



Partners In Torah
San Diego Study Guide

Vayeshev
תשפ"ג

Authored by Rabbi Avi Cohen
Partners Detroit

Partners In Torah San Diego

Mission Statement:

Partners In Torah San Diego is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah San Diego has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Welcome.

Thank you for coming.

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we can grow together as a community.

The second verse in this week's parsha (Genesis 37:2) starts out telling us about Yaakov's descendants, but then focuses only on Yosef.

(ב) אֵלֶּה תְּלִדּוֹת יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף

2) *These are the chronicles of Yaakov, Yosef ...*

The Torah next informs us that Yaakov loved Yosef more than any of his other children. The Midrash explains that because Yaakov worked for Lavan 14 years to marry Rachel, and Yaakov saw many similarities between her son Yosef and himself, Yaakov considered him his most precious child. Yosef strongly resembled Yaakov and went through many of the same trials and tribulations that Yaakov experienced. Yaakov was hated by his brother, and so was Yosef. Yaakov's brother tried to kill him, and so did Yosef's. Yet Yosef had another quality that made him very beloved to Yaakov.

For 20 years, Yaakov hid in Lavan's house from his brother Esav who had vowed to kill him. Just after Yosef was born, Yaakov told his family, "It's time to leave and return to my parents' home." What was it about Yosef's birth that prompted Yaakov to leave his hiding place even though it would mean a confrontation with Esav?

Rabbi Chelbo in the Talmud (Babba Batra 123b) asks and answers this very question:

בעא מיניה ר' חלבו מר' שמואל בר נחמני כתיב ויהי כאשר ילדה רחל את יוסף ויאמר יעקב אל לבן שלחני ואלכה אל מקומי ולארצי מאי שנא כי אתיליד יוסף אמר ליה ראה יעקב אבינו שאין זרעו של עשו נמסר אלא ביד זרעו של יוסף שנאמר והיה בית יעקב אש ובית יוסף להבה ובית עשו לקש וגו'

Rabbi Chelbo asked Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmeini, "The verse says (Genesis 30:25), 'And it was, when Rachel had given birth to Yosef, Yaakov said to Lavan, "Grant me leave that I may go to my place and to my land."' What happened when Yosef was born that Yaakov

requested to leave? Yaakov knew that the descendants of Esav (Amalek) would only be defeated by the descendants of Yosef. The verse in Obadiah (1:18) says:

(יח) וְהָיָה בֵּית יַעֲקֹב אֵשׁ וּבֵית יוֹסֵף לְהֵבֶה וּבֵית עֵשָׂו לְקֶשֶׁת וְדִלְקוּ בָהֶם וְאָכְלוּם
וְלֹא יִהְיֶה שְׂרִיד לְבֵית עֵשָׂו כִּי יִדְוֹד דָּבָר

18) And the house of Yaakov will be fire and the house of Yosef will be a flame, and the house of Esav for straw. And they will ignite them and devour them. There will be no survivor to the house of Esav, for Hashem has spoken.

Yaakov knew that Yosef was the antidote to Esav. Now that Yosef was born, Yaakov could combat Yosef and win.

Last week's portion ended with a lengthy list of Esav's descendants. After seeing all the powerful members of Esav's family, Yaakov wondered, "Who can defeat all of these powerful people?"

Rashi on the first verse of this parsha brings a Midrash with a parable to address this question:

הפשתני הזה נכנסו גמליו טעונים פשתן הפחמי תמה אנה יכנס כל הפשתן הזה היה פיקח אחד משיב לו ניצוץ אחד יוצא ממפוח שלך ששורף את כולו כך יעקב ראה כל האלופים הכתובים למעלה תמה ואמר מי יכול לכבוש את כולן מה כתיב למטה אלה תולדות יעקב יוסף וכתוב והיה בית יעקב אש ובית יוסף להבה ובית עשו לקש ניצוץ יוצא מיוסף שמכלה ושורף את כולם

A flax salesman entered an ironsmith's store with camels laden with huge bundles of flax, filling the entire store. The smith wondered, "How is all this flax going to fit into my little store?" A wise person told him, "What are you worried about? One spark from your anvil will burn it all up in a second!"

