Jewish Tribune – Mikeitz

**Unrecognisable**

וַיַּכֵּר יוֹסֵף אֶת אֶחָיו, וְהֵם לֹא הִכִּרֻהוּ

And Yosef recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him.

So reads the possuk in this week’s sedrah (Bereishis 42,8). I have always struggled with this. How could the brothers not have recognised Yosef? They had come to Mitzrayim to look for him!

Furthermore, Rashi in last week’s sedrah (Bereishis 37,2) tells us that Yosef looked like Yaakov.

שהיה זיו איקונין של יוסף דומה לו

Yosef’s features resembled Yaakov’s

Given that they had just left Yaakov’s presence, would not the similarities have jogged their memory and help them realise that this was Yosef?

Rashi does offer an explanation. When Yosef left, he was seventeen years old and yet to grow a beard. The man they now saw in front of them, had a beard.

Perhaps one can add that whilst Yosef was expecting them and looking for then, when the brothers met Yosef, the context was so far removed from their wildest imagination, they did not entertain the possibility that this could be Yosef.

Either way, I have long struggled with the possuk. How could the brothers not have recognised Yosef?

Last year I heard an interesting answer from Rabbi Moshe Levy. Let me first preface Rabbi Levy’s answer with some context.

Yaakov was devastated at the loss of Yosef and mourned him for twenty-two years. He refused to be comforted. Rashi in last week’s sedrah (Bereishis 37,35) tells us that Yaakov had a tradition that if none of his sons die in his lifetime, he was assured that he would not see the face of Gehinnom. When Yaakov was told that his beloved son was no longer, Yaakov’s life in this world and the next instantaneously imploded.

The Netziv makes an interesting observation. When Yaakov is told that Yosef had been killed by a wild animal, the possuk (Bereishis 37,35) says:

וַיָּקֻמוּ כָל בָּנָיו וְכָל בְּנֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיְמָאֵן לְהִתְנַחֵם, וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֵרֵד אֶל בְּנִי אָבֵל שְׁאֹלָה, וַיֵּבְךְּ אֹתוֹ אָבִיו.

And all his sons and daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said “I will go down to the grave mourning my son”, and his father wept for him.

Asks the Netziv, shouldn’t the possuk have first said that Yaakov wept for his son and then he refused to be comforted?

The Netziv suggests that the shock was so great, Yaakov did not actually cry for three days. But after that, he continued to cry for the next twenty-two years.

Rabbi Levy explains that Yaakov was so deeply affected by the loss of his son, his facial appearance actually changed. Indeed, this explains the unusual question that Pharaoh asked Yaakov when he first met him, enquiring about the age of his visitor (Bereishis 47,8). In the plain sense, Pharaoh was struck by the appearance of the man, who seemed to be older than anyone he had ever seen before.

The Rashbam and Ramban explain Yaakov’s reply that he had not yet lived nearly as long as his father Yitzchok or grandfather Avrohom, but he had aged due to a life filled with travail.

Rabbi Levy was once visiting someone and spotted a picture on the mantlepiece. He asked his host who that was. The man said that it was his father but that is not how he remembered him as his father had been ill for the last five years of his life and sadly the son only remembered an old, frail man.

It was that mournful, aged image of their father that the brothers got used to and had in their mind. A far cry from the more youthful and joyful way Yaakov looked when Yosef was still with him.

Yes, the זיו איקונין of Yosef was similar to that of Yaakov, Yosef’s features indeed resembled those of his father, but that was whilst they were still together. After Yosef was taken down to Mitzrayim, Yaakov’s life changed dramatically and so did his facial features.

Perhaps that is why, on being reunited with his brothers Yosef asked:

הַעוֹד אָבִי חָי

Is my father still alive? (Bereishis 45,3)

The father I left and not the distraught man you know.

It is certainly an interesting explanation. And there is a relevance to many people. When you visit an older person, it is worth remembering that this person was young once. He or she may have skipped to school and frolicked like other youngsters. And a lasting image of a parent need not be one of a person in decline. Let it be a more joyous upbeat image.

May we all merit to enjoy good health, productive lives and happy memories.

**Rabbi Golker is the** **Menahel of Hasmonean High School. To listen to his shiurim, go to TorahAnytime.com or JewishPodcasts.Org**