

## Potomac Torah Study Center

Vol. 13 #9, December 12-13, 2025; 23 Kislev 5786; Vayeishev 5786; Mevarchim HaHodesh Hanukkah starts Sunday evening, Dec. 14; Rosh Hodesh Tevet Shabbat & Sunday Dec. 20-21

**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

---

**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

---

**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We celebrate the return of our living hostages and mourn those of our people who perished during the last two years. May a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.**

---

**Mazel-Tov to Sahar Tartak & Joshua Glettner and to their families on their upcoming wedding this Sunday in Lakewood, NJ. As cousins of Joshua's, Hannah and I kvell with the rest of the family and friends.**

---

**Mazel-Tov to Rabbi Nissan and Sarah Antine, Honorees at the Honoree Shabbat for Congregation Beth Sholom, Potomac, MD. Mazel-Tov also to guest scholar Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Rabbi Antine's Rebbe.**

---

We always reach Vayeishev in the annual Torah cycle immediately before or early during Hanukkah. For every significant Jewish holiday prior to Hanukkah, the holiday Torah reading is either set in the Torah or, for Purim, with the connections to Amalek and Megillat Esther. Hanukkah is different, because we do not have a special Torah reading for this holiday. Instead, we read the daily gifts of the princes of the tribes for the Mishkan, and the Haftorah readings on Shabbat repeat those from two other weeks.

Suppose you were advising the Sanhedrin or men of the Great Assembly what Torah reading to use for Hanukkah. If someone had asked me, I would have suggested continuing in Emor after the end of chapter 23 (Torah readings for each holiday). What comes next? Chapter 24 of Vayikra starts with the mitzvah of lighting a Ner Tamid with pure olive oil. Our mitzvah of lighting Hanukkah candles with a special menorah fits in naturally immediately following the end of the most complete Torah discussion of observing the Yom Tovim.

Some of the Devrei Torah below discuss thematic connections between Vayeishev and Hanukkah. Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander discusses the Talmud's surprising interruption of the laws of lighting the Hanukkah Menorah with the way the Talmud reasons that the pit into which the brothers throw Yosef had snakes and scorpions. (Why else would the Gemora have mentioned that there was no water in the pit?) The Talmud thereby points us to connect the saga of Yosef and his brothers with the halachot of lighting the Hanukkah Menorah. When several young men throw their brother into a pit with dangerous animals and leave him to die, the family is ripped apart. To bring the light of Torah into a world with

such family and social problems, we must learn to keep the welfare of our brothers, sisters, and more distant relatives in our vision – as we do with the Hanukkah lights.

Rosh Yeshiva Dov Linzer discusses positive and negative deception among family members of our ancestors. Yaakov (with Rivka's help) deceives Yitzhak to trick him into giving Yaakov the bracha of wealth and power meant for Esav. This negative deception winds its way into most of Yaakov's life, requiring him to leave Canaan for Uncle Lavan's home (and university of deception), where Lavan tricks Yaakov into marrying Leah instead of Rachel, working as a family slave for twenty years, and ensuring that Yaakov could never have a happy married life.

In contrast, the saga of Yehudah and Tamar shows positive deception. When Yehudah delays for many years and still does not permit Tamar (a widow from his oldest son) to marry Yehudah's youngest son (to provide a child for her deceased husband), Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and comes to Yehudah. She asks Yehudah for his cloak, staff, and seal until he pays for her services. Tamar disappears. When her pregnancy becomes obvious, Yehudah charges her with adultery. Tamar shows the cloak, staff, and seal and lets Yehudah decide whether to admit that they belong to him. He admits the act – Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks calls Yehudah's confession the first in the Torah. The result of Tamar's bravery and Yehudah's confession is that both merit becoming the ancestors of King David. Ruth, a Moabite woman who stays with Naomi when she becomes a widow, merits becoming the great grandmother of King David. The stories of Tamar and Ruth illustrate that chesed, honesty, and devotion to Hashem's mitzvot merit the greatest blessings from Hashem.

Rabbi Marc Angel reminds us that Matityahu, the leader of the rebellion of Orthodox Jews against the Syrian-Greeks, had as big a fight against Hellenized Jews as against the pagan leaders of the time. Many Jews admired the Greeks and wanted to give up all signs of Judaism to fit in with the world leaders of the time. As Rabbi Angel observes, many Jews today have abandoned our mitzvot; many marry non-Jews or independently decide no longer to identify as Jews. One indication of misplaced priorities is the astounding survey result (from a CNN survey on election day) that a third of Jews in New York City voted for Mamdani, a vicious, long-time anti-Semite, to become mayor of New York City.

Rabbi Angel asks how many of the family members of the Jews of today will still be Jewish in a hundred years? The history of Jews demonstrates that a substantial percentage of Jews have long left our people. I have read estimates that as many as eighty percent of the Jews in Egypt may have dropped out at the time of the Exodus. (CNN did not send census takers to verify the numbers at that time.) How many Jews did we lose with the "lost tribes"? I am not an expert in this subject, so I shall not speculate. My point, however, is that one of our obligations as Jews is to do our best to see that our grandchildren remain Jewish and that they appreciate their obligation to keep their children and grandchildren Jewish as well. Teaching them our history and mitzvot is a good way to set them on this path.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, who celebrated his Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat Hanukkah, shared many insights into the Torah and holy days over the nearly half a century of our close friendship, many of those years when we were congregants and also were together for holy days. He started me on my path to learning when I was in my early 20s, and his dedication has stayed with me for more than half a century.

Shabbat Shalom; Hanukkah Samaich,

Hannah and Alan

---

**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

---

**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezl Esther, Avraham Dov ben Blimah; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben**

**Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel.** Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

---

## **Parshat Vayeshev/Chanukah: Seeing Our Brothers' Plight**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \*  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Chanukah lights placed higher than 20 cubits (about 9 meters or 30 feet) above the floor of a dwelling do not fulfill the holiday's mitzva, proclaims Rav Kahana in the Talmud (Shabbat 22a), quoting Rav Natan bar Manyomi in the name of Rabbi Tanchum. This rule parallels the religious laws concerning the maximum height of sukkot and a mavoi, crossbeam of an eruv used to mark off an area in which it is permitted to carry objects on Shabbat, because all of these cases depend on a normal human line of sight. If the lights, or the sukkot or eruvin, are too high, they are not easily visible. When it comes to Chanukah, there is also deeper symbolic significance for this theme of visibility and sight, which is part of the festival's larger moral message and is especially relevant for our own turbulent times.

The discussion regarding the height of the Chanukah lights appears in its natural context, amid the laws of the holiday in Tractate Shabbat. However, the Talmud then seems to take an abrupt turn, again quoting Rav Kahana, Rav Natan bar Manyomi, and Rabbi Tanchum, expounding on a verse in our parsha concerning the pit into which Yosef was thrown by his brothers: *"The pit was empty; there was no water in it"* (Bereishiet 37:24). The Talmud asks: If we know that the pit was empty, then why do we need to be informed that there was no water in it? It responds that the verse implies that while there was no water in the pit, it did contain dangerous animals such as snakes and scorpions.

Why does the Talmud place this homiletic interpretation of the text in the middle of a discussion of Chanukah? Is it simply that once one relevant statement is mentioned in the name of certain rabbis, the Talmud included unrelated teachings handed down through the same sages?

It is much more than that. If we look closely, we can discover in the seemingly random position of these two teachings a thematic connection between Chanukah and this week's parsha — and between spiritual illumination and brotherly love. Parshat Vayeshev is always read either on the Shabbat before Chanukah or on its first Shabbat, hinting at a deep conceptual relationship between this Torah portion and the festival of lights. The main idea of Chanukah is the spiritual illumination of the public sphere; hence the requirement to place the lights in a place and at a height that is visible to the public, and at a time when people are present. Parshat Vayeshev, on the other hand, revolves around the idea of brotherly loyalty and betrayal, exemplified by the casting of Yosef into the pit and his sale into slavery.

The message found in these two pronouncements of the Talmud is that these two themes are interdependent. If we wish to dispel societal darkness – wickedness, injustice, oppression – we must begin by focusing on our own sense of empathy and identification with our brothers and sisters, the very foundation of any community striving to bring the Torah's light into the world. If we are willing to sell out those dearest to us for personal gain, or – worse – to do so in God's name, if we are able to blind ourselves to their pain, to prey on them and humiliate them, then the holiday of Chanukah cannot realize its goal.

Thus, the insertion of this teaching about Yosef immediately after the law of the menorah's height is not an accident due only to the coincidence of its authorship. On the contrary – the Talmud is highlighting the interdependence of ethical responsibility and personal and communal decency. We must keep our brothers and sisters constantly in our line of vision – in our sights and in our minds. It doesn't matter if our fellow Jews act or observe Judaism differently than we do, our responsibility toward every Jew is sacrosanct and sealed in the blood of our collective covenant. This responsibility is what ultimately enables us to illuminate the public sphere.

**The holiday of Chanukah is about correcting the evils of history described so luridly in Parshat Vayeshev. The light of Chanukah is the light of empathy, of brotherhood, of loyalty. It is the conviction that every Jew, and every human being, deserves to be seen.** ]emphasis added[

\* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact [ohrtorahstone@otsny.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsny.org) or 212-935-8672. **Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.**

<https://ots.org.il/haftarat-parshat-vayetze-rabbi-brander-5786/>

---

## **Vayeishev: The Fear of Fear**

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5766

*The Chamberlain of the Bakers saw that he had interpreted well, so he said to Joseph, “I too! In my dream – behold! Three wicker baskets were on my head. And in the uppermost basket were all kinds of Pharaoh’s food – baker’s handiwork – and the birds were eating them from above my head.” Joseph responded and said, “This is its interpretation: The three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift your head from you and hang you on a tree: birds will eat your flesh from you.” )Breishis 40:16- 19(*

How did Joseph know that “the baker” would be put to death? What in the dream indicated that this would be his ill-fated end? The Dubner Maggid, with one of his famous parables, gives us what may be the key to Joseph’s unerring analytical processes.

There was an artist so talented that could paint a picture with such realism that it was often impossible to distinguish it from actual life. Once he drew a scene that portrayed a man standing in an open field with a basket of bread on top of his head. The painting was so life-like. He presented it to the king. The king, so proud of his new acquisition, offered a handsome reward for anyone who could find any fault in the painting. The painting was so real that actual birds were swooping down to try to eat the bread in the painting.

Many challengers came and tried to earn the prize money, but no one was successful in finding a single flaw in the painting. It was too- too perfect. Then a wise old man approached the painting. He observed the phenomena of the birds trying to eat the bread pictured atop the head of the man portrayed in the painting. In a moment, he had discovered a serious problem with the realism of this painting and it was he who won the prize.

He simply pointed out that if the birds are trying to eat the bread atop the man’s head then there is something wrong with the picture of the man. He reasoned that if the birds would perceive the portrait of the man as being true to life, then they would be too scared to approach the bread. Whatever the fault may be, it is unknown, but the birds do not take this man to be real.

**So it was that Joseph had noticed that the birds were eating off the basket in the dream of “the baker” and if the birds are eating from his bread basket then he is no longer to be considered alive.** ]emphasis added[

As opposed to the “the butler’s” dream where he was actively squeezing grapes and serving wine, “the baker,” in his dream, is passive. And so it happened that these two men met with differing fates as foreshadowed in each of their dreams. One pictures himself as a helpless victim of external circumstances. The birds swoop down and take at will while he remains a non-entity in his own life- circumstance. The other sees himself as a player and a doer – taking responsible action in his familiar role as “the butler.” And as they envisioned it, so it came to be!

Joseph was able to see the self-fulfilling prophecy imbedded in the dream of each. As is written, *“For the thing which I had dreaded has come upon me and that which I was frightened of has come to me” )Job 3:25(* Sometimes it is the fear of a

thing that invites the disaster. The fear of rejection and failure will often deliver both. And so too as the length of a day continually shrinks at this time of year, some, so to speak, sit fearful of being swallowed up by night – cursing the darkness and wallowing in prognostications of doom and gloom while another takes meaningful action – lighting a Mitzvah-Candle, chasing away darkness by casting out **the fear of fear**.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5766-vayeishev/>

---

## Women Navigating a Man's World

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2015

The story of Yehuda and Tamar is often understood to be Yehuda's story, but it is also Tamar's story. It is the story not of a leader or a person in a position of power, but of someone without power and without a voice. It is the story of how a woman in a patriarchal society is able to influence those with power, to right the wrongs done to her, and to help others do what is right.

Tamar cannot directly challenge those above her, for the powerless cannot simply confront the powers that be. She is silent and raises no objection when Yehuda tells her that she must marry Sheila, his youngest son. Yehuda is not being straight with her: *"for he said, lest he die just like his brothers"* (38:11). We can assume that she was not fooled by this excuse. But what could she do? Yehuda was the man and the head of the family; she had no choice but to take him at his word. So she says nothing; she goes, she sits, and she waits: *"And Tamar went, and she sat in her father's home"* (38:11).

If she cannot succeed through a direct appeal, then an indirect approach is called for. And so, when many years have passed and there is no question that Yehuda is not going to live up to his word, she takes matters into her own hands. Taking advantage of his state of sexual neediness, she dresses as a prostitute and acts – through deception – to right the wrong.

At this point, we are familiar with the use of clothing to misrepresent and deceive. Rivka dressed Yaakov with Esav's garments so that he could present himself as his brother. But the outcomes of the two stories are radically different. Yaakov's and Rivka's deception led to great suffering: Yaakov flees in exile, labors for twenty years, and is himself deceived by Lavan. Tamar's deception, in contrast, leads to the acknowledgement of her righteousness and the birth of two children, one whom will be the forbearer of the Davidic line.

To appreciate the differences between these two stories we must first appreciate the parallels, and the parallels are striking. The key woman in each story – Rivka in one, Tamar in the other – gives birth to twins. Both sets of twins – Yaakov and Esav, Peretz and Zarach – fight in utero for who will be the true firstborn son. In both stories, clothing is used to misrepresent a person's identity and a kid goat plays a key role in the deception. In both narratives, the word *yaker*, to recognize, is central and represents the turning point of events. *"Lo hi'kiro,"* Yitzchak did not recognize at the key moment that the person before him was not Esav, not the intended son, and blessed him. In parallel, at the critical moment of our story we read, *"va'yaker Yehuda"*; Yehuda recognized the cloak and staff and acknowledged that he was the true father.

The purpose of these parallels, however, is not to show us that the two stories are the same, but to highlight their differences. In the Rivka story, the presence of the goat skins deceived. Because of the goat skins on Yaakov's hands, Yitzchak believed him to be Esav: *vi'lō hi'kiro*. In the Tamar story the absence of a goat stripped away the deception. Because he had no goat, Yehuda gave his cloak, staff and signet ring, markers of a person's true identity and because he had given these items, *va'yaker Yehudah*, the truth came to light.

While both Rivka and Tamar use an indirect and perhaps less than fully honest approach, the critical question is how it is being used. Is it being used to deceive and lead someone astray, or to educate and encourage someone to live up to his

commitments and responsibilities? Rivka did what she did despite Yitzchak and with disregard for his desires. Yitzchak was not doing anything unusual or wrong in trying to give his blessing to his firstborn son. If it was wrong, it was only so because God told Rivka that the older son would serve the younger one. But she seems to have never shared that communication with Yitzchak. Because she had not been forthright earlier, she now had to act in a way contrary to Yitzchak's wishes and desires.

The reverse is true for Tamar. There was no question where Yehuda's obligation lay; he had to marry his next son to Tamar. Tamar acted not only to do what she thought right, but also to help Yehuda do what he himself knew was the right thing to do. As Ramban points out, the concept of levirate marriage seems to have existed before it was commanded in the Torah, and at this earlier time the obligation would have extended to other family members beyond the brother of the deceased. If Sheila was not going to marry Tamar, it was Yehuda's responsibility to do so himself.

Tamar's goals were not the only difference from Rivka. Her method was different as well. While Tamar dressed as a prostitute, she did not trick Yehuda into doing something he did not want to do. Yehuda knowingly and willingly chose to hire a prostitute. Tamar's actions allowed him to do what he desired, to sleep with another woman, and in so doing, also enabled him to do the right thing by fulfilling his obligation to his daughter-in-law. The contrast goes even deeper. Rivka, although motivated by her belief in what was right, nevertheless took away what belonged to one brother to give it to another. Tamar, on the other hand, restored to a brother what was his due. The act of the levirate marriage is one of self-sacrifice of one brother for another. Knowing that "*the seed would not be his*," the living brother is called upon nevertheless to sire a child that will carry on his dead brother's name. Onan would have none of this – he betrayed his brotherly obligation and died as a result – and Yehuda continued to delay its fulfillment. It was left to Tamar to step in, remind Yehuda of his obligation, and ensure that this brotherly obligation would be fulfilled.

While Rivka's deception put a man who was already blind more in the dark, Tamar's actions led to the restoration of Yehuda's moral sight. It is thus no accident that, when dressed as a prostitute, Tamar sits "*b'petach einayim*," "*in the open place*," but also, more literally, "*at the opening of the eyes*." Her actions enabled Yehuda to see clearly: *va'yaker Yehuda*.

As a powerless woman in a male-dominated society, like Rivka before her, Tamar could not take the direct approach. She could try, as Rivka had, to use subterfuge to trick Yehuda and bend him to her will. Doing this is not only morally problematic. As the aftermath of Yaakov's subterfuge demonstrates, even if this deception is successful in the short term, it is bound to lead to suffering and strife. Tamar chose to do what was right, and what was right was also what was most effective. Rather than tricking the person in power, she helped him to see the light.

We are taught that Tamar does not directly accuse Yehuda when she is about to be burned because she did not want him to suffer public embarrassment. This is a valuable moral lesson, but it is not the reason she avoided direct confrontation. Had she directly challenged Yehuda, she would have failed. Yehuda would have denied that he was involved, and she would have been executed. Instead, Tamar places the identifying items in front of him and then steps back. She gives Yehuda the space to accept responsibility and to do what is right. And Yehuda steps forward and owns that responsibility.

While the story of Rivka's deception begins with the struggle of the younger and older brother; the story of Tamar ends with one. Peretz also struggled with his twin brother, but he did not come out holding onto his older brother's heel. He won the fight and legitimately came out first. Peretz was the son of Tamar and Yehuda, of a mother who knew that one who lacks power must nevertheless always do what is right, and of a father who had learned that one who wields power must not allow it to blind him to the right course of action. Many generations later, Boaz, a descendant of Peretz, will come to recognize where his true obligations lay through the actions of Ruth, another woman honestly navigating a man's world. Their descendants will become the future leaders of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

---

## Seeing the "Hen" of Others: Thoughts for Parashat Vayeshev

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

The Talmud (Yoma 9b) suggests that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed due to the sin of sinat hinam, baseless hatred. Yet, "baseless" hatred seems to be rare, if not impossible. Whenever people hate, they don't think their hatred is baseless. They hate others because of their race or religion, because they fear them or were hurt by them. The reasons for their hatred may be entirely false and unfounded — yet, in their minds it is not baseless. Indeed, it would be quite amazing to come across someone who states that he/she hates you for absolutely no reason...just for the sake of hatred!

I believe the phrase sinat hinam should be interpreted differently. It does not mean baseless hatred. Rather, the word hinam derives from the word hen — graciousness, loveable-ness. The Temple was destroyed because people hated to see the hen in others. They dehumanized their opponents, treating them as though they lacked human charm and worth.

In this week's Parasha, the Torah reports that God helped Joseph when he had been imprisoned at the demand of Potifar. "Vayiten hino be-einei sar beit hasohar (Bereishith 39:21), and *He endowed his hen in the eyes of the prison warden.*" We thus see that the root word hen can be presented in a possessive form...including hinam.

At the time preceding the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews were divided into hostile factions. There were zealots and pacifists, war-mongers and peaceniks, religious extremists and moderates. The groups were so antagonistic to each other that they could not see the hen in their opponents. They stereotyped and demonized each other. This led to the fragmentation of society and to the inability to work together in a unified fashion.

When we look into each other's eyes and see a fellow human being, it is quite difficult to hate. We realize that all of us — regardless of nationality and ideology — are human beings. We love, we fear, we care for our families, we can be kind and compassionate. When we see the hen in others, our emotions steer away from hatred and toward sympathy.

Too often, people do not seriously look for the hen in others who are not part of their own inner circle. They dehumanize, create stereotypes...and hate to see the hen in those who differ from them. They do not see the individual human being with a heart and soul and feelings; instead, they see Settlers and Peace Now; ultra-Orthodox and secular; Jews and Arabs; Sephardim and Ashkenazim. Instead of talking to each other as fellow human beings, we tend to shout at each other as enemies. It is easy to hate a stereotype; it is difficult to hate a fellow human being who has hen.

Don't we deeply lament the fact that our enemies constantly engage in dehumanizing us, in presenting us as hateful objects rather than as fellow human beings? Don't we profoundly wish that our enemies would take the time to look into our eyes and see our hen, realizing that we all are created by the same God and all are endowed with grace and loving-kindness?

And if we are profoundly disappointed by the hatred aimed against us, shouldn't we strive our mightiest to avoid falling into that same vicious trap of hating others? Shouldn't we try to elevate our own humanity by seeing the hen in our fellow Jews and in all our fellow human beings?

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/seeing-hen-others-thoughts-parashat-vayeshev>

**The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](https://www.jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th**

Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its current fund raising period. **Thank you.**

---

## **Hanukkah: Then, Now and Tomorrow**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

In 166 BCE, officials of Antiochus IV Epiphanes strove to break Jewish resistance to the tide of Hellenization. Officers went to Modi'in where they confronted Matityahu, the local priest, urging him to sacrifice a pig as a gift to Zeus, the Greek god. They told him: *"Come forward first and carry out the command of the king, as all the heathen, the men of Judah, and those left in Jerusalem have done; if you do so you and your sons will be counted among the friends of the king and will be honored with silver and gold and many gifts"* (I Maccabees 2:17-18).

Matityahu famously rejected this proposal. *"All those for the Lord come with me!"* And thus began the Jewish rebellion that ultimately led to victory over the Greeks, rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, the establishment of the holiday of Hanukkah, and the beginning of Maccabean rule over Judea.

Although we celebrate Hanukkah today in appreciation of the remarkable victory of the Maccabees over their oppressors, Matityahu and followers were also engaged in battle against an internal enemy: Jewish Hellenizers. Many Jews, including priests and high priests of the Temple in Jerusalem, were avid advocates of adopting Greek culture. They wanted to adapt to the prevailing powers and styles; they sought to be *"politically correct."* For them, traditional Jewish religious beliefs and customs were a hindrance to their being accepted in Hellenistic society.

The temptations to give up on Jewish tradition were great. Rabbinic texts report that even the son and nephew of Rabbi Yose ben Yoezer — one of the two leading sages of the time — succumbed to the blandishments of Hellenism (Shabbat 133b; Bereishith Rabba, 65).

**The battles that led to the creation of Hanukkah were twofold. The physical enemy had to be defeated; but the spiritual war against Hellenism also had to be won. Rekindling the menorah in the Temple of Jerusalem symbolized both military and spiritual victories.** [emphasis added]

Jews always have faced external enemies seeking to murder us or undermine our way of life. But we have also faced — and continue to face — internal challenges from Jews who for various reasons do not prioritize Jewish physical and spiritual survival. They are assimilationists, or supporters of antizionism. Some are alienated from traditional Jewish beliefs and religious observances. Others are more identified with left-wing politics than with Judaism. They are the modern-day *"Hellenizers."*

Will our descendants 100 years from now be living proud, happy and meaningful Jewish lives? This will largely depend on choices we make today. The Jewish future will consist of those — like Matityahu of old — who heroically maintain Jewish faith, traditions, and values; for whom Judaism and Jewishness are primary sources of identity and personal fulfillment. The *"Hellenizers"* will fade away as Jews.

Matityahu's heroic challenge continues to resonate for us this Hanukkah: *"All those for the Lord come with me."* Those who respond positively are the Jewish heroes of our time. The Jewish future depends on them ... on us!

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City. This article by Rabbi Marc D. Angel was first published in the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles, December 9, 2025.

**The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](http://jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its current fund raising period. Thank you.**

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3392> Also available at:  
<https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/columnist/385468/hanukkah-then-now-tomorrow/>

---

## **Chanuka: Operator Standing By**

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

*May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel*

*“The mitzva to light the Chanuka menorah is a mitzva which is very dear.”* So declares the Rambam in his Halachic work, *Mishneh Torah*, a work of Jewish law, which typically does not discuss emotion unless it is an essential part of the mitzva. In addition to the importance of Chanuka — to remember and commemorate the miracles of the war and of the oil — the Yom Tov of Chanuka is one of endearment. Hashem loves us; sometimes He shows it with unabashed clarity.

When we think back to what precipitated the two miracles of Chanuka, we recall that the Syrian-Greeks claimed to hold the wisdom of the world. They were able to quantify everything academically, through science and math. They insisted that they had discovered the depth of human experience through physicality. The Jewish people were the only holdouts to the world dominance of the Greeks, holding on to the belief that there is a higher, spiritual calling, and that G-d, the creator of heaven and earth, runs the world, and not some committee of Greek idols.

The Greeks believed that they could quantify everything through their numbers and statistics; the two miracles we commemorate on Chanuka defy the numbers and the statistics. That a small band of Jews was able to rout the world class Greek army is something that was viewed as statistically impossible. That oil enough for one night should burn for eight was considered impossible. Through miracles that the Greek way of thinking considered impossible, Hashem smiled at the Jewish people and said, *“Don’t worry, I am still in charge. Usually, I follow the laws of nature that I created. Usually, I don’t intervene in an obvious way. But I can intervene if need be. I am standing by, and I am here for you.”*

Hashem’s typical interventions are subtle and majestic in their simplicity. I like to give the example of an incident during the Revolutionary War when General George Washington realized that the British were closing in on his winter encampment. Fearing that if he delayed just one more day, the British would surround him in a siege, Washington gave the order to break camp immediately and travel before daybreak. Most of the soldiers quickly obeyed and prepared to travel. But the soldiers in charge of the cannon approached Washington and said it was impossible. The ground was muddy and soft; the wagons laden with the cannon would simply sink in the mud; they simply could not travel. Recognizing the British threat and realizing the precariousness of the situation, Washington simply responded, *“Figure it out. We are traveling tonight.”*

Well, that night, Hashem changed the temperature to freezing cold. Bitter cold winds caused the ground to freeze, and with hours to spare before dawn, the ground was frozen solid. After all of the fears, the wagons laden with cannon were able to travel. They would in fact support the fledgling army in the months ahead until the war was won.

Similarly, I recall a story of a man in England who was on a list waiting for a transplant. But he was on the bottom of the list and there was not much hope that he would live long enough to have his turn. Then, things changed for him. A volcano in the area spewed forth enough ash to close down the airports. During this closedown, a deadly car accident produced

organs ready for transplant, but none of the people on the list were able to travel to the hospital to be recipients. Insistent that the organs be used to save someone's life, the transplant team gave instruction to go out of the list order, *"Just get us a recipient that can come."* This man who was on the bottom of the transplant list lived just blocks from the hospital. He is the one who received the organ.

When we daven to Hashem, it is good to know that we are davening to the creator of heaven and earth. He is the one who can change the temperature at will; He is the one who can bring about a volcano and all of its ramifications if He so wills it.

Most of Hashem's interventions are subtle and majestic, interventions that could easily go unnoticed to the untrained eye. But sometimes Hashem just changes the rules, because He is the one with the keys to creation.

A friend of mine went to an amusement park with his family a few months ago, and during one of the rides his son's glasses flew off. He approached the teenage attendant asking if he could hold the ride for a few minutes so he could look for the glasses. The attendant answered very firmly, *"Oh, we can't do things like that. This ride runs like clockwork, and we can't change anything."* A bit perturbed my friend looked around for the older, operator of the rides. He found him a few feet away chatting with some people. My friend asked the operator if he could stop the ride for a few minutes so he could look for his son's glasses. The operator said, *"Sure, no problem."* The operator walked over to the electric box that controlled the ride and pulled out a master key from his pocket. He said, *"When the ride pulls in this time, I will shut the electric and all the clockwork the attendant told you about will stop. Then, it will be safe for you to look around for the glasses."*

Although the world typically runs like clockwork, Hashem is the Operator. He holds the master key and intervenes when He sees fit, as He did on Chanuka. Those interventions are acts of love. Connecting with them reminds us that Hashem is always standing by, paying attention, and intervening, in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways.

May Hashem bless us all with the endearing blessings of Chanuka. Let us make the most of this opportune time to communicate in thanksgiving and in prayer with the Operator who is always standing by.

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos and a Happy Chanuka,

\* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

---

### **Mikeitz - Chanukah – The Miracle of the Moment**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \* © 2021

[ed. note: We always read Mikeitz during Chanukah, so I am using this archive Dvar Torah by Rabbi Singer.]

The Parsha begins by telling us that two years after Yosef interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's head butler and baker, Pharaoh himself had dreams. The Torah relates how these dreams ultimately led to Yosef's redemption from freedom, when the head butler recalls how Yosef had interpreted these dreams.

Rash"i at the end of last week's parsha explains that these two years which had passed were very significant. Yosef was originally supposed to be freed from prison and installed as viceroy of Egypt immediately after Pharaoh's head butler was

freed and reinstated in his position. However, when Yosef interpreted the head butler's dream, Yosef asked the head butler to inform Pharaoh of his plight and his innocence and to try to intercede on his behalf. This request was considered to be a violation of Yosef's faith in G-d. For turning to the head butler for help, rather than relying on G-d, Yosef was punished with an extra two years in prison. That is why our parsha opens with the phrase "*And it was at the end of two years.*"

Many commentaries struggle to understand why Yosef's request was considered to be a violation of faith in G-d. One of the most basic elements of the Torah's guidelines for faith in G-d is that we must recognize that G-d has placed in a physical world of cause and effect, and if we don't activate the causes, G-d will not bring about the effect. If we do not work, we cannot expect to find money in our bank account. If we do not eat, we cannot expect to be healthy and nourished. Yosef at this point had been living in a high level prison for a decade. He had no contact with the outside world and no means to plead his case. He finds himself face to face with an individual who is regularly at the king's side. Why is it wrong for him to utilize the opportunity and ask the head butler to intercede on his behalf? Aren't we supposed to put in the effort?

Rabbeinu Bechaye in his introduction to this week's parsha presents a novel approach to this question. He explains that as we grow and develop, our faith and trust goes through several stages. In our infancy, our hope is focused exclusively on our mother's milk. As we grow, we begin to see our mother as our source of nourishment, especially as we begin eating other foods. Then, we begin to understand the concept of money and realize that our sustenance comes through the breadwinner. As we grow older, we begin to rely on our own abilities and our own income. It is at this point when we are naturally brought to recognize G-d's involvement in our lives and to rely on Him. As we see those human abilities to provide an income have limits, and that everyone needs factors outside of their control to succeed, we begin to rely on G-d and to turn to Him to help us with those factors beyond our control. We can then take our faith to the next level and realize that it is G-d who provides the factors within our control, as well, and that He is truly the source of all that we have.

