

**Parashat Vayeshev**

December 12, 2020, 26 Kislev 5781

**Torah:** Genesis 37:1-40:23; Maftir Numbers  
7:18-29; **Triennial** 38:1-30

**Haftorah:** Zechariah 2:14-4:7

**Why Be Good When No One Else is Watching?**  
**Ilana Kurshan**

Joseph's ability to resist the attempted seduction of the wife of his employer, Potiphar, ends up costing him his job. When Potiphar's wife discovers, to her dismay, that she is unable to win over the handsome young lad in her husband's employ, she blames him for trying to seduce her, and a furious Potiphar casts his right-hand man into an Egyptian prison. But in the Talmud, Joseph is lauded for "sanctifying the name of heaven in secret" (Sotah 36b), which is how the rabbis interpret his resistance. For the Talmudic rabbis, this scene of seduction becomes a story of sanctification that teaches us why we still should be good even when no one else is watching.

The Talmud's discussion of Joseph's confrontation with this married woman appears, rather appropriately, in tractate Sotah, which is about women suspected of

adultery. The rabbis quote a verse from Psalms (81:6) in which Jacob's name is spelled with an extra letter: "He appointed it in Joseph [Yehosef] for a testimony when He went forth against the land of Egypt." According to the rabbis, Joseph merited to receive the letter Hey—a letter from God's name, and the same letter added to the names of Abraham and Sarah—on account of his sanctification of God's name in private when he fled from his master's wife.

According to the Talmud, Potiphar's wife had been trying to attract Joseph's attention for a while: "The clothes she wore in the morning she would not wear in the evening, and the clothes she wore in the evening she would not wear in the morning" (Yoma 35b). But then finally she found her moment. The Torah states that "no one of the household was there inside" (Genesis 39:11) when Potiphar's wife took hold of Joseph's garment and insisted that he lie with her. But the Talmud in Sotah (36b) clarifies that Joseph and Potiphar's wife were not entirely alone, because at the very moment of seduction, Joseph suddenly had a vision in the bedroom window of his father Jacob, who warned him that he was risking his future prospects. His father told him that the names of his brothers were destined to be written on the Ephod – a ceremonial garment worn by the high priest. If Jacob were to succumb, his name would be erased from it. And so Joseph, who may have noticed Potiphar's wife's frequent costume changes, was ultimately held back by the thought of a priestly garment.

The introduction of Jacob into the bedroom is a bit surprising. The contemporary biblical scholar James

Kugel proposes that the rabbis are offering a midrashic reading of a verse from Jacob's deathbed blessing to Joseph at the end of Genesis: "His arms were made firm By the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob— There, the shepherd, the rock of Israel" (49:24). The biblical word for shepherd is *roeh*, a near-homonym for "see." According to Kugel, the rabbis are reading this verse as signifying that Joseph saw the rock of Israel, namely the icon or image of his father Jacob, who was known as Israel. Joseph maintained his firm resistance on account of this image of his father, who appeared to him in the window.

The contemporary Israeli rabbi and novelist Haim Sabato offers an alternative explanation of Joseph's resistance based on an old book of biblical commentary by a Moroccan rabbi that he once found in a used bookstore – or so he relates in his autobiographical novel *Beshafirir Chevion* (untranslated). Sabato writes that Joseph must have grown up in a house without mirrors, since he lived in agrarian Canaan during times of famine and privation. But Potiphar's wife's bedroom was surely full of such luxuries. And so perhaps when Joseph entered, he saw his reflection mirrored back clearly at him for the first time. Never having seen himself before, he thought he was looking at his father, whom he very closely resembled, according to Rashi (on Gen. 37:2). The sight of his father in the bedroom—though it was really just his own reflection—was enough to save him from sin.

These are richly imagined explanations for Joseph's continence, but in the biblical text, Joseph himself explains why he does not sin: "How could I do

this most wicked thing and sin before God?" (39:9). Joseph realizes that even if no one else were to ever find out about it, his indiscretion would not go unnoticed, because God is always watching. The guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers, and so every sin is a sin before God. Indeed, it is even more brazen to sin in private, because it is as if we are denying God's omnipresence.

The rabbis teach that anyone who transgresses in private is considered as if he is pushing away the feet of the divine presence (Kidushin 31a). They base this claim on a verse from Isaiah (66:1): "So says the Lord: The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool." God sits in heaven with God's legs dangling down to earth, and any time we sin, we are bumping up against the divine feet. When we are alone, we are effectively alone with God, and thus we have the greatest possibility for intimacy with God.

Like Joseph, who spent most of his years in Egypt estranged from his father and brothers, all of us go through periods in life when we are more alone than we might wish. But the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife reminds us that even when we are alone, we carry with us an image of ourselves (the mirrors), the values of our parents (Joseph's father), and the presence of God (Whose legs dangle in the room). These presences accompany us when we are tempted by sin or tormented by solitude, reminding us that we are never truly alone.

