

## Yehuda's Monologue: Reading Between the Lines

By Rav Elchanan Samet

### 1. "RASHOMON"

"Rashomon" is the name of a gate in the ancient wall around the city of Kyoto, Japan. This gate provided the name for a 1950 movie based on a short story written at the turn of the century by the Japanese writer Ryunosuke Akutagawa. The story (originally entitled, "In a Grove") contains three versions of a single event - a murder - given by the only three people present at the scene of the crime. Each report is logical and persuasive, but they contradict one another regarding the critical question of who committed the crime. At the end, the reader remains utterly confused, unsure as to the true identity of the culprit.

The film "Rashomon" aroused considerable interest throughout the world. The literary genre that developed throughout the twentieth century on the basis of this model is called, appropriately enough, "Rashomon."

Can we find examples of "Rashomon," or at least something similar, within the Chumash? This is unlikely, as the events are written by the omniscient God, Whose version of any story needs no verification. However, when the narrative itself omits its objective description of events, providing them only through the mouths of the biblical characters, then we may speak of "Rashomon" even in the Chumash. The most classic examples of this style, in life as well as in literature, generally involve courtroom scenes, where the litigants and witnesses present differing accounts of what transpired. The story of the trial of the two women before King Shelomo ([I Melakhim 3](#)) constitutes a clear example of this genre in Tanakh.

With this background, we approach the story of Yosef to see if we can perhaps categorize this drama as Rashomon. Only here, the conflict arises between the narrative itself and one of the characters.

### 2. YEHUDA'S MONOLOGUE - ITS STRUCTURE AND KEYWORDS

Yehuda's monologue at the beginning of Parashat Vayigash (the longest single speech in Sefer Bereishit) brings the story of Yosef and his brothers to its dramatic denouement, as it leads Yosef to finally reveal himself to his brothers. Despite its clearly emotional and spontaneous quality, this speech is perfectly structured, aimed at softening the viceroy's heart through brilliant rhetoric and a variety of skillful techniques.

First, let us briefly review Yehuda's appeal. After recounting the brothers' initial encounter with Yosef the viceroy (44:18-23) and their conversation with their father upon their return to Canaan (24-29), Yehuda arrives at the conclusion that Ya'akov would die should the brothers return home without Binyamin (30-32). Finally, Yehuda offers an alternative: that he remain behind in Binyamin's place (33-34). The recurring element throughout the section is Ya'akov's certain death should he lose Binyamin: in the first part - "The boy cannot leave his father; if he were to leave him, his father would die" (22); in the second section - "If you take this one from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to She'ol in sorrow" (29); and in the final section - "When he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die..." (31).

Yehuda expresses this claim with particular emphasis through the use of several keywords that weave the speech together. The word "av" (father) in its various forms appears fourteen times through his discourse, all, of course, in reference to Ya'akov. Correspondingly, Yehuda employs the word "ha-na'ar" (the boy) - referring to Binyamin - seven times. He expresses his humble submission to the viceroy's authority by referring to him with the expression "adoni" (my master) seven times, and to himself and the brothers as "avadecha" (your servants) no fewer than twelve times.

### 3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YEHUDA'S FLASHBACK?

Why does Yehuda see fit to recount the events of the past, the brothers' initial meeting with the Egyptian viceroy and their discussion with Ya'akov in Canaan? The inclusion of the second account - the brothers' attempt to persuade Ya'akov to

allow Binyamin's descent to Egypt - seems clear. Yosef had no idea of how difficult it was for the brothers to pull Binyamin away from Ya'akov - even when the famine reached life-threatening proportions and Ya'akov consented, he still feared his own death should Binyamin not return. Now, as Ya'akov's worst fears begin to come true, Yehuda hopes to soften Yosef's heart by recounting Ya'akov's insistence that Binyamin remain behind.

But what does Yehuda achieve by recalling the brothers' first trip to Egypt? Yosef certainly needs no reminder of his discussion with them only a short while ago. The answer lies in Yehuda's opening words: "Please, my lord, let your servant speak into my lord's ears, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh" (18). This introduction serves not only as an apology for the harsh words to come, but also indicate that out of respect for the viceroy's stature the harsh criticism will remain concealed beneath the surface. Yehuda asks, "Let your servant speak into my lord's ears" - "May my words enter your ears" (Rashi). Yehuda behooves Yosef to listen carefully and sense the bitterness underlying his polite, respectful petition.