He then adds that there is one more level of faith in G-d, above and beyond the recognition of G-d's involvement and control in every element of our lives. He describes this level of faith based on the words of Shlomo Hamelech: "*Trust to Hashem with all of your heart.*" )Mishlei 3:5( We are told not to trust "in" Hashem, but rather to trust "to" Hashem. This means that we need to actively direct our faith and trust solely to G-d. He explains that once a person reaches the ultimate understanding of G-d's love and care for us, he comes to a point where he wants to rely on G-d alone and does not want to risk any possible thoughts of other sources of help. At this point, a person understands how our faith is part of our relationship with G-d and daily interaction with G-d, and therefore seeks to preserve and maintain that faith at all costs.

At this final stage, a powerful change begins in a person's heart, as a person begins to view his entire life's circumstance from a new perspective. Once he recognizes that G-d is intimately involved in all that we do, and that every time we experience that sense of reliance on G-d we are entering into our relationship with G-d, a person views their entire life as living within G-d's embrace. Whatever situation such a person finds himself in, he knows that it was chosen by G-d specifically for him and prepared for him with love. Through this understanding, he begins not only to rely on G-d, but to also accept what G-d has provided to him.

This new perspective also brings about a subtle change in a person's conduct. Normally, as we go through life, we have our own goals and dreams of what we think is important for us. When we find ourselves in situations which don't match our dreams and goals, we seek ways and means to alter our circumstances. We try to create new opportunities for ourselves and may begin to work a second job or attend a night school to learn a new career or some other means of creating new opportunities. For most of us, this is considered appropriate and responsible conduct. It is our way of accepting the reality of the world G-d has created for us and living in it according to His will.

For a person with this higher level of faith, it is not that simple. When he finds himself in a different situation than he may have wanted, he sees that situation as a gift from G-d. He understands fully that G-d can arrange his life however G-d wants, and that G-d has chosen this environment. He feels that every situation in his life is a direct gift from G-d, and he

cherishes it as G-d's personal embrace. From this lofty level of reliance on G-d, were he to seek to create ways of changing his life's circumstances, he would be saying to himself that he is not happy with what G-d has given him. He would be telling himself that if only I could change this detail or that detail about my life, then I would be better off and have the best life. Yet, he does not believe this to be true. He truly feels that G-d is providing him with the best life for him.

Rabbeinu Bechaye explains that this was Yosef's error. Yosef had reached this high level of the ultimate faith in G-d. Whether or not he understood it, he truly felt that every circumstance he experienced was a personal gift from G-d. While his life was far from what he expected as he was growing up in his father's house, he believed deeply with every fiber of his being that G-d was arranging the best life possible for him. Yet, when he asked the head butler to intercede on his behalf, he was allowing himself to think "*I could do better for myself, if I would just change a few things about my life.*" This was Yosef's error.

The Beis Yosef famously proposes that Chanukah should only be a seven day holiday. Since we had enough oil to burn for the first night, the miracle only began when the flame continued burning after the oil should have run out. The Alter of Kelm, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, answers that **the first night of Chanukah is highlighting what the true message of Chanukah is. The miracle of the oil served to remind us that Hashem is always with us and watching over us.** They had been fighting against the mighty Syrian-Greek army for three years and had finally reclaimed the Beis Hamikdash from the Hellenists. Prophecy had ended two centuries before, and they did not live with miracles as they had during the first Beis Hemikdash. **When the oil miraculously burned for eight days, this served as a concrete confirmation that all that we had experienced was indeed the Hand of G-d. This is why we celebrate the first night along with the other seven. We are celebrating the miracle of nature itself and striving to recognize that G-d is with us in all that we do.** [emphasis added]

We all have real struggles we are dealing with in life. We are not expected to be on Yosef's lofty level of faith in G-d. As such, G-d wants us to be honest with Him and with ourselves and to seek the means to better our lives and improve our circumstances. At the same time, though, we can take strength and encouragement from Yosef. While we are working to improve our circumstances, we can understand that G-d has chosen these circumstances for us. **Chanukah is a wonderful opportunity to give ourselves strength, as we stop and recognize the message of the candles – that nature itself is a miracle.** No matter what our hopes may be for tomorrow, we find ourselves where we are today because G-d has chosen it for us personally out of His never ending love for us. May we merit to feel the embrace of Chanukah, and to experience the miracles of nature. [emphasis added]

\* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and then associated with the Savannah Kollel.

---

### VaYashev Parsha Pointers

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

Usually, when the Torah speaks of a man's Toldot, descendants, all his children are mentioned, but in 37:1, Yosef is the only one mentioned.

Yosef hangs out with the sons of Bilha and Zilpa. Do his other brothers reject him?

Yosef is depicted as a teenager who cannot read emotions. He keeps telling his dreams to his brothers and does not process their animosity towards him.

Yaakov sends Yosef to check on his brothers. Why? Did he think that his involvement causes tension and want to let them sort things out on their own?

A man finds Yosef wandering in the field )37:15-17(. The man is anonymous, but the Midrash identifies him as an angel. Is it possible that the Midrash tries to acquit the brothers by claiming that God directed the events?

Yosef could have returned home and told his father he did not find his brothers, but he keeps looking for them. His words, "I seek my brothers," can be understood physically and metaphorically. See Rashi on 37:17.

The Midianites are the ones who sold Yosef to the Ishmaelites )37:28( while the brothers were far away, debating what to do.

In 37:36 the Torah states that the Medanites sold Yosef to Egypt. This statement seems to contradict verse 28. Perhaps the Torah means that the Midianites started the process which brought Yosef to Egypt. The Torah changes the word מִדְנִים to מִדְנִים which also means quarrels, to indicate that sibling rivalry was the cause of this tragedy. See Proverbs 6:19 and 10:12, and especially 6:14 where these two Hebrew spellings are interchangeable.

In 37:31-32 Yaakov's sons deceive him with garments and a slaughtered goat, just as he deceived his father.

In 38:9 the sin is not destroying one's "seed" but rather selfishness. Onan did not want to have a child which will be named after and belong to his late brother.

There are allusions in the story of Tamar and Yehudah to the phenomenon of cultic prostitution, especially the use of the term 38:21-22( פָתַח עַנִּים ), but also the location (38:14, and see Rashi there).

Yehudah is deceived with garments and a goat.

Tamar uses the same words the brothers used to deceive Yaakov: הַכֵּר נָא (37:32 and 38:25).

Potiphar )39:1( is not Poti-Phera )41:45( Yosef's future father-in-law.

Yosef is framed by Potiphar's wife who uses his garment as evidence. He thus joins Yitzhak, Yaakov, and Yehuda. Note that garment in Hebrew, בגד, also means to betray, to deceive.

Enjoy reading and learning. Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Haim Ovadia

\* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan )Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(.

**Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.**

---

### A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation \*

This week, as we approach Chanukah, I will be taking a brief break from our regular order during this week's Shabbat service. I will not be speaking before Musaf so that I can instead teach a class after Kiddush on the halachot of Chanukah.

Because of this schedule change, I am sending out the "Point for Discussion" earlier than usual. I will discuss it on Friday night, so you can talk it over on your way to the Beit Knesset this week.

### **The Walk-to-Shul Discussion**

We live in a unique time – one in which we )usually( have the privilege of choosing our leaders. When making such a choice, we naturally want to look at a candidate's history in order to make an informed decision.

Imagine you had to choose between two leaders: A person who always follows the rules – squeaky clean, never in any kind of trouble, a truly "vanilla" character who has lived an uneventful, flawlessly compliant life. The second choice is a reformed convict – someone who made serious mistakes, served their time, sincerely repented, took responsibility, and is now running for office with genuine commitment to do better.

Whom would you choose and why? ]editor: relate this discussion to the parsha[

Shabbat Shalom; Chanukah Samaich; B'Ahavat Yisrael.

Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

]Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message for the congregation?[

**Bridging the Generations: The Holocaust and Its Legacy:** The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand is hosting the annual International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration on January 25, 2026, in Auckland. Created in 2005 by the United Nations, 27 January -the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau - is International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which honours and remembers the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. This year's commemoration is dedicated to strengthening the crucial link between the past and the future, empowering younger generations to carry the torch of remembrance and responsibility.

**B'Nai Akiva:** AHC has an active chapter of B'Nai Akiva and is looking for a venue for this year for its 20 active members.

\* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

---

### **Rav Kook Torah**

#### **Vayeishev: The Special Teshuvah of Reuben**

*"Reuben returned to the pit, but Joseph was no longer in the pit. He tore his clothes ]in grief[."*  
)Gen. 37:29(

Where was Reuben coming from? Why wasn't he together with the other brothers?

According to the Midrash, Reuben was “occupied with sackcloth and fasting,” as he repented for changing his father’s sleeping arrangements. )The word *vayashov* “he returned”( can also mean “he repented.”(

The Midrash continues:

*“The Holy One said: No one has ever sinned before Me and repented, but you [Reuben] are the first to repent. As you live, one of your descendants will stand up and be the first to urge repentance. And who was this descendant? Hosea, who called out, “Return, Israel, to the Eternal your God”” )Hosea 14:2(.*

This Midrash is quite difficult. There were a number of individuals who repented before Reuben’s time, such as Adam and Cain. Also, why does the Midrash state that Hosea was the first to exhort the people to repent? We find that the mitzvah of teshuvah is already mentioned in the Torah )Deut. 30(.

It must be that Hosea informed the people regarding some aspect of teshuvah that had not been taught before.

### **Internal and External Consequences**

The impact of sin is in two areas. Sin darkens the soul’s inner holiness. But it also has a negative impact on the world at large. *“When the people of Israel do not fulfill God’s Will, it is as if they are weakening the great strength of Heaven”* )Eichah Rabbah 1:33(.

With teshuvah we repair the soul and restore its original purity. But the damage caused in the world at large — this is only repaired through God’s kindness. *“I, yes, I am the One Who erases your transgressions for My sake”* )Isaiah 43:25(. The corrective power of teshuvah is a joint effort — partly by us, partly by God.

Nonetheless, it is possible for an individual to also repair the external damage. When one’s goal is to elevate all of society, and one’s teshuvah is focused on preventing one’s own mistakes from harming and misleading others — such an individual increases light and holiness in all of creation.

### **Reuben’s Teshuvah**

Reuben attended to both of these aspects in his teshuvah. First he occupied himself in fasting and sackcloth, repairing the damage to his own soul. But his teshuvah did not end there. He then *“returned to the pit.”* An open pit in the public domain — *bor b’reshut harabim* — is a metaphor for a situation likely to lead to public trouble and suffering.

After repairing his soul, Reuben returned and looked at the pit. He examined the damage that he had caused outside himself, in the public domain. He then worked to rectify his actions so that they would not be a stumbling block for others.1

That is why the Midrash states that Reuben was the first to *“sin before Me and repent.”* He was the first to repair not only his soul, but also that which is *“before Me,”* i.e., everything that God created. In the words of the Midrash, what made Reuben’s teshuvah unique was that he *“started with teshuvah.”* Reuben aspired to correct the external damage ordinarily repaired by God’s kindness.

### **Israel Alone**

Now we may understand the special level of teshuvah mentioned by the prophet Hosea. In the Torah it says, *“You will return to God... and the Eternal your God will accept your repentance”* )Deut. 30:2-3(. This is the common level of teshuvah. We work to repair the damage in our soul, while God corrects the damage we caused in the world.

Hosea, however, spoke of a higher form of teshuvah. He described a teshuvah like that of Reuben — an attempt to repair all the repercussions of one's errors. Therefore he called out, *"Return, Israel, to the Eternal your God."* Hosea encouraged a complete teshuvah, performed by Israel alone.

)Adapted from *Midbar Shur*, pp. 191-194.(

1 On a simple level, we may explain that Reuben sinned by upsetting the order in his family when he intruded on his father's private life. He sought to correct this mistake by restoring harmony to the family, through his efforts to protect his brother Joseph.

<https://ravkooktorah.org/VAYEISHEV-71.htm>

---

## **Vayeshev: The Heroism of Tamar (5775, 5782)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former UK Chief Rabbi\*

This is a true story that took place in the 1970s. Rabbi Dr Nahum Rabinovitch, then Principal of Jews' College, the rabbinic training seminary in London where I was a student and teacher, was approached by an organisation that had been given an unusual opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue. A group of African Bishops wanted to understand more about Judaism. Would the Principal be willing to send his senior students to engage in such a dialogue, in a chateau in Switzerland?

To my surprise, he agreed. He told me that he was sceptical about Jewish-Christian dialogue in general because he believed that over the centuries the Church had been infected by an antisemitism that was very difficult to overcome. At that time, though, he felt that African Christians were different. They loved Tanach and its stories. They were, at least in principle, open to understanding Judaism on its own terms. He did not add – though I knew it was in his mind since he was one of the world's greatest experts on Maimonides – that the great twelfth-century Sage held an unusual attitude to dialogue. Maimonides believed that Islam was a genuinely monotheistic faith while Christianity – in those days – was not. Nonetheless, he held it was permitted to study Tanach with Christians but not Muslims, since Christians believed that Tanach (what they called the Old Testament), was the word of God whereas Muslims believed that Jews had falsified the text.]1[

So we went to Switzerland. It was an unusual group: the semichah class of Jews' College, together with the top class of the yeshiva in Montreux where the late Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg, author of *Seridei Esh* and one of the world's foremost halachists, had taught. For three days the Jewish group davenned and bentsched with special intensity. We learned Talmud each day. For the rest of the time we had an unusual, even transformative, encounter with the African Bishops, ending with a chassidic-style tisch during which we shared with the Bishops our songs and stories and they taught us theirs. At three in the morning we finished by dancing together. We knew we were different, we knew that there were deep divides between our respective faiths, but we had become friends. Perhaps that is all we should seek. *Friends don't have to agree in order to stay friends. And friendships can sometimes help heal the world.* ]emphasis added[

On the morning after our arrival, an event had occurred that left a deep impression on me. The sponsoring body was a global, secular Jewish organisation, and to keep within their frame of reference, the group had to include at least one non-orthodox Jew, a woman studying for the rabbinate. We, the semichah and yeshiva students, were davening the Shacharit service in one of the lounges in the chateau when the Reform woman entered, wearing tallit and tefillin, and sat herself down in the middle of the group.

This is something the students had not encountered before. What were they to do? There was no mechitzah. There was no way of separating themselves. How should they react to a woman wearing tallit and tefillin and praying in the midst of a group of davening men? They ran up to the Rav in a state of great agitation and asked what they should do. Without a moment's hesitation he quoted to them the saying of the Sages: *A person should be willing to jump into a furnace of fire rather than shame another person in public.* )See Brachot 43b, Ketubot 67b( With that he ordered them back to their seats, and the prayers continued.

The moral of that moment never left me. The Rav, for the past 32 years head of the yeshiva in Maaleh Adumim, was and is one of the great halachists of our time.]2[ He knew immediately how serious were the issues at stake: men and women praying together without a barrier between them, and the complex question about whether women may or may not wear a tallit and tefillin. The issue was anything but simple. But he knew also that halachah is a systematic way of turning the great ethical and spiritual truths into a tapestry of deeds, and that one must never lose the larger vision in an exclusive focus on the details. Had the students insisted that the woman pray elsewhere they would have caused her great embarrassment. *Never, ever shame someone in public. That was the transcending imperative of the hour. That is the mark of a great-souled man. One of the great privileges of my life was to have been his student for over a decade.* ]emphasis added[

The reason I tell this story here is that it is one of the powerful and unexpected lessons of our parsha. Judah, the brother who proposed selling Joseph into slavery )Gen. 37:26(, had “gone down” to Canaan where he married a local Canaanite woman. )Gen. 38:1( The phrase “gone down” was rightly taken by the Sages as full of meaning.]3[ Just as Joseph had been brought down to Egypt )Gen. 39:1( so *Judah had been morally and spiritually brought down*. Here was one of Jacob’s sons doing what the patriarchs insisted on not doing: marrying into the local population. It is a tale of sad decline.

He marries his firstborn son, Er, to a local woman, Tamar.]4[ An obscure verse tells us that he sinned, and died. Judah then married his second son, Onan, to her, under a pre-Mosaic form of levirate marriage whereby a brother is bound to marry his sister-in-law if she has been widowed without children. Onan, reluctant to father a child that would be regarded as not his but his deceased brother’s, practised a form of coitus interruptus that to this day carries his name. For this, he too died. Having lost two of his sons, Judah was unwilling to give his third son, Shelah, to Tamar in marriage. The result was that she was left as a “*living widow*,” bound to marry her brother-in-law whom Judah was withholding, but unable to marry anyone else.

After many years, seeing that her father-in-law )by this time a widower himself( was reluctant to marry her to Shelah, she decided on an audacious course of action. She removed her widow’s clothes, covered herself with a veil, and positioned herself at a point where Judah was likely to see her on his way to the sheep-shearing. Judah saw her, took her to be a prostitute, and engaged her services. As surety for the payment he had promised her, she insisted that he leave her his seal, cord and staff. Judah duly returned the next day with the payment, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. He asked the locals the whereabouts of the temple prostitute )the text at this point uses the word *kedeshah*, “*cult prostitute*,” rather than *zonah*, thus deepening Judah’s offence(, but no one had seen such a person in the locality. Puzzled, Judah returned home.

Three months later he heard that Tamar was pregnant. He leapt to the only conclusion he could draw, namely that she had had a physical relationship with another man while bound in law to his son Shelah. She had committed adultery, for which the punishment was death. Tamar was brought out to face her sentence, and Judah instantly noticed that she was holding his staff and seal. She said, “*I am pregnant by the person to whom these objects belong.*” Judah realised what had happened and proclaimed, “*She is more righteous than I*” )Gen. 38:26(.

This moment is a turning-point in history. **Judah is the first person in the Torah explicitly to admit he was wrong.**]5[ We do not realise it yet, but this seems to be the moment at which he acquired the depth of character necessary for him to become the first real baal teshuvah. We see this years later, when he – the brother who proposed selling Joseph as a slave – becomes the man willing to spend the rest of his life in slavery so that his brother Benjamin can go free. )Gen.

44:33( I have argued elsewhere that it is from here that we learn the principle that a penitent stands higher than even a perfectly righteous individual. )Brachot 34b( ]6[ Judah the penitent becomes the ancestor of Israel's Kings while Joseph the Righteous is only a viceroy, mishneh le-melech, second to the Pharaoh. ]emphasis added[ Thus far Judah. But the real hero of the story was Tamar. She had taken an immense risk by becoming pregnant. Indeed she was almost killed for it. She had done so for a noble reason: to ensure that the name of her late husband was perpetuated. But she took no less care to avoid Judah being put to shame. Only he and she knew what had happened. Judah could acknowledge his error without loss of face. It was from this episode that the Sages derived the rule articulated by Rabbi Rabinovitch that morning in Switzerland: it is better to risk being thrown into a fiery furnace than to shame someone else in public.

It is thus no coincidence that Tamar, a heroic non-Jewish woman, became the ancestor of David, Israel's greatest King. There are striking similarities between Tamar and the other heroic woman in David's ancestry, the Moabite woman we know as Ruth.

There is an ancient Jewish custom on Shabbat and festivals to cover the challot or matzah ]while[ reciting Kiddush. The reason is so as not to put the bread to shame while it is being, as it were, passed over in favour of the wine. There are some very religious Jews who, unfortunately, will go to great lengths to avoid shaming an inanimate loaf of bread but have no compunction in putting their fellow Jews to shame if they regard them as less religious than they are. That is what happens when we remember the halachah but forget the underlying moral principle behind it.

**Never put anyone to shame. That is what Tamar taught Judah and what a great Rabbi of our time taught those who were privileged to be his students.** ]emphasis added[

#### FOOTNOTES:

]1[ Maimonides, *Teshuvot HaRambam*, Blau Edition )Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1960(, no. 149.

]2[ This essay was originally written by Rabbi Sacks in 2015. Rabbi Dr. Nachum Rabinovitch was Rabbi Sacks' Rav, his Rabbi, teacher, and mentor. He sadly passed away in 2020, a few months before Rabbi Sacks. To read more from Rabbi Sacks about Rabbi Rabinovitch, please see the Covenant & Conversation essay entitled "*My Teacher: In Memoriam*," written for Matot-Masei.

]3[ According to midrashic tradition )*Midrash Aggadah, Pesikta Zutreta, Sechel Tov* et al.(, Judah was "sent down" or excommunicated by his brothers for convincing them to sell Joseph, after the grief they saw their father suffer. See also Rashi ad loc.

]4[ Targum Yonatan identifies her as the daughter of Noah's son Shem. Others identify her as a daughter of Abraham's contemporary Malkizedek. The truth is, though, that she appears in the narrative without lineage, a device often used by the Torah to emphasise that moral greatness can often be found among ordinary people. It has nothing to do with ancestry. See Alshich ad loc.

]5[ The text here is full of verbal allusions. As we noted, Judah has "gone down" just as Joseph has been "brought down." Joseph is about to rise to political greatness. Judah will eventually rise to moral greatness. Tamar's deception of Judah is similar to Judah's deception of Jacob – both involve clothes: Joseph's blood-stained coat, Tamar's veil. Both reach their climax with the words haker na, "Please examine." Judah forces Jacob to believe a lie. Tamar forces Judah to recognise the truth.

]6[ Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation Genesis: The Book of Beginnings*, pp. 303-314.

## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE: Questions to Ponder

]1[ According to Rabbi Sacks' interpretation, who are the heroes and villains of the story of Judah and Tamar?

]2[ What messages and values can we learn from the 2 stories shared in this essay?

]3[ How did Rabbi Rabinovitch internalise these values? How can you internalise them?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayeshev/the-heroism-of-tamar/> Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Devar.

---

### Why Did the Brothers Hate Joseph?

By Mordechai Rubin\* © Chabad

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that there was serious tension between Joseph and his brothers, who are described as "hating" him. The source of this tension, however, is less clear. The Torah gives no less than three potential reasons for their hatred:

*"He brought negative reports about them to his father."*<sup>1</sup>

*"Israel )Jacob( loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was the son of his old age, and Israel )Jacob( made him a robe of fine wool."*<sup>2</sup>

*"And Joseph dreamed a dream and told his brothers, and they continued to hate him."*<sup>3</sup>

Let's explore the convergence of these verses and how the various commentaries frame the relationship between Joseph and his brothers.

#### 1. The Brothers Believed He Was Loved Because of the Reports

According to Abarbanel )Rabbi Don Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel 1437–1508(, although the verse explicitly states that Jacob's love for Joseph stemmed from him being *"the son of his old age,"* the brothers did not see this as the primary factor. They felt that the reports Joseph brought to their father — reports of their wrongdoings — were the cause of Jacob and Joseph's special relationship. They therefore despised him deeply, viewing his actions as an effort to demean them and the source of their father's favoritism.<sup>4</sup>

#### 2. The Brothers Feared He Would Receive the Birthright

The Malbim )Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel 1809 – 1879( offers an alternative explanation for the brothers' hatred. They were afraid that just as Ishmael was set aside in favor of Isaac, and Esau was overlooked in favor of Jacob, they too

might be excluded from inheriting their father's legacy. They suspected that Joseph would be chosen as the sole heir to the "blessing of Abraham."<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Jacob Conveyed All His Wisdom to Joseph**

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040 – 1105) notes that Onkelos translates the phrase, "*because he was a son of his old age,*"<sup>6</sup> as "*he was a wise son to him,*" meaning that whatever Jacob had studied at the Academy of Shem and Eber, he taught to Joseph. The Chatam Sofer (Moshe Sofer, 1762–1839) infers from this that due to his superior wisdom, everyone — including his brothers — was obligated to show him the respect worthy of a Torah sage. The verse, however, makes sure to note that "*he was a wise son to him*" — to Jacob. While his father considered him wise, his brothers viewed him as a child who spent his time frivolously playing with the sons of the maidservants.<sup>8</sup>

### **4. He Was Loved Even More Than Benjamin**

In his classic work *Meshech Chochma*, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (1843–1926) explores another angle. He explains that while the brothers could accept that Jacob loves Rachel's children more, as she was his preferred spouse, they could not justify the superiority of Joseph over all the brothers, including Benjamin who was Rachel's second son. This singling out of Joseph for no good reason (in the eyes of the brothers) was the real source of the serious animosity between them.<sup>9</sup>

### **5. Retelling the Dreams Was an Attempt at Reconciliation**

While discussing the dreams that seem to demonstrate Joseph's authority over his brothers, the Rebbe poses the obvious question: Why would Joseph retell these dreams, knowing his brothers already deeply despised him? Did he not realize that this would only intensify their hatred?

The Rebbe suggests that in Joseph's understanding, these dreams actually showed that the brothers would not be subservient to him; they showed only that he was slightly superior. He hoped that this would allay their fears and reduce the tension. Regarding the first dream, Joseph understood it very simply, that he would be blessed slightly more than his brothers and therefore his wheat would be a little superior. Regarding the second dream, where 11 stars, the sun, and the moon bowed to him, he interpreted it not that the brothers themselves would be subservient to him, but rather their heavenly constellations — represented by the stars — would assist him. Joseph sought to emphasize not his superiority but his need for their assistance. He therefore made a point to retell the dreams in an attempt to diffuse the tension. His brothers, however, did not accept his interpretations and instead saw the dreams as proof of what they had long suspected: that Joseph was attempting to rule over them.<sup>10</sup>

Others suggest that by relating his dreams to his brothers, he hoped to demonstrate that any superiority or dominance was ordained by God, and therefore there was no cause for hatred.<sup>11</sup>

### **6. God Orchestrated the Entire Episode**

The Zohar,<sup>12</sup> in reference to this episode, makes a startling statement "*God orchestrated this entire episode in order that the decree [He articulated to Abraham] at the Covenant of Parts, come about.*" This means that all this tension, which culminated in the brothers selling Joseph down to Egypt, was part of God's plan for the Jews to end up as slaves. If the brothers would not have sold Joseph, the slavery in Egypt would have come about in some other, more damaging way. In this Kabbalistic reading, the fact that the brothers started this process, allowed for redemption later.<sup>13</sup>

### **7. It Was a Misunderstanding**

Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin (1818–1898), rabbi of Brisk, Lithuania, before becoming rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Jerusalem, suggests that Joseph sought to assist his brothers by reporting their behavior to their father. He hoped his father would devote more time to educating them on the correct path. His brothers, however, thought he was merely “*tattling*” so that his father would favor him even more. Moreover, when he tried to converse with his brothers peacefully, they suspected him of being double-faced, reporting negatively to their father and then attempting to be pleasant to them face-to-face. This is why they hated him and could not speak with him peacefully.<sup>14</sup>

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Genesis 37:2.
2. Genesis 37:3.
3. Genesis 37:5.
4. Abarbanel, Genesis 37:4
5. Malbim, Genesis 37:2.
6. Genesis 37:3.
7. Chatam Sofer *ibid.*
8. Genesis 37:2.
9. *Meshech Chochma* *ibid.*
10. *Sichot Kodesh* 5734, vol 1, p 201.
11. Chizkuni, Genesis 37:6.
12. Zohar, 1:184a.
13. See Yalkut Reuveini, *Parshas Vayeishev and Asarah Mamarot*, (Rema MiPano), *Maamar Aim Kol Chaii*, ch. 8
14. Maharil Diskin, Genesis 37:2.

\* Content editor and staff writer at Chabad.org.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/6704904/jewish/Why-Did-the-Brothers-Hate-Joseph.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6704904/jewish/Why-Did-the-Brothers-Hate-Joseph.htm)

---

### **Vayeishev: Protected by the Torah**

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

*When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his shirt, of the fine woolen robe that he was wearing. (Gen. 37:23)*

G-d originally taught Adam the wisdom that He would later present formally to humanity in the form of the Torah. This wisdom was passed down through the generations, and Jacob received it both from his father Isaac and from the school of Shem and Eber, Noah's son and great-grandson. Jacob taught the Torah to all his children, but of all of them, Joseph was the most devoted to absorbing its teachings.

Rashi tells us that Jacob gave Joseph a special robe because Joseph was his most studious son. In this context, the robe that Jacob gave Joseph alluded to how the knowledge of the Torah immunized Joseph against all of the trials that he would eventually face. As Rashi notes, the word for "fine woolen" (pasim), describing Joseph's robe, is an acronym for these trials – Potiphar, Socharim (merchants), Ishmaelites, and Midianites. Allegorically, then, Jacob cloaked Joseph in a "robe" of Torah wisdom that protected him in his future challenges.

Similarly, the wisdom and spiritual power that we glean from studying the Torah nowadays protects us, helping us respond successfully to all life's challenges.

\* — from *Daily Wisdom #3*

\* An insight by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on parashat Vayeishev from our *Daily Wisdom #3* by Rabbi Moshe Wisnfsky.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society  
291 Kingston Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11213

---

To receive the complete D'Vrai Torah package weekly by E-mail, send your request to [AfisherADS@Yahoo.com](mailto:AfisherADS@Yahoo.com). The printed copies contain only a small portion of the D'Vrai Torah. Dedication opportunities available. Authors retain all copyright privileges for their sections.

---



**Covenant and Conversation**  
**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l**

**What is the theme of the stories of Genesis?**  
One of the most fundamental questions about the Torah turns out to be one of the hardest to answer. What, from God's calling to Abraham in Genesis 12 to the death of Joseph in Genesis 50, is the basic religious principle being taught? What does the entire set of stories about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their wives, together with Jacob's sons and daughter, actually tell us? Abraham brought monotheism to a world that had forgotten it, but where do we see this in the actual text of the Torah itself?

Here is the problem: The first eleven chapters of Genesis teach us many fundamentals of faith: that God brought the universe into being and declared it good; that God made the human person in His image; that God gave us freedom and thus the ability to do not only good but also bad; that the good is rewarded, the bad punished and that we are morally responsible for our actions. Chapters 8 and 9 also tell us that God made a covenant with Noah and - through him - with all humanity.

It is equally easy to say what the rest of the Torah, from Exodus to Deuteronomy, teaches us: that God rescued the Israelites from slavery, setting them on the road to freedom and the Promised Land; that God made a covenant with the people as a whole on Mount Sinai, with its 613 commands and its purpose, to establish Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In short, Genesis 1-11 is about creation. Exodus to Deuteronomy is about revelation and redemption. But what are Genesis 12-50 about?

