

Making Sense of the Unbelievable Fact that the Holy Shevotim Bought Shoes with the Money They Received for Selling Yosef

In this week's parsha, parshes Vayeshev, we deal primarily with the difficult subject of the sale of Yosef by his venerated brothers, the heads of the shevotim—a sale which lands Yosef in Mitzrayim. One who delves into the statements of Chazal concerning this topic—which we shall examine at length—will realize that we must not accept the events surrounding the sale of Yosef at face value. For, it is implausible that the holy shevotim, “Shivtei Koh,” upon whom the entire structure of the Jewish people is founded, committed such an appalling sin—the sale of their own brother into slavery.

Furthermore, before Yaakov's death, the Torah states (Bereishis 47, 31): **“וישתחו ישראל על ראש המטה”**—and Yisroel prostrated himself toward the head of the bed. Rashi comments on this possuk: **“על שהיתה מטתו שלימה ולא היה בה רשע”**—because his progeny was flawless and there was not a single wicked person among his children. Thus, we have indisputable testimony to the fact that all of the shevotim were totally righteous. It behooves us, therefore, to examine this subject more closely in order to shed some light—with the illumination and guidance of our holy sages, the Tannaim and Amoraim, and our teachers that followed them—upon the matter of the sale of Yosef; may Hashem direct us on the path of truth.

“Thus said Hashem: For three transgressions of Yisroel” I Have Looked away

It is well-known that our blessed sages instituted the reading of the haftoreh for every parsha from the words of the prophets which bear a connection with the central theme of the parsha itself. The source for this institution is found in the Levush Malchus (O.C. 284, 1). Concerning this matter, we find a tremendous insight related to the spirit of the month of Kislev. The practice to recite the haftarat was instituted during the Greek regime. The Tosfos Yom Tov (Megillah 3, 4) writes in the name of the Tishbi:

“טעמא דהפטרות כתוב בספר תשבי שורש פטר שמצא כתוב, שאנטיוכוס הרשע מלך יון גזר על ישראל שלא יקראו בתורה ברבים, מה עשו ישראל, לקחו פרשה אחת מנביאים שענינה דומה לענין מה שכתוב בפרשה של שבת ההיא, ועתה אף שבטלה הגזירה המנהג הזה אינו בטל.”

Antiochus, the evil Greek ruler, decreed that the Jews should not read the Torah publicly. To compensate, the Jews adopted the practice of reading a corresponding passage from the prophets that shared a common theme with the parsha that should have been read that Shabbos. Currently, even though the decree has long since been abolished, this custom remains.

Accordingly, let us examine the haftoreh reading selected by our blessed sages in connection with parshes Vayeshev (Amos 2, 6): **“כה אמר ה' על שלשה פשעי ישראל ועל ארבעה לא אשיבנו, על מכרם בכסף צדיק ואביון בעבור נעלים”**—Thus said Hashem: For three transgressions of Yisroel I have looked away, but for four I will not pardon them, for their selling a righteous man for money, and a poor man for shoes. Rashi provides us with a simple, straightforward interpretation of the possuk: **“על מכרם בכסף צדיק, הדיינין היו מוכרים את מי שהיה זכאי בדין, בכסף שוחד שהיו מקבלים מיד בעל דינו”**—the possuk is referring to judges who would accept bribes and sell out the innocent. The problem, however, is that this simple meaning of the possuk bears no connection to the subject matter of our parsha.

The true meaning of the possuk, therefore, lies elsewhere. The prophet is alluding to one of the most astonishing and perplexing aspects concerning the sale of Yosef—the fact that the shevotim purchased shoes for their feet with the money they received from the sale. The possuk states (Bereishis 37, 28): **“ויעברו אנשים מדינים סוחרים וימשכו ויעלו את יוסף מן הבור, וימכרו את יוסף לישמעאלים בעשרים כסף ויביאו את יוסף מצרימה”**—Midianite men, traders, passed by; they (the shevotim) pulled and brought Yosef up from the pit and sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty pieces of silver; then they (the Midianites) brought Yosef to Mitzrayim. The Targum Yonesen explains: **“וּזְבִינוּ ית יוסף לערבאין בעשרין מעין דכסף, וּזְבִנוּ מנהון סנדליו, ואייתו ית יוסף למצרים”**—the brothers purchased sandals with the money.

