

VA-YAFOG LIBBO (Gen. 45:26) WHEN JACOB WAS INFORMED THAT JOSEPH WAS ALIVE

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When Jacob is informed that his long-lost son Joseph is alive, the Bible uses the phrase *va-yafog libbo* (Gen. 45:26). The JPS translates this as *and his heart fainted*, while the NJPS renders it as *his heart went numb*. Artscroll translates *va-yafog* as *but his heart rejected it*. This is based on a metaphorical reading by Rashi and Rambam, where being revived (in the next verse) refers to a return of the Divine spirit which had left Jacob during Joseph's absence. A similar approach is reflected in the Septuagint, which translates the phrase as *Jacob's mind was confounded* (NETS). However, other classical Jewish commentators give a literal interpretation: a heart attack. Indeed, the Brown-Driver-Briggs lexicon links the Hebrew root *P-U-G* with the Arabic "grow cool" and the Syriac "be cold", translating the word as "cease, be helpless."

Thus, Sforno's translation is "missing a few heartbeats", Rabbenu Bahya renders it as "heart movements ceased", while Ibn Ezra takes it to mean the heart "ceasing to function." Samson Raphael Hirsch likewise construes the term as "heart stopped." The most interesting explanation is given by *Midrash Sekhel Tov* (Buber): "heart jumps" [*oleh u-mekappetz*] ventricular fibrillation!

It is interesting to note that both Rambam and Ramban, who were physicians as well as exegetes, explain the term as being related to the explanation above, based on the Arabic "grow cool." Rambam, in his commentary on the Mishnah (*Yoma* 1:7), explains *va-yafog libbo* as "heat [blood flow?] in the heart stopping and the heart growing cold." Ramban, who maintains that "his heart stopped beating and he ceased breathing", writes that in cases of sudden joy the heart enlarges and opens, thus releasing heat and cooling the heart. This approach is followed by *Tzeror ha-Mor*, whose explanation refers to a lack of blood flow, so that the "heart went from warm to cold."

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