

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L**

### Covenant & Conversation

In his Laws of Repentance, Moses Maimonides makes one of the most empowering statements in religious literature. Having explained that we and the world are judged by the majority of our deeds, he continues: "Therefore we should see ourselves throughout the year as if our deeds and those of the world are evenly poised between good and bad, so that our next act may change both the balance of our lives and that of the world." (Hilkhos Teshuvah 3:4) We can make a difference, and it is potentially immense. That should be our mindset, always.

Few statements are more at odds with the way the world seems to us most of the time. Each of us knows that there is only one of us, and that there are seven billion others in the world today. What conceivable difference can we make? We are no more than a wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the seashore, dust on the surface of infinity. Is it conceivable that with one act we could change the trajectory of our life, let alone that of humanity as a whole? Our parsha tells us that, yes, it is.

As the story of Jacob's children unfolds, there is a rapid rise of tension between his children that threatens to spill over into violence. Joseph, eleventh of the twelve, is Jacob's favourite son. He was, says the Torah, the child of Jacob's old age. More significantly, he was the first child of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Jacob "loved him more" than his other sons, and they knew it and resented it. They were jealous of their father's love. They were provoked by Joseph's dreams of greatness. The sight of the many-coloured robe Jacob had given him as a token of his love provoked them to anger.

Then came the moment of opportunity. The brothers were away far from home tending the flocks when Joseph appeared in the distance, sent by Jacob to see how they were doing. Their envy and anger reached boiling point, and they resolved to take violent revenge. "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a wild animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams."

Only one of the brothers disagreed: Reuben. He knew that what they were proposing was very

wrong, and he protested. At this point the Torah does something extraordinary. It makes a statement that cannot be literally true, and we, reading the story, know this. The text says, "And Reuben heard and saved him [Joseph] from them."

We know this cannot be true because of what happens next. Reuben, realizing that he is only one against many, devises a stratagem. He says, Let us not kill him. Let us throw him alive into one of the cisterns and let him die. That way, we will not be directly guilty of murder. His intention was to come back to the cistern later, when the others were elsewhere, and rescue Joseph. When the Torah says, "And Reuben heard and saved him from them" it is using the principle that "God accounts a good intention as a deed." (Tosefta, Peah 1:4) Reuben wanted to save Joseph and intended to do so, but in fact he failed. The moment passed, and by the time he acted, it was already too late. Returning to the cistern, he found Joseph already gone, sold as a slave.

On this, a midrash says: "If only Reuben had known that the Holy One blessed be He, would write about him, 'And Reuben heard and saved him from them,' he would have lifted Joseph bodily onto his shoulders and taken him back to his father." (Tanhuma, Vayeshev, 13) What does this mean?

Consider what would have happened had Reuben actually acted at that moment. Joseph would not have been sold as a slave. He would not have been taken to Egypt. He would not have worked in Potiphar's house. He would not have attracted Potiphar's wife. He would not have been thrown into prison on a false charge. He would not have interpreted the dreams of the butler and baker, nor would he have done the same two years later for Pharaoh. He would not have been made viceroy of Egypt. He would not have brought his family to stay there.

To be sure, God had already told Abraham many years earlier, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there" (Gen. 15:13). The Israelites would have become slaves, come what may. But at least they would not have had this happen as a result of their own family dysfunctions. An entire chapter of Jewish guilt and shame might have been avoided.

If only Reuben had known what we know. If only he had been able to read the book. But we never

can read the book that tells of the long-term consequences of our acts. We never know how much we affect the lives of others.

There is a story I find very moving, about how in 1966 an eleven-year-old African-American boy moved with his family to a hitherto white neighbourhood in Washington. (Stephen Carter, *Civility*, New York: Basic Books, 1999, 61-75) Sitting with his brothers and sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, "I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here..."

As he was thinking those thoughts, a woman passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, "Welcome!" Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and cream-cheese and jelly sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment -- the young man later wrote -- changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realise, at a time when race relations in the United States were still fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were colour-blind. Over the years, he learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The young man, Stephen Carter, eventually became a law professor at Yale and wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it *Civility*. The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and she died all too young. He adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. "In the Jewish tradition," he notes, such civility is called "hessed -- the doing of acts of kindness -- which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God."