What special quality did Yosef possess that made him the antidote to Esav and his descendant, Amalek?

Yosef was able to see the hidden hand of Hashem in everything that happened to him. He had such a close relationship with Hashem that he was able to see Hashem's guiding hand in every step of his trying journey. Realizing that Hashem was always with him gave him the ability to negotiate the challenges that confronted him.

Yosef's brothers had gone to Shechem to pasture their father Yaakov's sheep. Shechem was the city in which Shimon and Levy had killed all the men because of what was done to their sister Dina. Yaakov was concerned for the welfare of his sons. What if the surrounding cities would decide to take revenge against them? Yaakov sent Yosef to check up on his brothers and return with a report. When Yosef reached Shechem, however, his brothers were nowhere in sight. How could he know in which direction they went? Trying to find them would be futile. Yosef would have to return to his father without the information. Just then, the Torah tells us (Genesis 37:15-17):

(טו) וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְהִנֵּה תַעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאמֹר מַה תִּבְקֹשׁ
(טז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת אַחֵי אֲנֹכִי מִבְּקֹשׁ הַגִּידָה נָא לִי אֵיפֹה הֵם רְעִים
(יז) וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֹמְרִים גִּלְכָּה דְתִינָה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף
אַחַר אָחָיו וַיִּמְצְאֵם בְּדוֹתָן

15) A man discovered him and behold; he was blundering in the field. The man asked him, "What do you seek?" 16) And he said, "I seek my brothers; tell me, please, where are they pasturing?" 17) The man said, "They have journeyed on from here, for I heard them saying, 'let us go down to Dothan'" So Yosef went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Who was this person who found Yosef and sent him directly into the lion's mouth, his jealous brothers who hated him for being his father's favorite son? Rashi, quoting the Midrash Tanchuma, tells us that it was the angel *Gavriel*.

Looking at it from Yosef's perspective, he had come to Shechem to find his brothers. They were no longer there and, with no other option, he would have had to return empty handed to his father, causing him anguish and worry about the welfare of his sons. Suddenly, out of nowhere, someone approaches him and asks, "Can I help you?" The person happened to overhear the brothers say that they were going to Dothan, and he directs Yosef to them. Yosef thought, "Wow! What are the chances of that being random? Hashem has answered my prayers! Thank You Hashem!!" He couldn't have been more correct. Yosef had to meet up with his brothers, so, Hashem sent an angel to make it happen.

Realizing that Hashem had helped him to find his brothers, he proceeded without worry or concern about their jealousy and hatred towards him. If this is where Hashem wants him to go, this is where he will confidently go!

When the brothers saw Yosef approaching from afar, they convened a court and judged him. What were the allegations? He is a "*rodef*" – a pursuer. A "*rodef*" is someone who is pursuing an innocent person to kill him. The Torah says that a *rodef* has forfeited his right to life by choosing to use it to terminate the life of an innocent individual. Not only that, it is a mitzvah to kill him *before* he kills the innocent victim.

The brothers perceived that although Yosef presented no physical threat to them, he was out to accomplish something much worse. He was trying to kill them spiritually by destroying their spiritual future. Yosef reported to his father what he thought were sins that his brothers had committed. It looked to them like he was trying to use his special status in Yaakov's eyes to turn his father against them so that they would be excluded from being part of the future Jewish nation.

The precedent, notably, had been set. Avraham had two sons, Yitzchak and Yishmael, but only Yitzchak was chosen to carry on Avraham's legacy. Yitzchak, too, had Yaakov and Esav, yet only Yaakov was selected to carry on Yitzchak's legacy. The brothers suspected that Yosef was trying to accomplish the very same thing with them, namely, leave them out of the picture and proceed himself to become the fourth patriarch. Hence, he was trying to kill them spiritually, a far more grievous crime than physically killing them.

They found him guilty as accused and were about to execute him when Reuven piped up and said, "Why kill him ourselves? Let's just throw him into this pit with snakes and scorpions, and let them do it!"

Reuven intended to come back later and take Yosef out of the pit. He knew that if Yosef was truly righteous, the snakes and scorpions would not harm him. Similar to the story with Daniel in the lion's den, no animal can injure a Tzadik.