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all recognise God. But so do non-Jews like Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, who is described as a "priest of God most high" (Gen. 14:18). So even does the Pharaoh of Joseph's day, who says about him: 'Can there be another person who has God's spirit in him as this man does?' Gen. 41:38

God speaks to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but He does likewise to Avimelech king of Gerar

**To sponsor an issue of Likutei Divrei Torah:**  
Email: [sgreenberg11@gmail.com](mailto:sgreenberg11@gmail.com)  
or call Saadia Greenberg 301-518-3364  
<http://torah.saadia.info>

(Gen. 20:3-7), and to Laban (Gen. 31:24). So what is special about the patriarchs?

They seem to teach no new principle of faith. Other than childbirth and rescue from danger, God performs no world-transforming miracles through them. They deliver no prophecies to the people of their generation. Further, apart from an ambiguous hint when the Torah says that Abraham and Sarah took with them on their journey "the souls they had gathered" (Gen. 12:5), which may refer to converts they had made, but may equally merely refer to their servants, they attracted no disciples. There is nothing explicit in the text that says they sought to persuade people of the truth of monotheism or that they did battle against idolatry. At most there is a story about how Rachel stole her father's teraphim (Gen. 31:19), which may or may not have been idols.

To be sure, a persistent theme of the patriarchal stories is the two promises God made to each of them, namely that they would have many descendants and that they would inherit the land of Canaan. But God also makes promises to Ishmael and Esau, and the Torah seems to go out of its way to tell us that these promises were fulfilled before the promises were fulfilled for the children of the covenant. About Esau's children, for example, it says: These are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites.[1] Gen. 36:31

So the question is real and puzzling. What was so different about the patriarchs in Genesis that we spend so many chapters on them? What new component did they bring to the world? What difference did monotheism make in their day?

There is an answer, but it is an unexpected one. One theme appears no less than six (possibly even seven) times. Whenever a member of the covenantal family leaves his or her own space and enters the wider world of their contemporaries, they encounter a world of sexual free-for-all.

Three times, Abraham (Gen. 12 and Gen. 20) and Isaac (Gen. 26) are forced to leave home because of famine. Twice they go to Gerar. Once Abraham goes to Egypt. On all three occasions the husband fears he will be killed

so that the local ruler can take his wife into his harem. All three times they put forward the story that their wife is actually their sister. At worst this is a lie, at best a half-truth. In all three cases the local ruler (Pharaoh, Avimelech), protests at their behaviour when the truth becomes known. Clearly the fear of death was real, or the patriarchs would not have been party to deception.

In the fourth case, Lot in Sodom (Gen. 19), the people cluster round Lot's house demanding that he bring out his two visitors so that they can be raped. Lot offers them his virgin daughters instead. Only swift action by the visitors – angels – who smite the people with blindness, saves Lot and his family from violence.

In the fifth case (Gen. 34), Shechem, a local prince, rapes and abducts Dina when she "went out to visit some of the local girls." He holds her hostage, causing Shimon and Levi to practise deception and bloodshed in the course of rescuing her and avenging her abduction.

Then comes a marginal case (Gen. 38), the story of Judah and Tamar, more complex than the others and not part of the overall pattern. Finally there is the sixth episode, in this week's Parsha, when Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph. Failing, she accuses him of rape and has him imprisoned.

In other words, there is a continuing theme in Genesis 12-50, a contrast between the people of the Abrahamic covenant and their neighbours, but it is not about idolatry, but rather about adultery, promiscuity, sexual license, seduction, rape, and sexually motivated violence.

The patriarchal narrative is surprisingly close to the view of Freud that eros is one of the two

**What Does Judaism Say About ... Podcast**  
with Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel. The week's topic is: **Underlying Values and Concepts of Chanukah**

- Next week: Revenge in Judaism: Is It Ever Justified?

Search for "Nachum Amsel" on your podcast app or go to:

Apple: [tinyurl.com/applejudaismsays](http://tinyurl.com/applejudaismsays)  
Spotify: [tinyurl.com/spotifyjudaismsays](http://tinyurl.com/spotifyjudaismsays)

primal drives governing human behaviour (the other is thanatos, the death instinct), and the view of at least one evolutionary psychologist (David Buss, in his books *The Evolution of Desire* and *The Murderer Next Door*) that sex is the main cause of violence amongst humans.

This gives us an entirely new way of thinking about Abrahamic faith. *Emunah*, the Hebrew word normally translated as faith, does not mean what it is taken to mean in English: a body of dogma, a set of principles, or a cluster of beliefs often held on non-rational grounds. *Emunah* means faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, honouring your commitments, doing what you said you would do and acting in such a way as to inspire trust. It has to do with relationships, first and foremost with marriage.

Sex belongs, for the Torah, within the context of marriage, and it is marriage that comes closest to the deep resonances of the biblical idea of covenant. A covenant is a mutual act of commitment in which two persons, honouring their differences, each respecting the dignity of the other, come together in a bond of love to join their destinies and chart a future together. When the prophets want to speak of the covenantal relationship between God and His people, they constantly use the metaphor of marriage.

The God of Abraham is the God of love and trust who does not impose His will by force or violence, but speaks gently to us, inviting an answering response of love and trust. Genesis' argument against idolatry – all the more impressive for being told obliquely, through a series of stories and vignettes – is that it leads to a world in which the combination of unchecked sexual desire, the absence of a code of moral self-restraint, and the worship of power, leads eventually to violence and abuse.

That domestic violence and abuse still exist today, even among religious Jews, is a disgrace and source of shame. Against this stands the testimony of Genesis that faithfulness to God means and demands faithfulness to our marriage partners. Faith – whether between us and God or between us and our fellow humans – means love, loyalty, and the circumcision of desire.

What the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs tell us is that faith is not proto- or pseudo-science, an explanation of why the natural universe is as it is. It is the language of relationships and the choreography of love. It is about the importance of the moral bond, in particular as it affects our most intimate relations. Sexuality matters to Judaism, not because it is puritanical but because it represents the love that brings new life into the world.

When a society loses faith, eventually it loses the very idea of a sexual ethic, and the result in the long term is violence and the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. Women suffer. Children suffer. There is a breakdown of trust where it matters most. So it was in the days of the patriarchs. Sadly, so it is today. Judaism, by contrast, is the sanctification of relationship, the love between husband and wife which is as close as we will ever get to understanding God's love for us.

[1] See Gen. 25:12-18 for the account of Ishmael's children and God's fulfilment of His promise.

### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

#### **Dreams and Visions**

"We were binding sheaves in the field, when my sheaf suddenly stood up erect. Your sheaves formed a circle around my sheaf, and they bowed down to it." (Genesis 37:7)

The sibling rivalry between the eleven sons of Jacob and their brother Joseph results in their casting him into a pit and selling him to Egypt. What was the source of such bitter hatred and enmity?

On one level, Jacob's favoritism expressed towards the elder son of his beloved wife Rachel was the obvious cause, exacerbated by the young Joseph's dreams. Predictably, the brothers are aghast at the dream's grandiose message: Does Joseph desire to be king and rule over them?

He then divulges a second dream, populating it with the sun, the moon, and eleven stars all bowing down to him. Even Jacob, whose own life was transformed by the dream of the ladder, scolds his son. "Do you want me, your mother, and your brothers to come and prostrate ourselves on the ground to you?" (Gen. 37:10).

From this perspective, it is more than obvious that the dreams served as an incendiary device, and biblical language affirms this position. After all, what follows the account of the second dream is Jacob sending Joseph to where his brothers have gone to graze their flocks near Shechem. When Joseph is spotted from the distance, a plot against him unfolds: "Here comes the dreamer...Let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits..." (Gen. 37:19-20).

On the fundamental level (*p'shat*), the arrogant dreams catapult the plot forward. But Joseph's dreams should not be regarded exclusively, or even primarily, as manifestations of sibling rivalry. On a deeper level, the dreamer may have generated the sibling rivalry not only because of their message of superiority, but also and perhaps even primarily because of their inherent ideology. Indeed, the argument between the brothers may well have been far

### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

deeper than familial jealousy; it may well have been a profound conflict between two different philosophies and two antithetical ways of life. The key to understanding the difference in *Weltanschauung* between Joseph and his brothers may lie in a more sophisticated interpretation of his dreams.

The brothers are shepherds, their lives are their flocks. This was true of their forebears, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But Joseph dreams of sheaves of corn, the symbol of agricultural society. His dream may well allude to an ideological rivalry between the new world of the farmer and the old world of the herdsman, the nomad, the shepherd.

The very first instance of sibling rivalry in the Bible, a rivalry which results in the first murder, emerges from the struggle between these two different ways of life. "...and Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain was a tiller of the ground" (Gen. 4:3). Both bring offerings to God, Cain the fruit of the earth and Abel the first-born of his sheep. But only Abel's offering is pleasing to God, enraging Cain, and the result is the murder of Abel.

The worlds of shepherding and of farming are fundamentally different. The shepherd preserves and maintains the status quo. He shears the wool and extracts the milk, providing himself with food (cheese, butter) and clothing without destroying or essentially changing the livestock in his charge. The shepherd has time to rest, pray, meditate, compose poetry. He weaves an inner harmony with nature.

Farming is the opposite. In the evolution of civilization, it is a major step forward. The farmer's job is to transform nature. Nature does its share, but that is not enough to make whole wheat toast. The Mishna specifies eleven stages in the manufacture of bread, all of which are forbidden on the Sabbath because they create a basic change in the natural world as it is: sowing, plowing, reaping, gathering, threshing, winnowing, sorting, grinding, sifting, kneading and baking (Mishna Shabbat 7:2). Indeed, there is a time-honored custom to place our ten fingers on the challot right before making the blessing over bread at the Sabbath meals, explained by most commentaries as reminding us of the ten words in the 'Hamotzi' blessing.

The Zohar, however, the mystical interpretation of the Bible, provides another explanation. Bread is the symbol of the partnership between humans and God, and the challa is the result of divine beneficence plus human effort and change. It should not be surprising that bread, not meat or fish or wine, is called the staff of life, and that the blessing over bread obviates the necessity of making

blessings over other foods consumed during the meal. Bread does not grow on trees, and never will; the transformation from seed to pumpernickel is up to the human being to effectuate.

What Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik defines as Adam ii, "reflective person," the individual who fits in with the natural order of the universe, finds its counterpart in the contemplative existence of the shepherd. The shepherd is conservative; he wants things to remain as they are. Adam ii is placed into the garden of Eden to save, protect and conserve it. The shepherd is perfectly content to leave the world as it is, seeing his major task in continuity and preservation.

The revolutionary is the farmer. He is the experimenter, the transformer. Placed into the world to subdue it, he makes it yield its secrets, whether they be technological, biological or atomic. He is the prototype of Rabbi Soloveitchik's Adam i, functioning as a partner with God, creating and aggressively producing a world very different from the one he was given by the Creator. His major task is to improve and change.

Joseph's brothers, being shepherds, are for the old way of life. They stand for the conservative way, and are suspicious of change. The land of Israel is also a perfect place for shepherding, with its mixture of desert and oases providing areas for leading the sheep without having to be constantly concerned about their destroying the crops. Egypt, on the other hand, as 'the gift of the Nile' is the land – and sophisticated center – of agriculture, and seems to be the foreign focus of Joseph's distant and even heretical dream.

Joseph, unlike his brothers, is symbolic of a psychology of advancement, the transformation of the nomadic existence of the tribes into an agricultural and eventually industrial nation, which must deal with new societies and challenges. And if it takes the family to foreign places, so be it. After all, it is the Abrahamic mission to be a blessing for all the families of the earth.

The imagery of the second dream not only expands this theme, but takes it to a higher level. The sun, moon and stars are not just familial symbols of mother, father and children, but should also be understood literally. The heavens are the zenith of Joseph's aspirations. He desires to conquer the cosmos. It is not only the sheep of Canaan but the entire universe which he sees as his sphere of concern. In neither dream is there any veneration of, or even consideration for, past traditions and a former way of life.

The rebuke mingled with respect which Jacob expresses upon hearing of Joseph's dreams foreshadows the blessing he eventually gives his sons. He gives the blessing but not the birthright to Joseph because he is sensitive to the intrinsic danger of his dream. One may reach for the stars, but one dare not forget one's foundation, the matrix that bore us. Joseph gets the berakha, the material part of the blessing, the freedom to fly jets, to build laboratories and turbo engines and spaceships. Judah is the devoutly religious son whose very name expresses divine praise and who publicly admits transgression with his daughter-in-law Tamar. The Midrash teaches that he established an academy of Torah learning in Goshen prior to Jacob's arrival in Egypt (Gen. 46:28, Rashi ad loc). It is Judah who gets the bekhorah – the spiritual leadership which will eventually inspire the ingathering of the nations to Jerusalem.

But neither Judah nor Joseph can prevail alone. Our tradition speaks of two messiahs, Messiah son of Joseph and Messiah son of David (who emerges from the seed of Judah). Judah guards the traditions of the past, protecting what is holy and good and worth holding on to. Judah is the Torah scholar, the master of Jewish law. Joseph will apply that law to new situations and conditions, confronting technology, philosophy and psychology, to achieve the biblical dream of uniting heaven and earth. These two brothers need each other, for one without the other is incomplete.

A world of only Josephs could lose sight of the old in the adoption of the new, and a world of only Judahs could strap Judaism into a web of irrelevancies. Ultimately it is Judah, and not Joseph, who is the progenitor of the Messiah; Joseph must utilize his skills to provide the necessary universal and scientific infrastructure for Judah's spiritual vision.

Chanuka, which always falls out during these Torah readings, also represents the struggle between two forces: a Hellenistic Jewish mindset, which found in Greek culture and philosophy the more progressive direction for Judea and which would have transformed Jerusalem into a Greek city-state (polis); and the Hasmoneans, who would rather have given up their lives than give up the traditional Torah's commandments, and were against any change whatsoever. In many ways, this struggle has resurfaced today between modern-day 'secularist' Hellenists who define progress in terms of the norms of a permissive Western society, and Maccabean religionists who are suspicious of every idea which emanates from a source other than the Torah.

The truth lies in a synthesis between the two – in the ability of Josephs and Judahs to work together to take the best of Western culture and

## Likutei Divrei Torah

incorporate it under the rubric of Torah Judaism. It is the beauty of Japheth (Greece), in the Tent (Torah) of Shem. In Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's words, "the old must be made new, and the new must be sanctified."

### The Person in the Parsha

**Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

#### We'll Skip This Next Story

It was in the second or third grade that I began to study Chumash. I remember beginning at the beginning, with Parashat Bereshit. It must have been in third, or perhaps even fourth, grade that we reached this week's Torah portion, Vayeshev (Genesis 37:1-40:23).

Generally, we studied the text carefully, one verse at a time. We translated each phrase into a combination of Yiddish and English. The teacher supplemented each lesson with some of Rashi's commentary and stimulated our interest by sharing stories from the Midrash. Occasionally, we would skip over a passage, usually one which only contained a long genealogy or list of successive generations.

To this day, I remember when we began reading the highly dramatic story of Yosef and his brothers. We all identified with Yosef, of course, and were frightened and angry when his brothers sold him into slavery. We were shocked to learn that it was Yehuda who suggested that rather than throwing Yosef into a pit ridden with snakes and serpents, from which Yosef could never emerge alive, it would be better to sell him to a caravan of Ishmaelites who were passing by. Yehuda's influence over his brothers was so strong that they complied, extracted Yosef from the pit, and delivered him into the hands of the Ishmaelites for twenty silver coins. And so, Yosef was taken to Egypt.

We were then brought to tears when the brothers informed their father Yaakov about Yosef's whereabouts. "They took Yosef's distinctive robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe into the blood. They then sent (vayeshalchu) the magnificent robe and brought it to their father saying (vayomru), 'This is what we found, please recognize (haker na) whether this is your son's robe or not. He recognized it (vayakira vayomer), 'This is indeed my son's robe! A wild beast has devoured him. Yosef has been torn to bits!' Yaakov tore his garments, placed sackcloth around his waist, and mourned his son for many days. He could not be consoled and kept saying, 'I will go down to the grave grieving for my son.'" (Genesis 37:31-36, freely translated).

We returned to the classroom the next day, eager to learn of Yosef's fate, hoping to proceed to chapter 38 and hear the rest of the story. How disappointed we were when the

teacher informed us that “we will skip the next story.” He did not tell us why, but quietly, almost ashamedly, notified us that chapter 38 was not about Yosef at all but was about something that would not interest us. Raising his voice a bit, he informed us that we will next learn all about Yosef. He had us open our Chumashim and turn to chapter 39, where we immediately read, “And Yosef descended to Egypt.” From there onward, we learned the rest of his story.

What was the story in chapter 38, and why did we skip it? If indeed it was not about Yosef, then why was the suspenseful narrative of Yosef’s tribulations being interrupted? Years later, I came to know that chapter 38 contained the story of Yehuda and Tamar and that our teacher had decided that we were too young and immature to learn about their relationship. But I’ve remained puzzled for many years questioning why the Torah interrupted the story of Yosef with this digression into the story of Yehuda and Tamar.

Among the many answers offered to this question, I’ve come to favor one approach to most others. It is the approach of an Italian rabbi and famous bible scholar and professor in Israel, Umberto Moshe David Cassuto (1883-1951). He served as chief rabbi of his native Florence, was a professor of Hebrew at the university there, and eventually was appointed chair of Bible studies at Hebrew University, Jerusalem. He was a major opponent of so-called “Higher” biblical criticism and maintained forcefully that we must, in his words, “penetrate to the innermost meaning of the Biblical passages and draw from the texts themselves the answers to our questions. Let us consult the book; let us listen to the verses and hear what they tell us.”

It is here that I must assume that the reader is familiar with the story of Yehuda and Tamar. Otherwise, please read chapter 38 yourselves, in Hebrew preferably, or in a good English translation if necessary. Following Professor Cassuto, I will focus only on the denouement of the story, its final episode, chapter 38, verses 25 and 26 especially.

There, Yehuda, having suspected his pregnant former daughter-in-law Tamar of harlotry, condemns her to death by fire. He does not realize that he himself fathered the child (or twin children) that she carries. She is taken to the site of her execution and “she sends to her father-in-law and says (shalcha … laymor), ‘Please recognize (haker na) to whom this signet ring and threads and staff belong (note: these are the very objects that he gave to her as payment for her intimacy with him, at the time not knowing her identity).’ Yehuda recognizes these objects and says (vayaker Yehuda vayomer), ‘she is more righteous than me!’”

If you’ve been reading this carefully, you have noticed the striking phenomenon of the phrases “and she sent to her father-in-law saying,” “and she said please recognize,” “and Yehuda recognized and said,” in chapter 38, which are almost identical to the phrases “and they sent the robe… and they said,” “please recognize whether this is your son’s robe,” “and he recognized it and said,” in chapter 37.

In an essay Professor Cassuto published in 1929, he wonders, “Can this be mere coincidence? Or do the phrases in chapter 37 serve as background for the frightful sense of bereavement experienced by Yaakov when he is confronted with the image of his favored son torn to pieces by a wild beast. Could Yaakov’s trauma not be seen as Yehuda’s fault? Could not the Judge of the World have punished Yehuda, whose idea it was to sell Yosef into bondage, by having him suffer similar trauma by being confronted by his sinful, albeit unintentional, illicit relationship with his daughter-in-law? Just as Yehuda and his brothers caused Yaakov to tragically “recognize” the death of his beloved son, so was Yehuda destined to “recognize,” to his horror and shame, the objects that were sent to him forcing him to “recognize” and confess his guilt.”

I find Professor Cassuto’s approach ingenious and just one example of the power of “listening to the verses and hearing what they tell us.”

I’d like to conclude with words of Professor Cassuto as he ended his inaugural address when he assumed his position at Hebrew University. It is a prayer as suitable now as it was then in 1939:

“Just as the books of Scripture proved a source of a blessing for our forefathers, may it be so too for us, for our children and our children’s children. May they raise our spirits and embolden our hearts to realize our aspirations and to achieve the aims toward which we have directed our being, the renewal of the people of Israel upon the Land of Israel.”

#### **Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand** **The Key to Yaakov’s Gratitude is Hayarden HaZEH**

Yaakov thanked Hashem for his “rags to riches” success over the past twenty years of his life by saying, “I have been diminished by all the kindnesses and by all the truth that You have done for Your servant; for with my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps” (Bereshis 32:11) One word in Yaakov’s statement seems rather strange. Yaakov notes that he crossed Hayarden hazeh (this Jordan River). Whenever the word zeh is used in Chumash, it connotes that the speaker is pointing at the object in question, for

#### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

example, zeh K-eli v’avneihu (This is my G-d and I will glorify Him). Unless we assume that Yaakov was standing on the banks of the Yarden now and was pointing at “this Yarden,” why does the pasuk over here use the word zeh?

The answer to this question is the following: The key for a person to be makir tova (recognize when a favor has been done for him) is remembering the situation before he merited this favor. A person should never take what he has for granted and think “this is what I have now and this is the way it has always been.” It behooves us to try to think back and remember “what it once was like.”

A person may have been suffering terribly. He went to the doctor and had a successful operation. Now he is a new person. In the beginning, he is appreciative of the doctor – the surgeon who saved him from all his pain and suffering, significantly improving his quality of life. But with the passage of time, a person may forget how it was before the operation.

Consider knee replacement surgery. When people get older, it often becomes necessary to have their knees replaced. Knees can become arthritic and can get to a point where the person cannot walk. It is simply too painful to walk. Today, Baruch Hashem, people can have knee replacement surgery, where surgeons can put in an artificial knee and the person can go from not being able to walk to even playing tennis again. After the operation, a person feels: “Ah! Gevaldik!” But one, two, or three years later, he may take for granted his ability to walk normally again. The key to maintaining a sense of gratitude is to remember “I was not able to walk and now I can even play tennis.” That is how a person is makir tova.

Yaakov Avinu could say “for with my staff I crossed this Jordan River” even when he was not standing next to the Yarden because he always remembered “what I was like before.” “I was a fugitive. My brother wanted to kill me. I literally had nothing to my name. I came to Rochel empty handed. All I had was my walking stick!” That image was permanently imbued in Yaakov’s memory, so much so, that it was as if he was standing by the Yarden, as he was about to leave Eretz Yisrael. Yaakov replayed that scene over and over, such that he could always feel “Katonti m’kol hachasdim...” (I am unworthy of all the kindness...)

Why Did the Brothers Wait Until Parshas Vayeshev to Become Jealous of Yosef?

The pasuk says, “Yaakov raised his eyes and saw, and behold, Eisav was coming, and with

him, four hundred men – so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two handmaids. He put the handmaids and their children first, and Leah and her children later, and Rachel and Yosef last.” (Bereshis 33:1-2). Eisav is approaching Yaakov. Yaakov splits the camps. He positions the handmaidens and their sons first, followed by Leah and her children, followed in the rear by Rochel and Yosef. It would seem that the most expendable members of his entourage were placed first and the most cherished were placed in the back.

The Vilna Maggid asks the following question: Next week’s parsha contains the famous story of Yaakov showing favoritism towards Yosef by giving him a kesones passim. This led to Yosef’s brothers becoming jealous of him, and it ultimately led to the entire Galus Mitzrayim (Egyptian Exile). The Gemara learns out from this incident that a father should never show favoritism towards any of his children.

The Vilna Maggid asked, why were the brothers jealous when Yosef received his kesones passim but they were apparently not jealous when he was placed last in the family configuration to best protect him from Eisav and his approaching army? No one said, “Hey, what am I – chopped liver?” “What am I – cannon fodder?” We don’t see them objecting to this here. This would appear to be a much bigger deal. A person can live just fine without a kesones passim. However, the configuration when they met Eisav was potentially a matter of life and death!

The Vilna Maggid gives three answers to this question. For my purposes today, I am only going to mention one of these answers: The brothers understood that since Rochel, the prime wife of Yaakov, only had one child, it was necessary to afford maximum protection to an “only son.” Similarly, in the Israeli Army today, an “only son” is not placed in a combat unit. This is a long-practiced and well-understood plan of action. The brothers were not going to protest Yaakov’s urge to protect an “only son.”

However, the situation “next week” in Parshas Vayeshev is a different story. There was no excuse for Yaakov to single out Yosef and dress him in a special garment that he felt that only this son and not his other sons deserved to wear. This is the answer of the Vilna Maggid.

I saw that the sefer Me’Orei Ohr raises the same question and offers a different answer. He says as follows: Yaakov Avinu had just come back from Lavan, where he had his eleven children. He knew that the environment in the house of Lavan was spiritually toxic. Yaakov did everything in his power to make sure that his children would not be influenced

by Lavan’s home. That was his goal in life – to create the “Shivtei K-ah” (Tribes of the Almighty) – and he would do everything under the sun to inoculate them not to be influenced by their grandfather, Lavan.

Now Yaakov meets Eisav with his four hundred men. Yaakov does not know what is going to happen. He does not know whether Eisav is going to insist that they stay together. Yaakov realized that his children were all facing potential danger because he was going from a toxic environment to another environment that was also hostile to them. He feared that the twenty years he invested in creating the “Shivtei K-ah” and protecting them may all go down the drain.

At this point, the other shvatim were already older children. However, Yosef was still a little child, perhaps four or five years old. Most of Yaakov’s sons were already teenagers, who already knew how to take care of themselves. Yosef was a little kid. “What is going to be with my poor little Yossele? Yossele doesn’t know any better. He is a kindergarten baby.”

That is why Yaakov put Yosef last – to protect him. He was not being protected from being killed. Regarding the physical danger, Yaakov relied on his promise from Hashem that “I will be with You wherever you go.” (Bereshis 25:21). However, regarding “ruchniyus” (spirituality), Hashem does not make any promises. “All is in the hands of Heaven – except for fear of Heaven” (Berachos 33b). Ruchniyus is up to us. Yaakov felt that he needed to protect his little Yosef from the spiritual dangers that contact with Eisav and his army might present. As a little child, Yosef was most vulnerable to being spiritually contaminated by outside influences. Therefore, the other shevatim had no problem with their youngest brother being placed at the back of the camp.

### Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

How can we bring peace between rivals?

This was a dilemma faced by our patriarch Jacob. In Parshat Vayeshev, we are told that he sent Joseph on a mission to Shechem, and he said to him, “Lech-na re’eh et-shelom acheicha” – “Go now and see how your brothers are.”

Jacob knew that there was a deep feud, an enormous tension, between the brothers on the one hand and Joseph on the other.

Why did he send him on this mission, and what was he saying to him?

Actually, in the Hebrew text, the Torah should have said “please now go Leddarash et shelom acheicha,” in order to find out, but instead it

### Likutei Divrei Torah

says “re’eh” – “see the shalom of your brothers.”

What was there to see?

The 19th-century Chasidic master, Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, gives a beautiful commentary. He says as follows: The term “Shalom” – peace – comes from the root “Shalem,” which means wholeness.

When you achieve peace, everything is whole, everything is perfect. So, Jacob was saying to Joseph, “Go and see the shleimut,” the wholeness, of your brothers. And what you will realize is that, right now, there is a feud between you on a particular issue, but actually, beyond that issue, you have the basis to get on well with them. See the whole person, as a result of which you will admire them. You will be able to love them.

In Pirkei Avot, we are taught, “Vehevei dan et kol ha’adam lekaf zechut” – “Judge everybody favourably.” But actually, “kol ha’adam” means “judge the whole person.” Because if you’ve got some reason to doubt or to hate, actually look at the entire person, and you will find that there is so much about that individual that you can admire.

And now we can understand another teaching in Pirkei Avot: “Vehevei mekabel et kol ha’adam b’seiver panim yafot” – “You should greet every person with a cheerful countenance.” It’s not every person, it’s “kol ha’adam” – greet the whole person with a cheerful countenance.

Because sometimes, when you see certain people and you know that they are really disappointing you, you might not be so cheerful. However, if you see the whole person, then you will come to respect them and hopefully love them.

Unfortunately, what Jacob tried to do failed in that instance. But that shouldn’t stop us from seeing the whole person and striving always to get on well with one another.

### Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

**Frustrated Family Dynamics – Age-old Problems that Remain Relevant**

**Rabbi Max Godet**

Frustrated family dynamics and ancient problems remain deeply relevant in our portion as well. The story of Yosef is the Torah’s longest personal narrative. While many commentators delve into its every detail, few grapple with its somber reality: a cautionary tale about ignoring family issues and the catastrophic consequences that ensue. The theme of jealousy threads through nearly every generation in Bereshit: Kayin and Hevel,

Yishmael and Yitzchak, Esav and Yaakov, Leah and Rachel.

Though Yaakov personally endured the pain of envy and its destructive behavior, in the portion of Vayeishev, he appears to perpetuate the very mistake that once victimized him. Yosef may be the protagonist of this narrative, yet its rhythm and melody are dictated by the realities of Yaakov's life. The name "Yaakov" itself signifies "the crooked path." Yaakov often evades direct confrontation, a trait cemented when he approached his visually impaired father disguised in his brother's garments at his mother's urging. His relationship with Yosef underscores how deeply ingrained behavioral patterns can be.

At the beginning of Vayeishev, we encounter Yosef's renowned dreams and the growing animosity between him and his brothers—animosity that, under the circumstances, seems almost inevitable. How does Yaakov respond? "His brothers envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind" (Bereshit 37:11). Rather than addressing the tension, Yaakov "kept the matter," perhaps shielding himself from confronting the uncomfortable reality he allowed to fester.

But truth, hidden in darkness, does not disappear; it lingers. We cannot wish it away or distance ourselves—and those we love—from harsh realities. Within a family or any relational framework, it is all too easy to sidestep painful truths. While directly confronting entrenched conflicts and animosities might feel fraught with risk, the alternative can be far graver.

Consider a detail often overlooked in Yosef's story: While his brothers debated killing him, they were either unwilling or unable to do so directly. Instead, "They took him and cast him into the pit—the pit was empty; it had no water. Then they sat down to eat bread" (Bereshit 37:24-25). After abandoning Yosef in a desolate, waterless pit to die, they nonchalantly sat down to enjoy their midday meal.

Rabi Ovadia Sforno highlights this chilling moment: "To them, it was no hindrance or restraint to enjoy a full meal." Their hatred for their brother had scorched their moral compass so thoroughly that they remained unmoved by the juxtaposition of their feasting and Yosef's impending death.

Sforno interprets the brothers' actions as evidence of their utter desensitization to Yosef's suffering. Consumed by frustration and hatred, they felt no remorse for the harm they inflicted, enabling them to dine with ease while Yosef languished in despair. This

chilling example illustrates how hatred can blind individuals to the suffering of others.

The Malbim offers an alternative perspective: the brothers believed themselves to be agents of justice, responding righteously to Yosef's perceived offenses. Their act of eating bread reflected their confidence in their moral correctness and their lack of guilt. They were not merely indifferent to Yosef's suffering but also oblivious to their error.