"Civility", he adds, "itself may be seen as part of hessed: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard."

"To this day", he adds, "I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever."

A single life, says the Mishnah, is like a

universe. (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5; original manuscript text) Change a life, and you begin to change the universe. That is how we make a difference: one life at a time, one day at a time, one act at a time. We never know in advance what effect a single act may have. Sometimes we never know it at all. Sara Kestenbaum, like Reuben, never did have the chance to read the book that told the story of the long-term consequences of that moment. But she acted. She did not hesitate. Neither, said Maimonides, should we. Our next act might tilt the balance of someone else's life as well as our own.

We are not inconsequential. We can make a difference to our world. When we do so, we become God's partners in the work of redemption, bringing the world that is, a little closer to the world that ought to be. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd there passed by Midianite merchants, and they drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver, and they brought Joseph down to Egypt" (Genesis 37:28). Who bears the ultimate responsibility for a criminal act? Is it the person who plans the crime, or the one who pulls the trigger or stabs with the knife? Is it the agency that sets up the act, the terrorist inciters, the mercenary for hire, or even the disinterested parents or apathetic society that nurtured the evil intent leading to the villainous deed?

An ambiguous verse in Vayeshev dealing with the sale of Joseph initiates a difference of opinion amongst biblical commentators that have relevance to this important question.

Let's consider this scene of *déjà vu*. We know that Isaac was actually blind when he planned to give the blessings to his favored son, Esau, who turned out to be Jacob because of Rebecca's planned deception. Now, we find Jacob is equally blind in his relationships with his own sons, for "Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age, and he made him a coat of many colors" [Gen. 37:3]. This infuriated his brothers. 'And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him' [Gen37:4]. The Talmud declares:

"A parent must never favor one child among the others; because of a piece of material worth two selahs [the coat of many colors] that Jacob gave to Joseph more than his other children, his brothers became jealous of him and the matter degenerated until our forefathers were forced to descend to Egypt." (B.T. Shabbat 10b)

Apparently, our Sages felt that Jacob bore 'ministerial responsibility' for the tragedy of the brothers, although his sin was certainly inadvertent. Jacob suffers grievously for his mistake in family management, believing for twenty-two years that his beloved son is dead. But nevertheless, he certainly is not the main culprit.

Joseph doesn't do anything to assuage his brothers' feelings: he recounts his dreams that flaunt his superiority and eventual domination over the other family members (Genesis 37:5–11). Then, in a fateful move, the still unaware (blind) Jacob sends Joseph to Shekhem to see "whether all is well with his brothers, and well with the flock" (Genesis 37:14). Sighting Joseph from a distance and clearly aggrieved by their father's favoritism, Joseph's brothers conspire in their hearts to kill him. They tear off his coat of many colors and cast him into a pit.

Shortly afterwards, the brothers spy an approaching caravan, prompting Judah to suggest that since killing isn't profitable, they should rather sell Joseph to the Ishmaelite caravan and tell their father he was devoured by a wild beast.

Undoubtedly, the moment Joseph is sold into slavery is one of the turning points in the Torah. It is considered the most heinous crime of the biblical period – the sin of sibling hatred foreshadowing the Jewish divisiveness that led to the destruction of the Second Holy Temple and its aftermath of tragic exile and persecution.

However, when we examine the verse recording the sale of Joseph, it's hard to figure out who it was that actually sold the hapless brother, the Ishmaelites, the Midianites or the brothers who initiated the plan (Genesis 37:27,28).

Joseph himself initially considers the brothers responsible, as he said when he first reveals his true self to them, "I am Joseph your brother whom you sold to Egypt." (Genesis 45:4)

However, the Rashbam maintains that since the brothers were not the ones who actually pulled Joseph out of the pit to sell him, they could not be considered as the only guilty party; but they must still share responsibility for the events that unfolded as a result of the sale. Their initial act of casting their brother into the pit was done with murder in their hearts. Rashbam casts guilt upon everyone who shares in unleashing the forces of evil, even those whose hands remain clean – while others do the actual dirty work.