Following Reuven's suggestion, the brothers threw Yosef into the pit.

Imagine the picture: A pit full of snakes and scorpions receive a meal of a live human being, but instead of pouncing on him, they recoil and don't as much as touch him!

Yosef then realized that *Hashem was with him in the pit* protecting him every second. Ironically, this gave him great comfort. He realized that Hashem was with him in this most difficult situation. But how long would he be down there? Until he dies of hunger? How would he get out? Of course, he had no answers to these terrifying questions, and probably many more; but one thing he knew with certainty: Hashem was with him, and all will work out per Hashem's plan for him.

The Torah doesn't say how long Yosef was in the pit, but as the brothers sat down to eat, they noticed a caravan of *Yishmaelim* coming towards them. At this point, Yehuda said, "What will we gain from killing our brother, let's sell him to this caravan of *Yishmaelim*." They fetched Yosef from the pit, and sold him to them.

The Torah tells us that the caravan was carrying sweet smelling spices for sale. Rashi wonders why the Torah went out of its way to tell us even what the caravan was transporting. To teach us, he answers, that Hashem saw to it that Yosef's journey to Egypt was (relatively)pleasant. Usually, Yishmaelim carry smelly petroleum and tar products, which would have made Yosef's trip very repulsive, but Hashem saw to it that this not be the case for Yosef.

Imagine Yosef's situation in the wagon travelling to who knows where with who know who? "Where am I going? What will my fate be when I get there? What does the future hold for me?" How did Yosef deal with all the uncertainty of his future? When Yosef smelled the sweet smell of the spices, he once again felt Hashem's loving hand in this difficult phase of his journey and was able to remain calm knowing he was in Hashem's guiding hands.

Potifar, one of Pharaoh's officials, purchased Yosef as a servant. The verse says (Genesis 39:3)

(ג) וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי יִדְוֹד אֶתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה יִדְוֹד מִצְּלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ

3) *His master perceived that Hashem was with him, and whatever he did, Hashem made succeed in his hand.*

In what way could his master see that Hashem was with him? Rashi explains,

(ג) כי ה' אתו - שם שמים שגור בפיו (ב"ר)

3) *Hashem's name was always on his lips.*

The Midrash (Tanchuma Vayeshev 8) on the verse (39:3) informs us:

וירא אדוניו כי ה' אתו וגו'. וכי פוטיפר רשע היה רואה שהקב"ה עמו ומה הוא כי ה' אתו? אלא, שלא היה שמו של הקב"ה אז מפיו! היה נכנס לשמשו והוא היה מלחש ואומר רבון העולם אתה הוא בטחוני אתה הוא פטרוני תנני לחן ולחסד ולרחמים בעיניך ובעיני כל רואי ובעיני פוטיפר אדוני ופוטיפר אומר לו מה אתה מלחש שמא כשפים אתה עושה לי והוא משיבו לא אלא אני מתפלל שאמצא חן בעיניך

How could Potifar, an evil man, see Hashem with Yosef? He saw that Hashem's name never left Yosef's lips. When Yosef entered to serve him, he would mumble and say, "Hashem, You are all I have to depend on, please let me find favor in the eyes of my master." Once, Potifar asked him, "What are you saying? Are you mumbling witchcraft on me?" Yosef answered, "I am praying to find favor in your eyes."

Because Yosef was always connected to Hashem, he continually credited Hashem for all of his successes. We see this in every one of the Torah's quotations of Yosef.

Later, when Yosef served as the prison warden, he noticed the concerned and depressed looks on the faces of two of the other prisoners, Pharaoh's chamberlains, the cup bearer and the baker. When they told him of their disconcerting dreams, Yosef's response was (40:8):

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף, "הֲלוֹא לַאֱלֹקִים פְּתוּרִים! סִפְרוּ נָא לִי"

8) *He said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to Hashem? Relate it to me if you please."*

Yosef went on to interpret their dreams. Events transpired exactly as Yosef had interpreted the dreams. Three days later, at Pharaoh's birthday party, Pharaoh restored the cup bearer to his former position, and the baker was killed. Seeing that the cup bearer would be restored to his former position, Yosef asked him to tell Pharaoh that he was in prison for no crime. But upon achieving his freedom, the cupbearer promptly forgot. Two years passed, and Yosef saw no end to his imprisonment.

