheless, Yaakov did give in and let Binyomin go. Yaakov allowed his youngest son to go because Yosef had told them he would not meet with them unless he came. Yehudah said to Yosef that he accepted responsibility for Binyomin. Yehudah could not face his father returning 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 that a beginning student encounters. Yosef's question posed such a problem. Yet Rashi remains silent and does not explain!

The explanation is that Rashi had already answered this question. 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 that it means he mourned his beloved son for *twenty-two years!* The Torah tells 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 blurts out, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" Of course, Yaakov is still alive; they had just been discussing

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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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 a beginning student needs to understand the Torah's simple meaning. We can see this from the instances where 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 that seems challenging to understand, and Rashi does not comment, it must mean one of two things. Either there is no difficulty, or Rashi has already answered the question.

### 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 did not wish to allow them to return to Egypt with Binyomin, their youngest brother. Finally, Yehudah prevailed upon his father, and he accepted responsibility for Binyomin's welfare.

The Torah tells 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 unaware that he would ultimately become 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 where Yosef could no longer maintain the charade. The Torah tells us<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!

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.

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

1. After Adam and Chavah sinned by eating 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>, "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 was still alive. Rashi already explained it twice. He knew they would be embarrassed before him because of how they had treated him in the past. Therefore, he began by engaging them in conversation to lighten the tension and help them remain calm.

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

Rashi gave another explanation earlier that could also serve as an answer to the beginning student's question. It is possible to interpret Yosef's words as a statement of wonder rather than as a request for information. We find a similar explanation from Rashi earlier. When G-d approached Kayin and asked where his brother was, he responded,<sup>11</sup> "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" There, Rashi explains as follows. "This is a question asked in astonishment. That is so with every "hey" prefix vocalized with a "chataf patach"<sup>12</sup>."

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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 Vayeitzei, Bereishis 29:15. This is not a complete list.

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 Patach" (הָ) indicates either a factual question or, as Rashi states here, a question which serves as a declaration of surprise.

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However, this explanation does not work either. For one thing, at that time Yaakov was 130 years old, far less than the lifespans 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 his surprise with his brothers that his father was still alive? It certainly does not seem appropriate when he reveals his true identity to his brothers. If, however, Yosef was asking a question, that would have been the perfect time to ask it!

### The Explanation

There is, in fact, a straightforward explanation for all of the above questions. After Yaakov's children showed him Yosef's bloodied coat, he was sure someone had killed his favorite son. The Torah tells us that<sup>13</sup> "all his sons and daughters arose to console him, but they could not console him." As a result<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 during which Yaakov neglected to honor his father<sup>15</sup>.

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

Knowing all this, the beginning student understands that Yosef's words were a declaration of shock that his father was still alive. The student learned how beloved Yosef was to his father. Therefore, he grasps the sort of grief and pain that Yaakov felt. Surprisingly, he endured so much constant pain for twenty-two consecutive years yet remained alive!

Based on this, we can also understand why Yosef was so insistent that his brothers return to their father quickly. He also emphasized that they should bring him back to Egypt quickly. He told them, "*Hurry and go up to my father and tell 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 torturous suffering explains why Yosef said "my father" and not "our father." Hashem punished Yaakov for failing to fulfill the Mitzvah of honoring his father. Throughout those twenty-two years, Yosef could not fulfill this Mitzvah.

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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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### 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 had ended, and his punishment was complete. That being the case, he wanted to ensure 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 hand<sup>18</sup>. One must ensure that at the very moment that there is no longer a need to inflict punishment, it ceases. One's focus must be on raising students with the attribute of kindness.

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

**I hope 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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