BEGED OR *SIMLAH* – IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

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In Genesis 37:29, Reuben, upon discovering that Joseph was not in the pit, *tore his clothes* [*vayikra et* ***begadav***]. In 37:34, when Jacob sees Joseph's bloodied coat, *Jacob tore his clothes* [*vayikra Yaakov* ***simlotav***]. The question is: Why does the text use the different words *beged* and *simlah* as object in recounting the act of rending a garment?[1]

A number of responses can be offered:

1. The difference in objects betokens a difference in the status of the individual. In this case the different garments might distinguish between the patriarch (in his *simlah*) who sits at home maintaining a leadership role, as opposed to his son (in his *beged*) who works shepherding in the fields.

2. The difference in objects implies a difference in attitudes of the subject. Reuben, the brother, is anguished but not to the point of total mourning over the dead as was Jacob, the father. Perhaps *beged* here indicates an undergarment of lesser importance, whereas *simlah* indicates an expensive overgarment.

3. The different words are used out of purely stylistic considerations, making the text more aesthetically pleasing by using diverse words in close proximity.

By way of introduction, it is interesting to note that the word *simlah* is a relatively rare word, appearing a mere 28 times in the Bible, while the ubiquitous word *beged* appears well over 400 times.

Though response Number 1 seems on the surface to have merit, the word *simlah* is used for a garment worn both by leaders (e.g., Gen. 37:34; Josh. 7:6; II Sam. 12:20) and by poor persons (e.g., Ex. 22:26), and for both value (e.g., Gen. 45:22, Ex. 3:22) and simplicity (e.g., Deut. 10:18). Thus, biblical usage does not support response Number 1.

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Response Number 2 also seems attractive. However, once again, there is no support for it in biblical usage. Naftali Tzvi Berlin in his commentary *HaEmek Davar* (Gen. 35:2) states that, "every occurrence of the word *simlah* in the Torah refers only to the uppermost garment." Nevertheless, the more general term for clothing, *beged,* refers to all the various layers of clothing, including the uppermost (e.g., *bigdei kehuna*). Indeed, the word *beged* is used for all kinds of clothing in general (Lev. 13:56); and people tear [*kria*] their *beged* for all kinds of reasons (e.g., Num. 14:6; II Kg. 5:8). Tearing of the *simlah* occurs only three times in the Bible, in anguish over a death or other distress. Jacob tears over Joseph's apparent death (Gen. 37:34); the brothers tear after Joseph's goblet is found in Benjamin's pack (44:13); Joshua and the elders tear over the casualties of the war at Ai (Josh. 7:6).

One could make the case that these three examples do show ultimate anguish over death, since even in the instance of the brothers, they may have felt certain that they or their father would die. If *simlah* here indicates tearing over death as distinct from tearing a *beged* for some lesser grief, we would expect such a distinction to hold in all places. Interestingly, within the Pentateuch, this seems to hold true, for tearing a *beged* occurs only twice: Reuben on finding that Joseph is no longer in the pit (Gen. 37:29); Joshua and Caleb upon hearing the negative report of the spies (Num. 14:6).

However, there are 30 occasions elsewhere in the Bible when a *beged* is torn, and the overwhelming majority are explicitly over death (e.g., II Sam. 1:2, 11). It is not until II Samuel 13:31 that we read of an explicit mourning over a lost close relative, when David tears over the death of his son Amnon.

And so we are left with response Number 3, that the usage is simply stylistic. Besides the elimination of Numbers 1 and 2, this response has the explicit support of the Targum Onkelos which translates both Reuben's *beged* and Jacob's *simlah* as "*levush*" [clothing]. As such we must conclude: "*Pshuto Ke'Targumo.*"

Nevertheless, though our analysis has led us to conclude that the two words are used interchangeably, there is room to make the argument that, within the context of the Sale of Joseph story as a whole, the words serve to emphasize a symbolic significance. The story of Joseph and his brothers begins with the brothers' animosity toward Joseph and concludes with their loyalty to Benjamin.