Pharaoh then had two consecutive dreams that none of his wise men or advisors could satisfactorily interpret, whereupon the cupbearer remembered that Yosef had perfectly interpreted his and the baker's dreams and told Pharaoh about Yosef and his amazing abilities. Suddenly, Yosef was fetched from his cell, cleaned up, given a shave and suitable clothing, and was whisked before the king, who needed him to interpret his dreams. The chamberlain had finally come through. Under these circumstances, one would think that Yosef would want to impress the king with his great wisdom and ability. But when the king said to Yosef, "I hear that you know how to interpret dreams," Yosef responded (45:16) with,

טז) וַיַּעַן יוֹסֵף אֶת פַּרְעֹה לֵאמֹר בְּלִעְדֵי אֱלֹקִים יַעֲנֶה אֶת שְׁלוֹם פַּרְעֹה

16) *Yosef answered Pharaoh saying, "It has nothing to do with me, Hashem will answer Pharaoh's need."*

In front of Pharaoh, who had made a deity of himself, Yosef deflected all of the attention from himself to Hashem, using the opportunity to explain that despite his being under Pharaoh's

jurisdiction and control, Yosef believed in Hashem. That takes guts, and piety. Yet for Yosef, who lived with Hashem, there was no other way. This was the reality—Hashem does it all.

The Torah reveals just the opposite about Amalek in the words (Deuteronomy 25:18) אשר קרך בדרך. To them everything is coincidental. (The numeric value – gematria- of עמלק – 240, is the same as the numeric value of ספק- 240, which means *doubt*.) Their goal is to create doubt about the reality of Hashem's existence.

Amalek are the ones who, just after the Jewish people left Egypt with all the miracles of the ten plagues and the Jewish people walking through the Reed Sea, which split for them, said that all of these open miracles were just coincidence and attacked them. To Amalek, the Jewish people just got lucky. The ten plagues were a freak of nature that just happened to come at the right time for the Jews. Similarly, the tide went out just at the right time for them to cross the sea. The other nations recognized Hashem's great might and were afraid to tussle with the Jews, but Amalek had no reservations about attacking the Jewish nation. They say, "Don't be fooled by what looks like it was the product of intelligence. It was really just a coincidence."

In a very strong sense, we currently live in a world that also seeks to deny Hashem's existence. On one side, there is the notion of evolution, which suggests that the world and everything in it came about through coincidence; and on the other, we have technology, which gives the illusion that we can control everything with our gadgets and computers. So, who needs Hashem? This is the world of Esav and his descendants, whose goal it is to create doubt whether Hashem exists altogether.

As the descendants of Yaakov, we know that Hashem is behind everything that happens in the world, to each individual and to the world at large. Our mission as Hashem's nation is to reveal Hashem in our personal lives and from there to the entire world; to show that Hashem is in control of all that transpires.

But how do we do this? It starts with our personal lives. We need to activate the quality of Yosef, to see Hashem's hand in all that happens to us. Granted, it may not be as easy for us as it was for Yosef, but if we pay close attention and seek to find Hashem's presence in everything that we do, we will see Him in every step of our lives. The *Chovot Halevavot* says that to the degree that a person tries to see Hashem in his life, *he will see Hashem in his life.*

When a person reaches this level of trust in Hashem, he can stand up to any challenge, no matter how difficult, just as Yosef did.

This is the secret as to how to deal with today's difficult challenges. We are living in an upside-down world, but we must realize that, ultimately, all is in Hashem's hand, and He has a plan. This is all preparing us for Mashiach. And although we cannot see the complete Master plan in action, we realize that Hashem is behind all that is happening. The more we see Hashem in our lives, the better prepared we are to see Hashem in world events as well.

When the Mashiach reveals himself, we will all see how Hashem guided the events such that Mashiach should come. In retrospect we will see Hashem's hand and how it brought about the Mashiach's coming. May we all be here to see how the plan plays out when the Mashiach comes speedily in our day!