

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Vayeshev

Yosef's Coat: What Happened to it?

After selling Yosef to Egypt, the Torah describes how the brothers took his coat¹ and dipped it in goat's blood to make it look as if he had been attacked by a wild beast. The verse then relates:²

וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפְּסִים וַיְבִיאוּ אֶל אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מִצְאָנוּ הִכָּר נָא הַכְּתֹנֶת בְּנֶדָה הוּא אִם לֹא

They sent the fine woolen coat and they brought it to their father and said, "We found this; identify it, please, is this your son's coat or not?"

There is a basic difficulty with the simple reading of this verse. It first states that they "sent" the coat, and then says that "they brought it to their father." The question is: Having already sent it, how could they then bring it?

The Ramban offers two answers to this question:

1. The brothers sent the coat their father via messengers, with the second phrase, "they brought it," referring to the messengers. The presumption is that the brothers were reluctant to bring the coat to their father themselves, and so had others do it.
2. The word "וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ" is not related to the idea of sending, but of tearing, as we find this term used in Iyov.³ The brothers first tore the coat to make it look as if Yosef had been attacked and then they brought it to their father.

LISHLOACH AND LESHALACH – SENDING AND SENDING AWAY

With regards to first explanation of the Ramban, namely, that the brothers sent the coat with messengers, it is worthwhile noting that the Torah has two terms for "sending": LishLOAch (לשלוח) and LeSHALach (לשלח).

1 The word כְּתוֹנֶת is translated variously as coat, shirt or tunic. We have used the word coat for simplicity's sake.

2 Bereishis 37:32.

3 36:12.

- ▶ LishLOAch denotes sending something or someone to a destination with a mission in mind. An example of this is Yaakov's sending messengers to Esav with a message of peace, where it states: 4. "וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים"
- ▶ LeSHALach denotes sending something *away*. An example of this term is the goat which is sent away to the wilderness on Yom Kippur, where it says "לְשַׁלַּח אֹתוֹ לְעִזְאֵזֶל".⁵

With this in mind, we return to our verse, where it says "וַיִּשְׁלַחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים". If the brothers sent the coat with messengers to their father, the verb should have been "vayishLEchu", as per the first type of sending. However, given that the verse uses the term "vayeSHALchu", the implication is that they *threw his coat away!* This, of course, cannot be, for how could they – or anyone else – bring it to their father if they had thrown it away? Clearly, the verse is to be understood as describing them sending it to Yaakov, which then leaves us having to explain why the verb for "sending away" is used.

How Many Coats Did Yosef Have?

According to one of the great Italian commentators of the seventeenth century, Rav Moshe Chefetz,⁶ the key to this matter lies in an earlier verse, describing the brothers' actions when Yosef first approaches them. Verse 23 reads:

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל אָחָיו וַיַּפְשִׁיטוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף אֶת כְּתֹנֶתוֹ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו

And it was, when Yosef came to his brothers, they stripped Yosef of his coat, the passim coat that was on him.

We note that the verse contains two references to Yosef's coat. Rashi explains:

- ▶ **His coat** – this is a tunic.
- ▶ **The Passim coat** – this is the one his father added for him above and beyond his brothers.

What is the meaning of these comments? Specifically, how many coats are we to understand that Yosef had?

R' Eliyahu Mizrahi, the foremost commentator on Rashi, insists that the verse cannot be relating that Yosef had more than one coat.⁷ According to him, the second phrase – "the passim coat" – is there for emphatic purposes, specifying that "his coat" was the special passim coat which was the source of such contention.⁸ However, he concedes that if this is true, the final two words of the verse, "אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו", present a difficulty, for what do these words come to add? Surely the idea that Yosef's coat was "on him" is not likewise one that is in need of elaboration?

Other commentators, however, do understand the verse as indicating that Yosef wore two coats:

4 Bereishis 32:4.

5 Vayikra 16:10. See Rashi to Bereishis 8:8 where he discusses the difference between these two terms.

6 *Melech Machsheves, Parshas Vayetzei*.

7 This is based on his assertion that the term "כתונת" refers specifically to a garment that is worn

8 See Commentary of Tur to this verse.

His regular one like the other brothers, and his additional passim one.⁹ Moreover, according to them, this itself is the meaning of the concluding words “אָשֶׁר עָלָיו”; for the word “עליו” here is not to be translated as “on him” i.e. on Yosef, but rather “on it” – i.e., that the second passim coat was *on top of the regular coat*!

MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

However, there is a basic issue to be raised with this explanation: The word “כתונת” is a feminine noun. As such, had the Torah meant to say that the passim coat was on top of his regular coat, it would not have referred to it as “אשר עליו,” but rather, “אשר עליה”! Clearly, the words “אשר עליו” indicate that the coat was directly on Yosef, and hence, as the Mizrachi pointed out, they appear entirely redundant.

All the above leads Rav Chefetz to a rather different conclusion. He concurs with those who understand that the verse is referring to two separate coats. However, it is also telling us something else, namely, that on this occasion, Yosef wore the two coats *in reverse order*!

Yosef is well aware that his passim coat is a point of contention between himself and the brothers. In this particular situation, far from home and on his way to the brothers, Yosef wishes to avoid unnecessarily agitating them any further and hence he decides to wear his passim coat *underneath* his regular coat. For this reason, when the verse describes the brothers stripping him of his two coats, it first mentions his regular coat, which he was wearing on top, and then mentions his passim coat which, on this occasion, was “עליו” – directly on his body!

DIPPING THE COAT IN BLOOD

This brings us back to our opening question. The verse states that the brothers “sent the coat, and brought it to their father.” We asked: Having already sent it to their father, how could they then bring it to him? The answer, says Rav Chefetz, is that the coat that they sent was not the coat that they then brought.

How is this so?

The verse which describe the dipping of Yosef’s coat in blood reads as follows:

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחַטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת הַכְּתֹנֶת בַּדָּם.

They took Yosef’s coat, slaughtered a goat and dipped the coat in blood.

We note that both references in this verse are to “Yosef’s coat.” His passim coat is not mentioned until the next verse where it says that they “sent it”. As we have seen, where not otherwise qualified, the term “Yosef’s coat” refers to his regular coat. It was that one which they dipped in blood to bring to their father. Why did they choose to dip his regular coat and not his passim coat? Perhaps they had such an aversion to that coat they wished to have no further involvement with it. Alternatively, given the special love their father attached to this coat, perhaps they could not bring themselves to bring it to him stained with blood. Therefore, they chose the regular coat as the medium through which to imply that Yosef had been devoured by a wild beast.

9 See e.g. Gur Aryeh.

What then became of the passim coat? If it was not brought to Yaakov, where did it go? The answer is provided in the beginning of the following verse: “וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפְּסִים”. As we noted, the word “וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ” indicates throwing something away, which is what the brothers did to the passim coat, discarding it in a nearby field. Then, as the verse proceeds to describe: “וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל־אֲבִיהֶם – they brought to their father” Yosef’s regular coat which they had dipped in blood, which they then asked him to identify.¹⁰

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10 While this phrase (“they brought”) follows on from the opening phrase (“they sent”) and would seem to also refer to the passim coat, we note that the pronoun which would connect the two – “ויביאה” (they brought it) is missing, allowing us to understand that what they brought was not the passim coat that they had “sent” i.e. sent away. Moreover, the fact that brothers asked Yaakov to identify the coat indicates that it was not the passim coat, which would have been so distinct as to have been immediately recognizable to all. Yosef’s regular coat, however, would have been less distinct from others like it and would have required identifying on Yaakov’s part.