So where are the harsh words in Yehuda's appeal? The answer appears in the Midrash (cited by Rashi): "From the outset you approached us with false accusations. Why did you ask all these questions!?" Yehuda reviews their initial encounter with Yosef to underscore Yosef's preconceived suspicion of the brothers, as evidenced by the unusually detailed questionnaire he thrust at them immediately upon their arrival. He recounts Yosef's inexplicable insistence that they bring Binyamin, alluding to his recognition of the fact that Binyamin was framed. The brothers know full well that Binyamin didn't steal anything. Although they have no clue as to what interest the foreign ruler has in tearing the young son away from his elderly, heartbroken father, they realize that this entire incident was orchestrated by the viceroy from the very beginning. As Yehuda now observes, Ya'akov suspected right away the malicious intent of the Egyptian viceroy, and therefore forbade the brothers to bring Binyamin with them.

Thus, Yehuda's entire petition constitutes a lengthy accusation against Yosef's policy towards the brothers from the moment of their arrival in Egypt. The rhetorical genius of Yehuda's appeal lay in the delicate balance between that which is stated between the lines and that which he articulates outright.

Yehuda's report to Yosef of the brothers' discussion with their father upon their return from Egypt deviates somewhat from the Torah's account in last week's parasha. By carefully examining the second part of Yehuda's monologue, we can identify these changes and determine the reason behind them.

Most glaringly, whereas the Torah earlier records two distinct exchanges between Ya'akov and his sons regarding Binyamin's traveling to Egypt, Yehuda appears to condense both discussions into a single conversation. Beyond that, the single dialogue as presented by Yehuda is shorter than any one of the two conversations as cited in Parashat Miketz. Condensing and sharpening clearly constitute fundamental techniques in effective and persuasive speech. Yehuda chooses his words with brilliant selectivity, while at the same time remaining true to the events as they actually occurred.

Recall that when the brothers first return and ask their father's permission to take Binyamin with them to Egypt, he refuses (42:29-38). As the famine worsens, however, Ya'akov once again asks them to go to Egypt and buy grain, and they again insist that they can return to Egypt only if accompanied by Binyamin. After Yehuda's guarantee – "I myself will be surety for him; yomay hold me responsible: if I do not him back to you and set him before you, I shall stand guilty before you forever" (43:9) – Ya'akov grants them permission to take Binyamin.

A careful examination of Yehuda's review of the events reveals that he summarizes the first exchange with Ya'akov in a single verse: "When we came back to your servant my father, we reported my lord's words to him." Yehuda makes it clear to Yosef that because of his maltreatment of the brothers, Ya'akov could not allow the brothers to return to Egypt and purchase food. But, when recounting Ya'akov's eventual concession, he quotes specifically Ya'akov's comments in the first exchange, when he outright denied the brothers' request to take Binyamin: "If you take this one from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to She'ol in sorrow" (44:28; compare with 42:38). He thereby highlights more sharply the difficulty with which Ya'akov granted Binyamin permission to join the brothers in Egypt. In fact, although Yehuda shortens his account of their conversation with Ya'akov as much as possible, he elongates Ya'akov's single-verse response to their request during the first exchange (42:38) into three verses (44:27-29). Clearly, Ya'akov's feelings of dread form the backbone of this section of Yehuda's appeal.

Now let us turn our attention to the earlier part of the speech, where Yehuda recalls the brothers' initial encounter with Yosef. A careful reading of the Torah's description of this meeting (42:7-20) and Yehuda's terse chronicle of this exchange (44:19-23) reveals little similarity between the two stories. It is almost hard to believe that Yehuda is referring to the same meeting we read about just last week. That meeting, as narrated in chapter 42, revolved around Yosef's accusation that the brothers were spies. Yosef's questioning of their family background and their response evolved from the central issue: their status as either innocent tourists or spies. Yehuda, however, opens his argument by recalling, "My lord asked his servants, 'Have you a father or another brother?'" without providing the background to this inquiry.