I share the view of Rashbam. One must do something – not merely think something – in order to be responsible, but the one who sets the ultimate crime in motion by his action, even though he might not have perpetrated the act of the sale itself, must nevertheless certainly take responsibility. Hateful intentions alone cannot create culpability, but placing an individual in a vulnerable position – like casting him into the pit –

inciting others to participate in that hatred as well as actively aiding and abetting the perpetrators of the crime, certainly makes one a partner in crime who must assume a share of the guilt.

But there is a twist in this portion, and Joseph engages in a little historical revisionism. A much wiser and more mature Joseph was Grand Vizier of Egypt twenty-two years later; he looks upon this incident from the perspective of Jewish history, sub specie aeternitatis, under an Eternal gaze. From his vantage point, when he stands as Master rather than hapless victims, he continues, "But now do not be sad, and let there not be reproach in your eyes because you sold me here; it was in order that you [all] might live that God sent me [to Egypt] before you...to ensure your survival in the land and to sustain you [for a momentous deliverance]. And now, it was not you who sent me here but God..." (Genesis 45:5–8).

Hence Joseph may very well be holding the brothers responsible for the sale even though it may have been the Midianites who actually committed the transaction – not only because it was the brothers who began the process which led to the sale, but mostly because he wishes to involve them in redemption. For Joseph, the act that began as a crime concluded – owing to divine guidance and Joseph's own quick-wittedness – as the salvation of the family of Israel. Joseph is anxious to restore family unity – and thus to look upon the sale from a divine perspective, which turned a tragic family transgression into a truly mighty salvation! ©2022 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

#### RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**M**odern writers and commentators have found the biblical narratives of the book of Bereshith irresistible in their penchant for psychoanalyzing people described in terms of modern understanding and current correctness. In so doing they do a great disservice to Jewish tradition and present a distorted picture of the message that the Bible is attempting to convey.

The narrative regarding Joseph and his brothers has engaged mankind for millennia. In it is represented all of the personality characteristics of nobility, self-justification, blindness and deception throughout history. The narrative stands by itself and needs no "deeper" exposition or analysis. It is what it is and that is how Jewish tradition has always viewed it.

The tendency to "understand" the characters of the people presented in the Torah narrative leads to all sorts of weird ideas that serve to undermine Jewish values and traditions instead of strengthening them. In all of the narratives that appear in this holy book the unseen hand of Heaven, so to speak, is present and active. And that part of the story is not subject to any psychological or personal analysis or perspective.

Rashi points this out in his opening comment to this week's Torah reading. The plan of Yaakov is to enjoy a leisurely retirement in his later stage of life but Heaven interferes as the story of Yosef and his brothers unfolds. No matter how you will analyze the motivations of the characters in this biblical narrative, we still will not know the entire story. It is always the inscrutable hand of Heaven that governs the story and mocks our pretensions.

One of the great differences between the traditional commentators and the more modern versions of this genre is this God factor. Midrash, Talmud, and the great medieval and later commentators that created the framework for understanding the narrative of the Torah, also delved deeply into the personalities and motives of the people represented in the Torah. They were always careful not only to include but also to emphasize that ultimately it was the will of Heaven that was guiding events towards Divine purposes.

The Bible is not a psychodrama or rebuke of history and psychology. It is a book of fire and holiness and one has to be careful in handling it. But modern commentators – even those who are observant and scholarly – many times insert currently faddish values and interpretations into its eternal words. Keeping this in mind in dealing with the great narrative regarding Joseph and his brothers, one of the key narratives in the entire Torah, we should do so with caution and tradition.

To do otherwise, is a great disservice to the text of the story itself and to the value system that Jewish tradition has assigned to it. The dispute between Joseph and his brothers has heavenly and historic consequences and still hovers over Jewish life today. To treat it as a matter of sibling rivalry is a misunderstanding of the entire purpose of the Torah narrative. ©2022 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**W**hy does Reuben do all within his power to prevent the sale of Joseph? Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik once suggested that the answer lies in an analysis of the Talmud's teaching about Reuben's having relations with his father's wife Bilhah (Genesis 35:22).