Hatred is a poison that deadens the heart and soul. It blinds us to the emotions and needs of others, obstructing our ability to perceive truth. When consumed by hatred, we lose the capacity for empathy and fail to recognize the pain of others. Hatred also locks us away from meaningful connections, obscuring the goodness in those we despise.

In today's world, fraught with division and conflict, it is vital to confront the perils of hatred and callousness. We must face the hatred within ourselves and seek ways to overcome it. Rather than dwelling on negativity and focusing on what divides us, we should emphasize what unites us and aspire to build strong, meaningful relationships.

#### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

#### Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg

#### The Divine Conductor

The parshiyos of Vayeishev and Mikeitz are always read around the time of Chanukah. What is the connection between these parshiyos and the miracle of Chanukah?

One of the distinguishing features of Yosef throughout his experiences in Mitzrayim is his fervent belief in hashgacha pratis (Divine Providence). The pasuk describes that when Yosef is successful in Potiphar's home, "His master saw that Hashem was with him, and that Hashem brought him success in all his endeavors" (Vayeishev 39:3). How did his master know that Hashem was the source of his accomplishments? Rashi explains that G-d's name was constantly on Yosef's lips - sheim shamayim shagur b'fiv. Therefore, when Yosef was successful, Potiphar naturally attributed that success to the G-d that Yosef always mentioned.

When the head butler and head baker are troubled by their dreams, Yosef tells them, "Don't interpretations of dreams belong to G-d? Tell me (your dreams) if you please" (Vayeishev 40:8). Similarly, when Pharaoh says to Yosef that he heard Yosef can interpret dreams, Yosef answers, "That is beyond me; it is G-d who will respond with Pharaoh's welfare" (Mikeitz 41:16). Rashi and Sforno explain that Yosef was saying that only Hashem can enable him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams.

#### Likutei Divrei Torah

Later, when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, he tells them, "And now, do not be distressed, nor be angry with yourselves, for having sold me here, for it was to be a provider that G-d sent me ahead of you" (Vayigash 45:5). After Yaakov's death, when Yosef's brothers beg his forgiveness for having sold him, Yosef responds once again that they have nothing to fear. "Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good" (Vayechi 50:20). Yosef constantly attributed his success to Hashem, and he realized that all his trials and tribulations were divinely ordained.

This ability to see Hashem's hand in all of life's experiences is something Yosef learned from his father Yaakov. On his journey to Lavan's home, Yaakov asks Hashem to protect him and provide for him (Vayetzei 28:20). And on his way back to his parents' home, Yaakov tells his family, "Let us go up to Beis-El, and I will make there an altar for G-d who answered me in my time of distress, and was with me on the road that I traveled" (Vayishlach 35:3).

When Yaakov is reunited with Yosef after twenty-two years of separation, the pasuk says that Yosef cried on Yaakov's shoulders, but it does not mention Yaakov crying (Vayigash 46:29). Chazal comment that Yaakov was instead reciting the shema at that time (see Rashi there). The Maharal (Gur Aryeh there) explains that Yaakov was not reciting the shema to fulfill the mitzvah of krias shema, but rather as an expression of love and appreciation toward Hashem for reuniting him with his beloved son.

Yaakov understood that Hashem had orchestrated all his experiences in life - the pleasant ones and the challenging ones. They had all emerged from the same Source - Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad. Even the difficulties which seemed to emanate from Hashem's middas hadin (attribute of judgement - Elokim) really stemmed from his middas harachamim (attribute of mercy) - Hashem echad. This is a lesson that Yaakov imparted to Yosef, and that is why Yosef constantly expressed his belief that Hashem was in control of all that happened to him.

The miracle of Chanukah involving the jug of oil gave the Jewish people a heightened appreciation for Hashem's involvement in their lives. As the commentators point out (see Penei Yehoshua, Shabbos 21b, among others), since ritually impure oil may be used to light the menorah (tumah hutrah b'tzibbur), the miracle of the jug of oil was not even necessary. But Hashem wanted to show his love for Klal Yisrael, to reinforce their understanding that even when His presence is not readily apparent, He still is watching over

them and orchestrating events from behind the scenes.

This message was especially significant for the Jews of that time. After all, one of the decrees the Greeks had issued against the Jews was to forbid them from even mentioning G-d's name (Rosh Hashana 18b). After the Chashmonaim defeated the Greeks, they instituted that people should mention G-d's name even in their legal documents. The Greeks wanted to remove G-d from the public square. Making reference to G-d's name reminds man that ultimately he will be held accountable to a Higher Authority for his actions. Talking about G-d and religion forces man to reassess his sense of priorities; it gives him a different focus in life. The Greeks fought to suppress these values.

After the Greeks were defeated, Chazal wished to reaffirm the importance of recognizing Hashem's presence in this world by instituting that Hashem's name should be mentioned even more frequently than before. Although this enactment was later abolished for certain practical reasons, the intent of the decree remains as relevant as ever, because the more people mention Hashem's name, the more they connect with Him, and the more they appreciate how involved He is in their lives. The miracle of the jug of oil served to further highlight this idea, to remind us that Hashem is still watching over the Jewish people, even in our darkest moments, even when His presence seems hidden.

Chazal say (Shabbos 22a) that the best way to perform the mitzvah of ner Chanukah is to light near the doorway of a home, on the left side of the entrance, so that the mezuzah will be on the right side, and the Chanukah lights will be on the left. The Mishna Berura (671:33) explains that this is to ensure that a person is surrounded by mitzvos on all sides. But perhaps there is a deeper connection between the mezuzah and the Chanukah lights. The Rambam (Hilchos Mezuzah 7:13) writes that the purpose of the mitzvah of mezuzah is to remind a person of Hashem every time he passes his doorstep, and that will keep him focused on the path of Torah and mitzvos. It is not surprising then that Chazal instituted that the Chanukah lights and the mezuzah should be placed on either side of the doorway because both of these mitzvos serve the same purpose, namely, to remind us of Hashem's presence in our lives.

May we merit this Chanukah to see Hashem's light, His love and salvation, for us and the entire Jewish people.

---

### Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

---

#### To Prepare... Prepare... Prepare!

The Chamberlain of the Baker saw that he had interpreted well, so he said to Yosef, "I too! In my dream- behold! Three wicker baskets were on my head. And in the uppermost basket were all kinds of Pharaoh's food- baker's handiwork- and the birds were eating them from above my head." Yosef responded and said, "This is its interpretation: The three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift your head from you and hang you on a tree: birds will eat your flesh from you." (Breishis 40:16- 19)

Yosef is uniquely titled with the name HaTzadik! That being the case, there is something troubling in his dialogue with the Chamberlain of the Baker. I remember reading in a journal somewhere that doctors are most often sued by patients not because of actual malpractice but rather because of a lack of bedside manner. Usually, a person with an axe to grind based on a rude encounter with their physician will find some fault, while real victims who were treated gently have a hard time responding otherwise.

Yosef, The Tzadik, has a very direct and brutal message for the Baker after analyzing his dream. Maybe he could have let him know in a kinder fashion. That would seem more like the trait of a Tzadik, or even a decent doctor. Why does he tell him straight and strong that he has three days to live? Say, rather, "It doesn't look so good! I don't know what or how to break this to you..." There is a precedent in Torah and it seems to be a Midah of HASHEM not to land shocking news all at once but rather to build up slowly. We find that when HASHEM approached Adam after the sin, He asked, "AYEKCHA- Where are you!?" and when HASHEM wanted to let Avraham Avinu know about the Akeida he let on slowly at first, "Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Yitzchok...". Why is the Tzadik in this episode seemingly so cruel in his honesty? That cannot be so!

I entered the classroom of one of my teachers years ago and listened carefully to the beautiful lesson that he was delivering. They were learning about the fate of the Baker and the Wine Butler.

The Rebbe asked a marvelous question. Firstly, he explained what the Baker and the Butler were in jail for. The Baker presented Pharaoh bread with a stone inside and the Wine Butler delivered a cup of wine to Pharaoh with a fly in it. So, why was the Baker more culpable? Because a stone is stationary while a fly is very mobile. It's obviously more negligent and sloppier to allow a stone to slip into dough than a flying fly into an open cup of

### Likutei Divrei Torah

wine. Then, he asked, "Why is the Wine Butler guilty at all? He is totally not at fault! He is an ONUS!" He explained that when a stone gets into the dough, it is immediately covered up and hidden and hard to find until one bites into it and finds a surprise. However, when a fly lands in the king's cup, it is floating on the top. He obviously was not paying close enough attention when he was serving wine to Pharaoh.

The answer he gave opened up another subject in my mind. There is an old debate about which is more important in "serving HASHM", the preparations (HACHANA) or the actual performance of the Mitzvah (B'Shas Maasch)?! The Wine Butler was lacking, not paying attention at the time when he was giving the cup to the king, and the Baker was deficient during the time of his preparation. We see from here that preparation supersedes the performance at the time of "serving the king". If a Cantor gets nervous and hits a sour note or says the wrong word it is more forgivable than if he comes to Daven woefully unprepared. The same is true of teaching and almost everything else as well.

Now we can understand Yosef's seeming brutal honesty. The Baker was lacking in seriousness around preparation. If Yosef had been vague then the Baker would likely have wasted his time. He has only three days to ready himself to meet his Creator and go on a forever journey. The Mishne in Pirke Avos says "This world is like an entranceway to a grand banquet hall. Prepare yourself in the entranceway!" So, Yosef was doing the Baker a huge favor by telling him. "You have only three days to get ready to meet Your Maker. Do not delay! Take this time to prepare, prepare, prepare!

---

### Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

---

#### Hanukkah – The Progressive Candles: A Commentary on Jewish Life

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the most important feature of Hanukkah — the Hanukkah candles — is the increase in the number of candles from day to day. The lighting of the candles is progressive; that is, we proceed from least to most. The first night we light one candle, the second night two candles, the third night three candles, and so until the eighth night, when the candelabrum is ablaze with all eight candles. What we have is growth and increase and progress. It was the House of Hillel which gave this order its legal form when it said that mosif ve-holekh, the number of candles is to be increased each night, because ma'alim be-kodesh, because one must rise, increase, or progress in holiness.

In a sense, this idea of increase, of addition, of the progressive candles, is a very deep and

incisive commentary on Jewish life and what it should be. The Hanukkah candles represent more than merely the military victory of the Jewish Maccabees over the Greek Antiochus. They symbolize as well the clash of cultures, the war of world-views. There was the Greek world, steeped in its oriental idolatry, pitted against a Jewish minority stubbornly proud of its pure belief in one God.

One should not dismiss the Greek world lightly. The world's greatest philosophers were nursed in the cradle of Greek culture. But the great difference between Hellenism, as the Greek culture is known, and Judaism, lies in this: The Greek world glorified contemplation, the Jewish world glorified behavior, mitzvot. The Greeks stressed creed, while we insisted upon deed. The Greeks were inclined to inactivity — the perfection of form, while the Jew insisted upon activity. The Greeks had many philosophers but few saints; many thinkers but few doers. With the Jews this was reversed. Our world was not one of cold thought, but one of warm action. And this Jewish attitude is best represented by the progressive candles — increase, growth, action, progress. I have no doubt that if the Greeks had won the war, and decided to celebrate it by the lighting of candles, they would have constructed one gigantic, beautiful candle in front of the statue of Zeus, or a thousand smaller ones all around him — but it would have remained that way. With us Jews, however, Hanukkah is celebrated by progressive candles. Ma'alim be-kodesh.

In human terms, we could call the Greeks sitters or standers; that is, in their cold inactivity they confined themselves, insofar as ethics and good deeds are concerned, to one place and there stagnated. They were sitters or standers who rarely chose to help a fellow man. And if the Greeks were sitters and standers, we Jews were walkers and goers. And when one of us decided to "sit it out," and not participate actively in the good life, then our Rabbis were merciless in their criticism.

The Torah tells us, "Va-yeshev Ya'akov b'aretz megurei aviv," which is usually translated as, "and Jacob dwelt in the land of his father's residence," but which literally means, "and Jacob sat in the land of his father's residence" (Genesis 37:1). Even Jacob — who was all his life a great and dynamic "doer" and "goer" — was at times a "sitter." And listen to the Rabbis' biting remark: "Wherever man sits, Satan jumps; wherever man becomes inactive, Satan raises his ugly head and becomes active" (Bereishit Rabbah, Va-Yeshev 84). Here was Jacob, an old man who was tired and weary of a life of wandering and running away. He felt that his energies were spent in wrestling with angels, in warding off Laban, and in protecting himself from Esau. He now had twelve

children and he was ready to retire. "Enough done in one lifetime," he thought. "Now is the time to get a little nosh, the time to sit back and relax."

And so Jacob sat back and relaxed where his father had once lived. And what happens? Satan becomes active. Once a Jacob sits, jealousy invades his home, and his sons begin a struggle with each other over a mere colored shirt. Once a Jacob sits, then one son speaks evil of another. Once a Jacob sits, then he finds that his son Joseph, as the Rabbis relate, spends more time combing his hair in front of a mirror than in poring over his schoolbooks, and he soon begins to dream high-handed dreams of conquest and royalty. Indeed, once a Jacob sits, then his family is torn apart and some sons sell other sons down the river and into slavery.

And sitting, in this sense of inactivity, leads not only to family dissension, but also to downright immorality. Here was Israel, a "holy nation and a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6), wandering in the desert, and suddenly "Israel sat in the plains of Moab" (Exodus 22:1). What happens when a nation sits? The children of Israel entered into immoral relationships with the daughters of Moab. So sitting leads to immorality as well. Indeed, once stagnation sets in, once there is only sitting or standing but no going or progress, then Satan jumps and becomes ferociously hyperactive.

What is the Jewish way? Certainly not sitting or standing, but going and walking. In the great vision that Abraham beheld, God's command was clear and to the point: "Walk before me and be perfect" (Genesis 17:1). When a man walks, not sits, then he has a chance of becoming perfect. When Joshua the high priest stands before Almighty God, and Satan is at his right hand, God promises Joshua the ultimate redemption of Israel and tells him, "If you will walk in my ways, then I will give you places to walk among those that stand" (Zechariah 3:7). Yes, the world is full of sitters and standers, those who in their inactivity and stagnation invite the company of Satan. But the Abrahams and the Joshuas are committed to a policy of walking and going, of constant activity and positive, helpful deeds. For such is the active policy of Jews in all ages, an activation symbolized by the progressive candles of the Hanukkah menorah. Ma'alim be-kodesh.

How unfortunate, therefore, that so many of our modern Jews, while lighting the candles, forget their meaning. How often a rabbi hears the following remarks: "You see, Rabbi, it's true I am not an Orthodox Jew, I don't put on tefillin, I don't observe Shabbat, I don't observe the dietary laws; but, Rabbi, let me tell

## Likutei Divrei Torah

you that I have a good heart; it's all in here." And this is followed by a thumping of his chest.

Of course, that is precisely what Rabbis are afraid of — that it's all in here, that the good heart is something which lies buried between the ribs and behind the diaphragm, and whose warm heartbeats cannot be heard without the aid of artificial instruments. The "good heart" is the excuse of the sitter or the stander. The "good heart" excuse is in the tradition of Greece, and not Israel. I am very wary, indeed, when all a person has to offer is a good heart; whose good intentions cannot be reflected in good limbs and good pockets and good deeds. Imagine what would happen if we would translate that "good heart" idea into actual medical terms. If all the blood were to be drained from your body, from the fingertips to the tips of your toes, and concentrated in your heart, it would certainly be a good heart because it would contain all the blood in your body. But such a situation can only lead to death, because a good heart is not enough; we must have a heart which can circulate this goodness all over the body.

Good intentions without good deeds and good actions are characteristic of the Greeks and not of the Jews. I feel sure, for example, that our synagogues were not built by good intentions or good hearts alone, but by good deeds and good actions. The UJA and Yeshiva University were not built by good hearts alone. They required sturdy hands and sharp heads and noble actions.

With this in mind, we can understand part of the special Al ha-Nissim prayer. In the course of that prayer we praise God and thank Him for assuring us of victory over the Greeks, who, we say, wanted to cause us to forget the Torah and to transgress God's commandments. This statement is, seemingly, not true from a historical point of view. We know that Antiochus promulgated only three harsh laws against the Jews: He forbade the observance of Shabbat, the festival of Rosh Hodesh, and the rite of circumcision. But nowhere do we find that this mad emperor prohibited the study of Torah.

The answer, however, lies in the idea we have been trying to convey; that is, if the Jew is forbidden to observe the practical commandments, the hukkei retzonekha, if the study of the Torah cannot lead to resolute action, then it is the same as if he were prohibited from even thinking about the Torah — and it must lead to forgetting the Torah. Of what use is Torah if it does not lead to concrete action and noble deeds? If Antiochus did not allow the Jews to observe their commandments, then he stands accused in the eyes of history of destroying their study of the

Torah. For the Jew, study without implementation is of slight value. Creed must give birth to deed; contemplation must result in behavior; thought must end in action. Ma'alin be-kodesh.

The light of the progressive candles is, therefore, for us, an enlightening commentary on what Jewish life should be. They inspire us to better behavior, challenge us to greater deeds, and urge us on to new and broader horizons, with that ever-valid commandment, "Rise in holiness."

*[Excerpted from Rabbi Norman Lamm's 'The Megillah: Majesty & Mystery', co-published by OU Press and Ktav]*



BS"D

To: parsha@groups.io  
From: Chaim Shulman  
<cshulman@gmail.com>

I was recently in Antwerp (2017) to speak at a dinner there. Antwerp is a very interesting community. Today, it is a small community with a very interesting mix. It was decimated during the Holocaust. As much as the Holocaust is in the recesses of our memory in America, there, it is still such a reality. They told me that there are very few Jews over the age of eighty in Antwerp, because there is a gap until the end of the 1940s. Most of the people there in the beginning of that decade were killed. The Nazis cleaned out Belgium in general and Antwerp in particular.

Yet, if you look around today, you will see that it is once again a beautiful community. Who would have anticipated...? The school I spoke for is 120 years old. But there was a certain period in its history when there was no one there.

This year (2017) is the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. The same (Who would have anticipated...?) can be said about the developments in Eretz Yisrael. Who would have believed that what we witnessed there this past century would have happened? I am not a historian, and I don't remember all the things that expert Jewish historians have said, but for the Balfour Declaration to have been issued, so many historical precursors had to occur that anyone contemplating its issuance only a decade or so earlier would have had to be crazy to expect it to be issued. Not the least of which was that the Ottoman Empire, which had been in business for three or four hundred years, would collapse at the end of World War I. Who would have believed it?

The simple reading of this Medrash is that "Who would have anticipated (what happened with all these Biblical personalities)" foreshadows the unpredictability of all of Jewish history.

However, I saw a schmooze from Rav Elya Svei, z"l, in which he said that the message of this Medrash is more than just this lesson. In each one of these cases of "Mi haya mechakeh?", the answer was: "Yes, there was someone who was mechakeh!"

For example, when the Medrash says "Who would have been mechakeh that Yosef, who experienced all these trials and tribulations would eventually become the viceroy," there was indeed someone who anticipated it. Who was it? Yosef anticipated it! Yosef never gave up. He was keenly aware that all the trials and tribulations he experienced were the "Yad Hashem" (Hand of G-d) and that all these things were happening for a purpose!

The Medrash says that when Yosef heard the dream of the sar hamashkim (wine butler) regarding the three clusters of grapes, he saw in it an allusion to the three future redeemers of Klal Yisrael from Mitzrayim: Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. This sar hamashkim is dreaming about idle grape vines, but Yosef sees within it a matter of Divine prophecy. Yosef is constantly waiting and thinking – how is this going to pan out?

"I know this looks impossible now. I am currently sitting in a dungeon with a bunch of lowlives – but one day I am going to get out of this!" Or, when Yosef speaks of "kos Pharaoh" (Pharaoh's goblet), "kos Pharaoh," "kos Pharaoh," "kos Pharaoh" (repeating the term kos Pharaoh four times), the Medrash states that Yosef intuited four nations that would enslave Klal Yisrael and that the Ribono shel Olam would provide Klal Yisrael with four kosos of salvation.

The answer to the question "Who was anticipating?" is "Yosef himself was waiting and never gave up!" Just like the pasuk says, "And his father guarded the matter" (Bereshis 37:11) when Yosef related the dream that the sheaves would all bow down to him, Yaakov did not reject the dream as a crazy vision, so too Yosef himself guarded the matter and never gave up! Another example – Who was waiting for Moshe? The answer to that question is that Miriam was waiting for him. She never gave up hope. Chazal say on the pasuk "And his sister stood at a distance to find out what would happen with him" (Shemos 2:4) that she was waiting in anticipation. What was she waiting for? Chazal say that she had a prophecy that her mother was destined to give birth to a son who would save Klal Yisrael. The fact that he was as an infant floating aimlessly down the Nile River in a basket with minimal chances for survival did not faze her. When Moshe was born, the room filled with light and Amram also rejoiced over the apparent omen that Miriam's prophecy would come true. However, when Moshe had to be cast

## INTERNET PARSHA SHEET ON VAYEISHEV & CHANUKAH - 5786

[parsha@groups.io](mailto:parsha@groups.io) / [www.parsha.net](http://www.parsha.net) - in our 30th year! To receive this parsha sheet, go to <http://www.parsha.net> and click Subscribe or send a blank e-mail to [parsha+subscribe@groups.io](mailto:parsha+subscribe@groups.io). Please also copy me at [cshulman@gmail.com](mailto:cshulman@gmail.com). A complete archive of previous issues is now available at <http://www.parsha.net>. It is also fully searchable.

Sponsored in memory of **Chaim Yissachar z"l** ben Yechiel Zaydel Dov.

To sponsor a parsha sheet contact [cshulman@gmail.com](mailto:cshulman@gmail.com) (proceeds to tzedaka)

from: **Rabbi Yissocher Frand** <[ryfrand@torah.org](mailto:ryfrand@torah.org)>

to: [ravfrand@torah.org](mailto:ravfrand@torah.org)

date: Dec 11, 2025, 10:40 PM

Parshas Vayeishev

### Don't Give Up Hope

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: #1360 – Showing Favoritism Amongst Your Children

Good Shabbos!

Don't Give Up Hope

There is an interesting Medrash in Parshas Vayeshev which, in effect, asks: "Mi haya mechakeh?" – Who would have waited or thought or anticipated that Avraham and Sora would ever have a son? Who would have ever anticipated that Yaakov Avinu, who crossed the Yarden with nothing more than his walking cane, would eventually return a wealthy man, with a large encampment of family members? Who would have ever anticipated that Yosef, who had all these trials and tribulations, would become the viceroy of Mitzrayim? Who would have ever anticipated that Moshe, who was thrown into the Nile River as an infant, would become the great teacher of Klal Yisrael, the master of all prophets? Who would have anticipated that Rus, who was a lowly convert, would become the matriarch of monarchy in Klal Yisrael? Who would have ever anticipated that Dovid the shepherd would become the king whose descendants would rule until the end of all the generations? Who would have anticipated about Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya...? Etc., etc., etc.

The simple message of this "Who would have anticipated..." Medrash is that these are comforting and encouraging words to Klal Yisrael. If we examine the history of the Jewish people – who would have ever anticipated it?

Who would have believed that eighty years after the Holocaust, Torah study would reach the magnitude it has reached today? Who would have believed in 1941, when Rav Aharon Kotler started the Lakewood Yeshiva with six talmidim or in 1933, when Rav Yaakov Ruderman started Ner Yisrael with four talmidim, who would have believed that today these yeshivos would have thousands of talmidim? This is a nechama to Klal Yisrael: Don't give up hope!

away into the river, Amram chastised his daughter for conveying false hope to the family. However, Miriam yet waited in anticipation. So in each of these cases, there was someone who still believed.

Furthermore, as with the case of Yosef, Moshe also waited for himself. Moshe was out of Mitzrayim for a minimum of sixty years. There is a machlokes how old he was when he had to flee Mitzrayim, whether it was twelve or twenty. He returned at age eighty. In sixty years, the distant past becomes forgotten.

The pasuk says that Moshe saw a burning bush that was not consumed by the fire. The Medrash says that he saw in that imagery the fact that Klal Yisrael was going to be saved. Klal Yisrael? That was ancient history. He left Klal Yisrael sixty years ago! The answer is that Moshe Rabbeinu never gave up hope. He knew that Klal Yisrael would eventually leave Mitzrayim. How would it happen? That he didn't know. But he sees this burning bush sixty years later and he thinks "Aha! This is a sign from Heaven!"

The same can be said of all these examples: Yosef was waiting. Miriam was waiting. Moshe was waiting. And so too, all the others were waiting. They had emunah that eventually the Ribono shel Olam is going to bring the geulah and save us.

Transcribed by David Twersky; [JerusalemDavidATwersky@gmail.com](mailto:JerusalemDavidATwersky@gmail.com)

Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD [dhoffman@torah.org](mailto:dhoffman@torah.org)

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Vayeshev is provided below: # 034 – Chanukah Licht on Erev Shabbos # 076 – Katanis: The Twice Widowed Woman # 125 – Ha'Malbin P'nei Cheviro: Shaming Another # 172 – The Complex Issue of Child Custody # 218 – Grape Juice and Yayin Mevushal # 262 – Yichud and the Open Door Policy # 308 – Secular Studies # 352 – "Chamar Medina" — Used for Kiddush? # 396 – Artificial Insemination Before Chemotherapy # 440 – Third Night of Chanukah but Only Two Candles # 484 – The Ubiquitous Donor Plaque # 528 – Sending Someone on a Fatal Mission # 572 – Determining Paternity # 616 – Chanukah – Women Lighting for Husbands # 660 – Birthdays – A Jewish Minhag? # 704 – Sparing Someone's Humiliation? # 748 – The Menorah – Inside The House or Outside? # 792 – Observing Shiva for Grandparents? # 836 – Katanis: A Third Marriage # 880 – Lying For The Sake Of The Truth # 924 – Bitachon Vs Hishtadlus # 967 – Can Older Brother Object to the Younger Brother's Engagement? #1011 – Davening with a Minyan on Chanukah vs Lighting On Time #1055 – Can You Kill Someone Who Hashem Doesn't Want To Die? #1098 – Doing A Mitzvah in Face of Sakana #1141 – Business Partnerships With Non-Jews #1184 – Holding the Kiddush Cup – Exactly How? Always? #1228 – Saved Miraculously from a Car Accident? Special Bracha? #1272 – V'sain Tal U'Matar: Some Fascinating Shailos #1316 – Endangering Oneself To Perform The Mitzvah of Kibbutz Av #1360 – Showing Favoritism Amongst Your Children #1404 – Is Grape Juice As Good As Wine For Kiddush And Other Halachos? #1448 – MaOz Tzur and Its Traditional Tune – Not as Kosher as You Might Think #1492 – Zerizus vs Hidur: What's More Important Doing Mitzvos Promptly or Beautifully? #1536 – Using Jelled Olive Oil for Chanukah – Not as Simple as You May Think (2022) – Why Should You Always Light the Shul Menorah Every Year? A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail [tapes@yadyechiel.org](mailto:tapes@yadyechiel.org) or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Do you have a question or comment? Feel free to contact us on our website. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/> learn@torah.org (410) 602-1350

---

from: Kol Torah Webmaster <[webmaster@koltorah.org](mailto:webmaster@koltorah.org)>

date: Dec 11, 2025, 10:39 PM

subject: **Parashat VaYishev and Chanukah**

**Light After the Shortest Day**

**By Rabbi Chaim Jachter**

Avodah Zarah 8a records: "Rav Chanan Bar Ravah says: When are these pagan festivals celebrated? Kalenda is celebrated during the eight days after the winter solstice, and Saturnalia is celebrated during the eight days before the winter solstice.

With regard to the dates of these festivals, the Sages taught: When Adam the first man saw that the day was progressively diminishing, as the days become shorter from the autumnal equinox until the winter solstice, he did not yet know that this is a normal phenomenon, and therefore he said: Woe is me; perhaps because I sinned the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven, as it is written: "And to dust shall you return" (Genesis 3:19). He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer.

Once he saw that the season of Tevet, i.e., the winter solstice, had arrived, and saw that the day was progressively lengthening after the solstice, he said: Clearly, the days become shorter and then longer, and this is the order of the world. He went and observed a festival for eight days. Upon the next year, he observed both these eight days on which he had fasted on the previous year, and these eight days of his celebration, as days of festivities. He, Adam, established these festivals for the sake of Heaven, but they, the gentiles of later generations, established them for the sake of idol worship.

The Sages taught: On the day that Adam the first man was created, when the sun set upon him he said: Woe is me, as because I sinned, the world is becoming dark around me, and the world will return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven. He spent all night fasting and crying, and Eve was crying opposite him. Once dawn broke, he said: Evidently, the sun sets and night arrives, and this is the order of the world. He arose and sacrificed a bull whose horns preceded its hoofs in the order that they were created, as it is stated: "And it shall please the Lord better than a bullock that has horns and hoofs" (Psalms 69:32). This verse is referring to the one particular bull whose horns preceded its hoofs".

**Light after Dark**

We can glean manifold lessons from this Gemara. First, Hashem embeds great light emerging after a period of great darkness into the very fabric of Creation. Rav Nachman of Breslov famously teaches that where there is darkness, light will inevitably arise.

Rav Asher Weiss stated publicly after the viciously evil Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, that something great will inevitably emerge. He noted that the Mishnah and Gemara emerged in the wake of Churban.

After the immense havoc wrought by the Spanish Inquisition came the Shulchan Aruch's composition and the emergence of the Chachamei HaKabbalah. After the Shoah came the restoration of Jewish sovereignty over part of Eretz Yisrael for the first time in nearly two thousand years. Rav Asher Weiss predicted that following this pattern, a similar great result would arise in the wake of October 7.

However, the emergence of light after dark not only depends on Hashem. The responsibility to bring it about devolves us as well.

**Avodah Zarah's Origin**

Another point is that our Gemara supports the Rambam's account of Avodah Zarah's development (Hilchot Avodah Zarah Perek 1). Originally, all humanity served Hashem until it deviated and descended into Avodah Zarah. Binyamin notes that our story teaches us to uphold tradition and reject the false notion that we can improve our Mesorah. Avodah Zarah's originators thought they had devised a better way to serve Hashem, but this led to awful results.

The Gemara presents the origin of the Roman pagan holidays of Calanda and Saturnalia, observed at the winter solstice. The subsequent, semi-Pagan holidays celebrated at these times emerge from these two ancient pagan holidays. This is an example of what Rashi to BeMidbar (13:27) teaches: a lie that does not begin with a bit of truth does not last.

The Pagan and semi-Pagan winter solstice observances stem from a legitimate beginning - Adam HaRishon's eight-day celebration of light after steadily increasing darkness - but severely deviate from the truth.