The story begins with the brothers' hatred – a hatred so overpowering that it brings them to the brink of murder and to an act of deception, the result of which is told in the painful words *Jacob tore his clothing* [simlotav]. The story ends with the brothers' love – a familial love so strong that they are pained onto death over the possible consequences of the act of deception being perpetrated against them, the result of which is told in the familiarly painful words *and they tore their clothing* [simlotam].

Maimonides[2] explains that true penance can only be effected when an individual who has committed a sin is once again in precisely the same circumstances yet does not sin. The brothers were guilty of harboring deep animosity toward the "youngest"[3] brother Joseph, son of the favored mother, to the point that they sold him into slavery and led their father to believe that he had been lost. Their true repentance was effectuated, when they were faced with the choice of "selling-out" their youngest brother Benjamin, son of the favored mother, into slavery and telling their father that he had been lost. The text poignantly demarcates their perfect repentance by using the same words *vayikreu simlotam* (Gen. 44:13) like bookends, to denote their sin as well as their act of penance.

This symbolic usage is further emphasized when we consider that it might have been far more conventional to use *beged*. This word is linguistically related to the words "betrayal" and "deception".[4] Furthermore, it is used throughout the Book of Genesis as a symbol of deception. Jacob uses a *beged* to deceive his father to obtain his blessing (27:15,27). Tamar changes her *beged* to deceive Judah at the crossroads (38:14,19). Potiphar's wife deceives her husband with Joseph's *beged* (39:12,13,15,18). Reuben tears his *beged* upon being betrayed by the brothers who sold Joseph without his elder counsel and consent (37:29). Thus it would have been natural, almost expected, to employ the word *beged* when Jacob was being deceived by his sons and similarly when the brothers were being deceived by Joseph. By not using the obvious *beged*, the text throws into relief these two instances, drawing our attention to make the connection between them.

In conclusion, on one level of interpretation, a purely localized view of the text, the terms *beged* and *simlah* simply indicate clothing. However, from a broader contextual perspective the terms are symbolically indicative of much more. The term *beged* is used with Reuben to indicate the brothers' betrayal

of their eldest brother. The term *simlah* is used in relation to Jacob – not because he was not betrayed, but to demarcate the sin committed against him, a sin that would be atoned for in kind by a tearing of the *simlah*.

NOTES

1. YiYasher Koachacha to my son Eitan Yisrael Navon (2nd grade student of Orot Etzion, Efrat) for asking this question.
2. Rambam, Hil. Teshuva 2:1.
3. For all intents and purposes, Joseph was the "youngest" since Benjamin was not yet old enough to be of consideration.
4. *begida, boged,* et. al.

RESPONSES from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book TORAH DIALOGUES

1. Possible retaliation by the defeated tribes of Genesis Chapter 14. The Midrash suggests that Abraham was troubled because righteous people may have been killed in the battle (cf. 18:24ff). From Abraham's response in the following verse (15:2), perhaps the fear was that he had no heir.

2. In these thirteen verses, Ishmael is referred to with seven different nouns, each significant in its context. Sarah sees the boy as *the son of Hagar the Egyptian* (v. 9) emphasizing his foreign origin; *the son of the handmaid* (v. 10) highlighting his lowly birth. Abraham acknowledges that he is *his son* after all (v. 11). God speaks of Ishmael as a *lad* (v. 12) and as *your seed* (v. 13), perhaps to arouse Abraham's sympathy.

3. Here are some of the interesting differences in Eliezer's version:
   v. 35: He expands the description of Abraham's wealth (cf. v. 1)
   v. 37: He does not mention God (cf. v. 3)
   vv. 38 and 40: Eliezer makes Abraham's family the requirement for marriage, not just his homeland (cf. v. 4)
   vv. 39-40: The suggestion that Isaac might be brought to Aram is studiously omitted (cf. vv. 5 and 8)
   v. 47: Omits details in vv. 22-23 and reverses the order of inquiry and bestowal of gifts.