According to the Talmud, he did not actually commit this deed. Rather, "When Rachel died, Jacob took his bed which was placed regularly in the tent of Rachel...and placed it in the tent of Bilhah. Reuben came and resented the insult to his mother and said, 'If my mother Leah was subordinate to Rachel, must she

also be subordinate to Rachel's handmaid?' Therefore, he disarranged [Jacob's bed by moving it to Leah's tent]" (Rashi, Shabbat 55b). Still, the Midrash considers this action to be heinous, almost as if Reuben actually had relations with Bilhah.

On its face, the Midrashic understanding of the sentence is difficult. After all, Reuben's sin seems minor. His intention was to show respect to his mother.

It is here that Rabbi Soloveitchik notes that every act has two elements. First, the act itself, and second, its consequences. At times, an action may seem innocuous, but its impact may be great.

In this instance, from the perspective of the deed itself, Reuben did little wrong. However, the consequence of the deed was disrespecting his father and indicating to his brothers that Jacob could be challenged.

Hence, Reuben later takes the lead in protecting Joseph, as he views himself as responsible for the brothers' brazenness in challenging their father by selling his favorite son.

No wonder, then, that after Joseph was sold, Reuben rent his garments and declared, "The child is not [there]. And as for me, where shall I go?" (Genesis 37:30). Reuben feels personally responsible for having planted the seeds that precipitated the sale.

I remember the Rav bringing his analysis to a crescendo with his famous expression, "and I'll clinch it." He did so by pointing out that Reuben was not present during the sale. And Rashi, wondering where Reuben was, notes the Midrash that states that Reuben "was occupied with his sackcloth and his fasting because he had disarranged the couch of his father" (Rashi, Genesis 37:29; Bereishit Rabbah 84:19). In other words, Reuben understood that he needed to fast for that wrong, as it was the cause of his brothers' disrespect.

The message is clear: we must be careful with every deed. A deed – for the good or the bad – may in and of itself be minor, but its impact may have unexpected consequences. Knowing this, we ought to consider extra moments of reflection to try to anticipate these ramifications. ©2022 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

**ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT**

## Embarrassing Someone

*Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**O**ur Sages derive from Parshat Vayeshev the principle of "It is better for someone to be thrown into a fiery furnace than to embarrass another person in public." For we see that Tamar refused to announce that Yehudah was the one who got her pregnant, for fear of embarrassing him, even though as

a result of her silence she was taking the risk of being put to death.

It would seem that this is an example of a case in which a person should give up his life rather than transgress. True, we normally assume that there are only three sins in this category: sexual immorality, murder, and idol worship. However, it is possible that the prohibition of humiliating someone is a subset of the prohibition of murder. This is because when a person is mortified, his face turns white when the blood drains from it, just as in death.

Others disagree, explaining that the three cardinal sins are limited to those mentioned explicitly in the Torah. The prohibition to embarrass someone is not explicit. Furthermore, the Meiri explains that the principle of "It is better for someone to be thrown into a fiery furnace than to embarrass another person in public" is not meant to be taken literally. It is stated dramatically to ensure that people will take it seriously, making efforts to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

May people embarrass themselves? If we take literally the comparison between embarrassing and murdering, then just as people may not harm themselves intentionally, so too they should be forbidden to embarrass themselves intentionally. This would mean that a person would not be allowed to wear torn clothes that expose a deformed part of his body, even if he is doing so in order to make money. However, the Meiri allows a person to embarrass himself, consistent with his understanding the comparison as ethical and not literal.

In order to avoid embarrassing people, our Sages ordained that all first fruits (*bikurim*) that are brought to Jerusalem should be in baskets of reeds. This was to prevent the rich from using gold and silver baskets, which would make the poor feel embarrassed of their more humble baskets. There is also a custom in many congregations that a designated Torah reader (*ba'al korei*) does all the reading from the Torah. This ensures that someone who is unable to read from the Torah will not be embarrassed by being expected to do so. However, there are other congregations that do not share this concern. On the contrary, they believe that the fear of embarrassment will motivate all the men in the congregation to learn to read the Torah for themselves. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

"His brothers said to him, 'Shall we make you king over us; will you rule over us?' and they hated him more because of his dreams and his words." (Beraishis 37:8) Yosef dreamed that he and his brothers were working together in the fields. They were making bundles of wheat (though they were shepherds...) and the brothers' bundles bowed to his.

