



Partners In Torah

San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura

Take home Dvar Torah

תשפ"ה Parshat Vayeishev

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Hello, Welcome!

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

Thank you for joining us!

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

The story of Yosef and his brothers is one of the Torah's most difficult stories to understand. How could the brothers' jealousy towards Yosef have been so great that they wanted to *kill* him because of it? And, after they decided not to kill him, how could they heartlessly sell a 17-year-old boy to a caravan of Yishmaelim? Did they not consider what could happen to him?

What complicates the matter further is that the brothers were holy and righteous people. Hashem, Who plumbs the depths of our hearts and knows our most secret thoughts, testifies in the Torah that they were all righteous. These were not people who succumbed to their base and earthy inclinations. Their every move was carefully evaluated to ensure that it complied with Hashem's will. This is true even though it may not look so on the surface.

A look at the story through the Torah's eyes as explained by our Sages reveals a completely different understanding of the story.

A number of factors led the brothers to this seemingly strange result.

1) Yosef's favored status

The Torah tells us that Yaakov loved Yosef more than any of his other sons. The Torah also tells us why (Genesis 37:3):

(ג) וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת יוֹסֵף מִכָּל בְּנָיו כִּי בֶן זָקְנִים הוּא לוֹ וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים:

3. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons since he was ***the son of his old age***, and he made him a fine woolen tunic:

Targum Onkelos (the Aramaic translation of the Torah) understands "***son of his old age***" to mean that Yosef was a wise child. (Binyomin was actually younger than Yosef.) Yaakov saw his son Yosef as a wise soul beyond his years in wisdom. For this reason, Yaakov taught

Yosef all the Torah that he had learned in the Yeshiva of Shem and Eber. Yosef was like a sponge and absorbed everything. Additionally, Yaakov, being over a hundred years old, needed someone to help him, and he chose Yosef. While his brothers were busy with the sheep and cattle, Yosef did not leave his father's side.

According to the Midrash, Yosef also looked very much like his father, and both of them had been born circumcised, evidencing a strong similarity between them. This created a very special and deep bond between them. Yaakov also saw in Yosef spiritual qualities that were complimentary to his own, augmenting Yaakov's spiritual powers.

Because of Yosef's closeness to his father and the abundance of Torah that he had learned, Yosef would teach and guide his brothers with his Torah. Yet, in spite of his superiority, Yosef did not hold himself higher than any of them. On the contrary, he was very humble and would make it a point of helping out even the children of Bilhah and Zilpah, Rochel's and Leah's former maidservants, who had become Yaakov's full-fledged wives. Leah's sons, however, would denigrate them and call them slaves, and they, in turn, would have a few choice words for their brothers.

2) Yosef looked like an instigator (37:2).

וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת דְּבָרֵיהֶם רָעָה אֶל אָבִיהֶם:

2) And Joseph would bring evil reports about them to their father:

Yosef tattled on his brothers to their father regarding the brothers' treatment of the children of the former maidservants as slaves. Yosef wanted Yaakov to intervene and make peace among them. His intentions were pure and humble: to teach his brothers the Torah that he had learned from his father, and to help his downtrodden half-siblings. The brothers, however, misjudged Yosef and felt that he was preaching to

them because he felt himself superior and that he was helping the downtrodden only because he was like them.

Yosef related other complaints to his father. He claimed that his brothers would cut off a piece of flesh from an animal before it died, something forbidden as one of the Seven Noahide laws. He also claimed that they were acting inappropriately with non-Jewish women.

The commentary פרשת דרכים (1657-1727) seeks to explain why Yosef suspected his brothers of violating these laws.

The Torah tells us that the forefathers, beginning with Avraham, kept the Torah's mitzvot even before they were given on Sinai when they became obligatory for all Jews. This is derived from the following verse (Genesis 26:5).

(ה) עֵקֶב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַע אַבְרָהָם בְּקוֹלִי וַיִּשְׁמֹר מִשְׁמֵרָתִי מִצְוֹתַי חֻקֹּתַי וְתוֹרָתַי:

5. *Because Abraham obeyed My voice, and observed My **safeguards**, My **commandments**, My **decrees**, and My **Torahs**.*

Rashi explains that the **safeguards** refer to the Rabbinic laws designed to protect the biblical laws, the **commandments** refer to the Torah's logical laws - not to steal or kill, the **decrees** refer to the laws that defy our understanding, and the **Torahs** refers to the Written and Oral Torahs.

This line of thinking maintains that Yosef and the brothers disagreed about whether they had the status of a full-fledged Jewish person even as far as the leniencies in the law that accrue to a Jew. The brothers maintained that the covenant that Avraham Avinu entered with Hashem when he performed the Brit Milah on himself elevated him to the status of a full-fledged Jew with all the Torah's stringencies and leniencies. Yosef maintained that although they kept all the mitzvot and

were different than the other nations, they still had to keep the stringencies of the Noahides.