## How Can You Stay? How Can You Leave?

### Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

This Parasha opens with the fraught relationship of Joseph and his brothers which leads to his sale into slavery in Egypt. The next chapter is about Judah. How are the two connected?

#### **Text: Bereshit 37:31-38:1**

*(37:31) And they took Joseph's tunic and slaughtered a kid goat and dipped the tunic in the blood, (32)and they sent the ...tunic... to their father... "recognize. Is it your son's tunic or not?"... (34)And Yaakov rent his cloths...(35) and he said: "...I will go down to my son in Sheol, mourning" (38:1)And it was at that time and Judah went down from his brothers and he turned until an Adullamite man named Hirah.*

- What might be the connection between the disappearance of Joseph and Judah leaving his brothers and attaching himself to someone from outside the family?
- Can you find any linguistic link that connects the opening of 38 to what came before it?

#### **Commentary: Rashi Bereshit 38:1**

***And it was at that time*** – *Why is this section placed adjacent to the previous one, thus interrupting the section of Joseph's story? To teach that his brothers degraded him from his high position when they saw their father's grief. They said, "You told us to sell him: if you had told us to send him back to his father, we would have obeyed you."*

***And he turned*** - away from his brothers.

- According to this reading, why did Judah depart? (You can decide if there are one or two answers here.)
- What picture do we get of the relationships within the family?

#### **Commentary: R. Joseph Bechor Shor Bereshit 38:1**

***And Judah went down from his brothers*** – *As he saw his father's sorrow and his crying, he could bear it no more and separated himself from his father's home and from his brothers.*

- According to this reading, why did Judah depart?
- How does it differ from the previous one? What does it add to it?

#### **Commentary: Seforno Bereshit 38:1**

***And it was at that time*** - *at about the same time when Joseph was sold to Egypt at the suggestion of Judah who had proposed this instead of bringing him back to his father, thereby bereaved his father. Judah reaped some of the fruit of his ill-advised plans, for he sired two children that would die, and he would become bereaved of both.*

- How does Seforno understand the placement of Judah's story (chapter 38) here?
- Do you consider Judah's bereavement a punishment or an education?

## **Not Knowing** **Bex Stern Rosenblatt**

We came back to Jerusalem in the 530s BCE, after the exile to Babylon, to rebuild our nation and our temple out of the ruins of destruction. Armed with Cyrus of Persia's edict allowing us to build the temple, and then the support of the Persian Emperor, Darius, we had all the external support we needed to make our dream a reality. However, this was not an easy undertaking. Dreams are grand and lacking in details. To take a memory of the temple, passed down through two generations, and rebuild an actual temple, required an extraordinary amount of confidence, resilience, and innovation. Most important, it required us to accept and acknowledge what we had lost and what we no longer knew.

Our haftarah from Zechariah takes place during this time period. Zechariah, prophet of God and spoken to by angels, is able to acknowledge, time and again, how little he knows and how little he understands.

In Zechariah 4, an angel approaches Zechariah and asks him what he sees. Blessed with prophetic sight, Zechariah replies, describing a most unusual menorah, flanked by two olive trees. Although he has had this vision, Zechariah does not understand it. He asks the angel to interpret it for him. The angel, surprised, asks Zechariah, "But surely you know what these are." And Zechariah still replies, "No, my lord."

Let us step back. Zechariah has seen a menorah. He is living during the time of the rebuilding of the temple.

Presumably the menorah he sees refers to the menorah they are returning to its rightful place within the rebuilt temple. Although the details of the menorah itself are confusing, the meaning of the menorah seems self-evident. Even the angel seems to think so. And yet Zechariah insists he does not know what it is.

And lo and behold, the angel goes on to provide an explanation. The meaning of the menorah is, as the Lord of Hosts says, "Not by might and not by power, but rather by my spirit alone." God tells Zechariah that the Jewish governor will indeed be successful in completing the task of rebuilding. The meaning is not dissimilar from what we had presumed the menorah meant. And yet, by insisting that there was more to know, more to learn, Zechariah produces one of the most famous verses of the Tanakh.

The Jews were successful in the building and consecration (*hanukkah*) of the second temple, after the exile in Babylon. They were successful a few hundred years later as well, when the Maccabees again reconsecrated the temple. It is a story we tell and retell every year. This year, may we be more like Zechariah. May we assume that we do not already know everything there is to know about the holiday. May we acknowledge that our roles as parents, leaders, teachers, and rabbis require us to start from a place of curiosity, of looking to learn ever deeper meanings. And may we take the uncertainties of this year as a chance to see the world through new eyes.