When Yosef recounted this dream to them, they got upset, asking whether he would indeed rule over them. It is curious that this is the direction they took. Even Yaakov, when he heard of the dreams of Yosef, merely said, "Shall we all bow down to you?" Where was mention of Yosef being a king?

Second of all, the Gemara in Brachos tells us a rule which the brothers undoubtedly knew. "All dreams follow the mouth," which is to say that the interpretation of a dream creates its reality. Even if the brothers felt Yosef's dream was about ruling over them, why vocalize it? They could have pointed out that they were shepherds, not farmers, and clearly the dream was false and they would never bow to Yosef. Why open the door for him to be a king?

Perhaps the brothers were trying to give Yosef mussar in a way he might listen. He had a dream about them bowing to him. If it was not a prophecy, it could have been because that's what Yosef was thinking about, and that's why it manifested as a dream. They aimed to point out the error of his ways to him.

They asked, "Shall we appoint you king over us?" They asked him to gauge his own worthiness for being a leader. They hated him not only for his dreams, but for his words – the painful words of slander Yosef brought to their father about his brothers. They asked if this was behavior he thought would endear him to them, and make them want him as a king. Clearly the answer would have to be, "No."

Then they said, "Or do you intend to rule over us forcibly?" They were pointing out the issue. "Do you think you're doing it for our benefit? That you are beneficent and therefore ruling over us to make sure we are acting properly? Or are you merely power-hungry and doing this for your own ego?" It was intended to be a wake-up call to Yosef and show him how ironic it was that he spoke ill of them and still dreamed of being a ruler. That's not how sons of Yaakov view power.

They were not interpreting a dream, in their opinions. They were explaining the mental process behind Yosef's having the dream. However, they were willing to vocalize it on the outside chance that it would have a positive impact on Yosef. Yaakov, not seeing any desire for power in Yosef's actions took the dream at face value, and only mentioned the bowing, not the ruling over anyone.

However, because the brothers cared enough to show Yosef where he'd gone wrong, not only did their interpretation come true in terms of Yosef's becoming a king (at least Viceroy), but their words had the desired impact and Yosef became a benevolent monarch who chose his words carefully, to avoid hurting his brothers further.

Once, someone introduced R' Avraham Pam, the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaath, with all sorts of flattering comments, including calling him the Gadol

*HaDor. R' Pam got up and gave his speech with making any remarks about the introduction.*

*Afterwards, a close disciple approached him and asked his normally humble Rebbi why he did not protest or at least deflect any of the comments and compliments made about him. R' Pam answered that if he had, the only thing it would have accomplished is that people would say, "And he is so humble as well!"*

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### RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

## Cross-Currents

**H**e refused. That is the meaning of the word *vayima'en*, a word used twice in the story of Yosef in this parsha, once to describe a refusal by Yaakov Avinu, the second to describe one by Yosef.

Mourning his missing and presumed killed son for many days, the Torah recounts, Yaakov refused to be comforted (Beraishis 37:35): *Vayima'en lihisnachem*.

And then, when Yosef, serving as the second-in-command of the house of the Egyptian notable Potifar (ibid, 39:8), is seduced by his master's wife, he refuses her: *Vayima'en*, again.

I haven't been successful in tracking down the source of a suggestion I heard several years ago, but offer it all the same.

It was Yaakov's refusal to accept that Yosef was no longer alive that enabled Yosef to refuse Mrs. Potifar's blandishments. The first *vayima'en* gave power to the second one. It was, in other words, the merit of Yaakov's love for, and dedication to, his son that empowered that son to overcome a great moral challenge (which he came close to failing, hinted at by the wavering *shalshes* with which his *vayima'en* is chanted).