The seventh Noahide law prohibits a person from cutting off a piece of a live animal and eating it before the animal dies. A Jew has this law as well; however, a Jew also has the mitzvah of ritual slaughter - שחיטה - *shechitah*. A Noahide, on the other hand, may kill an animal any way he chooses.

Now, it is very common for an animal to spasm after slaughter, like a chicken that can run around without its head. For a Jewish person, a moving animal that has been properly slaughtered is considered dead and he may already cut a piece from it. (He can't eat it until the animal stops moving, though.) For a Noahide, however, the animal is not considered dead until it has completely stopped moving, and therefore he must wait until the animal completely stops moving before he is permitted to cut off a piece of meat from it.

Yosef saw his brothers cut a piece of meat from a slaughtered animal before it stopped moving. Assuming they had the status of Noahides in this matter, this was clearly forbidden. Thus, he told his father that the brothers were transgressing the law of eating from a live animal. The brothers however, applied the leniency of the Torah that after ritual slaughter the animal is considered dead, so it is permitted.

This line of thinking explains the other two complaints that Yosef had against his brothers. His criticism of his brothers stemmed from his difference of opinion on their status.

3. The dreams

Yosef exacerbated the situation by relating his two dreams to his brothers.

In the first, Yosef was the center of attention, and his brothers all bowed down to him. Yosef insisted on telling this dream to his brothers - in their minds - to rub it in. In his second dream, Yosef saw the sun, the moon, and 11 stars bow down to him. They understood the sun as referring to Yaakov, the moon to his mother, and the 11 stars to them. When Yaakov heard the dream he said, "How do you think I and your mother (who had died giving birth to Benjamin) would bow down to you?" Nevertheless, Yaakov saw from the dreams that Yosef was destined for greatness.

The brothers, on the other hand, saw an egomaniac; someone who dreams of power and dominion over his family. This only confirmed their suspicions about Yosef's intentions.

Because Yaakov favored Yosef over his brothers, and because Yosef, the egomaniac looked like he was trying to discredit his brothers to his father, the brothers suspected Yosef of trying to take over Yaakov's legacy and exclude them 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 chosen to carry on Yitzchak's legacy. The brothers concluded that Yosef was trying to accomplish the very same thing with them. He wanted to become the fourth patriarch and leave them out of the picture. These allegations made Yosef, in his brothers' eyes, guilty of a capital crime.

The law is that if a murderer is pursuing an innocent man to kill him, it is a mitzvah to kill the pursuer to save the innocent victim. This is the law of רודף (*rodef*) a pursuer. By seeking to take another's, the pursuer has forfeited his right to life, and one must kill him before he kills the innocent man.

Although Yosef was not trying to kill anybody physically, in his brothers' eyes he was trying to kill their entire spiritual future and prevent them from becoming the kernel of the Jewish nation. To them, not only was Yosef committing a crime against them personally, he was also causing a tremendous loss to Hashem by not allowing the other eleven tribes to create greater honor for Hashem. They felt themselves worthy of being the building blocks of the nation that would ultimately receive the Torah on Sinai; in their evaluation, Yosef was trying to stop it.

The Midrash says:

מדרש תנחומא פנחס - פרק ג

רבי שמעון אומר מנין אתה אומר שכל המחטיא את חבירו קשה מן ההורגו?
שההורגו בעה"ז יש לו חלק לעה"ב * והמחטיאו הורגו בעה"ז ולעה"ב

Rabbi Shimon said, "How do we know that one who has caused his fellow to sin is committing a greater crime than if he would have actually killed him? [The logic is that] physically killing him only takes him out of this world, whereas causing him to sin takes him out of this world and the next."

This is why they were so merciless to Yosef. They steeled themselves because the stakes were so high.

The story continues (Genesis 37:18):

(יח) וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרָחֹק וּבִטְרָם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ:

18. They saw him from afar; and when he had not yet approached them, they conspired against him to kill him:

The Seforno (1480-1550) comments on this verse:

(יח) ויתנבלו אותו להמיתו. הנה לשון "נכל" יורה על המצאה להרע כמו אשר נכלו לכם. אמר שחשבו את יוסף בלבם נוכל להמית ושבא אליהם לא לדרוש שלומם אלא למצוא עליהם עלילה או להחטיאם כדי שיקללם אביהם או יענישם האל ית' וישאר

הוא לבדו ברוך מבנים ולי' התפעל יורה על ציור הדבר בנפש כמו אתה מתנקש
בנפשי מצייר בלבבך מוקש על נפשי ולשון להמיתו שימית הוא את אחיו כמו
לעשותכם אותם לעברך בברית. ובזה הודיע מה היה למו בהיות כלם צדיקים גמורים
עד שהיו שמותם לפני ה' לזכרון איך נועדו לב יחדו להרוג את אחיהם או למכרו ולא
נחמו על הרעה כי גם כשאמרו אבל אשמים אנחנו על אחינו לא אמרו שתהיה
אשמתם על מכירתו או מיתתו אלא על אכזריותם בהתחננו. והנה הגיד הכתוב כי
ציירו בלבם וחשבו את יוסף לנוכל ומתנקש בנפשם להמיתם בעולם הזה או בעולם
הבא או בשניה' והתורה אמר' הבא להרגך כו':