We find a similar exposition in the Midresh Tanchuma (Vayeshev 2): **“עמדו מכרוהו בעשרים כסף, לכל אחד מהם שני כסף לקנות מנעלים לרגליהם. וכי תעלה על דעתך שנער יפה”**

כמותו נמכר בעשרים כסף, אלא כיון שהושלך לבור, מתוך פחד נחשים ועקרבים שבו, נשתנה זיו פניו וברח ממנו דמו ונעשו פניו ירוקות, לפיכך מכרוהו בעשרים כסף בעבור נעלים." He explains that although Yosef was an extremely handsome youth, nevertheless, the frightening experience of snakes and scorpions in the pit altered his appearance. As a consequence, he was sold very inexpensively.

"For their selling a righteous man for money and a poor man for shoes"

This amazing bit of information is also described in the Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (38), deriving proof from the words of the prophet Amos cited above: "ומכרו אותו לישמעאלים בעשרים כסף, וכל אחד ואחד נטל שני כספים לקנות מנעלים ברגליהם, שנאמר על מכרם בכסף צדיק ואביון בעבור נעלים"—each of the shevotim received two silver coins with which to purchase footwear as described by the prophet.

The reason our sages specifically chose this passage from the Prophets to be recited in association with this week's parshe is now quite evident. Both deal with the subject of the sin of the sale of Yosef.

Therefore it is incumbent upon us to make some sense out of this astounding sequence of events. We know that the shevotim considered Yosef to be a usurper, spying on them and reporting their inappropriate activities back to their father; they believed that he deserved to be killed on this account. Nevertheless, what possessed the holy shevotim to purchase sandals precisely at the moment that their brother, Yosef HaTzaddik, was sitting hostage as a Ishmaelite slave, on his way to Mitzrayim? Without a doubt, there are issues here that are beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, this does not absolve us of striving to comprehend them to the best of our abilities.

The Zayis Raanan's Explanation of the Midresh

We will begin our expedition with the enlightening words of the great possek, the author of the Mogen Avrohom, in his commentary on the Midresh Yalkut Shimoni (Vayeshev 142), the Zayis Raanan. He addresses the matter of the brothers purchasing footwear with the money they received from the sale as follows:

"אפשר לומר כפי מה שכתב בעשרה מאמרות (אם כל חי ח"ג פכ"ב) דאמרינן (פסחים קיג:) מי שאין לו מנעלים ברגליו הוא כמנודה לשמים, וצריך ללבוש מנעלים להפסיק בינו ובין האדמה אשר אררה ה', ויוסף הוא שופריה דאדם [הראשון], אם כן הוא הגורם שנתקללה האדמה שצריך ללבוש מנעלים, לכן מכרוהו בעבור מנעלים."

We can understand his commentary based on what we have learned in the Gemoreh (Shabbos 129a): "לעולם ימכור אדם קורות ביתו ויקח מנעלים לרגליו"—one should sell even the beams of his house, if necessary, to acquire shoes for his feet. Additionally, we have learned (Pesochim 113b) that one of seven categories of people who are banished from heaven is: "המונע מנעלים מרגליו"—one who does not wear shoes. In Asoroh Maamaros, the Rama of Pano explains that in the aftermath of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, the earth was cursed. As a consequence, one must wear shoes to create a barrier between oneself and the cursed earth.