Moreover, if we study Yehuda's review of this encounter closely, we will find that nearly every sentence adds something not found in the Torah's account in Miketz.

1. As mentioned, Yehuda opens by citing Yosef's requesting information about their family. However, in the account in Miketz, Yosef never solicited this data; the brothers volunteered the information about their father and younger brother so as to deny Yosef's accusation against them.
2. When citing the brothers' presentation of their family background, Yehuda adds several details not included in the brothers' actual response to Yosef: "We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age, the youngest; his full brother is dead, so that he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him" (20). According to the account in Miketz (42:13), the brothers made no reference to Ya'akov's old age, the close relationship between the younger brother and the missing brother, or the particular affection of the father towards the remaining son.
3. Yehuda cites Yosef as ordering that Binyamin be brought "that I may set eyes on him," i.e., that Yosef guaranteed the boy's protection. This forms part of Yehuda's accusation against Yosef, claiming that the viceroy violated his original agreement to look after Binyamin's welfare. Parashat Miketz, however, mentions nothing of such a guarantee. It presents Yosef's order as simply a means of verifying their innocence.
4. Yehuda tells Yosef that the brothers initially objected to his demand that Binyamin be brought: "The boy cannot leave his father; if he were to leave him, his father would die" (22).

In Parashat Miketz, they respond to Yosef's order with nothing but acquiescent silence.

5. Yehuda cites Yosef as threatening, "Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, do not let me see your faces!" (23). These words are found nowhere in the narrative in chapter 42.

As stated earlier, Yehuda's review of the initial encounter with Yosef serves as an accusation against the viceroy for having wrongly suspected the brothers from the outset. Although this alone could explain most or all of the changes in Yehuda's account, such a suggestion is implausible. If a person wishes intentionally to alter the facts while reporting previous incidents, he must obey two conditions. First, he can make only subtle changes, hardly noticed by the listener. The general framework of the event must remain the same as what actually occurred, and only small changes here and there may be inserted so as not to arouse any suspicion. One cannot distort essential facts and thus rewrite the past. Secondly, one may misconstrue past events - however mildly - only so long as the listener did not participate in the event under discussion. Otherwise, he will easily identify the intentional attempt at misconstruing the past and immediately reject any testimony thereof. For example, when the brothers first return from Egypt, they report to Ya'akov their experiences in Egypt in brief generalities, without divulging the details of the difficulties they encountered (42:29-34). Their account is credible because the person to whom they report - Ya'akov - was not present at the events, and their changes to the story are subtle, involving mainly the omission of certain details. (They presented a softened version of the events and minimized the dangers, so as to convince Ya'akov to let them take Binyamin and return to Egypt.)

Yehuda, however, violates both basic requirements. First, he is now addressing someone who actually participated in the events he claims to be recounting, i.e. Yosef; secondly, the meeting he describes bears little similarity to the meeting that in fact took place. Yosef could have refuted each of Yehuda's accusations, verse by verse, by simply stating, "It's not true."

If we do not view Yehuda's misrepresentation as a deliberate distortion of the past, then we have two different and contradictory versions of Yosef's encounter with his brothers - a "Rashomon." [Actually, if we look closely, we will see that we have two witnesses to each account of the events: the brothers' first report to Ya'akov (42:30-34) is in line with the narrative account of the events at the beginning of chapter 42; and the brothers' second report (43:3-7) is in line with the version Yehuda presents before Yosef in Vayigash.] But there is one major problem: the version standing in opposition to Yehuda's is that of the objective Narrator, Whose perspective may never

be subject to questioning or suspicion. How, then, can we explain Yehuda's argument?

## VI. THE COMPLEX SOLUTION

Given the incontrovertibility of the narrative in Parashat Miketz, we cannot classify the conflicting versions of Yosef's encounter with his brothers as "Rashomon." We therefore have only two options: either to understand Yehuda's revisions as intentional, or to come up with a synthesis of both seemingly conflicting reports. As we will now explain, the solution involves a combination of both approaches.

We may classify the distortions in Yehuda's speech into three categories: the omission of critical information, which changes the very essence of the event; added pieces of information that appear nowhere in the narrative itself; and outright contradictions.