**Chanukah**

Yisrael notes the obvious parallel to Chanukah with its eight-day celebration of light after a period of great darkness, observed near the winter solstice. Yet, the parallel goes unstated. This omission might be explained by the fact that it would degrade Chanukah by noting its similarity to a holiday that descended into the abyss of Idolatry. Perhaps the unstated parallel points to Chanukah redirecting mankind to Hashem's light.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik points to Shabbat 21b, referring to the Chanukah lighting time, which lasts until the Tirmodai leave the market. Rashi explains that Tirmodai are non-Jews who sold firewood at the end of the day. Thus, the Chanukah lights are directed at all of humanity to serve Hashem, as did our common ancestor, Adam HaRishon.

**Conclusion**

Atarah wonders what would have happened if Adam had not fasted, cried, and prayed so that the world would not be destroyed. Did Adam HaRishon err in his assumption that his sin caused the world to end, or did his Teshuvah reverse Hashem's decree? Adam remarking that the cycle of light and dark is the "Minhago Shel Olam" indicates that he made a mistake at first. However, Hillel suggests that just as the Midrash (BeReishit Rabbah 3:7) records that Hashem destroyed prior worlds, perhaps Hashem intended

to destroy this world were it not for Adam HaRishon's Teshuvah and Tefillah.

Binjamin adds that we find in numerous Torah sources that Hashem empowers us to change the world's course, most prominently with Yehoshua prolonging the day with his proclamation of "Shemesh BeGivon Dom VeYarei'ach Be'emek Ayalon," "may the sun remain still above Givon and the moon above the Ayalon Valley" (Yehoshua 10:12). Such is the power of earnest fasting, Teshuvah, and Tefilah.

---

from: YUTorah <yutorah@comms.yu.edu>  
date: Dec 11, 2025, 6:02 PM

### Seeing Our Brothers' and Sisters' Plight

#### Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

Chanukah lights placed higher than 20 cubits (about 9 meters or 30 feet) above the floor of a dwelling do not fulfill the holiday's mitzva, proclaims Rav Kahana in the Talmud (Shabbat 22a), quoting Rav Natan bar Manyomi in the name of Rabbi Tanchum. This rule parallels the religious laws concerning the maximum height of sukkot and a mavoi, crossbeam of an eruv used to mark off an area in which it is permitted to carry objects on Shabbat, because all of these cases depend on a normal human line of sight. If the lights, or the sukkot or eruvin, are too high, they are not easily visible. When it comes to Chanukah there is also deeper symbolic significance for this theme of visibility and sight, which is part of the festival's larger moral message and is especially relevant for our own turbulent times.

The discussion regarding the height of the Chanukah lights appears in its natural context, amid the laws of the holiday in Tractate Shabbat. However, the Talmud then seems to take an abrupt turn, again quoting Rav Kahana, Rav Natan bar Manyomi, and Rabbi Tanchum, expounding on a verse in our parsha concerning the pit into which Yosef was thrown by his brothers: "The pit was empty; there was no water in it" (Bereishit 37:24). The Talmud asks: If we know that the pit was empty, then why do we need to be informed that there was no water in it? It responds that the verse implies that while there was no water in the pit, it did contain dangerous animals such as snakes and scorpions.

Why does the Talmud place this homiletic interpretation of the text in the middle of a discussion of Chanukah? Is it simply that once one relevant statement is mentioned in the name of certain rabbis, the Talmud included unrelated teachings handed down through the same sages?

It is much more than that. If we look closely, we can discover in the seemingly random position of these two teachings a thematic connection between Chanukah and this week's parsha —and between spiritual illumination and brotherly love. Parshat Vayeshev is always read either on the Shabbat before Chanukah or on its first Shabbat, hinting at a deep conceptual relationship between this Torah portion and the festival of lights. The main idea of Chanukah is the spiritual illumination of the public sphere; hence the requirement to place the lights in a place and at a height that is visible to the public, and at a time when people are present. Parshat Vayeshev, on the other hand, revolves around the idea of brotherly loyalty and betrayal, exemplified by the casting of Yosef into the pit and his sale into slavery.

The message found in these two pronouncements of the Talmud is that these two themes are interdependent. If we wish to dispel societal darkness – wickedness, injustice, oppression – we must begin by focusing on our own sense of empathy and identification with our brothers and sisters, the very foundation of any community striving to bring the Torah's light into the world. If we are willing to sell out those dearest to us for personal gain, or – worse – to do so in God's name, if we are able to blind ourselves to their pain, to prey on them and humiliate them, then the holiday of Chanukah cannot realize its goal.

Thus, the insertion of this teaching about Yosef immediately after the law of the menorah's height is not an accident due only to the coincidence of its authorship. On the contrary – the Talmud is highlighting the interdependence of ethical responsibility and personal and communal decency. We must keep our brothers and sisters constantly in our line of vision – in our sights and in

our minds. It doesn't matter if our fellow Jews act or observe Judaism differently than we do, our responsibility toward every Jew is sacrosanct and sealed in the blood of our collective covenant. This responsibility is what ultimately enables us to illuminate the public sphere.

The holiday of Chanukah is about correcting the evils of history described so luridly in Parshat Vayeshev. The light of Chanukah is the light of empathy, of brotherhood, of loyalty. It is the conviction that every Jew, and every human being, deserves to be seen.

---

from: TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org>  
date: Dec 11, 2025, 9:31 PM

#### Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

#### Perfect Timing, Then and Now

I was once asked by an illustrious rabbi, "Who is the most unsung hero in Parshas Vayeshev?" After reflecting, I answered Reuven, for the Torah testifies on his behalf that he had the best of motives to save Yosef from his brothers, though he tragically never carried out those intentions. The correct answer the Rabbi gave me, however, was nothing short of astonishing: the fly. He proceeded to explain the precise, split-second timing of that fly. Had the fly plunged into Pharaoh's cup one second earlier, while it was still in the butler's hand, Yosef would have remained in prison, as the butler would simply have removed the insect. Had the fly appeared a second after the butler handed the cup to Pharaoh, Yosef would likewise still be imprisoned, for all present would have seen that it was Pharaoh's fate, not the butler's error, that caused the mishap. Instead, the fly arrived at the exact moment the butler presented the cup to Pharaoh. The timing was so razor-thin that the "umpires" could not agree on whether the butler was guilty. Pharaoh himself was unsure and decided, perhaps, a short prison term was warranted. And the rest is history. While this hero might be the most unexpected, its "nomination" teaches a profound lesson: Hashem runs the world.

This theme continues in next week's parsha. When Pharaoh dreamed and none of the proposed interpretations satisfied him, the butler suddenly remembered: "The Hebrew youth, the slave of the chamberlain of the butchers, was with us in jail and interpreted our dreams." And again - the rest is history. The Torah tells us (Breishit 41:14), "So Pharaoh sent and summoned Yosef, and they rushed him from the dungeon." Every word in the Torah is exact. Why emphasize that Yosef was rushed? The Seforno explains that the Torah is teaching not only a historical detail but a timeless principle: Divine salvation always comes hastily and unexpectedly. So it was in Egypt, as the passuk says (Shemos 12:39), "Because they were thrust out of Egypt," and as we recite in the Haggadah: their dough had no time to rise, for the King of Kings revealed Himself and redeemed them. And so it will be in the future redemption, as Malachi (3:1) teaches, "And the Lord Whom you seek will suddenly come to His Temple." Mashiach will come unexpectedly - "in the blink of an eye."

History is filled with such examples of Hashem orchestrating events with split-second precision.

At the beginning of the sixth chapter of Megillas Esther we read, "That night, sleep eluded the king." Does it matter which night Achashveirosh had insomnia? Yes, because we again see yeshuas Hashem keheref ayin, the salvation of Hashem comes faster than the blink of an eye. Rashi explains that this was the night after Esther invited the king and Haman to her banquet. The paranoid Achashveirosh feared Esther and Haman were plotting against him. Meanwhile, Esther, while walking to the throne room, prayed, "My G-d, my G-d, why have You forsaken me?" Hashem did not merely respond quickly; He responded immediately.

Similarly, why does the Torah (Shemos 14:21) note, "And Hashem moved the sea with a strong east wind all night"? Who cares about the weather? Because skeptics might claim that the wind alone split the sea. Yet the Torah highlights the wind's perfect timing: it blew just long enough for over two million Israelites to cross. Only once the last Jew stepped onto dry land did the wind cease, causing the waters to drown the Egyptians. Timing is everything.

In Parshas Toldos, the Torah states (27:30), "And it was that when Yitzchak finished blessing Yaakov, and Yaakov had scarcely left his father's presence, Eisav his brother came from his hunt." Rashi notes that as one left, the other entered—another example of divine orchestration down to the second.

Likewise, in this week's parsha, the Torah describes the cargo of the caravan transporting Yosef to Egypt (37:25), "Their camels bearing spices, balsam, and lotus." Does this really matter? Rashi, citing Bereishis Rabbah, teaches that Hashem intervened for Yosef's comfort; Ishmaelite caravans typically carried foul-smelling goods such as tar and naphtha. Hashem arranged that this caravan be an exception. Perfect timing.

This background helps us better appreciate Chanukah. Each night, we recite the blessing "She'asah nissim la'avoseinu" - that Hashem performed miracles for our ancestors. The plural "nissim" refers both to the miraculous military victory and to the miracle of the oil. But why was the second miracle necessary? Was it not enough that the assimilationist decrees of the Greeks were overturned, that Hashem delivered the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton into the hands of the Torah-faithful?

The Maharal (Chiddushei Aggados, Shabbos 31b) explains that one might mistakenly attribute the military victory to natural causes, such as familiarity with the terrain, strategy, or luck. Therefore, Hashem provided an unmistakably supernatural miracle - the oil burning eight days - to demonstrate that the victory, too, was entirely supernatural. And the timing is no coincidence - the war ended on the twenty fifth of Kislev, and the miracle of the oil began that very night. A Divine wink.

Finally, returning to the second Chanukah blessing: we thank Hashem for the miracles He performed "bayamim hahem," in those ancient days, "bazman hazeh," at this time. "At this time" refers not only to the season - the darkest nights of the year when we light the menorah - but also to His extraordinary timing throughout history. It reinforces our belief in the twelfth of Rambam's Thirteen Principles: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of Mashiach, and though he may tarry, I await his arrival every day." As Malachi promised: Mashiach will come - suddenly.

© 2025 by TorahWeb Foundation. All Rights Reserved

---

from: TorahLectures <torahlectures@pb04.wixmails.com>

subject: Torah Lectures - Rav Meilech Biderman, shlit'a

... At the end of the parashah, it states (40:5-6) of two The ", them dreamt a dream on the same night; each one according to the interpretation of his dream..." Chazal explain that in addition to their dreams, each one dreamt the explanation of their fellow man's dream. The Sar HaMashkim saw in his dream that the Sar Ha'Ofim would be killed in three days, and the Sar Ha'Ofim saw that the Sar HaMashkim reinstated be would "Yosef came to them in the morning and he saw that they were aggrieved." The Pnei Menachem asks why the Sar Ha'Ofim was sad? He saw the meaning of the Sar HaMashkim's dream, that he would live and work again for Pharaoh. Perhaps this was a sign that his dream was also positive.

Why was he downcast? ,state it does Why 'they were aggrieved'? The Pnei Menachem answers that the Sar Ha'Ofim was sad to see that his partner in prison would go free and attain a highranking position. He was upset that good was coming upon another. Due to his ayin ra, his evil eye, he wasn't saved.

The Severity of Embarrassing Others Most importantly, we have to be careful never to cause embarrassment to one's fellow man. Tamar didn't want to embarrass [Yehudah]...

Rather, she said, 'If he admits it on his own, then so be it, and if he doesn't, I will be burned. But I won't embarrass him.' Chazal learn from this that "It is better for a person to be thrown into a fiery furnace and not to embarrass his fellow man in public."

Pnei Yehoshua proves from the Gemara (Bava Metzia 58b) that embarrassing one's fellow man is worse than murder. This is because the **כל הירידן ליגונם**, says Gemara **יעילים**, "Whoever goes to Gehinom will leave Gehinom." This applies to all aveiros, including murder, r'l. Gehinom isn't forever. Reshaim suffer in Gehinom for twelve months, but afterwards, their

neshamos are brought to Gan Eden. So, even for murder, the baalei aveirah will eventually leave Gehinom. However, the Gemara says that there are three exceptions, those go to Gehinom and never leave. Among those who never leave Gehinom are those who embarrass their fellow man in public and those who call their fellow man by a degrading nickname. Embarrassing one's fellow man is worse than murder.

The Ostrovtza zt'l explains that Tamar was pregnant with twins. If she were burned, three souls would die. Nevertheless, Tamar understood that this was better than embarrassing one's fellow man in public.

In contrast, we understand the great reward for those who give chizuk to their fellow man. The Imrei Emes zt'l said that sometimes you can't offer advice, and you are unable to help someone in different ways. But you can listen to the person, as he pours out his heart before you and tells you of his tzaros. Sometimes it's sufficient, and he is relieved afterwards. This is hinted in the words (37:21) **רְאוּ文** heard, he listened to someone pour out his bitter heart, and that brought salvation. The person feels understood, and he feels that others have compassion for him, and this can help him endure the difficult test he is going through.

The Maharshal teaches that the shamesh should be placed above the other chanukah lech. This hints that when one shines and gives light and hope to others, he is above all.4

The Candles' Message

The Kav HaYashar (96) writes, "We have several sources that Hakadosh Baruch Hu loves lamps of a mitzvah, for it states (Yeshayah Honor', 24:15), **כִּבְדָּק אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים** Hashem with lamps.' Every candle lit for a mitzvah has immeasurable holiness. If we had ruach hakodesh, we would be able to see the future when lighting these lech because the candles of a mitzvah tell prophecies, just like a navi giving over what he heard from Hashem's mouth."5

At this point, the Kav HaYashar tells a story: "The gaon, the Maharshal z'l, writes in the introduction to his sefer Yam shel Shlomo, 'Once, with a candle of a mitzvah, heaven encouraged me and opened the gates of light. Heaven told me, "Study Torah... Be like a lion in his den. Write sefarim... And after I received this message, I couldn't abstain from writing sefarim."

Hashem told the Maharshal, through holy candles, that Hashem loves his sefarim, and that encouraged him to continue doing so. What was the story? The Kav HaYashar heard it from his rebbe, the Yesod Yosef, who heard it from scholars:

"One night, Reb Shlomo Luria (the Maharshal) was studying and writing his sefer Yam Shel Shlomo with only a small candle before him, and it was about to go out. The candle remained lit for several hours – as if he had three or four complete candles... He understood from his candle that Hashem was with him." The miraculous candle told him that Hashem loves his Torah learning and chiddushei Torah, that Hashem wants him to continue learning and writing his chiddushim, and that encouraged him. The miracle that happened to the Maharshal is similar to the miracle of the menorah in the Beis HaMikdash on Chanukah" (Kav HaYashar). One night, Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg zy'a was learning Torah by candlelight, and a gust of wind blew out the candle.

He didn't have a match or a stone to light his candle, so he went onto the porch to see if a passerby could light it. A man passed by, lit his candle, and Rebbe Shmelke returned to study Torah.

Rebbe Shmelke later thought, "How did he light my candle? I was on the porch of the second floor, and the man was on the street!" He realized that Eliyahu HaNavi had come to light his candle so he could continue learning. The Alter of Novardok zt'l would study Torah and mussar in a small hut in the forest. One night, his lamp blew out, and he needed more oil. The Alter of Novardok told himself, "Hashem can do everything; Hashem can send me oil.

He opened the door of his hut to do his hishtadlus.

Just then, a man came by. "Do you have oil?" the Alter asked. He did. The Alter was able to study Torah and mussar for the rest of the night. In the morning, the Alter took the remaining oil and stored it, so he would never forget the miracle that Hashem performed for him.

Once, there was a fire in his home, and the jar of oil was consumed in the fire. The Alter said he was happy this happened because "Why should I remember this episode more than all the other miracles Hashem performs for me? Every moment of life is filled with miracles."

As we wrote from the Kav HaYashar, the lamps tell prophecies, like a Navi relaying what he heard from Hashem. We don't have ruach hakodesh to understand the prophecies, but one message comes through clearly: The lecht tell us that Hashem loves us, and He wants our Torah and mitzvos. That is the message of the Chanukah lecht. Regardless of our spiritual level, Hashem loves us and wants our avodah

---

from: YUTorah <yutorah@comms.yu.edu> date: Dec 11, 2025, 6:02 PM A

### Tale of Two Tunics

**Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner**

from: YUTorah <yutorah@comms.yu.edu>

date: Dec 11, 2025, 6:02 PM

### Our Struggles, Our Triumphs

**Mrs. Michal Horowitz**

In Parshas Vayeishev, the story of Yosef and his brothers begins to unfold in full force. Yaakov has returned home to Canaan, where - contrary to his longing for some tranquility and peace in his life - the troubles with his sons begins. At the age of seventeen, Yosef - the favorite son - dreams of sheaves in the field, and heavenly bodies, all bowing down to him. These dreams are the brothers, who increase their hatred and jealousy of him.

When, one day, Yaakov sends Yosef to check on his brothers and the flocks, the brothers see Yosef approaching, and plot against him. Ultimately, he is sold to Egypt and bought by Potiphar, Chief Executioner to Pharaoh (Bereishis 37).

The next perek moves to the topic of Yehuda and Tamar, from whose union, ultimately, Melech Ha'Moshiach will be born (Bereishis 38).

In the house of Potiphar, Eishes Potiphar tries to seduce Yosef, until he finally resists, leaving his cloak in her hand and running outside to escape her seduction. She frames Yosef, claiming he tried to seduce her, and Potiphar has Yosef thrown in jail (Bereishis 39). After a decade in jail, he meets the Butler and Baker, both of whom are disturbed by their respective dreams. Yosef correctly interprets their dreams, and asks the Butler to remember him, and not to forget him. The Butler gets out of jail and promptly forgets Yosef (Bereishis 40).

Whereas Yaakov thought his troubles were finally over - the trouble of Eisav, the trouble of Lavan, the abduction and violation of Dina, and the death of Rachel - his most significant trouble - that of Yosef and the brothers - had only just begun.

It is the sons of Yaakov who presented their father with Yosef's cloak that they dipped in goat blood to trick him into thinking Yosef was torn to shreds by a wild animal. And when all of Yaakov's children arise to comfort him, the pasuk tells us: and he refused to be comforted, and he said: For I will descend on account of my son as a mourner to the grave (37:35). Of all the avos - and despite the fact that Avraham was tested with ten tests - Yaakov had the most turbulent life. As the angel attests when he renames Yaakov to Yisrael: for you have striven/wrestled with G-d and with man, and you have prevailed (32:29).

Yaakov had to deal with struggles and strivings practically his whole life. He had his external enemies - Eisav, Lavan, Shechem; the abduction and violation of his daughter, Dina; his troubles in the home between his children - Yosef and the brothers; the disappearance of Yosef for over twenty years; and his move - out of necessity - to Egypt - for the last seventeen years of his life. Moreover, these struggles are not just relevant to the life of our forefather, Yaakov, they are the blueprint of the lives of all of us, his children, Am Yisrael. For, as the Sages teach us: kol mah she'eirah la'vos, siman la'banim - all that happened to the patriarchs is a foreshadowing and omen for future generations.

From the life of Yaakov the Torah is teaching us how we can traverse the highways of life, and emerge triumphant. As he was limping, we may in fact be wounded - and often are, may Hashem have mercy on us - but as our

nation as a whole always prevails, so can each one of us, as individuals. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks points out that the Torah portrays the avot and imahot as very real personalities, with all of their human complexities, so that we can relate to them, take strength from their lives and learn from them (Covenant and Conversation, Genesis, p.230) (In his commentary to Sefer Bereishis, this is also the consistent approach of Rav Samson Rafael Hirsch). Had our avot and imahot been portrayed, for posterity, as angelic, superhuman, or as demigods, chas v'shalom, we could not learn from, nor emulate, them or strive to better ourselves.

After Yaakov wrestles with the angel on the shores of the River Yabok, and the angel asks Yaakov to free him, Yaakov replies: I will not send you off until you have blessed me (32:27). Rabbi Lord Sacks writes, "I will not let you go until you bless me: These words of Jacob to the angel lie at the very core of surviving crisis. Each of us knows from personal experience that events that seem disappointing, painful, even humiliating at the time, can be the most important in our lives. Through them we learned how to try harder next time; or they taught us a truth about ourselves; or they shifted our life into a new and more fruitful direction. We learn, not from our successes but from our failures. We mature and grow strong and become more understanding and forgiving through the mistakes we make. A protected life is a fragile and superficial life. Strength comes from knowing the worst and refusing to give in. Jacob/Israel bequeathed us many gifts, but few more valuable that the obstinacy and resilience that can face hard times and say of them: 'I will not let you go until you bless me.' I will not give up or move on until I have extracted something positive from this pain and turned it into blessing.

"... What Genesis [Sefer Bereishis] tells us is that the heroes of our faith did not live charmed lives. They suffered exiles, knew danger, had their hopes disappointed and the expectations delayed. They fought, they struggled, but they neither gave in nor gave up... Sometimes they laughed in disbelief; there were times when they feared, trembled, wept... They were human beings, not angels; they were people with whom we can identify, not saints to be worshipped. Jacob taught us that we cannot preempt crisis, nor should we minimise it, but we can survive it, thus becoming worthy of bearing the name of one who struggled with G-d and with men and prevailed" (Covenant and Conversation, Genesis, p.232-233).

May we be graced with the courage and strength, faith and trust, perseverance and fortitude, to extract blessing from all times in our lives, b'ezras Hashem. Though at times this may be of supreme difficulty, and require us to find the light even when we are limping, may Hashem - in His great mercy and compassion - guide us on the path of triumph and success.

---

from: **Ira Zlotowitz** <Iraz@klalgovoah.org>

date: Dec 11, 2025, 3:02 PM

subject: **Tidbits • Parashas Vayeishev 5786**

In memory of Rav Meir Zlotowitz ZT"L

This week is Shabbos Mevorach Chodesh Teves. Rosh Chodesh is next Shabbos & Sunday, December 20th-21st. The molad is early Shabbos morning at 2:22 AM and 10 chalakim.

Chanuka

On Sunday, Erev Chanukah, December 14th, Tachanun is omitted at Mincha. Tachanun and Lamenatzei'ach are omitted throughout Chanukah, as well as Kel Erech Apayim before Krias Hatorah, and the Yehi Ratzons that follow. Fasting and hespedim are generally prohibited. Al Hanisim is said in Shemoneh Esrei and Bircas Hamazon. The omission of Al Hanisim does not need to be corrected. However, if one remembers before completing Bircas Hamazon he may recite the compensatory Harachaman at the end of Bircas Hamazon, followed by Bimei Mattisyahu. Similarly, one can add this compensatory Harachaman at the end of Eloki Netzor, followed by Bimei Mattisyahu.

Each day of Chanukah, the complete Hallel is recited during Shacharis. The Krias Hatorah of each day of Chanukah corresponds to the day of the bringing of the Korbanos Ha'nesiim (Naso 7). Some congregations recite

Mizmor Shir (Psalm 30) after the Shir Shel Yom. A woman should recite Hallel.

The Achronim agree that there is a mitzvah to gather at a meal and give thanks to Hashem; through this we publicize the Chanukah miracles. Singing and saying words of praise to Hashem renders the meal a Seudas Mitzvah. There is a minhag to eat dairy foods in commemoration of Yehudis's defeat of the enemy general by feeding him dairy items. The practice of eating latkes, doughnuts and fried foods commemorates the miracle involving oil (Rabbeinu Maimon, Ibn Ezra).

There is a praiseworthy minhag of giving gifts to the melamdim of one's children (R' C. Palaggi zt"l). This sets an example of hakaras hatov for your child and displays the importance of their chinuch. A gift accompanied by warm words of thanks is a tremendous source of chizuk for our Rebbeim and teachers.

Daf Yomi - Shabbos: Bavli: Zevachim 90 • Yerushalmi: Yoma 51 • Mishnah Yomis: Bechoros 5:2-3 • Oraysa (coming week): Yevamos 8a-10a • Kitzur Shulchan Aruch: 32:8-15

Chanukah begins Sunday night, December 14th.

Summary

**VAYEISHEV:** Yosef, the favorite son, is gifted the kesones pasim shirt • Yosef's dreams • The brothers plan to kill Yosef • Reuven persuades them to put him in a pit instead • While Reuven is away, Yosef is sold to merchants descending to Egypt • Yehuda and Tamar • Tamar bears Yehuda twins, Peretz and Zerach • Yosef is sold to Potiphar and rises to become his trusted advisor • Potiphar's wife tempts Yosef, Yosef resists ("Vayima'ein!") • Yosef is wrongfully accused and imprisoned • Yosef is given responsibilities in the prison • Yosef correctly interprets the dreams of the wine steward and the baker • Yosef is forgotten and remains in prison.

**Haftarah:** The Navi Amos (2:6-3:8) warns that although Hashem may have mercy for three sins, there is a fourth sin which will bring about certain Divine wrath. The Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer says that this fourth sin is related to the brothers' selling of Yosef. As even if it was necessary for Yosef to be distanced, using the profits to purchase shoes demonstrated a level of indignity and insensitivity.

For the Shabbos Table

"And their camels bearing spices, balsam and lotus" (Bereishis 37:25) Rashi explains that the Yishme'elim would generally transport goods that had a foul-smelling odor. However, when Yosef was sold and transported to Mitzrayim, he merited that the caravan in which he was transported carried goods with a pleasant aroma. But what is the significance of this small 'comfort' when one is being carted off to servitude?

The Telzer approach, attributed to Rav Mottel Pogremonski zt"l, explains this with a parable. Both a surgeon and a murderer bring a knife to the skin. Yet the distinction between the one that seeks to heal and the one that seeks to injure is observed in the surgeon's meticulousness and delicate approach. Although Yosef was being cast away, it was ultimately for the later good; a "Refuah Kodem L'makkah". This small detail of the pleasant aroma despite the circumstances demonstrates that the master plan was perfect and meticulous.

In a similar vein, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz explains that this pleasant aroma was Hashem's message to Yosef that He is with him in his suffering. On Chanukah we recognize and express our gratitude for the miracles performed. Along with the great miracles of the times of the Chashmonaim, we also need to recognize the many smaller miracles that take place in our times and get a good 'scents' of all the everyday blessings in our lives.

---

from: RIETS Kollel Elyon from RIETS Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon Substack <[riets@substack.com](mailto:riets@substack.com)>  
date: Dec 11, 2025, 11:40 AM

**Daf Yomi Zevachim 88 and VaYeshev: What Can be Done About Lashon Hara and Humiliation?**

A Special Convergence and the Unique Power of Learning Kodshim  
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman

The Daf Yomi and the weekly Torah reading converge today in a manner that conveys the unique value of learning kodshim, even, and perhaps especially, in the modern era.

The transgressions of Lashon Hara and of humiliating others in public both feature prominently in Parashat VaYashev (as discussed in this week's previous posts) and both of them are discussed in today's daf (Zevachim 88) which teaches that the priestly vestments can atone for both of them, although in one case some explanation is needed.

We learn that the vestments can atone for Lashon Hara and for murder. In the latter case, however, Tosafot (Arakhin 16a, s.v. ha d'ahani) point out that this does not seem to be the case, as there are a number of indications that an actual murder would not receive atonement through such methods. Instead, they suggest the reference here is to humiliating others, which is equated with murder.

Considering this idea together with that regarding Lashon Hara yields a fascinating insight together with a tremendous overlooked opportunity. The notion of an atonement coming from priestly garments, or from the sacrifices, or from the Temple vessels is not simply a supernatural concept. It teaches that sin often results from a misalignment of perspectives and priorities. The sacrifices and related aspects are loaded with symbolic elements. The attention given to these elements when the sacrifices are offered, or the garments are worn, calls attention to the messages represented by these elements. As a result, the deficiencies in perspective may be corrected, and thus atonement and redemption flow naturally.

If this is indeed the methodology, a tremendous potential emerges. In the modern era, the sacrificial order is not practiced, and instead, we must suffice with a study of its concepts, which we are taught is credited as practice (Menachot 110a). Here again, this need not be limited to the realm of supernatural grace. If sacrifices effect their atonement, at least to some extent, through realigning perspectives, then studying their details can actually accomplish the exact same thing. The study of Kodashim can accomplish a crucial component of what the sacrifices themselves could accomplish, even in the modern era. Indeed, the Talmud elsewhere (Yoma 72b) indicates that the priestly vestments continue to effect atonement even today.

In that light, one can consider how the priestly vestments serve as atonements for these specific transgressions. The Torah stresses that these garments serve as a source of honor and glory ("kavod u'tiferet"). Extended attention to their details forces an appreciation for the value of such honor. One who would humiliate others displays a deficient appreciation for the importance of dignity in the individual, and the focus that the priestly garments gives to that attribute can correct this. The study of its concepts can do this as well (R. Yaakov Emden alludes to this idea in his writings). While the rabbinic teaching that Lashon Hara is addressed through the affliction of tzaraat is well known, the Talmud also identifies another atoning element for lashon hara: the special coat worn by the priests in the Temple. This coat, fitted with small bells, produced sound during the service. An item that generates sound is thus invoked to atone for a transgression that itself involves sound.

The Talmud states that the affliction of tzara'at and the priestly coat correspond to two different forms of lashon hara: the affliction is directed at one who has caused actual harm through negative speech, while the coat atones for a case in which no concrete harm has occurred.

This distinction is qualitative rather than quantitative. One who speaks negatively without causing direct damage has nonetheless engaged in an act that corrupts his own character and spiritual posture. The symbolism of the coat is therefore an appropriate corrective, aimed at addressing the internal mindset that produces such speech. One who has in fact harmed others and introduced division into the community, however, requires the more forceful, outwardly oriented corrective of tzara'at.

R. Moshe Shtembuch, in his *Taam VeDaat*, suggests—homiletically—that the various tzara'at afflictions symbolize the internal traits that give rise to lashon hara. The Torah uses the term *se'eit*, related to "to lift," representing an arrogant individual who elevates himself above others and thus demeans

them. Another term, *baheret*, is related to “clear,” representing one who views matters as so obvious and unambiguous that he judges others without considering broader context or complexity.

R. Shneur Kotler (*Kol HaTorah* 61, p. 47) notes additional symbolism inherent in the priestly coat. It incorporated *tekhelet*, the particular blue wool also found in the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. The Talmud describes *tekhelet* as recalling the sea, which reflects the sky, which reflects the heavenly throne. The imagery conveys the need to look outward and upward, to broaden one’s perspective and see beyond the narrow confines of one’s immediate judgments. The flaw of one who indulges in *lashon hara* is precisely this shortsightedness. The coat and the *tekhelet* woven into it thus serve as a corrective toward greater expansiveness of vision.