Now, we have learned in the Gemoreh (Bovo Metzie 84a): "שופריה דיעקב אבינו מעין שופריה דאדם הראשון"—the radiance of Yaakov Avinu resembled the radiance of Odom HaRishon. Additionally, it states in our parshe (37, 30): "וישראל אהב את יוסף מכל בניו כי בן זקונים הוא לו"—Yisroel loved Yosef more than all his sons, since he was a child of his old age. Rashi comments: "שהיה זיו איקונין שלו דומה לו"—because the splendor of his appearance resembled Yaakov's. We can deduce, therefore, that the radiance and appearance of Yosef HaTzaddik bore a resemblance to that of Odom HaRishon—who committed the sin with the Tree of Knowledge, causing the earth to be cursed. This, then, is the reason the shevotim sold Yosef and purchased shoes for their feet. They wished to indicate that he was the cause for the necessity to wear shoes--to create a barrier between man and the earth.

The Sale of Yosef Was Heavenly Ordained

Proceeding along this exalted path, let us continue to delve into this perplexing subject. What prompted the brothers to purchase footwear with the money received from the sale of Yosef? According to the Mogen Avrohom, they did so erroneously, believing that Yosef had caused the earth to be cursed as a result of the sin involving the Tree of Knowledge. Yet, since we know that, in truth, Yosef HaTzaddik helped rectify the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, it seems clear that that these events were ordained from above. HKB"H inspired them to purchase shoes; for, He was intimately involved in the sale of Yosef which landed him in Mitzrayim—as we shall explain, G-d willing.

First, let us recall a revelation from our blessed sages. The entire matter of the shevotim's hatred for Yosef and his ultimate sale to Mitzrayim was heavenly arranged. This scenario was necessary to create the circumstances that would lead Yaakov and his sons down to Mitzrayim and allow for the fulfillment of the decree of exile issued at the Bris bein HaBesorim, the Covenant of the Parts (Bereishis 15, 13): "כי גר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם ועבדום"

“וענו אותם ארבע מאות שנה”—your children will be strangers in a land not their own, they will enslave them, and they will oppress them for four hundred years. Based on the possuk in our parshe (39, 1), the Midresh Tanchuma elaborates:

“ויוסף הורד מצרימה, זה שאמר הכתוב (תהלים טו ה) לכו חזו מפעלות אלקים נורא עלילה על בני אדם... היה הקב"ה מבקש לקיים גזירת ידוע תדע, והביא עלילה לכל דברים אלו, כדי שיאהב יעקב את יוסף וישנאוהו אחיו, וימכרו אותו לישמעאלים ויורידוהו למצרים, וישמע יעקב שיוסף חי במצרים, וירד עם השבטים וישתעבדו שם, הוי ויוסף הורד מצרימה, אל תקרי הורד אלא הוריד את אביו והשבטים למצרים.”

All of these events were orchestrated by HKB”H in order to fulfill the decree mentioned above. He arranged for Yaakov to love Yosef; this led to his brothers’ hatred, his sale to the Yishmaelim, and his ultimately ending up in Mitzrayim. Yaakov eventually learned that Yosef was still alive and living in Mitzrayim; consequently, he went down to Mitzrayim with the shevotim and, in the end, they were enslaved there. Although the possuk states that Yosef was taken down to Mitzrayim, in reality, he brought his father and brothers down to Mitzrayim.

This is similarly expressed in another Midresh (B.R. 84, 13) on a possuk in our parshe concerning the mission Yaakov sends Yosef on to find his brothers (37, 14): “וישלחהו מעמק חברון”—he sent him from the valley of Chevron. Rashi states, based on the Midresh: “מעצה עמוקה של אותו צדיק הקבור בחברון, לקיים מה שנאמר לאברהם—בברית בין הבתרים כי גר יהיה זרעך”—from the deep counsel of the tzaddik buried in Chevron, in fulfillment of that which had been said to Avrohom at the Covenant between the Parts...

