

(16) Yehudah said, “What can we say to [you] my lord? What can we tell [you]? How can we defend our righteousness [before you]? God has uncovered the sin of your servants. We are ready to be slaves to my lord — both we and the one in whose hand the goblet was found.”

(17) He said, “It would be profane for me to do this. The person in whose hand the cup has been found, he [alone] shall become my servant; but [the rest of] you shall go in peace to your father.”

(18) Then Yehudah approached him and said, “Please, my master, may your servant speak a word in my lord’s ears and let your anger not flare up against your servant — for you are like Pharaoh.”

YEHUDAH’S FIRST APPROACH TO THE VICEROY

Consider the following questions:

1. When Binyamin is caught with Yosef’s goblet, Yehudah tells Yosef that as their punishment, all the brothers would become Yosef’s slaves (verse 16).
 - (a) Why is it that Yehudah gets angry¹ and approaches Yosef to protest after Yosef reduces the punishment and says that only Binyamin would remain as his slave (verse 17)?
 - (b) Why doesn’t Yehudah present his many arguments for clemency (verses 18–34) *before* offering Yosef that all the brothers would become his slaves?
2. Verse 16 states: *We are ready to be slaves to my lord — both we and the one in whose hand the goblet was found* (i.e., Binyamin).
 - (a) Why does Yehudah mention the other brothers (“we”)?

1. As the Alshich notes, the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 93:6) states that *Yehudah approached Yosef for battle*.

(טז) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה מִה־נֹּאמֶר לְאֹדְנִי מִה־נִּדְבַר וּמִה־נִּצְטַדֵּק הָאֱלֹהִים מִצָּא אֶת־עֵוֹן עֲבֹדְךָ הִנְנּוּ עֲבָדִים לְאֹדְנִי גַם־אֲנַחְנוּ גַם אֲשֶׁר־נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ.

(יז) וַיֹּאמֶר חֲלִילָה לִי מִמַּעֲשׂוֹת זֹאת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ הוּא יִהְיֶה־לִי עֶבֶד וְאַתֶּם עָלוּ לְשֵׁלֹם אֶל־אֲבִיכֶם.

(יח) וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֹדְנִי יִדְבַר־נָא עֲבָדְךָ דְבַר בְּאָזְנִי אֹדְנִי וְאִל־יִחַר אַפְךָ בְּעֲבָדְךָ כִּי כְמוֹךָ כִּפְרָעָה.

before Binyamin? It would have made more sense to mention Binyamin first, since he was really the “guilty” party.

- (b) The words **גַּם אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ** literally mean: **also** we, **also** the one in whose hand the goblet was found. What do these repetitions of the word **גַּם** come to include?
3. What is verse 18 pointing out when it says that Yehudah *approached* Yosef? And what does Yehudah mean by saying that he wishes to *speak a word in my lord’s ears*?
 4. What is the meaning of the phrase **בִּי אֹדְנִי** (lit., *in me, my master*)?² If Yehudah was really saying, “Please, my master” (which is what this phrase *seems* to mean), he should have said “נָא אֹדְנִי”.
 5. Why does Yehudah tell Yosef not to get angry at him for what he is about to say, when his next words **praise** Yosef (“*for you are like Pharaoh*”)? In what way does Yehudah mean to compare Yosef to Pharaoh?

2. The Alshich cites the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 93:6), which translates this unusual phrase: “In me [you will find what you want,] my master, [and not in Binyamin],” meaning: “Whatever you might want a slave to do, I can do better than Binyamin.” However, the Alshich seeks to understand it according to its simple meaning.

Yehudah thinks that the whole matter of the silver cup and the viceroy's subsequent actions is a punishment from Hashem for the brothers having sold Yosef so many years earlier — a punishment he feels is deserved and that he is prepared to accept. Thus, he tells Yosef (verse 44:16), “*God has uncovered the sin of your servants. We are ready to be slaves to my lord.*” He offers that all the brothers be enslaved, and does not even try to argue. [This answers Question 1b.]

Answer to
Question 1b

Moreover, Yehudah wanted **all** the brothers to do *teshuvah*, i.e., even those who were not directly involved in Yosef's sale. The phrase **גַּם אֶנְחִנוּ** comes to include Reuven, for although he had not been there when Yosef was sold, he was the one who had said to throw him into a pit; even though his intention had been to save him,³ he arguably deserved some punishment for this. Meanwhile, the second **גַּם** (**גַּם אֶשֶׁר נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ**) means, “and even Binyamin,” who did even less than Reuven with regard to harming Yosef.⁴ [This answers Question 2b.] Since the other brothers are the main ones who deserve punishment, however, Yehudah mentions them (**גַּם אֶנְחִנוּ**) before mentioning Binyamin. [This answers Question 2a.]

Answer to
Question 2b

Answer to
Question 2a

However, when Yosef says he's only going to keep Binyamin as a slave and not the other brothers (verse 44:16), Yehudah realizes that the viceroy's decree is **not** a punishment from Hashem; rather, it is the viceroy's own idea, stemming from his own free will. That is why it is at this point, in the beginning of our

3. Bereishis 37:22.

4. The Alshich does not explain why Binyamin should be included in this punishment. Perhaps Yehudah thought that Binyamin had something to do with the stolen cup, even if inadvertently; or maybe he thought that Binyamin had done some hitherto unknown sin for which he deserved punishment, and Hashem decided to punish him now by having the viceroy falsely accuse him. Another possibility is that Binyamin did share some small part of the blame in selling Yosef because he accepted his brothers' version of what happened and never went to look for Yosef, his only full brother.

parashah, that Yehudah starts arguing with Yosef. [This answers Question 1a.] In addition, he wanted to speak to him directly (“in my lord’s ears”), without an interpreter.⁵ He therefore *approached him*, standing where the interpreter had been standing until that point. [This answers Question 3.]

Answer to
Question 1a

Answer to
Question 3

Yehudah now tells the viceroy his thought process, to explain why he is suddenly protesting. “I offered earlier, without protest, that we would all be your slaves, because I believed this was our due punishment for having sold our brother. But now you are threatening to take Binyamin and **not** us?! בִּי אֲדֹנָי (lit., [the sin is] in me, my master); I am the main one responsible for selling our brother.⁶ וְעַתָּה יֵשֶׁב גַּם עִבְדְּךָ תַּחַת הַנְּעִר לְאֲדֹנָי וְהַנְּעִר יַעַל עִם אָחָיו — let **me** be your slave in place of Binyamin, and let him go back to Canaan with his brothers.” [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to
Question 4

Now, there were two reasons why Yehudah should not have undertaken to speak to the viceroy directly, without an interpreter. First, the implication would appear to be that he considered himself the viceroy’s equal. Second, it was possible that the viceroy did not speak Yehudah’s language, *lashon hakodesh*! Yehudah therefore indicates to the viceroy that he should not be angry: “May ‘your servant’ speak a word in my lord’s ears,” he says. “I know I am your servant and not your equal.” I also know that you **do** speak my language, because Egyptian law requires the rulers to speak 70 languages, and *you are like Pharaoh*; you certainly speak it, just as Pharaoh certainly speaks it.”⁷ [This answers Question 5.]

Answer to
Question 5

5. See *Bereishis* 42:23.

6. See *Bereishis* 37:26–27.

7. The Alshich notes that in this, Yehudah was in fact mistaken: Pharaoh was supposed to know *lashon hakodesh* but he didn’t. Indeed, *Chazal* tell us (*Sotah* 36b, cited by Rashi in *Bereishis* 50:6) that Pharaoh made Yosef swear he would not tell this to anyone.