

And Yosef said to his brothers, “I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?” (45:3)

Yosef was revealing his true identity to his brothers. The first question that he asked after he identified himself was, “*Ha’ode avi chai?*”, “Is my father still alive?” One wonders at the timing of this question. During the time that Yosef’s brothers appeared before him, they mentioned their elderly father several times. Why did Yosef suddenly ask a question whose answer was obvious? Each in his own way, the commentators suggest an interpretation of Yosef’s question. In his popular “*Maggid*” series, Rabbi Paysach Krohn relates a poignant story that offers a new meaning to the question, “Is my father still alive?”

The story is told about a little boy by the name of Matisyahu, otherwise known as Motti. He was a sad, withdrawn child, the product of a broken marriage. He heard nothing from his father. His mother had remarried quickly to a man who had limited time or patience for him. It was no wonder that the child was depressed and reclusive, maintaining few friendships. It is difficult to be friendly to a boy who is carrying the world’s problems on his little shoulders.

He attended a *yeshivah* only because his grandmother wanted him to have a religious education. He had a loving and caring *rebbe* who did everything to make Matisyahu smile. His *rebbe* would try to draw him into the classroom dialogue, but to no avail. Matisyahu sat in the rear of the classroom in a world of his own.

Each week, the *rebbe* discussed the *parsha* narrative in a manner that included his students in the story. He would ask questions which elicited surprising responses from his young charges. On the week of *Parashas Vayigash*, the *rebbe* was relating how Yosef and Yehudah disagreed concerning whether Binyamin should remain in Egypt. In the *Torah* narrative, Yehudah was beginning to lose patience with Yosef. He insisted that their aged father needed his son at home. He could not survive the loss of yet another son. He described how the *Torah* relates that Yosef could no longer contain himself; he could no longer continue to hide his identity from his brothers. At last he was prepared to reveal his true identity. “I am Yosef,” he burst out “Is my father still alive?” he asked.

The *rebbe* turned to the class and asked, “Why did Yosef ask such a question? His brothers had just finished telling him that they must take Binyamin home in order to protect the health of their aged father. Yosef knew that his father was alive. Why did he ask an unnecessary question?” The students pondered the question. The *rebbe* scanned the room for answers. Suddenly, a little hand appeared at the rear of the room. The *rebbe* was taken aback to see that Matisyahu, the boy who was always quiet, who never raised his hand, wanted to say something. The *rebbe*, understandably shocked, looked at Matisyahu and asked, “Yes, Matisyahu, do you have an answer to the question?” “Yes. I think I do,” he said. “I think I know what Yosef meant.” “Would you care to

share it with the class?”, the *rebbe* inquired anxiously.

“Yosef was well aware that his father was alive,” Matisyahu began. “Yosef did not ask, ‘Is your father alive?’ He asked, ‘Is my father alive? Does he still think about me? Does he still care about me after all these years of separation? Does he still think of me as his son?’ That’s what Yosef meant when he asked, ‘Is my father still alive?’”

Tears welled up in the *rebbe*’s eyes as he realized what Matisyahu was implying. As a result of his life experiences this child understood what the other students were unable to comprehend. Matisyahu was talking about Yosef, but he was actually referring to himself. He was describing the sad, frightened boy that sat alone in the back of the class. Matisyahu could well relate to the Yosef who was separated from his father at a young age.

While this may not necessarily be the true meaning of Yosef’s question, its message should be clear and thought-provoking. Children have feelings and sensitivities. Although they do not always readily express themselves, their eyes, their actions, or inaction tell the story. A perceptive parent or teacher can look at a child and sense his hurt, feel his grief, and reach out to him with gentleness and compassion. Only in this way can the true nature of the child begin to shine. The frightening aspect of this situation is what does or does not happen to those children whom no one notices.