This scenario is also evident from the possuk (37, 15) depicting Yosef’s encounter along the way in search of his brothers: “וימצאהו איש והנה תועה בשדה... ויאמר האיש נסעו”—a man discovered him, and behold!—he was wandering about in the field... The man said, “They have moved on from here, for I heard them saying, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” Here, Rashi explains in the name of the Midresh, that this man was none other than the angel Gavriel; in other words, HKB”H sent a heavenly agent to assist Yosef in finding his brothers—so that they could sell him into slavery and he would be taken down to Mitzrayim. In fact, the Ramban writes (ibid.):

“ויאריך הכתוב בזה להגיד, כי סיבות רבות באו אליו שהיה ראוי לחזור לו, אבל הכל סבל לכבוד אביו, ולהודיענו עוד כי הגזירה אמת והחריצות שקר, כי זימן לו הקב"ה מורה דרך שלא מדעתו להביאו בידיים, ולזה נתכוונו רבותינו באמרם כי האישים האלה הם מלאכים, שלא על חינם היה כל הסיפור הזה, אלא להודיענו כי עצת ה' היא תקום.”

In short, no matter what measures or precautions are taken, they are to no avail when HKB”H has decreed that certain events must transpire. Therefore, Yosef endured and tolerated these events with due respect.

Yosef HaTzaddik Paved the Way for Yisroel to Sanctify Themselves in Mitzrayim

Thus far, we have provided a general explanation for these surprising events. HKB”H arranged that the brothers should hate Yosef, so that they would sell him into slavery taking him down to Mitzrayim and the decree of servitude would be fulfilled. Even so, why did HKB”H orchestrate matters in this specific fashion? Why did it require such an unlikely and ruthless deed as the shevotim selling their brother Yosef into slavery? Certainly HKB”H could have utilized other scenarios to lure Yaakov and his sons down to Mitzrayim without Yosef having to be sold into slavery.

A wonderful explanation can be found in the Midresh (V.R. 32, 5):

“שרה אמנו ירדה למצרים וגדרה עצמה מן הערוה, ונגדרו כל הנשים בזכותה, יוסף ירד למצרים וגדר עצמו מן הערוה, ונגדרו ישראל בזכותו. אמר רבי חייא בר אבא, כדאי היה גזור ערוה בעצמו שנגאלו ישראל על ידו.”

Soreh Imeinu went down to Mitzrayim and guarded herself against immorality; in her merit all of the Jewish women were guarded. Yosef went down to Mitzrayim and guarded himself against immorality; in his merit, Yisroel were guarded. Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said, “Guarding against immorality, in and of itself, was sufficient to warrant Yisroel’s redemption.”

We learn an important principle regarding the sale of Yosef from this Midresh. In Mitzrayim, Yosef had to withstand a very difficult test—resisting the temptation of his master’s wife. As the possuk relates (Bereishis 39, 10): “ויהי כדברה אל יוסף יום יום”—and it happened that she attempted to coax him on a daily basis, and he refused to accept her proposals. By being sold into slavery in Mitzrayim, and withstanding this difficult test—overcoming his evil inclination—he effectively paved the way for all of Yisroel during their exile in Mitzrayim. In his merit, their sanctity and purity were protected, they did not assimilate with the Egyptians, and, for this reason alone, they deserved to be redeemed.

Now, let us combine what we have learned from these two Midreshim: (1) the sale of Yosef is an example of the concept of: “נורא עלילה על בני אדם”—the sale was divinely ordained so that Yaakov and his sons would go down to Mitzrayim and fulfill

the decree of exile and (2) due to Yosef going down to Mitzrayim and guarding himself against immorality, he paved the way for all of Yisroel to guard against immorality in Mitzrayim and to merit being redeemed. On the one hand, the sale of Yosef was part of the heavenly plan to fulfill the decree of servitude (Bereishis 15, 13): **“כי גר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם ועבדום וענו אותם ארבע”**—**“מאות שנה”**—your children will be strangers in a land not their own, they will enslave them, and they will oppress them for four hundred years. On the other hand, it was also an example of the remedy being established before the actual malady arose. For, not only was the exile decreed, but the redemption was also guaranteed (ibid.): **“וגם את הגוי אשר יעבודו דן אנכי ואחרי כן יצאו”**—**“ברכוש גדול”**—and also the nation that will enslave them, I shall judge, and afterwards they shall leave with great possessions. So, by Yosef enduring the hardships of slavery in Mitzrayim and overcoming the lure and persuasions of his master’s wife, he insured the eventual redemption. Following in his footsteps, all of Yisroel sanctified themselves in Mitzrayim, and in that merit, they were redeemed—as stated in the Midresh : **כדאי היה גזור** : **ערוה בעצמו שנגאלו ישראל על ידו”**.