We will begin with the added information and see if we can find any allusions in Parashat Miketz to that which Yehuda describes. If we carefully examine the account of Yosef's meeting with his brothers, we will find that in fact three different conversations take place: immediately upon their appearance before Yosef (42:7-16); after the brothers' three-day imprisonment (18-20); finally, a conversation only alluded to in the text, upon Shimon's imprisonment: "He came back to them and spoke to them; and he took Shimon from among them and had him bound before their eyes" (42:24).

It would seem that this final exchange included Yosef's warning cited by Yehuda: "Unless your youngest brother comes with you, do not let me see your faces" (44:23). Yosef considered the possibility that Ya'akov would refuse to allow Binyamin to join the brothers, and would send the brothers without him to purchase grain, leaving Shimon in prison. Therefore, he added this warning. (In fact, this seems to be exactly what Ya'akov tries to do in 43:2, and only after Yehuda cites Yosef's warning - in verses 3 and 5 - does he agree to send Binyamin.)

Now let us examine the first two exchanges. The first confrontation ends with Yosef's proposal to resolve the issue of their truthfulness. He decides that one brother would return to Canaan to bring Binyamin, while the others remain imprisoned in Egypt (42:16). He then proceeds to confine them (17), and three days later the second conversation ensues. Here, Yosef

suddenly changes his mind: "Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man... let one of your brothers be held in your place of detention, while the rest of you go..." (18-19). Why did Yosef change his plan, now ordering the imprisonment of only one brother? If, as he indicates, he adopts a more lenient policy because he is "God-fearing," then what was he thinking the first time?

Yosef had apparently waited three days for the brothers to agree to send one of them back home to bring Binyamin. After he issued his initial order, not one of the brothers accepted the task of going to bring Binyamin. They understood that Ya'akov would never agree to send his youngest son in the hands of one brother to the cruel viceroy who holds the other brothers hostage. Realizing that this plan to bring Binyamin would not work, Yosef effectively gives in to the brothers and releases them all but Shimon, to ensure Binyamin's arrival.

We may presume, then, that throughout the three-day imprisonment an ongoing dialogue ensued, wherein Yosef asked the brothers why no one will agree to go bring Binyamin. They told him about their elderly father and the remaining brother who is "the child of his old age." The deceased son was the only full brother of the youngest, and he was beloved to his father. They therefore cannot take him away from his father, who would undoubtedly die should the youngest son be lost. Yosef's guarantee that he would "set eyes upon him" was to no avail.

Thus, as it turns out, Yehuda effectively condenses the three different conversations between the brothers and Yosef into a single discussion, just as he had combined the two conversations with his father into one dialogue. However, regarding the deliberations with Yosef, one of the three rounds of talks is never recorded in the Torah in detail.

The only remaining issues are Yehuda's most glaring omission - Yosef's accusation against the brothers - and the one apparent contradiction between Yehuda's account and the Torah's description, his assertion that "My master asked his servants, 'Have you a father or another brother?'"

It seems that indeed these differences constitute a deliberate distortion, but not to contradict or alter the facts - after all, Yosef knows full well what actually occurred - but rather to serve as a powerful allusion to Yosef. As the brothers stood before him, Yosef conducted his interrogation under the guise of a security check, standard procedure for any responsible leader. But Yehuda - speaking on behalf of all the brothers - sensed the lack of authenticity in Yosef's conduct. He recognized that the

accusation served merely as a cover for the intentional inquiry into the brothers' family background. The entire line of questioning seemed to have evolved out of Yosef's heretofore inexplicable desire to have the youngest brother brought to Egypt. Yehuda could not come right out and say, "You didn't fool us – we know full well that you never thought we were spies, and that you accused us only to get the information about our family." He therefore alludes to this claim more subtly, presenting the events as if Yosef from the outset had expressed interest in nothing other than the question, "Have you a father or another brother?"

Through brilliant artistry, with no explicit accusation, and through a novel presentation of the facts, Yehuda substantiates his initial claim as articulated by the Midrash: "From the outset you approached us with false accusations!" Everything you said and did, from the very first encounter through your most recent demand to keep Binyamin as a slave – it is all a false accusation orchestrated from the very beginning. As we know, Yehuda was correct.

(Translated by David Silverberg)

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