The lesson being that when we refuse to give up on someone who seems hopelessly "gone" – in whatever way – our very refusal can serve as a spiritual merit for that person, a long-distance and unknown-to-him assistance to him in dealing with adversity. ©2022

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### RABBI DAVID LEVIN

## The Man?

**A**fter Yosef had told his brothers and his father about his dreams, the brothers could no longer tolerate being near him. They left with their father's flocks to shepherd themselves away from contact with Yosef. After a short while, Ya'akov sent Yosef to find his brothers and inquire about their well-being and the well-being of the flocks: "Go now, look into the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring me back word, and he sent him from the depths of Hebron, and he came to Shechem." As he approached Shechem to search for his brothers, he

was met there by an unidentified man. "A man discovered him, and behold, he was blundering in the field. The man asked him, saying, 'What do you seek?' And he said, 'My brothers do I seek; tell me please where they are pasturing.' The man said, 'They have journeyed on from here, for I heard them saying, "Let us go to Dothan.'" So Yosef went after his brothers and found them at Dothan." Our Rabbis offer several explanations for this unidentified man and what purpose he served in this story. The Targum Yonatan, an Aramaic translation of the Torah, suggests that this man was the angel Gavriel in human form. This explanation opens an entire discussion among the Rabbis about the term *mal'ach*, which can mean both an angel and a messenger. What exactly is the nature of a *mal'ach*, an angel? Involved in this discussion is the difference between a human messenger and a supernatural one.

Rashi appears to side with the Midrash which explains that this "man" was really an angel (Gavriel) who appeared to Yosef. The Siftei Chachamim, a commentary on Rashi, explains that this identification can be derived from the text. Yosef did not ask this man if he knew his brothers and where they were shepherding, he assumed by the nature of this "man" that he knew his brothers and was placed in his path to give him guidance to find them. He could not have been an ordinary man but a direct messenger from Hashem. Yosef assumed that he did not meet this "man" by accident, but by Divine intervention. One can derive from this that Rashi's view is that an angel is a Divine messenger of a different quality of being than a human, and sent with a specific task to accomplish.

Ibn Ezra appears to downplay this concept of a supernatural *mal'ach*. His interpretation of this "man" is that he is a regular human who happened to pass on the way. He is not a messenger who is aware of his message, nor is he even aware, after his intervention, that he was a messenger sent by Hashem to guide Yosef. Yet we know that Hashem has sent him, as he plays an integral part in our narrative. Without his direction, Yosef might have given up hope of finding his brothers and returned to his father. This would have prevented his encounter with his brothers, their sin of kidnapping their brother, and the sale of Yosef into Egypt.

The Ramban appears to be a compromise between Rashi and ibn Ezra. The Ramban views this "man" as human and with the knowledge that he was sent by Hashem, but without the knowledge of the purpose of his mission. As a human, he does not possess supernatural powers and knowledge. Unlike an angel, he is not aware of a particular role to play, but he is aware that others said that the brothers were in Dothan. The Ramban points out that were he an angel, he would have been able to say that the brothers were definitively in Dothan instead of saying that he heard

others saying that they were going to Dothan.

The Kli Yakar implies an additional mission of this “man.” When we are told that the “man” saw Yosef blundering in the field, Yosef was “blundering,” not because he could not find his brothers, but because he misread the danger in approaching them. Yosef came in peace, the field being a metaphor for a spiritual place in which to speak with Hashem. This “man” understood that his brothers had moved away from that peace and were in Dothan, where they discussed ways to justify killing Yosef. The Kli Yakar strengthens his comment by explaining why Yosef misunderstood the danger. Yosef thought back to the quarrel between Kayin and Hevel (Cain and Abel). He believed that their argument was over the use of the “field.” Ka yin was a shepherd who wished that the land remain unplowed for grazing, but Hevel was a farmer who raised crops in the field. Yosef understood that his argument with his brothers was over the multi-colored coat that Ya’akov had given him, which he viewed as much less significant than land. He misread the anger of his brothers and how they viewed the importance of his coat and his dreams. The “man” acted also as a warning of their anger by telling Yosef that they had strayed even further away from their father.