Yosef HaTzaddik Represented the Shoes of All Yisroel

At this juncture, we can joyfully address the perplexing issue of the shevotim selling Yosef for twenty silver coins, with which they purchased footwear. Just as the sale was heavenly-ordained—representing the concept of **“נורא”**—**“עלילה על בני אדם”**—so was this event; they were divinely-inspired to do so.

We find in the Torah that Yosef HaTzaddik describes Mitzrayim to his brothers with the derogatory title: **“ערות”**—**“הארץ”**—the nakedness of the earth—the quintessence of immorality. This term appears in Bereishis 42, 9, and again ibid. 12. Due to the powerful inclination toward immorality that prevailed in Mitzrayim, the entire land was affected and contaminated.

We can deduce, therefore, that when Yisroel went down to this hotbed of immorality, footwear—both material and spiritual—was an imperative. In order not to be swept up by the immorality and sexual corruption prevalent in Mitzrayim, an impenetrable barrier needed to be established between themselves and “the nakedness of the earth.” As we learned above in the Midresh : **“יוסף ירד למצרים וגדר עצמו מן הערוה”**

“--ונגדרו ישראל בזכותו”—Yosef went down to Mitzrayim and guarded himself against immorality; in his merit, Yisroel were guarded. Clearly, Yosef himself represented the shoes of the people of Yisroel; in his merit, due to what he endured and accomplished, Yisroel did not connect with “the nakedness” of the land of Mitzrayim; they remained separate and pure.

Thus, we have gained a better understanding of why HKB”H inspired the holy shevotim to purchase shoes for each and every one of them. After all, their descendants are the ones who sanctified themselves in Mitzrayim due to Yosef’s efforts. It turns out that the sale of Yosef led to his taking on the role of the shoes of Yisroel. It was only fitting, therefore, that each of the tribes should acquire shoes as a symbolic gesture for the sacred mission that lay ahead of Yosef.

The concept of a “symbolic gesture” is explained by the Ramban (Bereishis 12, 6) as follows: **“ודע כי כל גזירת עירין כאשר תצא מכח הגזירה אל פועל דמיון, תהיה הגזירה מתקיימת על כל פנים, ולכן יעשו הנביאים מעשה בנבואות”**. He teaches us that before a miracle can be performed, a symbolic gesture must be performed down below in order to elicit a miracle from above. This explains why the prophets often perform a suggestive act in the course of their prophecies. The Seforno explains (Bamidbar 20, 8): **“הניסים יעשהו הא”ל יתברך על ידי עבדיו עם הקדמת איזו תנועה מסודרת מאתו, כענין השליכהו ארצה, הרם את מטך, והכית בצור”**—the Almighty’s miracles are preceded by a symbolic action from his servants down on earth—such as throwing an object to the ground, raising a staff or striking a rock.

It is quite conceivable that at the actual moment that the shevotim purchased their footwear, they mistakenly believed that they were deriding Yosef. As the Mogen Avrohom explained, they associated him with Odom HaRishon who sinned with the Tree of Knowledge and led to the curse of the earth. Seen in that light, he was perceived as the reason that it is necessary to wear shoes—in order to create a barrier between man and the earth. In reality, they finally realized that the acquisition of the shoes, with the money received from the sale of Yosef, was a tribute to Yosef HaTzaddik—**“yesod olam,”** the foundation of the world. It was crucial that they perform a symbolic gesture before Yosef descended to Mitzrayim to fulfill his sacred mission—to pave the way so that all of Yisroel could remain separated from the cursed immorality of the earth in Mitzrayim, by donning the holy shoes represented by Yosef HaTzaddik.