(The Talmud also mentions another atonement for *lashon hara*: the incense. It suggests that the coat atones for *lashon hara* spoken in public, while the incense atones for *lashon hara* spoken in private. Regarding this distinction, see *Torat HaOlah* of the Rama, 3:7, and *Shemirat HaLashon*, II, 20:9. For discussions of the symbolism of the incense as an atonement for *lashon hara*, see R. Avigdor Nebenzahl, *Sichot LeSefer Shemot*, pp. 325–328; *Sichot LeSefer Bemidbar*, pp. 156–15; *BiYad HaLashon*, pp. 153–154 and 367–370 (by R. Michel Zilber); R. David Kronglass, *Sichot Chokhmah uMussar*, 20; *Shmuot Chaim, Arakhin* ch. 3, p. 128.

For further observations regarding both the coat and the incense, see *VaYita Eishel to Arakhin*, 100; and, at length, *Emek HaLashon, Kuntres Leket HaMe'il*, pp. 170–190.

Note also the *Yerushalmi* (*Yoma* 5:3), which implies that the coat atones for all forms of *lashon hara*. See *Emek HaLashon*, p. 17, for analysis of the difference between the two formulations.

See also R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Choski, *Lev Aryeh*, Gen. p. 109, who suggests that Joseph’s special coat was given by Jacob as a countermeasure to the negative speech Joseph had previously relayed about his brothers.) In the modern era, when we lack both the priestly garments and the affliction of *tzara’at*, we nonetheless retain the ability to connect to their messages through study. In fact the Talmud (*Arachin* 15b) identifies Torah study as effective in its own right against the impact of sins such as *Lashon Hara*. However, as is clear from the discussion there and many later commentaries, this is subject to a number of conditions and limitations. Every additional tool in service of this goal is a gift. It may not be automatic; but with the proper awareness, it is available, and that is a precious opportunity.

RIETS Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon Substack is free today. But if you enjoyed this post, you can tell RIETS Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon Substack that their writing is valuable by pledging a future subscription. You won’t be charged unless they enable payments.

----- Morals and Meanings

Parsha Reflections for Living

**Chanukah**

**Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein**

Chanukah: In those Days – In our Times

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

From Greece to Rome

The Festival of Chanukah celebrates our ideological war against – and victory over – the oppression of the Greek Empire. And indeed, the Greek Empire is no more. However, the philosophy which they preached and the culture and lifestyle that it promoted outlived them and continue to influence the world around us until our time.

To frame this in terms of our national experience, this idea expresses itself in the fourth exile in which we find ourselves – the exile of Rome, which continues until Mashiach comes. Although politically the Roman Empire replaced Greece as the dominant world force, it nevertheless adopted the basic tenets of Greek philosophy and outlook. In a conceptual sense, therefore, we would be correct in saying that Greece was never fully conquered; rather, it merely transferred its power base to Rome.

Thus, we find that our Sages refer to Rome as “Italy of Greece,”<sup>[1]</sup> reflecting the idea that the essential philosophy of Rome was effectively bequeathed to them by their Greek predecessors. The full implication of this idea is that the

third exile will not fully end until the fourth one does. And indeed, basic Greek ideas such as the primacy of man’s intellect, as well as ascribing central value to the temporal world as the arena for man’s highest achievements, continue to exert their influence until our time.

Yet if the ideas of Greece continue to fill the world – and in so doing, likewise continue to assail the Jewish People and our Godly way of life – to what end do we celebrate Chanukah as “the victory over Greece”? The answer is that we do not celebrate Chanukah as the final victory over Greek ideas; rather, we celebrate it as the initial formative victory, which can be accessed and emulated in any and all subsequent confrontations. As we have noted throughout this book, the word “Chanukah” means initiation, and implies the beginning of a process. In terms of our present discussion, we may say that the process into which we were initiated on Chanukah was the war itself with Greece, which would continue in different forms and under different guises in the centuries that would ensue. The crucial implication of this idea for the Festival of Chanukah is that its goal is not only to commemorate the initial victory “in those days”, but to perpetuate it as long as continues to be required “in our times.” Every year on Chanukah, the spiritual light, energy and inspiration which illuminated the way to that initial victory return to be taken up anew.

Greece inside the Sanctuary

A central part of the Chanukah story relates to how the Greeks breached the Sanctuary and defiled all the oil.<sup>[2]</sup> Rav Kook explains<sup>[3]</sup> that this event paralleled what was happening within the Jewish people themselves. As a location, the Beis Hamikdash is the holiest place in the world. Within the Jewish people, the mikdash represents their inner value system and everything they hold holy and dear. If Greece has breached the Mikdash and has contaminated the oil, then to proceed to use that oil to light the Menorah will compromise the purity of its illumination. Likewise, if Greek notions have gained entry into our value system, then even our illumination cannot be assured of being authentically Jewish! At that point, we risk substituting the Torah’s eternal message as a response and guide to the times with one that is simply an expression of the times. Needless to say, this is not to imply that every idea currently in the world is instantly to be branded as false. What it means is that it should be considered carefully and not simply swallowed whole.

The miracle of the Menorah began with the small jar of pure oil bearing the seal of the Kohen Gadol. This too, explains Rav Kook, resides within each person. The Kohen Gadol has the ability to enter the Holy of Holies in the Beis Hamikdash, a place known as “inside the inside,” and this core likewise lies at the innermost point of the Jew. It partakes of the timeless quality of the Torah’s message and cannot be swayed by whatever value happens to be on special offer for that month. Accessing this element within ourselves was the basis of our victory. In military terms, it was not until we had gone to war and retaken the Beis Hamikdash that we found the jar of oil buried there; but in experiential terms, it was that jar of oil that lies within us which prompted us to go to war in the first place.

Chanukah and the Ohr Haganuz

Chanukah is celebrated by kindling lights, and indeed, this is most appropriate, as it celebrates the victory of light over darkness. However, the idea of light can itself express many things, some of which are completely disconnected from – and perhaps even antithetical to – the light of Torah. Let us not forget that Greece also saw themselves as bestowers of light, something that made their darkness all the more menacing. As such, on Chanukah, even the concept of light requires illumination! In this respect, the integrity of the light in our menorah and its message need to be preserved and protected, as surely as was the case with the oil in the Sanctuary.

Perhaps this will give us some insight into an idea mentioned by one of the early Kabbalists, the Rokeach<sup>[4]</sup>: The Sages inform us that the light with which we see is not the original light that Hashem created. There was a prior, supernal light, known as the *Ohr Haganuz* (“Concealed Light”), which Hashem then concealed, leaving us with the light that we have now. The Midrash further states that this original light burned for thirty-six hours before it was concealed.<sup>[5]</sup> The Rokeach writes that the original light which

burned for thirty-six hours illuminates every year from within the thirty six candles that are lit over the course of Chanukah.<sup>[6]</sup>

What is this “Concealed Light” and how does it emerge through the Chanukah lights? Without a doubt, this mystical statement can be understood on many different levels. However, let us consider what it might mean for us on an experiential and ideological level.

If we wish to attain some understanding of what this “Concealed Light” is, we first need to find out where it is concealed — if we can. Perhaps once we know where to find it, we can get a glimpse of what it looks like. The answer here is provided by the Zohar,<sup>[7]</sup> which states that Hashem concealed this light within the Torah. Of course, this idea too can be understood on many levels, but on a basic level it means the following:

Different forms of light do not create new things for us to see; they provide a new means through which to view that which is already in front of us. There are many ways in which we can view life, establishing certain goals as paramount, seeing certain values as inviolable, ascribing significance to some things while denying it to others, seeing some pursuits as worthwhile and others as worthless. The Original Light was a means through which to survey the world through the perspective of Absolute Truth, with knowledge of how to define value, importance, and success.

When the Zohar says that the original light was then concealed in the Torah, it means that through learning Torah, one can access the light through which to view the world as it should be viewed. He may discover that some things which people tend to view as of extreme importance are not actually that important at all. Conversely, he may discover that there are certain things which are of utmost importance that are commonly overlooked. In the most profound and meaningful of ways he comes to see the world in a different light.

Given that we are enjoined to learn Torah, which houses this light, we are forced to conclude that although Hashem concealed it in the Torah, He wants it to be uncovered! Moreover, not only is this light meant to be uncovered within the Torah, it is further meant to become the light in which we view the world.

The question of in which light one views the world was never more hotly contested than during the confrontation between Israel and Greece, for it was the very basis of that conflict. The Chanukah lights with which we celebrate our victory thus contain an element of the Ohr Haganuz, encouraging us not only to choose light over darkness, but also to be able to tell the difference between the two.

May the light and message of our Menorahs burn steady, bright and strong during these eight days, may their illumination spread outward to the entire year ahead, and may they ultimately light the path forward toward our final redemption!

Chanukah Sameach

1] Shabbos 55b. [2] Shabbos 21b. [3] Commentary Ein Aya to Shabbos ibid. [4] Hilchos Chanukah sec. 225. [5] Bereishis Rabbah 12:6. [6] See at length Bnei Yissaschar, Kislev maamar 2. [7] Zohar vol. 1 p. 264a and Zohar Chadash p. 103b. Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein Born and raised in London, Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein came to Israel following high school, where he studied for a number of years in Yeshivas Ateres Yisrael in Jerusalem, receiving Rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Chaim Walkin in 2001. Rabbi Bernstein is a distinguished author of both Hebrew and English books, publishing many works on Chumash, Talmud,...

---

from: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>

date: Dec 12, 2025, 1:19 AM

subject: **Rav Kook on Chanukah: The Single Light of Chanukah**

Chanukah: The Single Light of Chanukah

Before lighting the Chanukah lights, we recite the blessing, “Who sanctified us with His mitzvot and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light.”

Why does the blessing refer to a single light - “the Chanukah light”? We light several candles each night; why not say “the Chanukah lights”? Chanukah and Chinuch The word “Chanukah” means “dedication,” referring to the re-dedication of the Temple after its desecration by the Seleucid

emperor Antiochus IV. “Chanukah” shares the same Hebrew root as chinuch — “education.” But chinuch is the masculine form of the word while chanukah is the feminine form. Why?

Rav Kook explained that the goal of education is to nurture the student to grow and develop by inculcating good habits and proper conduct. Education develops their innate talents and natural integrity, and has a positive influence over the years to come. Therefore the word chinuch is in the masculine form, as it indicates a process of striving and developing inner potential.<sup>1</sup>

The dedication of the Temple, however, was a greatly different situation. From when it was first established, the Temple already encompassed all of its greatness and holiness. Future times will merely reveal the holiness that it always contained. Thus the Temple’s dedication is called chanukah. The feminine form of the word is used, denoting a state of intrinsic holiness and completeness.

**The Lights of Israel** The lights of Chanukah are a metaphor for the blessings of enlightenment that the Jewish people bestow to the world. All of the nation’s potential spiritual gifts are included in the dedication of Chanukah: Torah and wisdom, prophecy and morality, justice and compassion, and so on. Like the Temple, these are qualities inherent in the people of Israel — so the word chanukah is appropriate.

Sometimes these ‘lights’ emphasize their distinct nature in order to make their full contribution, even at the expense of other ideals. Such divisions, however, can lead to internal strife. Those who stress one particular ideal may look upon those who promote other ideals as detracting from a more important value. In truth, when each individual advances that light that corresponds to the inner makeup of his soul, the entire people of Israel is enriched.

But these conflicts will not exist forever. As long as there is strife and dissension, holiness cannot be properly established. In the future it will become clear that all of the different lights share a common root, and are really one single light. Therefore, the blessing of Chanukah, which also encompasses the future potential, speaks of a single “Chanukah light.” (Silver from the Land of Israel, pp. 118-119. Adapted from Olat Re’iyah, pp. 433-435.)

1 The Kabbalists described the active sephirot as “masculine,” and the receptive sephirot as “feminine.”

### **Fragrant Havdalah By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff**

Question #1: Perfume Reuven asks: May I use perfume for havdalah?

Question #2: Hadasim Freidel queries: If I use hadasim for havdalah, what beracha should I recite prior to smelling them?

Question #3: Fragrantly Distant Yael ponders: If someone is distant from the besamim at the time that havdalah is recited, what should they do?

Question #4: No Smell Yehudah questions: I have no sense of smell. Does that mean that someone else in the family must recite havdalah?

Question #5: No Fragrance Zevulun asks: I am on the high seas and have no besamim with me. Does that mean that I cannot recite havdalah until I locate some fragrance? Introduction In a different article, I discussed the order of the four berachos that we recite weekly when we make havdalah. In that article, I mentioned that we smell fragrances on motza’ei Shabbos to console our souls over the loss of the neshamah yeseirah -- the extra aspect of the neshamah that we receive when Shabbos arrives that helps us appreciate the cholent, the kugel and the other Shabbos delicacies -- that departs when Shabbos ends. This article will emphasize the halachos regarding the fragrances that we smell as part of the havdalah procedure.

I. Which fragrances warrant a beracha? In general, when we smell pleasant fragrances, we are required to recite a beracha before smelling them. However, we do not recite a beracha on just anything that has a pleasant smell. Pleasant fragrances upon which one may not recite a beracha fall under four general categories:

A. Forbidden fragrances, such as that used in idol worship or sorcery, or the perfume of an ervah (Rambam, Hilchos Berachos 9:7, based on Berachos 53a). Even if a small amount of a forbidden fragrance is mixed into a potpourri of other fragrances, one does not recite a beracha before smelling the blend (Biur Halacha 217:8).

B. Fragrances whose purpose is not for pleasurable smelling (Berachos 53a; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 217:2 and 297:2). These include: Deodorizers and other fragrances meant to neutralize bad odors; fragrances not meant for their aroma, but for other purpose, such as to add taste to food; items with only subtle fragrance that most people do not appreciate; items that most people do not consider fragrances, such as shampoos, essential oils, lotions or even fresh bread.

C. Fragrances whose source no longer exists, such as when you can still smell the residual aroma in the air or when you enjoy the smell of an empty besamim or esrog box.

D. Some recent authorities suggest that we should not recite a beracha on a synthetically created fragrance (Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, quoted in Shemiras Shabbos Kehilchasah, Vol. 2, Pg. 263 note 32). Synthetic fragrances are very common in perfumes, colognes, aftershave lotions etc., since synthetic aromas are frequently less expensive and their scent is more predictable than natural perfumes.

However, other authorities dispute this ruling, contending that fragrance should not be different from “synthetic food” made from a non-food substance, such as alcohol, vinegar, candies or flavoring whose source is petrochemical -- which is very common today.

**Perfume** Our opening question, from Reuven, was: May I use perfume for havdalah? I presume that Reuven was asking whether it could be used for the besamim of havdalah. (If he meant to ask if perfume can be used instead of wine, then the answer will have to wait for a future article that I am planning to write.) As we have seen, there may be several reasons why perfume should not be used: 1. It might be included under perfumes of ervah. 2. According to Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, it does not warrant a beracha since the flavor component might be synthetic.

**II. Hadasim** Several early sources, both halachic and kabbalistic, mention a preference to use hadasim as the fragrance for havdalah (Zohar; Tur, Orach Chayim 297). The various reasons cited also relate to the hashkafic reasons and lessons attached to the role of hadasim on Sukkos. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 297:4) rules that it is customary to use hadasim as besamim for havdalah. However, this sometimes created two difficulties, one, halachic, and the other, practical.

First, the halachic issue: The Gemara and halachic authorities note that there is not just one beracha to recite on pleasant smelling fragrances, but five different berachos, just as there are six different berachos recited on different types of food: hamotzi, mezonos, hagafen, ha'eitz, ha'adamah and shehakol. The five “fragrant berachos” are:

1. Borei shemen areiv, “Who creates pleasant oil,” is recited only before smelling the oil of the balsam tree (see Mishnah Berurah 216:22).
2. Hanosein (or, according to many opinions, Asher nasan) rei’ach tov ba’peiros, “Who bestows (or bestowed) pleasant fragrances in fruits,” is recited before smelling edible fruits and other foods (Shulchan Aruch 216:2; Rema 216:14). In the context of this beracha, peiros means not only what we usually call “fruit,” but anything usually considered edible. We will explain this a bit more shortly.
3. Borei atzei besamim, “Who creates fragrant wood (or fragrant trees).” One recites this beracha before smelling fragrant woody plants and trees or their leaves, seeds, flowers, wood, or oils. Hadasim are certainly in this category, since they grow on a woody branch and bush.
4. Borei isvei besamim, “Who creates fragrant grasses.” We recite this beracha before smelling non-woody plants, their parts and extracts. We will shortly note a point regarding whether a particular plant is called “woody” or “non-woody.” (The technical term for “non-woody” is “herbaceous.”)

5. Borei minei besamim, “Who creates different types of fragrances.” This is the “catch-all” beracha for all fragrances, the equivalent of reciting a shehakol on food. Sometimes, it is the preferred beracha, such as when the fragrance is not of any of the above sources, such as musk, which is of an animal source. It is also used when smelling a blend of several pleasant-smelling substances that have different berachos, such as, if someone mixed hadasim with esrogim. Other times, it is the beracha used to resolve uncertain cases, as we will see shortly.

However, since it can be used successfully on any fragrance, if someone, in error or without knowing, recited it before smelling balsam oil, esrogim, hadasim or mint, they will have fulfilled the beracha requirement and should not go back and recite the correct beracha.

**Hadasim** At this point, let us address Freidel’s question, the second of those beginning our article: “If I use hadasim for havdalah, what beracha should I recite prior to smelling them?”

As mentioned above, the beracha before reciting hadasim is borei atzei besamim. However, the Shelah rules that, when reciting havdalah, one should always recite borei minei besamim because not everyone knows the halachos of what berachos to recite on fragrances, and yet everyone is required to recite havdalah. On the other hand, there are other early authorities who clearly do not hold like the Shelah, and contend that lechatchilah one is always required to recite the correct beracha when smelling a fragrance, even for havdalah, just as one is always required to recite the correct beracha when eating. In their opinion, when smelling hadasim for havdalah, one should recite borei atzei besamim (Rabbeinu Yerucham, quoted by Magen Avraham, introduction to 297). The Mishnah Berurah (297:1) quotes the Shelah’s opinion as the primary one, but recommends avoiding the shaylah by using for havdalah something upon which the beracha is borei minei besamim. Among the possible choices is using a blend of fragrances that each alone requires a different bracha, or an item upon which there is a safek as to what its beracha is. The result of this discussion is that, according to the Mishnah Berurah, it is not ideal to use exclusively hadasim for besamim in havdalah, but it is preferred to mix hadasim with something that requires a beracha other than borei atzei besamim.

Above, I mentioned that some halachic and kabbalistic sources express a preference to use hadasim as the fragrance for havdalah (Zohar, Tur, Orach Chayim 297). Aside from the halachic issue just explained, there was also a practical problem in that the hadas, called myrtle in English, does not grow in cold climates. Jews in central and eastern Europe were able to get hadasim for Sukkos only with tremendous difficulty, and they were often dried out and without fragrance by the time they arrived. Although crushing the dried hadasim releases some of the fragrance, they were certainly not as fragrant as fresh hadasim or as other varieties of fragrance that were available. For this reason, there is discussion, already in the rishonim, whether to use hadasim for besamim. The conclusion of the Rema (Orach Chayim 297:4) is to take fragrant items available in the area and add some dried hadasim to them. The common practice in Ashkenaz was to use cloves as the fragrance for havdalah, presumably because they have a pleasant odor when dried and were readily available. A clove is the dried flower bud that grows on a tree. The clove is consumed only as a spice, but is not eaten on its own. Among the halachic authorities, we find four opinions which beracha to recite before smelling cloves:

- A. Hanosein rei’ach tov ba’peiros The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 216:2) rules that Hanosein rei’ach tov ba’peiros is the correct beracha to say before smelling cloves, contending that this beracha is recited on anything that is consumed, even if only as a seasoning.

- B. Borei atzei besamim Many authorities rule that we recite Hanosein rei’ach tov ba’peiros only on items that are eaten on their own, but not if they are solely a flavoring. Cloves are, therefore, discounted as a food item and treated exclusively as a fragrance. Since the clove grows on a woody stem, these authorities rule that we should recite Borei atzei besamim before smelling cloves (Yalkut Yosef 216:4).

- C. Borei isvei besamim Some contend that Borei atzei besamim is recited only on a fragrance that grows on what is considered a tree for all other halachos. The stem of a clove tree is hollow, which, according to some opinions, precludes it from being considered a tree. Therefore, some consider it an herbaceous plant, upon which the correct beracha is Borei isvei besamim. Apparently, this is the common custom among Yemenite Jews (Ohr Zion Vol. 2 pg. 136; Vezos Haberacha, pg. 174).

- D. Borei minei besamim Because of the disputes quoted above, many rule that one should recite Borei minei besamim on cloves, to avoid any halachic issues (Elyah Rabbah 216:9; Mishnah Berurah 216:16). This is the accepted practice among Ashkenazim and by many Sefardic poskim (Birkei Yosef 216:5; Kaf Hachayim 216:34; Ohr Zion Vol. 2 pg. 136).

In accordance with the custom cited by the Rema and to avoid any shaylos, this author makes a mixture of cloves, cinnamon and dried hadasim for havdalah and crushes the hadasim prior to reciting havdalah, to release their fragrance of the hadasim.

**III. Take time to smell the cloves!** Yael asked: What should someone do if he is distant from the besamim at the time that the havdalah is recited?

It happens that not every individual has an opportunity to smell the besamim at the time the beracha on them is recited. In such situations, they should not smell the besamim while the other berachos are recited, but should wait until after the havdalah wine is drunk and then they may recite a beracha and smell the besamim.

IV. No sense of smell At this point, let us analyze the fourth of our opening questions: “I cannot smell. Does that mean that someone else in the family must recite havdalah?”

In general, someone cannot recite a beracha of benefit, such as a beracha on food or beverage, for another person, unless the person reciting the beracha is also benefiting from the food or beverage and is required to recite a beracha before he may partake in the food or beverage. The exception to this rule is when the beracha is required in order to fulfill a mitzvah. For example, someone who has already fulfilled the mitzvah of kiddush may recite kiddush for someone who has, as yet, not fulfilled the mitzvah. Similarly, someone who has already fulfilled the mitzvah of havdalah may recite havdalah for someone who has, as yet, not heard havdalah.

Why is wine different? In both of these instances, the person reciting kiddush or havdalah may recite the beracha of *hagafen*, even though he will not be drinking the wine and someone else will. Why can he recite a beracha on the wine, when he is not partaking from it? The answer is that, in these instances, the beracha on the wine is also considered a *birkas hamitzvah*, a beracha recited upon performing a mitzvah, and not merely a beracha of benefit. When assisting someone else to perform a mitzvah, I can recite a beracha on the other person’s behalf, and that includes even the beracha recited on the wine as part of performing the mitzvah.

There is one other exception to this rule: I may recite a beracha of benefit to teach my child how to recite it (for the purpose of *chinuch*), notwithstanding that I am not benefiting at the moment and would otherwise be unable to recite the beracha. As we will see shortly, reciting a beracha on fragrances is not a requirement on *motza’ei Shabbos*, but simply a consolation to the *neshamah yeseirah*. As such, if I cannot smell the fragrances, I cannot recite the beracha on them. If I have children who are old enough to be responsible to recite berachos but are not yet halachically adults, I can recite the beracha on *besamim* for them and have them smell the fragrances. Otherwise, someone who cannot smell fragrances may not recite the beracha of *besamim*.

V. No fragrance At this point, let us analyze the last of our opening questions: Zevulun asks, “I am on the high seas and have no *besamim* with me. Does that mean that I cannot recite havdalah until I locate some fragrance?”

Regarding the beracha recited on a flame as part of havdalah, the Gemara states, “We do not search to find a flame as we search to observe a mitzvah” (*Berachos 53b*), meaning that there is no requirement to hunt for a flame in order to recite the beracha of *borei me’orei ha’eish*. Regarding someone who has no fragrance available, the Rosh reasons that the same law applies, since the rationale for the beracha on a flame on *motza’ei Shabbos* is stronger than that for reciting a beracha on fragrances. Therefore, once the Gemara rules that there is no requirement to search for a flame, there is certainly no requirement to look for fragrances; thus, it is better to recite havdalah when all are assembled than to delay. This ruling is accepted by the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim 297:1*) and all later authorities.

Conclusion In a monumental essay, Rav Hirsch (*Bereishis 8:21*) explains that the expression *rei’ach nicho’ach*, usually translated as “a pleasant fragrance,” should more accurately be rendered, “an expression of compliance.” He demonstrates that the word *nicho’ach* means “giving satisfaction” and the concept of *rei’ach* is used because fragrance implies receiving a very slight impression of something that is distant. Thus, when a korban is offered as a *rei’ach nicho’ach*, it means that it shows a small expression of our fulfilling Hashem’s will. Similarly, our observing all the details of the laws of *Shabbos*, down to the minutia of the halachos on fragrances, demonstrates our praising Hashem for even His small kindnesses.

<https://www.bircas.org/chanukah-5786/>

Chanukah 5786

**A Springboard to Thanking Hashem**

**By Rabbi Moshe Krieger, Yeshivas Bircas HaTorah ([www.bircas.org](http://www.bircas.org))**

Throughout Chanukah, we say in our prayers and in *bentching* the *Al Hanissim* prayer, which relates in detail the miraculous military victory of the Chashmonaim over the Greeks. Also, in *haneiros halalu*, we say that we are lighting the candles as a remembrance of Hashem’s great redemption of the Jewish nation at that time.

However, when the Talmud discusses the reason why the Sages enacted the holiday of Chanukah (*Shabbos 21b*), the military victory is barely mentioned, and the sages focus only on the miracle of the flask of oil, which

had enough oil to light only for one day, yet it remained lit for eight days until new, pure oil could be brought to the Beis Hamikdash.

There are clearly two main themes to Chanukah, the miraculous military victory and the miracle of the oil. Why is only one element present in our prayers, and the other present when discussing the basis for the *yon tov*? Rav Chaim Friedlander answers that the miraculous victory over the Greeks is for us the main miracle of Chanukah, because without that, the Jewish People could have been brought to extinction, *chalila*. As impressive as the miracle of the oil was, that alone would not have stopped the gentiles from making edicts against us, nor would it have ended the war. We praise Hashem on Chanukah for the fact that we’re still here, as a nation keeping His mitzvos!

However, for the Sages to institute that the days of Chanukah be special days of *Hallel* and *hodaah* (giving thanks to Hashem), this required a much stronger revelation than a military victory. This is because when considering the Chashmonaim’s victory over the Greeks, it could look as though in some small way, their going out to the battlefield to fight was what led to victory. Even though all could see that the Chashmonaim were a handful of kohanim and the Greeks were the most trained and equipped army of that era, still, whatever efforts the Chashmonaim made were enough to make the victory appear less than 100 percent miraculous. The miracle of the oil, however, was something that no human being could claim a part of. For such a miracle, the Sages decreed special days of *Hallel* and *hodaah*, but their intent was that this serve as the basis to recognize that just as the flask of oil was purely miraculous, so was the war. We’re expected to thank Hashem for the victory against the Greeks, but in order for us to recognize that this victory was Hashem’s alone, we first need the miracle of the flask of oil, which brings us to recognition and *hodaah*.

Rav Friedlander goes on to say that just as the miracle of the oil was intended to help us see that the war was purely a miracle, so too all of the miracles of Chanukah (war and oil alike) are expected to open our eyes to the fact that all of our lives are really miracles. Every day, the fact that we wake up in the morning, get out of bed unassisted and resume a day full of Torah and mitzvos — are these not open miracles? How many people don’t get up in the morning, *chalila*, or require assistance to do so? How often in our history were Jews unable to keep mitzvos due to religious persecution? Rav Friedlander bases this idea on the Ramban (*Shemos 13:16*), who states that from the great and grandiose miracles, we are expected to learn that all of our lives are miracles, and to thank Hashem for all of them.

The Alter of Kelm would say that this recognition of miracles answers the famous question of the Beis Yosef (*Orach Chaim 670*): Why do we light Chanukah candles for eight days? Is it because one day’s worth of oil in the Beis Hamikdash lit for eight days? If so, we should light for only seven days, because only after that first day could the burning of the oil be called a miracle!

The Alter of Kelm would say that we light for eight days because that first day was also a miracle — because nature is a miracle. In fact, there is no such thing as “nature,” meaning some natural flow of events that follows a charted, predictable course. There is no such thing! All of life is miracles! When we light the menorah that first day of Chanukah, this is recognition and a *hodaah* that what the gentiles call “nature” we also call “a miracle” and thank Hashem for!

Indeed, the misconception that there are “forces of nature” that act independently of a Creator — this was the heretical philosophy of the Greeks. Whatever we do to strengthen our emuna that all of our lives are miracles, particularly during Chanukah, is a new victory against the Greeks.

Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein points out that we should devote time to thinking into the details of our lives to see just how many things that happen to us can qualify as miracles. If we’re married, that didn’t just happen. If we have children, that too was a miracle. And livelihood? The Sages say that a man’s livelihood is no less a miracle than the Splitting of the Red Sea! (*Pesachim 118a*). How often were we suffering from ailments that one day disappeared? Did we thank Hashem for that? If not, let’s do it now!

And even before thinking about personal redemptions, what about the miracles that happen daily? As we mentioned, we woke up this morning, opened our eyes and could see. We were able to stand up straight, get dressed and walk on solid ground. Shouldn't we thank Hashem for all of these things? Each one of them merits a separate blessing in the *birchos hashachar*. Shouldn't we put more *kavana* into these brachos?

Moreover, let's talk openly with others about the miracles of our lives. If something good happens, publicize it! Tell your children: "Daddy was almost late for an appointment, but he made the bus!" If you felt *siyatta deShemaya* in finishing all of the Shabbos preparations on time, share this with the family. The more we speak about Hashem's miracles, the more a sense of gratitude and *hodaah* becomes a part of us.

When at a seuda together with the family, say: Where did this food come from? How many miracles did it take for us to have *challa*? First, the ground required rain, and then wheat kernels sprouted in the moist soil. Slowly, growth began emerging, a stalk and more wheat kernels. And how did it get to us? Hashem gave us money, etc...

Take a visit to the zoo with your family and speak about the wonders of Hashem and the myriad, picturesque creatures He gives life to!

Once, Rav Zilberstein paid a visit to a renowned talmid chacham who was suffering from cancer. The man was writhing in pain, yet he managed to greet Rav Zilberstein with a smile, and it was clear that despite his physical pain, he was in good spirits.

Rav Zilberstein asked him how he was able to withstand his pain so heroically, and the answer he received was a lesson in *hodaah*:

"It's true that I'm in pain, but I keep thinking, look at how much Hashem gave me throughout my life. I merited to spend many years studying Torah in good health. During those years, I married and merited a family, and I have nachas from all of them, even now, despite my illness. Yes, I'm in pain, but after all Hashem did for me, how can I complain? How can I just forget all the good I received already?"