Professor Nechama Leibovits points out that Rashi’s comments indicate a deeper understanding of the purpose of Yosef’s mission. Rashi explains that “the depths of Hebron” is a problematic statement since Hebron is in the mountains. He maintains that the phrase is an illusion to the burial place (depths) of Avraham. This presents the spiritual force behind this mission, namely, that Yosef would be used to fulfill the prophecy made to Avraham that his children would be enslaved in a land not their own for four hundred years. The Ramban also was aware that this was the Divine plan, but his “messenger” could not have known what effect he would have on the furtherance of history and Hashem’s Will. Professor Leibovits explains, “Ya’akov was not aware where he was sending Yosef, and Yosef did not know where his steps would lead him. Similarly, the ‘man’ did not know what the ultimate results of his instructions would be. (Even) Yosef’s brothers were not aware of the significance of their deed.”

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin sees an additional aspect of this “man’s” mission. When he saw that Yosef was blundering in the field, he understood that it was important that he approach Yosef to offer assistance. Since HaRav Sorotzkin saw this “man” as an angel, he had knowledge of the mission and its purpose. Hashem wished to have Yosef transported to Egypt as a slave to fulfill his prophecy to Avraham. The Midianites who transported Yosef to Egypt could have taken him from this field, but that would have precluded a test of his brothers. The “man” intervened at this point so that the test of the brothers would still occur.

For many, this incident in the Torah may be

insignificant. For those who study the Torah and understand that there is meaning in every word and every letter, we know that any encounter, any fact, any story in the Torah carries meaning. It is clear that without this encounter, Yosef might have believed that he would not be able to locate his brothers, and Hashem would have needed another way to bring Yosef to Egypt to fulfill His promise to Avraham. We see from this that when we endeavor to study Torah, we must search for the meaning of each passage. May we set that as a goal in our studies. ©2022 Rabbi D. Levin

#### YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

### Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN ZT"l

*Adapted by Avi Shmidman and Dov Karoll*

**A**t the beginning of this week’s parasha, Rashi (Bereishit 37:2 s.v. eileh) states that, at this point in his life, Yaakov sought to dwell in tranquility, but the ordeal of Yosef sprang upon him. He then generalizes this notion: the righteous seek to dwell in tranquility, but G-d says, “Is it not enough that the righteous will have tranquility in the World-to-Come, that they seek it in this world as well?”

The midrash on which this is based presents a somewhat different version. In the Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 84:3), it is Satan who attacks the desire of righteous people to dwell in tranquility.

Let us return to the formulation common to both Rashi and the Midrash. The righteous do not simply hope for tranquility. The term used is “bikkesh” -- it is a request. The righteous do not ask for wealth or power; they just want to live in tranquility, to have peace and quiet. Although Rashi (Vayikra 26:6 s.v. ve-natatti) states that even if one has other blessings, in the absence of shalom, of peace, it is as if one has nothing, nevertheless, as a dream and as a yearning, tranquility seems to be a moderate request at best. However, the more moderate and limited the request and desire, the more frustrating is its denial. When one holds moderate hopes and they are not fulfilled, how great is the disappointment!

At the end of his life, Yaakov tells Pharaoh, “Few and unpleasant have been the days of my life” (47:9). But were they really so bad? All those years at home with Yitzchak and Rivka, and the fourteen years he spent in study at the yeshiva of Shem and Ever, learning Torah at the feet of the masters? And what about the years in Lavan’s house? While he did have to work while there, and he did suffer at Lavan’s hands, he nevertheless succeeded in building up his family and fortune. He came there alone and empty-handed, and left with a flourishing family and with wealth.

The key to Yaakov’s negative evaluation of his life is his desire for tranquility at the beginning of

parashat Vayeshev. Let us look at Yaakov's life surrounding this point, taking both a glance back and a glance forward, to gain some greater perspective on the significance of this stage.