How beautifully this ties in with HKB”H’s command, on the night of the exodus from Mitzrayim, to consume the Pesach offering in the following manner (Shemos 12, 11): **“וככה תאכלו אותו מתניכם חגורים נעליכם ברגליכם”**—so shall you eat it: your loins girded, your shoes on your feet. . . As we have explained, Yisroel merited the redemption from Mitzrayim, because of their careful avoidance of immorality—due to Yosef HaTzaddik. It was only fitting, therefore, that they consume the korban Pesach with their shoes on their feet as a demonstration of this merit—the separation from the nakedness of the earth, the immorality, of Mitzrayim—at the time of their redemption.

The Connection between Yosef and Chanoch

After much consideration, I would like to propose a reason for why the Torah depicts Yosef—at the beginning of the parshe, before he is sold into slavery in Mitzrayim—in the following manner (37, 2): **“אלה תולדות יעקב יוסף בן שבע עשרה”** שנה היה רועה את אחיו בצאן, והוא נער את בני בלהה ואת בני זלפה **נשי אביו**—these are the offspring of Yaakov: Yosef, at the age of seventeen years, was a shepherd with his brothers by the flock, and he was a youth with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives. The Tikunei Zohar (Tikun 70, 137a) explains that Yosef is referred to as **“נער”**, a youth, as an allusion to Chanoch—who ascended to the heavens alive to become the angel Matat, **מט”ט**. The word **“נער”**, is also associated with Chanoch, as we find in the possuk (Mishlei 22, 6): **“חנוך לנער על פי דרכו”**; here we find the juxtaposition of the words **“חנוך”** and **“נער”**.

This is the source for what the Arizal states in Shaar HaGilgulim (Introduction 31): **“כי יוסף הצדיק זכה לנשמה”** **“זו של חנוך”**—Yosef HaTzaddik merited the neshamah of Chanoch. (The Megaleh Amukos discusses this topic at length.) Why does the Torah reveal this allusion connecting Yosef to Chanoch--**“והוא נער”**—precisely before Yosef is sold into slavery?

An answer can be suggested based on a Yalkut Reuveni (Bereishis 764) citing the Asoroh Maamaros mentioned above: **“מטטרון היה תופר מנעלים, ועל כל תפירה מכוין ואמר”** **“ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד”** The Rama of Pano explains that Chanoch, who is Matat, used to stitch shoes. With each stitch, he would have in mind that he was creating a separation between man and the earth, which Hashem had cursed; as a result, man would be able to connect with Hashem and reveal His glory and His sovereignty in the world.

Based on Rashi (Bereishis 5, 24), we can add one more small tidbit. HKB”H removed Chanoch from this world before his designated time, so that he would not endure the generation of the flood. Chanoch had foreseen by divine inspiration that the corruption in that generation would be so widespread until even the inanimate earth itself deviated from its nature and became corrupt (Bereishis 6, 11): **“ותשחת הארץ”** **“לפני האלקים”**—and the earth had become corrupt before G-d. This is why Chanoch stitched shoes—intending to separate mankind from the curse and corruption of the earth; and with each stitch, he would utter: **“ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד”**—expressing that mankind should serve Hashem and reveal His glory and His sovereignty in the world.

It is now quite clear why the Torah introduces the description of Yosef **“והוא נער”**—associating him with Chanoch—prior to describing the actual sale of Yosef. The Torah is providing us with a fascinating reason as to why the shevotim sold Yosef down to Mitzrayim. Since Yosef possessed the neshamah of Chanoch, he performed a similar function to Chanoch. Just as Chanoch stitched shoes—to establish a barrier between mankind and the curse of the earth—so, too, Yosef merited serving as the shoes of all of Yisroel. By withstanding the difficult trials he was subjected to in Mitzrayim, he paved the way for all of Yisroel to sanctify themselves in Mitzrayim and disconnect themselves from the nakedness and immorality of the land.