"And what about us?" Rav Zilberstein would ask, as he recounted this incident to others. "How many times is everything going well, but one little thing goes wrong and we feel as if everything is bad? Do we even think about thanking Hashem at that time, for all the many good things that continue to happen?"

May we recognize Hashem's miracles and thank Him for them!

---

from: **Rabbi YY Jacobson** <rabbiiy@theyeshiva.net> info@theyeshiva.net  
date: Dec 11, 2025, 10:57 PM

How to Deal with Temptation & Toxic Thoughts

by Rabbi YY Jacobson

A Rare Musical Note in the Torah Captures the Struggle and how to Overcome It  
Biblical Music

The Torah is well known as a book of words. Less known is the fact that it is a book of tunes. Each word of the Torah contains a musical note with which it is read and sung in synagogues whenever the Torah is read publicly.

This is what makes the reading of the Torah a challenging task. Since these notes are not transcribed in the Torah itself—they were transmitted orally from generation to generation—the person reading the Torah must memorize the appropriate note for each word.

These musical notes, passed down from Moses through the generations, are extremely meticulous and significant. They often expose us to a word's or a sentence's depth that we would never have appreciated from the word or sentence itself.

One of the rarest and most unusual musical notes in the Torah is known in Hebrew as the "shalsheles." No other written musical note of the Torah is rendered in a repetitive style except the shalsheles, which stubbornly repeats itself three times. The graphic notation of this note, too, looks like a streak of lightning, a "zigzag movement," a mark that goes repeatedly backward and forward. This unique musical note appears no more than four times in all of the Torah, three times in Genesis and once in Leviticus[1]. One of them is in this week's portion, Vayeishev, at a moment of high moral and psychological drama.

The Refusal

Here is the story:

Joseph is an extremely handsome teenager and his father Jacob's favorite child. He is sold into slavery by his brothers, who loathe him. Displayed on the Egyptian market, he is bought by a prominent Egyptian citizen, Potiphar, who ultimately chooses the slave to become the head of his household. There, Joseph attracts the lustful imagination of his master's wife. She desperately tries to engage him in a relationship, yet he steadfastly refuses her.

Here is the Torah's description[2]:

"Joseph was well-built and handsome in his appearance. After a while, his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me.' But he refused.

"He said: 'With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against G-d?'

Over the verb "but he refused," tradition has placed a shalsheles, the thrice-repeated musical note.

What is the significance of this rare note on this particular verb, so rare in the Torah?

There is one more intriguing detail in this narrative, concerning Joseph's response to the woman's proposition. When his master's wife asks him to lie with her, we would expect Joseph to first explain to her why he cannot accept her offer, and then conclude by saying "no." Yet the Torah tells us that the first thing Joseph did was refuse her. Only afterward does he justify his refusal. Why?

I will offer two fascinating interpretations. One comes from the 13th-century Spanish sage and commentator, Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi (1280-1345), in his commentary on this verse. The other comes from one of the great Polish Chassidic masters, Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam (1815-1898), known as "the Shinever Rav," in his work *Divrei Yechezkel*.

The Struggle

According to Joseph Ibn Caspi, the musical note captures Joseph's inner doubt. The shalsheles is an unusual note. It goes up and down, up and down, as if unable to move forward to the next note, and it was meant to convey a psychological state of uncertainty and indecision. The graphic notation of the shalsheles itself looks like a streak of lightning, a "zigzag movement," a mark that goes repeatedly backwards and forwards. It conveys frozen motion, in which the agent is torn by inner conflict. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks defines it in an essay as "the music of ambivalence."

We can imagine, writes Rabbi Sacks[2\*], the conflict in Joseph's mind at that moment. On the one hand, his entire moral sense said No. It would be a betrayal of everything his family stood for: their ethic of moral propriety and their strong sense of identity as children of the covenant. It would also be, as Joseph himself says, a betrayal of the Creator, and of Potiphar himself: "With me in charge, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"

And yet the temptation, tradition tells us[3], was intense. Joseph is a 17-year-old slave in a foreign country. He does not even own his body; his master exercises full control over his life, as was the fate of all ancient slaves. Joseph has not a single friend or relative in the world. One could only imagine his loneliness. Joseph would not need to return home in the evening to face a dedicated spouse or a spiritual father, nor would he have to go back to a family or a community of moral standing. His family's reputation would not be besmirched. He would remain alone after the event, just as he was alone before it.

In addition, we must recall the power possessed by this Egyptian noblewoman who was inciting Joseph. The Talmud[4] describes the techniques she used to persuade Joseph. "Every day," the Talmud says, "the wife of Potiphar would attempt to seduce him with words. Cloth she wore for him in the morning, she would not wear for him in the evening. Cloth she wore for him in the evening, she would not wear for him in the morning. She said to him, 'Surrender yourself to me.' He answered her 'No.' She threatened him, 'I shall confine you in prison... I shall subdue your proud stature... I will blind your eyes,'" but Joseph refused her. She then gave him a huge sum of money, but he did not budge.

At the end, she followed through on her threat, having him incarcerated in prison in an Egyptian dungeon on the false charges that he attempted to violate her. (At the end, he was freed after 12 years.)

The Talmud[5] gives a graphic description of his inner torment:

"The image of his father appeared to him in the window and said, 'Joseph, your brothers' names are destined to be inscribed on the stones of the [high priest's] apron, and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be erased? Do you want to be called an adulterer?'"

The shalsheles is an elegant commentary on Joseph's struggle. A slave, with no realistic hope of rescue, was he to become an Egyptian, with all the promiscuity that implied? Or would he remain faithful to his past, his conscience, his identity? In the end, Joseph refuses, but not without deep inner struggle.

Rabbi Joseph Ibn Caspi, writing in the 13th century, adds a vulnerable comment about himself: It is quite possible, he writes, that someone else with the same name would have chosen another path... He is referring to himself, as his name was Yosef, suggesting that he might have failed under those circumstances.

A Thundering No

How did Joseph overcome the enormous challenge?

This too is captured (according to the *Divrei Yechezkel*) by the rare musical note of the Shlasheles. Joseph may have suffered internally from ambivalence. But once he made the decision, he was all in.

Aware of the danger in front of him, Joseph presented the woman with a thundering "no." As the thrice-repetitive "shalsheles" note suggests, Joseph, in unwavering determination, declared three times: "No! No! No!" Forget about it, I will not do this! No buts, ifs, or maybes. Once Joseph decided on his course of action, there was no negotiation, no giving in. Only afterward did Joseph allow himself the indulgence of the rational argument against adultery.

When it comes to temptation, addiction, and toxic cravings and thoughts, you can't become a negotiator, because then you will remain in the obsessive loop of anxiety and addiction. You must be determined, ruthless, and single-minded. You must, with calm conviction, repeat the same "no" over and over again. Never allow room for nuance, negotiation, or ambivalence. The moment you begin explaining and justifying your behavior, you are likely to lose the battle. Only after an absolute and non-negotiable "no" can you proceed with the intellectual argument behind your decision.

The Push

There is an insightful expression about the way a person should deal with immoral and destructive thoughts, impulses, and fantasies. "You must push them away with both of your hands," says the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schnuer Zalman of Liadi in his *Tanya*[6].

What does it mean to push away a thought "with two hands?"

At times, you can push away a negative thought with one hand only. By fighting and arguing with the thought and the impulse, you give it validation. In effect, while pushing it away with one hand, you are inviting it to return with your second hand.

If you engage in these types of internal arguments and debates, you always lose. It is exactly what these thoughts hope for: To keep you locked into an endless loop of self-criticism, guilt, shame, and anxiety.

Pushing an impulse away with two hands means that you simply and silently dismiss it from your brain. Without argument, fanfare, or drama, you let it go. You make it very clear that you will not be going down that rabbit hole, and you must move on to alternative thoughts and actions. You do not validate it in any way, not even by arguing against it. You simply do not attribute any power or significance to it. That is what we call pushing it away "with both hands."

You do it without guilt or shame, without blaming yourself for how bad and sick you are. You do it with regulation and calmness, knowing who you really are at your core, and how you want to show up to life right now. From a regulated space, you allow these thoughts to pass through you, like the black clouds in the sky, so the sun can begin shining.

At a later point, you will have the serenity and mental bandwidth to discover the origin of these thoughts, why and how they developed, and how to unburden them from their need to drive you mad. For those of us who deal with anxiety and an inner critic who never goes on vacation, we will have to take time to address the origin of these thoughts, so that we do not suffer endlessly. But right now, in the heat and anxiety of the moment, learn how to let go of these nasty thoughts with a quiet grace, and without an argument, coming from your inner self-respect and clarity.

That is why the Hebrew word, "and he refused, Vayemaen," is the same letters as the Hebrew word "and he believed, Vayaaman," because the power to refuse these thoughts with such calm and conviction comes from your deep faith in G-d and in your own Divinity. You have an inner knowing that this action and these thoughts are a betrayal of G-d and of your own deepest truth. That faith allows

you to avoid the confusion of not knowing who you are and how you want to proceed. You can just say: "This is not what I want for my life."

In this story of Joseph, then, we are given a timeless lesson of how to deal with disturbing, immoral, and debilitating thoughts and inclinations. Do not try to strike deals with them, or to convince them otherwise. They are fighting for their life, and will do anything to keep you stuck. Just say: No! No! No! We are not going down this path.

They will accuse you of being ignorant, dishonest, and stupid. So what? You will come out with a happier marriage and a meaningful life.[7]

(Please make even a small and secure contribution to help us continue our work. Click here.)

[1] Genesis 19:16; 24:12; 39:8; Leviticus 8:23. [2] Genesis 39:6-9. [2\*]

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayera/the-music-of-ambivalence/> [3] In the continuation of the narrative, the Torah states (Genesis 39:11-12): "There was an opportune day when he entered the house to do his work, and none of the household staff was inside. She grabbed him by his cloak and pleaded, 'Lie with me.' He ran away from her, leaving his cloak in her hand, and he fled outside." What is the meaning of the phrase that Joseph "entered the house do to his work, and none of the household staff was inside?" What type of work did Joseph come to do? The Midrash suggests that the "work" Joseph came to do was to yield to the advances of his master's wife. After all of her unceasing pleas, Joseph finally succumbed. Only at the last moment did he abstain (Bereishis Rabah 87:7. Tanchumah 8-9. Zohar Vayechi 222a. See also Sotah 36b, quoted in Rashi to Genesis ibid). [4] Yuma 36a. [5] Sotah 36b. [6] Tanya chapter 12. [7] This essay on based on *Divrei Yechezkel* by the great Chassidic master Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam, known as "the Shinever Rav," as well as Tanya chapters 27-28.

\*\*\*\*\*  
**THE TANACH STUDY CENTER** [www.tanach.org](http://www.tanach.org)  
*In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag*  
**Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag**  
\*\*\*\*\*

### **PARSHAT VA'YESHEV - Who Sold Yosef?**

Could it be that the brothers DID NOT sell Yosef!

As shocking as this statement may sound to anyone familiar with the story of Yosef & his brothers; a careful reading of that narrative in Chumash may actually support this possibility!

In the following shiur, we explore this fascinating possibility (and its consequences) while taking into account some important geographic considerations.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

After throwing your brother into a pit to die, would you be able to 'sit down to eat'? The brothers did, so does the Torah tell us (see 37:24-25)! But when they sat down to eat, the Torah DOES NOT tell us if they sat NEAR the pit, listening to Yosef's screaming and pleading; OR if they sat FAR AWAY from the pit - to enjoy some 'peace and quiet'?

So what difference does it make?

Believe it or not, this tiny detail affects our understanding of almost every aspect of the story that ensues. Our shiur will entertain each possibility - showing how this 'missing detail' may be what leads several commentators to conclude that the brothers may never have sold Yosef after all!

However, before we discuss that detail, we must first review the Torah's description of these events, making sure that we understand not only what everyone is doing and planning, but more important - what everyone is thinking!

[We should also point out, that the distance between Hebron, where Yaakov is living, and Dotan, where the brothers are grazing their sheep, is about 100 kilometers. Therefore, the brothers are probably gone for at least several weeks. Certainly, they don't come home to Hebron to sleep at night, rather, they have set up a 'campsite' in the Dotan area.]

#### **PLAN A - THE BROTHERS / FIRST DEGREE MURDER**

Recall that as soon as Yosef arrives at Dotan, the brothers conspire to kill him (see 37:18-20). However, their plan concerning HOW to kill him is revised several times.

To show how, let's begin with the brothers' original plan to kill Yosef, as soon as they saw him [PLAN A]:

"They (the brothers) saw him from afar, and before he came close... they conspired to kill him. And they said to one another, behold the 'dreamer' is coming. Now, let's KILL him and throw his body into one of the pits..." (see 37:18-20).

Note how the brothers originally plan to kill Yosef immediately (on the spot) and then 'bury him' in a pit - most likely to 'hide the evidence' (should their father later accuse them).

Although Reuven opposes Yosef's murder, he realizes that the brothers would not accept his opinion. Therefore, instead of arguing with his brothers, he devises a shrewd plan that will first postpone Yosef's execution, and enable him at a later time to secretly bring Yosef back home.

[See further iyun for an explanation of why specifically Reuven wants to save Yosef.]

#### **PLAN B - REUVEN'S PLAN / SECOND DEGREE MURDER**

As you read Reuven's plan, be sure to differentiate between what Reuven SAYS (to his brothers) and what Reuven THINKS (to himself):

"... And Reuven said... 'Do not shed blood, cast him into a pit [in order that he die] OUT IN THE 'MIDBAR' (wilderness), but do not touch him yourselves --'

[End of quote! Then, the narrative continues by informing the reader of Reuven's true intentions...]

"in order to save him [Yosef] from them and return him to his father." (37:22).

Reuven's 'official' plan (that the brothers accept) is to let Yosef die in a less violent manner, i.e. to throw him alive into a deep pit to die, instead of murdering him in cold blood. However, Reuven's secretly plans to later return to that pit and free him.

Note how Reuven even suggests the specific 'pit' into which to throw Yosef - "ha-bor HA-ZEH asher ba-midbar"! Most probably so that he can later sneak away to that pit and save him.

[Compare this to the brothers' original plan to throw him into "one of the pits" (37:20) - possibly a pit closer by.]

Unaware of Reuven's true intentions, the brothers agree.

Yosef arrives, and - in accordance with PLAN B - the brothers immediately strip Yosef of his special cloak and throw him alive into the pit (see 37:23-24). Afterward, the Torah informs us, they sit down to eat (see 37:25).

#### **WHERE ARE THEY EATING?**

Until this point, the plot is clear. Now, two important details are missing which affect our understanding of the rest of the story.

- 1) WHERE did they sit down to eat, i.e. close by or far away?
- 2) WHERE is REUVEN, eating with them, or off on his own?

Even though the Torah does not tell us, we can attempt to answer these two questions by employing some 'deductive reasoning'.

#### **(1) Where are the brothers eating?**

Recall that the brothers are grazing their sheep in the Dotan area [see 37:17/ today the area of Jenin, between Shechem and Afula], which is on the northern slopes of central mountain range of Israel. The midbar" [wilderness], that Reuven is talking about, is found some 5-10 kilometer to the east of Dotan (that "midbar" is found along the eastern slopes of the entire central mountain range).

Considering that the brothers throw Yosef into a pit 'out in the MIDBAR', it would definitely make sense for them to return afterward to their campsite in the Dotan area to eat (see 37:16-17). Besides, it would not be very appetizing to eat lunch while listening to your little brother screaming for his life from a pit nearby - see 42:21 for proof that he was indeed screaming. ]

And even should one conclude that it would have been just as logical for them to have sat down to eat near the pit, when we consider the whereabouts of Reuven, it becomes quite clear that they must have sat down to eat farther away.

[Later in the shiur, we will bring textual proof for this assumption as well.

#### **2) Where is Reuven?**

Considering that Reuven's real plan is to later save Yosef from the pit, it would only be logical from him to either stay near the pit, or at least remain with his brothers (wherever they may be). Certainly it would not make sense, according to his real plan, for him to go far away, and to leave his brothers by the pit!

However, from the continuation of the story we know for sure that Reuven did not stay near the pit, because he RETURNS to the pit only AFTER Yosef is sold! Therefore, if Reuven left the pit area, then certainly the brothers also must have left that area. Hence, it would only be logical to conclude that the brothers are indeed eating away from the pit, and Reuven must be eating with them!

After all, not joining them for lunch could raise their suspicion. Furthermore, the Torah never tells us that he left his brothers.

In summary, by taking the logic of Reuven's plan into consideration, we conclude that Reuven remains with his brothers, as they all sit down to eat AWAY from the pit.

[Obviously, this interpretation does not follow Rashi's explanation that Reuven had left his brothers, as it was his turn to take of his father. See further iyun section for a discussion of how and why our shiur disagrees with that approach, and prefers the approach of Rashbam and Chizkuni.]

### PLAN C - YEHUDA'S PLAN / A 'QUICK BUCK'

Now that we have established that Reuven and the brothers are sitting down to eat at a distance far away from the pit, we can continue our study of the narrative, to see if this conclusion fits with its continuation:

"And the brothers sat down to eat, and they **lifted up their eyes** and saw a caravan of Yishmaelim coming **from the Gilad** carrying [spices]... to Egypt.

Then Yehuda said to his brothers, 'What do we gain by killing our brother ... let us **SELL** him [instead] to the Yishmaelim; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh, and his brothers agreed" (37:25-27).

[From Yehuda's suggestion, it becomes clear that the brothers truly planned to allow Yosef to die in the pit, and were unaware of Reuven's intention to save him.]

If indeed Reuven is still sitting with his brothers, then this new plan (to **sell** Yosef) puts him in quite a predicament, for if the brothers would sell Yosef, his own plan to rescue him would be ruined. Reuven has only one alternative - he must 'volunteer' to fetch Yosef from the pit, in order to free him - before his brothers may sell him.

What happens when Reuven returns to the pit? We'll soon see. But before we continue, we must provide a little background on Israel's geography, which is essential towards understanding the psukim that follow.

### THE ANCIENT TRADE ROUTE

Recall that Yosef met his brothers while they were grazing their sheep in the hilly area of Dotan (see 37:17), north of Shechem. Recall as well that during their meal, the brothers 'lifted up their eyes' and noticed a caravan of **YISHMAELIM** traveling down from the **GILAD** (today, the northern mountain range in Jordan), on its way to Egypt (see 37:25).

Now, when we read this story in Chumash, most everyone assumes that this convoy will soon pass nearby the spot where the brothers are eating. However, when we consider the geography involved, it is more probable to arrive at a very different conclusion!

This **CARAVAN** of Yishmaelim (camels et al.) most likely should be traveling along the ancient trade route (better known as the **Via Maris**), which crosses through Emek Yizrael (the Jezreel Valley) on its way toward the Mediterranean coast. Therefore, this convoy, now sighted by the brothers as it descends from the Gilad Mountains in Transjordan, must first pass through the Bet She'an valley, continuing on towards Afula and Megiddo in Emek Yizrael, on its way towards the coast. Certainly, it would NOT pass the hilly area of Dotan, for it would make no sense for the caravan to climb the Gilboa mountain range to cross through the Dotan area to reach the coast. Let's explain why.

Dotan, today the area of Jenin (about 20 kilometers north of Shechem) lies about 10 kilometers **SOUTH** of this main highway (the **Via Maris**) as it crosses Emek Yizrael. In altitude, Dotan sits about 300-400 meters above Emek Yizrael. Hence, from the hills of the Dotan/Gilboa area (where the brothers are eating lunch), one has a nice view of both the Gilad and parts of the Jezreel valley. However, the trade route itself follows through valley that cuts between the mountains.

This explains why the brothers are able to see a Ishmaelite caravan (convoy) as it was descending from the Gilad towards Bet She'an on its way to Emek Yizrael. Even though it was in sight, it was still far enough away to allow the brothers at least several hours to meet it, when it would pass some ten kilometers to the north. Therefore, in order to sell Yosef to that caravan, the brothers would have to first fetch Yosef from the pit, and carry him on a short trip till they meet the caravan in Emek Yizrael. They have ample time to first 'finish their meal', go fetch Yosef from the pit in the 'midbar' (on their way to the Emek), and then meet the convoy to sell Yosef.

### SOMEBODY GOT THERE FIRST

With this background, we now return to the story of 'mechirat Yosef' in Chumash. Let's take a careful look at the next pasuk, noting its grammar:

"And a group of Midyanite **TRADERS** passed by, and **THEY** pulled, and they lifted Yosef out of the pit, and **THEY** sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty pieces of silver, and brought Yosef to Egypt." (37:28)

[Carefully read this pasuk again, noting the difference between the Midyanim and Yishmaelim and the startling fact that the brothers are never mentioned!]

Based on the wording of this pasuk, it's quite clear that the Midyanim and the Yishmaelim are two **DIFFERENT** groups of people! To support this, note how the Torah describes the Midyanim as local '**traders**' ("socharim"), while the Yishmaelim are described as international '**movers**' ("orchat Yishmaelim - a transport caravan). Hence, a simple reading of this pasuk implies that a group of Midyanite traders happened to pass by the pit (they most probably heard Yosef screaming), and pulled him out. As these Midyanim are 'traders', they were probably on their way to sell their wares (now including Yosef) to the Ishmaelite caravan.

If this explanation is correct, then the **MIDYANIM** themselves pulled Yosef out of the pit and sold him. [After all, the brothers are never mentioned in this pasuk.]

[This interpretation also explains why the Torah needs to tell us about both **MIDYANIM** and **YISHMAELIM**, for understanding that these are two **DIFFERENT** groups is a critical factor in the story.]

So where were the brothers during all of this? Most probably, still eating! Recall our explanation above: the brothers had thrown Yosef into a pit out in the 'midbar' and returned to their grazing area to eat. They are far enough away that they do not see or hear what transpired between Yosef and the Midyanim!

And **WHERE** was Reuven? Again, as we explained above, he must have been eating **WITH** his brothers. However, as soon as he heard Yehuda's new plan (and the brothers' agreement) to sell Yosef, he would have to get back to the pit (before his brothers) to save Yosef - and that's exactly what he does! [But it's too late.] Note how this explanation fits perfectly into the next pasuk:

"And Reuven RETURNED ("va-yashov") to the pit, and behold, Yosef was no longer in the pit!; Then, he tore his clothes." (37:29)

Reuven is not the **LAST** brother to find out that Yosef was sold (as commonly assumed). Rather, he is the **FIRST** brother to recognize that Yosef is missing!

What can Reuven do? Shocked, he immediately returns to his brothers [probably by now eating dessert] with the terrible news:

"And he RETURNED ['va-yashov'] to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone! And for myself, what am I going to do?'" (37:30).

Note the word 'va-yashov' [and Reuven RETURNED] in both 37:29 and 37:30. This verb proves that the brothers could not have been eating near the pit, for if so, Reuven would not need to 'RETURN' to them. However, based on our explanation above, 'va-yashov' in both psukim makes perfect sense. Since Reuven and his brothers are eating away from the pit, Reuven must first RETURN to the pit, then he must RETURN back to his brothers to tell them the news - hence TWICE the verb 'va-yashov'!

### WHAT DO THE BROTHERS THINK?

At this point in the story the brothers must be totally baffled, for they have no idea what happened to Yosef. Assuming themselves that most probably was eaten by an animal, they don't want their father to think that he may be missing, nor would they want their father to accuse them of killing him - so they plot once again. They will trick their father into thinking that Yosef had been killed by a wild animal on his way to visit them. They dip Yosef's coat in blood and have it sent to their father (see 37:31-32). This plan works, as when Yaakov sees the coat:

"And he recognized it and said, 'My son's "ktonet", "CHAYA RA'A ACHALATU; tarof, taraf Yosef" - he was surely devoured by a wild beast (37:33).

Ironically, the end result of this final plan echoes the brothers' original plan (see "ve-amarnu - chaya ra'a achalatu" 37:20 -compare 37:33). Yaakov reaches the same conclusion that the brothers themselves may have reached, but for a very different reason!

Even more ironic is how the brothers final plan 'to sell Yosef' came true, even though they never sold him; and how (they thought that) their original - for Yosef to die - came true, even though they never killed him.

In retrospect, one could even suggest that the brothers may have never been able to 'gather the courage' to either kill or sell Yosef. Despite their various plans and intense hatred of Yosef, just as they had quickly retracted from their first two plans to kill Yosef (see 37:22 & 26), they most probably would have retracted from their plan to sell him as well.

Nevertheless: they talked; they planned; they plotted - and in God's eyes - are considered guilty, even though they never actually killed or sold Yosef.

#### WHAT DOES YOSEF THINK?

So far, our explanation has followed Rashbam and Chizkuni. [I recommend that you read their commentaries and note how they reach the same conclusion regarding who sold Yosef, even though they don't explain the events in the manner that we did.]

Even though this interpretation seems to explain the psukim quite well, there is a pasuk in Parshat Vayigash that seems to 'ruin' this entire approach. When Yosef finally reveals himself to his brothers, he states explicitly:

"I am Yosef your brother, whom you SOLD to Egypt"(45:4)

Based on this statement, it's quite clear that Yosef himself thinks that his brothers SOLD him! But if our above interpretation is correct, Yosef should have thought that the Midyanites had sold him, and not his brothers! In fact, this pasuk is most probably the primary basis for the more popular interpretation (advanced by Rashi and Radak - see Further Iyun section) that the brothers indeed did sell Yosef.

The Chizkuni, bothered by this pasuk, explains that Yosef knows that the Midyanites sold him, but since the brothers threw him in the pit, it was the brothers "who CAUSED me to be sold to Egypt".

Alternately, one could explain, based on the above shiur that Yosef truly did think that his brothers had sold him, even though the brothers themselves had no idea concerning what really happened.

To explain why, let's consider these events from Yosef's perspective.

Yosef was not aware of any of the brothers' conversations. All that he knew was that, as soon as he arrived, his brothers took off his coat and threw him into the pit. A short time later, some Midyanites passed by, took him out of the pit, and sold him to the Yishmaelites who, later, sold him to the Egyptians. Yosef, trying to piece together what had happened, probably assumed that his brothers had set it all up beforehand. In other words, he thought that the brothers told the Midyanites that they had thrown Yosef in a certain pit, and that they should take him from there to sell to the Yishmaelites.

If so, then Yosef was totally unaware that it was only 'by chance' that the Midyanites were passing by, nor did he think that the brothers originally wanted him to die in the pit. Rather, he thought all along that his brothers had sold him, even though they had no idea what had happened.

In next week's shiur, we will see how this understanding helps explain Yosef's behavior during his many years in Egypt. It will also explain why the brothers assume that Yosef is either missing (see 42:13) or dead (see 42:22 -"hineh gam damo nidrash"), even though Yosef thinks that his brothers sold him (see 45:4).

[Furthermore, this can also explain why Yosef tells his cellmates (in prison) that he was 'stolen' from the Land of Israel (see 40:15)

#### HASHEM'S PLAN

Even though the brothers had three different plans for 'getting rid' of Yosef, God had a different plan.

The Hand of Providence led the brothers to believe that THEIR 'dream' [to rid themselves of Yosef] had come true. In reality, it was

their plotting that eventually led to the fulfillment of Yosef's dreams to come true.

Finally, as will be seen in the story that follows, this was all part of God's long-term plan for the people of Israel to become a nation in the Land of Egypt, as the forecasts of "brit bein ha'btarim" now begin to unfold.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

#### FOR FURTHER IYUN

---

##### A. RASHI'S SHITTA

To explain Rashi's 'shitta' (opinion) that the brothers sold Yosef, we must return to the two questions raised earlier in the shiur: i.e. where are the brothers eating, and where Reuven is - and change our conclusions.

According to this opinion, the brothers sat down to eat nearby the pit, and for some reason (see below) Reuven left them.

Then, there are two ways to explain what happened next. Either when the Midyanites came by, the brothers employed their services as 'middlemen' to sell Yosef to the Yishmaelites (see Rashbam's second explanation), OR possibly, the term Yishmaelites is synonymous with the term Midyanites (see Radak).

To explain why Reuven had left his brothers, Rashi offers two reasons- either he went 'home' to take care of his father, or he had taken a short walk to do some 'soul-searching' (see Rashi & Radak).

Re: Rashi's quote of the Midrash that it was Reuven's turn to go home to take care of his father, it would be difficult to consider this pshat, for it's over 100 kilometers from Hebron to Dotan, and hence it would be totally against Reuven's own plan to save Yosef, from him to leave his brothers at a time like this!

One could suggest that this Midrash is not coming to explain pshat about what 'happened', but rather gives us insight regarding how 'frum' the brothers were, and the fact that they cared about the mitzvah of 'kibud av', but their hatred of Yosef was much greater than their love for their father.

If so, what point is this Midrash making regarding the nature of 'sin'at achim'.

Rashi's second opinion, that Reuven was 'fasting', may relate to Reuven's own plan - as discussed below:

#### WHAT'S IN IT FOR REUVEN!

B. For some reason, Reuven is interested in saving Yosef. Why does Reuven suddenly become so dedicated to his father?

One could suggest that Yaakov was quite angry with Reuven since the incident with Bilha (see 35:22), after which he was most likely cursed by his father (see 49:4), and hence lost his 'bechora'. Reuven may have hoped that by saving Yosef from the brothers, he would 'prove himself' once again worthy to his father. This would explain his reaction when he tells his brothers that Yosef is missing - "va-ani ana ani ba". This was his big chance to redeem himself. Now, it only looks worse for him. After all, should Yaakov find out what happened, bottom line, it was Reuven's idea to throw him in the pit! For Reuven, this could have been 'strike three'! [Just a thought.]

#### WHY THE BROTHERS HATED YOSEF

One could suggest that the brothers' hatred of Yosef may have been more than just 'petty sibling jealousy'. Considering that they all realized that they were a chosen family, with great goals for their future, and also realizing that in previous generations, certain children were chosen, and others 'rejected' - they may have felt that it was their spiritual 'responsibility' to 'expel' Yosef from this 'chosen family', considering his behavior.

Examine Yosef's dreams. Compare them to Yitzchak's original bracha to Eisav /Yaakov, and the standard blessing of bechira.

How would this confirm the brothers' fear? Do the brothers have reason to believe that Yaakov is making a mistake by favoring Yosef? Do they have a precedent for 'intervening'?