Turning to last week's parasha: "And Yaakov came to Shekhem, 'shalem,' complete" (33:18). What is the specific connotation of "shalem"? He has survived the challenge of Esav, and he has survived the challenge of Lavan. Esav was out to kill him, and Yaakov managed to dodge that threat. Lavan states at the end of parashat Vayetzei, "It is in my power to do you harm..." (31:29), indicating that Lavan also presented a real physical threat. But both of these threats did not come to pass. Yaakov has survived the external threats, and so he can now settle down, having achieved a state of being "shalem."

But what happens next? First comes the rape of Dina and the response of Shimon and Levi (chapter 34). After that is the story of Reuven and Bilha (35:22). These are crises from within. While the tragedy of Dina could have been attributed to Shekhem, Chazal (Bereishit Rabba 80:1) and Rashi (34:1) also ascribe it to her outgoing nature. Regarding the episode with Reuven, while Chazal (Shabbat 55b) insist that the assertion that Reuven sinned is erroneous, and that the verse is not to be taken literally, it is clear that there was some wrongdoing. This is explicitly clear from Yaakov's "blessing" to Reuven at the end of his life, "Because you went up to your father's bed and defiled it" (49:4). Whatever Reuven did, even if the physical action was only the moving of beds (Shabbat 55b, cited by Rashi 35:22), it was perceived by Yaakov as a rebellion against Yaakov's position as leader of the family. Reuven was undermining Yaakov's role within his own family, violating the basic family boundaries. This shows the beginning of the slow, internal deterioration of the family.

We now arrive at this week's parasha. Yaakov seeks tranquility. He has survived the external threats, and he now wants to concentrate on his family, focusing internally. The episodes with Dina and Reuven were disruptive, but Yaakov still retains his dream for tranquility. But then, "the ordeal of Yosef sprang upon him." The internal deterioration moves to another level with the episode of Yosef and his brothers, and Yaakov is left with frustration and failure.

A question arises regarding the brothers' bringing the coat to Yaakov: why did they have to make it so graphic? Why not just tell Yaakov a story? The Ramban (37:32) explains that they needed to send a bloody coat so that Yaakov would not suspect them of killing Yosef. He explains that since Yaakov was aware of their jealousy, they would have been suspect in the absence of evidence.

Yaakov knew that there were issues between the maidservants' sons and Leah's sons (see Rashi 37:2 s.v. et dibbatam); thus, if they had just made up a

story, he would have suspected that they killed him. The deterioration had gone so far that these were the issues that the brothers faced. Yaakov knew that there was such great animosity within the family that he would have suspected them of killing Yosef!

There is apparently a real deficiency in the education and values within the family. Education needs to be specialized to each element, to each unit and to each individual. It cannot be provided just in terms of the respective classes or groups within the society or the family. Overall, the family is full of problems, both socially and in terms of values. And, overall, there was a lack of unity.

We now understand Yaakov's statement to Pharaoh, "Few and unpleasant have been the days of my life." Yaakov's dream was to be able to settle down and develop his family. But when the external threats ceased, the internal ones began to sprout, disrupting the family from all directions, leading to the ultimate frustration and failure, for Yaakov's modest dream was left unfulfilled. But we cannot claim that the first stage involved external difficulties alone, with internal problems developing only subsequently. At some level, the two are interrelated. Rashi (Devarim 1:3) quotes a Midrash (Sifrei, Devarim 2) which asks why Yaakov did not criticize Reuven at the time; why did he wait until the end of his life? The Midrash's response is astounding. Yaakov did not admonish Reuven earlier because he was afraid that Reuven would abandon Yaakov and join forces with Esav. The external threat comes back to haunt Yaakov, as a result of the internal deterioration. The problems are both internal and external, with the issues intertwined.

In our country of Israel, we are all seeking tranquility and praying for it. But the issue then arises regarding our internal problems. If we cannot maintain our internal peace, then it will all be for naught. Furthermore, the internal problems will bring the external threats back once more, as the Midrash states regarding Yaakov and Reuven. It is our job, then, to ensure that the internal threats are stopped, to ensure that tranquility will reign internally. And in doing so, we can fulfill the wish of our patriarch Yaakov, who sought to live in peace and tranquility. *[Originally delivered on leil Shabbat, parashat Vayeshev 5762 (2001).]*