## Parshat Vayeshev: Yosef

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

Parashat VaYeshev turns the focus of the Torah from Ya'akov and his development as a spiritual/moral leader to the character and development of Ya'akov's successors, his sons. Having learned together through the parshiot from the beginning of the Torah until now, it should come as no surprise to us that -- like Adam, Hava, Noah, Avraham, Sara, Yitzhak, Rivka, Ya'akov, Rahel, and Le'ah -- Ya'akov's sons, while gifted and blessed, are not perfect. This faces us with the question we have dealt with in previous weeks with regard to some of the great figures above: **why are these individuals chosen to found the nation with a special relationship with Hashem? The Torah clearly records their sins and exposes their flaws. What makes them great?**

One approach to this question is that taken by some midrashim (rabbinic commentary on the Torah) and medieval commentators: that the figures above, including the twelve sons of Ya'akov, are indeed perfect or close to perfection. This approach requires reinterpretation of the many incidents the Torah reports which appear to show that these figures sinned or were flawed in important ways.

We have been taking a different approach, one which accepts a more literal meaning of the events in the Torah. In answering questions which arise, we look to the text of the Torah itself for answers. This means that we must accept that our founders were far from perfect, but, more importantly, it leaves us with the hard work of understanding what makes them great and what lessons we can learn from them.

Beginning in VaYeshev, the Torah focuses especially on the development of Yosef and Yehuda, and, to a lesser degree, Re'uvein. As we learn through VaYeshev, MiKetz, and VaYigash, our job is to follow these figures through their challenges and triumphs.

1. Yosef and Yehuda: What are their challenges? What do they learn, and how do they learn it? What makes them great?
2. Re'uvein: what kind of leader is he? Clearly, something seems amiss, but what is it?
3. In terms of leadership, what is the relationship between Yosef, Yehuda, and Re'uvein?
4. What is Ya'akov's role in all this, and how does his position in the family change over time?

### PARASHAT VAYESHEV:

Last week we completed a chapter in Ya'akov's life: his development from "Ya'akov" to "Yisrael," from subtlety, deception, and avoidance of challenges to straightforwardness, strict honesty, and courage. With this week's parasha, the Ya'akov-Eisav rivalry is history and the focus moves to Ya'akov's sons.

### THE TORAH FORESTALLS A MYTH:

By now, we have noticed the recurring theme that the family dynamics of the households of our Avot are somewhat less than perfect: Avraham is beset by the conflict between himself and his nephew, Lot, and suffers through the strife between his wives, Sara and Hagar; Yitzhak and Rivka participate in the competition and conflict between their sons; Ya'akov is the nexus of the competition between his wives for affection and fertility.

The mythical Jewish family is middle or upper-middle class, with a mom and dad, about three kids, no serious internal conflict, no underachievers. Today, the media devote lots of print and airtime to showing us that there are Jewish families of all kinds, some with one parent, some with four parents, some with no kids, some far below or high above middle class, some torn by strife and conflict, some burdened with 'underachievers.' I suppose this is a revelation to those who believe in this "mythical Jewish family," but it strikes me that this "mythical family" certainly did not grow out of Sefer Bereshit, where we find multiple female parents in one family, midlife deaths of wives and mothers, a persistent pattern of childlessness, siblings murdering one another or trying to, children and spouses being thrown out of houses, siblings who sell each other into slavery, strife between parents... never a dull moment. The Torah recognizes the reality of family life and does not hide the uncomfortable truth or try to project an unachievable model for us to follow. May all of our families be happy and

healthy... but our often less-than-perfect reality is affirmed by the family snapshots we see in the Torah's album.

We now turn to look at Ya'akov's children, his relationship with them, their relationships with each other, and their development.

### **TALENT . . . WHAT A BURDEN!**

We begin with Yosef. Yosef has so many things going for him!

- 1) He is his father's favorite.
- 2) His mother is Ya'akov's favored wife.
- 3) He is physically quite attractive.
- 4) He is a leader of rare capability.
- 5) He is a brilliant interpreter of dreams.

Of course, Yosef also faces many challenges:

- 1) He is his father's favorite -- which makes his brothers hate him.
- 2) His mother is Ya'akov's favored wife -- but she dies while he is still young.
- 3) He is physically very attractive -- but this contributes to his self-absorption (see Rashi) and helps land him in jail later on.
- 4) He is a leader of rare capability -- but this makes him a threat to some of the other brothers, who are hoping to one day lead the family. It also gives him authority over the others, which makes him unpopular.
- 5) He is a brilliant interpreter of dreams -- but his own dreams of leadership fuel his brothers' hatred and jealousy.

No characteristic is simply a strength or a weakness. Each can play either role, depending on how we handle it. At this point in his life, Yosef is full of potential, but his youthful lack of wisdom turns some of his assets against him.

### **SIBLINGS FOR SALE:**

How is it that Yosef's brothers arrive at an emotional state where they are ready to murder or sell him? The Torah describes the development of the relationship:

BERESHIT 37:2-4 --

These are the offspring of Ya'akov: Yosef, seventeen years old, shepherded the sheep with his brothers and was the supervisor of the sons of Bilha and Zilpa, his father's wives. Yosef brought evil reports of them to their father. Yisrael loved Yosef better than all of his other sons, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a striped cloak. His brothers saw that his father loved him better than all of his brothers, and they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

Who fires the first shot in this battle? Who first sets in motion the process which ends in Yosef's sale? Surprisingly, the answer is Ya'akov, Yosef's own father.

### **"BEN ZEKUNIM":**

Yosef is his father's favorite because he is a "ben zekunim" -- "the son of his old age." But how much age difference is there between Yosef and his brothers? Several mefarshim (commentators) point out that **Yosef is in fact the same age as several of his brothers!** He is the same age, for example, as Yissakhar and Zevulun. And his own brother, Binyamin, is even younger than he is -- even more of a "ben zekunim" than Yosef is. So what does "ben zekunim" mean, since it can't mean simply a son born in the father's old age?

Mefarshim disagree on the exact definition, but the Ramban's approach is perhaps the closest to "peshat" because it answers our question and also translates "ben zekunim" fairly literally. The Ramban says "ben zekunim" means that Yosef was chosen by his father to \*serve\* him in his old age. According to the Ramban, it was common practice for elderly people to choose one child to serve them, help them perform needed tasks, get from place to place, etc. This child would remain with the parent while the other children went about their business. "Ben zekunim," then, does not mean "a son born in his father's old age," it means "a son who was chosen for his father in his old age."

Ya'akov has chosen Yosef as his "ben zekunim," the son who keeps him company, runs his errands, and helps him perform tasks. This includes a crucial function which Ya'akov passes to Yosef: the task of keeping an eye on his sons (Seforno 37:4 asserts that Ya'akov appoints Yosef to take charge of his brothers in managing the flocks). Yosef, as his father's representative, performs this task by reporting to his father what his brothers are up to, which, as we hear, is not always good. And as we know, the brothers' opportunity to kill or sell Yosef is provided by Ya'akov himself, who sends Yosef off to observe the brothers and return with a report.

### **A LEADER IN THE MAKING:**

While we're on the topic of Yosef's leadership qualities, what evidence is there that Yosef is a talented leader? There is a pattern in Yosef's life which we see repeated several times with regard to leadership: people tend to give Yosef so much responsibility, such a degree of carte blanche to supervise things as he sees fit, that they all but abdicate their own role as leaders. There are four examples of this pattern:

1) Ya'akov:

Ya'akov gives up the role of supervising his sons and appoints Yosef as his field representative. Yosef is in charge not only of the operation of the family business, but also of the flow of information. His father depends on him not just for leadership, but also for reports about what is happening.

2) Potifar:

BERESHIT 39:2-6 --

God was with Yosef, and he was a man of success; he remained in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that God was with him, and that everything he did, God made successful. Yosef found favor in his eyes and served him; he appointed him over his house, and EVERYTHING HE OWNED, HE PLACED IN YOSEF'S HANDS. From the time he appointed him in his house over everything he owned, God blessed the house of the Egyptian because of Yosef, and God's blessing was upon all he had, in the house and in the field. He left ["abandoned," perhaps] all of his possessions in Yosef's hands; HE DID NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT HIS OWN POSSESSIONS, except the bread he ate . . . .

Not only is Yosef put in charge of everything, but Potifar basically abdicates as master of the house. Potifar actually has no idea what is going on in the house. He trusts Yosef so implicitly that he knows only that his meals arrive and that he eats them.

When the \*mistress\* of the house notices him and begins to make passes at him, we see even more powerfully the degree to which Yosef has become master of the house. She may be attracted to him not just because he is so handsome, but also because he has supplanted her husband as man of the house. She would never have laid eyes on a lowly slave, even a good-looking one, but this slave has become master of the house -- almost husband-like. Because his status has risen, it now becomes possible for her to think of him as a sexual partner (or target).

3) Prison Warden:

BERESHIT 39:21-23 --

God was with Yosef and drew favor to him, putting his favor in the eyes of the warden of the prison. The prison warden put all of the prisoners in the prison into Yosef's hands; anything that was done there -- he did it. THE PRISON WARDEN DID NOT SEE ANYTHING UNDER HIS CARE, since God was with him, and whatever he did, God made successful.

Again, we note the pattern above: not only does his superior give him responsibility, he basically gives up his job and lets Yosef do it. Yosef has functionally replaced the warden. Again, a person in authority trusts Yosef so implicitly that he lets Yosef do whatever he wants. The warden himself has no idea what goes on from day to day in the prison. Yosef is such a capable leader, such a natural authority-wielder, that when he arrives, whoever is in charge is so overawed by his capabilities (and so delighted to be free to watch television) that Yosef seems to inevitably replace that leader.

4. Paro himself:

BERESHIT 41:38-43 --

Paro said to his servants, "Is there anyone like this man, in whom is the spirit of God?" Paro said to Yosef, "Since God has told all this to you, no one can be as wise and understanding as you. You shall be OVER MY HOUSE; by your word shall my people be sustained, and I SHALL REMAIN GREATER THAN YOU ONLY IN THE THRONE." Paro said to Yosef, "See: I have placed you over all of Egypt." Paro removed his ring from his hand and put it on Yosef's hand, dressed him in linen clothing, and put a gold cape on his neck . . . .

Once again, Yosef demonstrates brilliant leadership, and the authority figure in this scenario -- Paro -- concludes that Hashem is with him. Paro appoints him as his second-in-command and relinquishes control of the single most important activity of his country for the next fourteen years: storing and distributing grain. Yosef \*\*becomes\*\* Paro, in effect. This self-replacement is confirmed by Paro's transfer of the signet ring to Yosef: whatever Yosef decrees \*becomes\* the will of Paro. Later, when the famine begins and the people begin to starve, they come to Paro -- who tells them to go to Yosef and to do whatever he tells them. Yosef has completely taken over, just as in the previous examples. (The words "over my house" clearly echo Potifar's words in appointing Yosef over his own household.)

## **BACK TO THE BROTHERS:**

In summary of what we've said so far about Yosef and his brothers, the brothers hate him because:

- 1) He reports on them to their father (this may explain why Yosef, unrecognized by his brothers when they come to Egypt for food, accuses them of being spies -- because one of the reasons they hated him long ago was for his spying on them and reporting back to his father!)
- 2) He is the best loved of them all because he does so much for Ya'akov and spends so much time with him.

Clearly, Ya'akov is responsible for putting Yosef in this tricky position. And as we are about to see, there is more to Ya'akov's role.

## **KETONET PASIM:**

The next thing the Torah says makes the brothers angry is that Ya'akov makes for Yosef a "ketonet pasim," a cloak with stripes -- perhaps colored stripes. But we are not talking about children here. Why does this cloak bother the brothers so much? Certainly, it is understandable that Ya'akov's preference for Yosef angers them. But why does the cloak make things worse? It seems so trivial!

The Ramban (Shemot 28:2) and the Seforo (Bereshit 37:3) suggest that the "ketonet pasim" represents leadership -- kingship. This cloak is not just the ancient Near Eastern version of a nice sweater, it is \*ROYAL\* garb, the cloak of a king (examples from Tanakh: Shmuel II 13:18, Yeshayahu 21:22). This is what it represents to the brothers; this is why it bothers them so much: Not only is Yosef the favorite son in terms of Ya'akov's affections, but he appears to have been selected by Ya'akov to be the family's next leader!

Ya'akov's selection of Yosef particularly challenges Re'uvein, the biological first-born and natural choice to lead the family, and Yehuda, who begins to take a prominent leadership role in the family, clashing with Yosef more than once.

All of this is quite a lot of 'baggage' for Yosef to carry around, and none of it seems to be his fault. Yosef's predicament appears to be created by Ya'akov, as the Torah explicitly tells us that the brothers hate him for his cloak and for reporting on them.

## YOSEF KNOWS THE SCORE:

But then the Torah reports that Yosef reports his dreams to his brothers. Usually, when we look at this story, even if Yosef's behavior (trumpeting to his brothers his dreams of ruling over them, 37:5-8) seems inappropriate to us, we assume he is just naive, an immature but talented 17-year-old who assumes his brothers will share his excitement about his bright future.

This is certainly one way to read the story. But there is another possibility, one which makes more sense in the context of the tense and hate-filled relationship the Torah says already exists. It is difficult indeed to believe that Yosef is unaware of the hatred already generated by his father's favoritism toward him (37:3). Ya'akov's preference is no secret -- Yosef actually walks around wearing the sign of that preference -- and Yosef must notice that his brothers seem unable to speak to him without almost spitting at him, as the Torah reports. In this context, how can he not realize that telling his brothers about his dreams of ruling over them will aggravate the situation?

Some suggest (see Hizkuni) that Yosef is attempting to convince his brothers that they should not hate him. He is hinting that his future as a leader is not something his father is giving to him; in truth, Hashem Himself is behind his rise to power. But if so, once he has tried to convince them of this by telling them the first dream, and he sees that their hatred has only grown, why does he report to them another dream which shows them bowing to him again? Isn't it clear to him that this strategy has totally backfired?

The Radak (37:5-7; see also Seforno 37:19) provides an entirely different approach to Yosef's role in this story. He suggests that in the already tense and hate-filled context, Yosef's sharing his dreams of dominating the family is not a naive mistake, but a very purposeful and *\*aggressive\** move! Yosef *\*knows\** his brothers hate him -- and he wants them to know that one day they will all bow to him! He tells them his dreams not because he is foolish enough to imagine that they will be happy for him, but in order to taunt them!

This view is supported by the fact that Yosef takes more than one opportunity to share these dreams with his brothers. Even if he somehow manages to convince himself the first time around that his brothers might be happy for him, he cannot be foolish enough to expect the same positive reaction the second time.

Yosef, it seems, is not the happy-go-lucky young man we might have imagined, with stars in his eyes and a jumbo helping of naivete. He is quite aware of his brothers' feelings about him, and he responds to their palpable hatred by taunting them with visions of their subservience to him. What we are beginning to see is that the situation is not quite as simple as it might have seemed, and that everyone involved -- Ya'akov, the brothers, and Yosef, all contribute a drop of poison to the relationship between the brothers and Yosef.

All of the elements of the approach we have been developing here answer another question: everyone understands that later on, the brothers deserve (to some degree) the manipulation Yosef perpetrates on them by pretending not to know them and accusing them of espionage. After all, they sold him! Yosef needs to see if they have learned anything since then. But why does Yosef himself deserve to be sold as a slave? And why does Ya'akov deserve to be deprived of his favorite son for 22 years? Are we to say that the whole story is just an accident, just the result of the evil in which the brothers decide to engage? According to our approach, Yosef and Ya'akov have both made great mistakes; both need to learn something important.

## YOSEF:

Yosef responds to the animosity of his brothers by putting his future leadership "in their faces": he announces to them that he has dreamed that he will rule over them. And then, for good measure, he does it again. What better learning process for Yosef than to be sold as a slave, the diametrical opposite of a king? This is not to say that Yosef's dreams are only expressions of his arrogant ambitions -- they are not his inventions, they are prophetic. But it was his choice to broadcast them to his brothers, his decision to respond to their hatred with high-handedness. Yosef will learn humility as a slave and prisoner. And then he can rise to responsible leadership.

It is also clear that this is not a lesson that his brothers consciously mean for Yosef to learn: they certainly do not sell him into slavery in order to rehabilitate him. They, of course, are ready to kill him, and only reconsider on second thought and decide to sell him. Their decision seems motivated by squeamishness about murder and perhaps also some greed, but no desire to aid Yosef in his personal development.

Later events show that Yosef has learned this lesson of humility:

1) When he offers to interpret the dreams of Paro's wine steward and baker, he emphasizes that the interpretations come from Hashem and are not expressions of his own wisdom. He gives Hashem all the credit, making himself peripheral, only a vehicle to deliver the interpretation from Hashem. On the other hand, he has not yet totally internalized that his interpretive powers are Hashem's, so he asks the wine-steward to remember him when the steward is released from jail and to try to have him set free. In other words, he still ascribes some credit for his talent to himself, and therefore thinks of his interpreting the steward's dream as a favor \*he\* did for the steward, not as a situation in which he is nothing but the vehicle for the Divine.

2) Yosef's true rehabilitation becomes apparent when he interprets Paro's dream. When Paro gives him the perfect opportunity to take all the credit himself, he gives all the credit to Hashem: "It is not me! Hashem shall respond to Paro's satisfaction" (41:16).

Yosef displays not only humility, ascribing his power to Hashem, but also shows that he now understands leadership on a much more profound level than before. Previously, he had used his prophetic dreams of leadership as a weapon against his brothers. Arrogantly, he had waved in their faces that they would one day bow to him. Of course, this very act showed that he was totally unfit to lead at that point -- part of leadership is being accepted by the group one is leading.

But by now, Yosef has matured; he not only interprets Paro's dream, but even successfully proposes the centerpiece of Egyptian economic-agricultural policy for the next fourteen years (7 of plenty and 7 of famine)! Fresh from jail, a slave shapes the future of the entire region and earns himself the power of second-to-the-king, largely because he couches his policy suggestion as something Hashem has told him. If he had phrased his suggestion as something he had thought of, Paro would either have thrown him out, executed him for chutzpah, or at least rejected his plan, for no king would accept a plan that is not only not his own plan, but which comes from a foreigner-slave-prisoner! As Hashem's plan, however, Paro can and does accept it.

The same Yosef who years before lorded his future supremacy over his brothers now behaves as if he is only a pipeline for Hashem. In order to learn these lessons about humility and leadership, Yosef had to be reoriented. He needed to be sold as a slave in order to see that his destiny was totally in Hashem's hands, that he would be a leader only if Hashem decided he would be, and that if Hashem preferred, he would be slave to an Egyptian minister or rot in an Egyptian jail forever.

#### **YA'AKOV:**

Ya'akov has made mistakes as well, and the loss of Yosef is designed to punish him:

1) Singling out one of his sons was bound to end in disaster, but he ignores this danger. In response, Hashem takes from him what is most precious, but which is also the focus of his error: his son Yosef. With Yosef gone, perhaps Ya'akov will approach the remaining sons more fairly.

2) One other sin also catches up with Ya'akov at this point: the sin of dishonestly running away from Lavan's house after twenty years there, sneaking away without taking leave properly:

A) BERESHIT 31:20 --

Ya'akov STOLE [va-yignov] the heart of Lavan the Aramean by not telling him that he was running away.

When Lavan catches up with Ya'akov several days later, he demands an explanation:

BERESHIT 31:26-27 --

Lavan said to Ya'akov, "What have you done, STEALING [va-tignov] my heart, treating my daughters like captives of war? Why did you sneak and run away, STEALING [va-tignov] me and not telling me . . . ."

Ya'akov responds, explaining why he ran away:

BERESHIT 31:31 --

Ya'akov answered and said, "Because I was afraid you would STEAL [ti-gnov] your daughters from me."

Now we look at the way Yosef characterizes his kidnapping and sale:

BERESHIT 40:14-15 --

"For I have been STOLEN away [ganov gunavti] from the land of the Ivrim . . ."

The Torah gives tremendous prominence to the word "ganav" in the story about Ya'akov's flight from Lavan's house -- and the same word is used here by Yosef in a double formation ("ganov gunavti").

B) Just as Ya'akov's "theft" was a theft from one country to another -- running away from Aram to Cana'an -- this "theft" is also from one country to another, as Yosef emphasizes: "I have been stolen FROM THE LAND OF THE IVRIM."

3) Most convincing of all is the exact parallel: Ya'akov explains to Lavan that he "stole away" because he was afraid that Lavan would "steal" his daughters (Ya'akov's wives) away. In return, Yosef, Ya'akov's son, is "stolen" from him.

Next week, we will deal with Yehuda, who deserves a spotlight of his own.

Shabbat shalom

## Parshas Vayeishev: Dreams and Prophecy

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

Our Parashah is “bookended” with stories about dreams; both stories featuring Yoseph as the central character. At the end of our Parashah, we are told about Yoseph’s success in the prison of the court of Egypt – and of his insightful explanation of the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners:

Each of the two men – the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison – had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. When Yoseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh’s officials who were in custody with him in his master’s house, “Why are your faces so sad today?” “We both had dreams,” they answered, “but there is no one to interpret them.” Then Yoseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.” (B’resheet 40:5-8)

Yoseph is confident about his ability to explain their dreams – and that confidence is quickly validated, as each of his explanations is played out in Pharaoh’s court. The butler is restored to his position and the baker is hanged. (40:21-22)

Where did Yoseph get this confidence; indeed, where did he get the ability to interpret dreams? The earlier dream sequence in the beginning of our Parashah, involving Yoseph, posits Yoseph not as a dream interpreter; rather, as the dreamer. His brothers and father are the ones who make inferences from his dreams – but he just reports them. When did he learn how to explain dreams?

This question carries extra significance in light of the later story of Yoseph’s redemption from prison. The butler “finally” remembers Yoseph and reports his successful dream interpretation abilities to Pharaoh. This leads not only to Yoseph’s rise to greatness (as a result of his explanation of Pharaoh’s dreams), but ultimately to our terrible oppression and slavery in Egypt. (See BT Shabbat 10b)

### II. DREAMS AND REACTIONS

In order to understand Yoseph’s ability to interpret the dreams of the butler and baker – and then those of Pharaoh, let’s look back at the first dream-sequence at the beginning of our Parashah:

Yoseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (B’resheet 37:5-11)

Yoseph had two dreams – the dream of the sheaves and the dream of the stars. An in-depth study of the differences between these dreams – surely a worthy enterprise – is beyond the scope of this shiur. We do note, nevertheless, several significant differences in the reaction of his family members to the dreams. Resolving two questions about these reactions and one (seemingly) ancillary issues will help us understand Yoseph’s later confidence and ability as a dream interpreter:

- 1) Why did Yoseph tell his brothers about his dreams? He already had a tempestuous relationship with them and, surely, relating these dreams would do nothing to reverse that trend.
- 2) When he told them that he had had the first dream (the dream of the sheaves) – before informing them of the content, they hated him more than before (37:5). After he related the content of the dream, his brothers accused Yoseph of plotting – or, at least contemplating – a “takeover” of the family. After he related the second dream (the dream of the stars), they had no reaction. Note that the dream of the stars is much more impactful than the dream of the sheaves in two ways:
  - a) Not only are the brothers bowing down (akin to the blessing given to Ya’akov – B’resheet 27:29), but the sun (father) and moon (mother) are also bowing.

b) Unlike the first dream, where their sheaves bowed to his sheaf, the second dream had the stars, sun and moon bowing to Yoseph himself.

Nevertheless, the brothers remained silent in response to hearing this dream – although they were jealous (37:11). Note that he related this dream twice; to his brothers and, later, to his father in their presence. Why didn't they react to the second dream – either time?

3) The father, on the other hand, reacted to the second dream in the same fashion as the brothers' reaction to the first dream – yet he kept the matter in mind; i.e. he waited to see if it would be fulfilled. Why did Ya'akov simultaneously castigate his son for this "egocentric" dream – indicating a dismissive attitude towards it – while waiting to see if it would come to pass?

### **III. YA'AKOV AND HIS \*BEN Z'KUNIM\***

Solving one other difficulty at the beginning of our Parashah will set us on the path to a solution. As we are introduced to Yoseph and the special relationship he had with his father, we are told:

"Now Yisra'el loved Yoseph more than any of his other sons, \*ki ven z'kunim hu lo\* (because he had been born to him in his old age)..." (B'resheet 37:3)

The Rishonim provide several opinions about the key phrase \*ben z'kunim hu lo\*. Rashi understands it as our translation indicates – since Yoseph was born to Ya'akov when he was old, the father felt a special affection for him. Ramban challenges this interpretation on two points:

b) The verse states that Ya'akov loved Yoseph more than any of his other sons; the implication is that Ya'akov loved him more than Binyamin, who was born much later and when Ya'akov was much older.

Onkelos translates \*ben z'kunim\* as "wise child". Ramban points out the difficulty with this translation: The verse states \*ki ven z'kunim hu lo\* – he was a \*ben z'kunim\* TO HIM (to Ya'akov). If \*ben z'kunim\* is rendered "wise child", then there is no need for the possessive \*lo\* afterwards. Clearly, the \*ben z'kunim\* position was not an objective description, rather it was relational to Ya'akov.

Ramban then offers his own explanation:

"The custom of elders was to take one of their younger sons as a servant, and he would lean on him at all times, never separating from him. He would be called "the son of his old age" (\*ben z'kunav\*) since he would serve him in his old age...this is what they [the Rabbis] intended when they stated (B'resheet Rabbah 84:8) 'Everything that [Ya'akov] learned from Shem and Ever he passed on to [Yoseph]', i.e. he transmitted to him the wisdom and secret teachings..."

Following Ramban's explanation, Yoseph had every reason to see himself as the heir of the Avraham-Yitzchak-Ya'akov tradition. As the closest and most favored recipient of Ya'akov's wisdom and tradition, Yoseph understood that he was destined to experience some of the same events that befell his father – and to have a similar relationship with God. (See Rashi at 37:2 – "...everything that happened to Ya'akov [also] happened to Yoseph...")

### **IV. YA'AKOV – THE FIRST DREAMER**

Among our Avot (Patriarchs and Matriarchs), the only one whom we are told had a dream was Ya'akov. Ya'akov dreamt not once, but twice – on his way out of the Land (B'resheet 28:12-15) and when being beckoned back (31:10-13).

[It is interesting to note that the only other two dreams recorded in B'resheet before Yoseph were nearly identical occasions. God appeared to Avimelekh (B'resheet 20:3-7) to warn him to return Avraham's wife to her husband. God then appeared to Lavan (31:24) to warn him not to attack Ya'akov. These two dreams are not of a category with Ya'akov's – or with the three remaining couplets of dreams – Yoseph's, Pharaoh's stewards' or Pharaoh's. In those dreams, there was a message about the future of the individual or his nation, not a divine intercession on behalf of the righteous.]

It is reasonable to posit that Ya'akov related his dreams, their meanings and their outcomes to Yoseph. The favorite son,

heir apparent to the tradition, had every reason to believe that if he dreamt a dream where the “message” of the dream was obvious, that he should regard it as prophecy and the word of God – just as his father experienced.

## V. DREAMS AND VISIONS

We can now look through the first dream sequence and understand the different reactions of the brothers and Ya'akov – and what Yoseph learned from them. [I recommended a careful review of 37:5-11 before continuing]

It is clear from the opening verses of our Parashah that Yoseph was engaged in a power struggle of sorts within the structure of the family (see Rashi and Ramban on 37:2). Yoseph then experienced a dream – with an obvious implication for that struggle and its [seemingly divinely mandated] outcome. He told the dream to his brothers – and they hated him even more just for telling them! He must have been confused by this (unless he wasn't aware of it) – for why would they not be interested in hearing the word of God, especially as it affects them so directly?

When he relates the dream of the sheaves (only to his brothers – his father does not hear of it), they understand its implication – and berate him for it. What did they find so offensive about his vision?

The verses do not indicate that the brothers disbelieved his dream – but they were offended by it. The brothers had a piece of information which was not yet known to Yoseph: Although father Ya'akov is a prophet – and his dreams are indeed visions from God, that is no longer the case with the next generation. A dream may not necessarily be a vision – it may be the expression of subconscious desires and repressed urges (as conventional psychology maintains). The Gemara in Berakhot (56a)

records two incidents where the local (non-Jewish) governor challenged one of our Sages to predict the content of his dreams of the coming night. In each case, the Sage described a detailed and horrific dream – which so preoccupied the governor that he dreamt about it that night.

An important distinction between a vision-dream and a subconscious-based dream is in interpretation. If the dream is truly a prophecy, its meaning should be fairly evident, as it is not generated by the person's own subconscious – we need not be privy to the psychological makeup of the dreamer to understand the message. A conventional dream, as we are all aware, may take a great deal of sophistication to understand – although that is not always the case.

The brothers were not offended by the dream – rather, by the apparent cause for this dream. They figured that Yoseph must be thinking about his takeover of the family so much that these thoughts have entered his dreams. Their derision and hatred is now clear – but why did they keep silent at the second dream?

There was a tradition in the house of Ya'akov that although a single dream may be caused by internal thoughts and ruminations, if that same dream (or the same “message” clothed in alternate symbolism) occurs twice, it is no longer a happenstance – it is truly God's word. We find this approach explicitly stated by Yoseph when he explains Pharaoh's doubled dream:

The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon. (B'resheet 41:32)

When Yoseph reported his second dream to his brothers, they did not increase their hatred – not at the report of the dream nor at the retelling of its content. The fact of the second dream – and its similar implication – was no longer reason for hatred, rather for concern and jealousy.

Ya'akov, however, had heard nothing about the first dream. That is why he, upon hearing about Yoseph's second dream, responds in an almost identical fashion as the brothers did to the first dream:

“What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?”

At this point, Ya'akov surely expected his other sons to have a similar reaction – but they were silent. [Remember from the incident in Sh'khem that these sons were not shy about speaking up in father's presence – their silence here is telling]. After his rebuke, the Torah tells us that his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. Ya'akov

must have been surprised by the brothers' silence – and must have figured that this dream was not the first one Yoseph had shared. That clued him in that there may be more to this dream than he first thought – and he kept the matter in mind – i.e. he waited to see if it would be fulfilled.

Yoseph learned a powerful lesson from this encounter – that even if a dream is “just a dream” and not prophecy – this is only true when it is an isolated incident. When the dream is repeated, this is a sign from God and must be understood that way.

We can now return to Yoseph in the Egyptian prison and explain his response to the butler and baker. When he learned that they had both experienced significant and terrifying dreams in the same night, he understood that these were more than dreams. He reasoned that just like a dream that occurs twice to the same person is more than a dream, similarly, if two men sharing a fate have impactful dreams on the same night, their dreams must be divine messages.

His response: Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams – is not presumptuous. He was telling them that their dreams were more than “just dreams” – they were in the province of God and, as such, would not need sophisticated interpretation (as is the case with a subconscious-based dream). They would be fairly easy to understand – as indeed they were. Yoseph earned his reputation as an interpreter of dreams – and his ultimate freedom and final rise to power – not by interpreting dreams at all! He earned it by remembering the lesson from his father’s house – that the “doubled dream” is a mark of prophecy, and by applying it intelligently years later in the Egyptian dungeon.

Text Copyright © 2012 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom and Torah.org. The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.