The verse reveals that in their hearts they saw Yosef as someone plotting to kill them. He was not coming to see how they are doing; rather he was coming to look for something to tell Yaakov and have him curse them, or get them punished from heaven, so that he alone should remain the blessed son... This explains how even though they were all completely righteous such that their names are inscribed on the breastplate of the High Priest, which accompanies him into the Holy Temple, they still plotted to kill their brother, or to sell him, and didn't refrain from the evil. For even though they did feel remorse at one point for what they did, they did not feel remorse for the act itself, just that they were unmerciful and did not heed his supplications to him. (They felt they were being punished for being so merciless) This is because they saw him as plotting to kill them in this world or in the world to come, or in both, and the Torah says, "If someone is trying to kill you, hurry and kill him first."

The Midrash tells us that the brothers convened a court, judged, and sentenced Yosef. After the sentencing, they sat down to eat. They had no qualms or guilty feelings about what they had just done, confident that they had done the right thing. This is what they needed to do to preserve their spiritual future as the foundation of the Jewish Nation.

The Midrash further informs us:

מדרש תנחומא וישב - פרק ב

אמרו נחרים בינינו שלא יגיד אחד ממנו ליעקב אבינו אמר להם יהודה ראובן אינו כאן ואין החרם מתקיים אלא בעשרה מה עשו שתפו להקב"ה באותו החרם! שלא יגיד לאביהם

[After selling Yosef to the Yishmaelim] they said. "Let's create a ban (an oath) between us that no one of us tell our father Yaakov." Yehuda said, "But a quorum of ten is required to institute a ban, and Reuven isn't here!" [Reuven had gone to help Yaakov.] What did they do? They co-opted Hashem with them to create the ban that no one should tell Yaakov.

Yitzchak as well knew that Yosef was alive but didn't tell Yaakov. He reasoned, "If Hashem isn't telling him, I surely shouldn't." Even Yosef abided by this ban. This is why he did not communicate with his father for the entire 22 years that he was in Egypt, even though he knew how much pain his alleged death caused him. That Hashem and Yitzchak abided by their ban and did not reveal to Yaakov that Yosef was alive indicates that they were correct in their judgement of Yosef.

4. Another important component is necessary to round out this story.

Hashem told Avraham Avinu at the ברית בין הבתרים - *the covenant between the parts*, that his children would be slaves in a foreign land for 400 years. The counting began with the birth of Yitzchak, and it was now 168 years later. The time had come for this decree's fulfillment. The place selected for this exile was Egypt, and somehow Yaakov and his family needed to get there to begin the process.

The Midrash tell us:

מדרש תהלים - מזמור קה

אמר רבי יהודה בר נחמן בשם רבי שמעון בן לקיש, ראוי היה יעקב לירד למצרים בשלשלאות של ברזל ובקולרין, ועשה לו הקב"ה כמה עלילות וכמה מנגנאות ונמכר יוסף למצרים כדי לירד. ויקרא רעב על הארץ, וכל כך למה, (שם מו, ו) ויבא יעקב

מצרימה. אמר ר' פנחס הכהן בר חמא, משל לפרה אחת שהיו רוצין למשוך אותה למקולין שלה ולא היתה נמשכת. מה עשו, משכו בנה תחלה והיתה רצה אחריו. כך עשה הקב"ה מנגנאות, שעשו אחי יוסף כל אותן הדברים כדי שירדו למצרים גם כן כדי שירד גם יעקב, שנאמר (הושע יא, ד) בחבלי אדם אמשכם:

Rabbi Yehuda son of Nachman said in the name of Reish Lakish: "Yaakov should have been taken down to Egypt in chains of steel, but Hashem created various pretenses so that he should go down with dignity. Yosef was sold to Egypt, and then there was a famine in the land." Rabbi Pinchas HaCohen said: "It's like the cow that would not go to slaughter. They led its calf in front of it and it came running. Similarly, Hashem made the pretense by having Yosef's brothers do what they did for Yaakov to go down to Egypt."

The Torah hints to this concept in the following verse. When Yaakov sent Yosef to check on his brothers, the Torah tells us (37:14) that Yaakov sent him from the "Valley of Chevron."

וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ מֵעֵמֶק חֶבְרוֹן וַיָּבֵא שָׂכָמָה:

Rashi comments:

(יד) מעמק חברון - והלא חברון בהר שנאמר (במדבר יג) ויעלו בנגב ויבא עד חברון אלא (ב"ר) מעצה עמוקה של אותו צדיק הקבור בחברון לקיים מה שנאמר לאברהם בין הבתרים (לעיל טו) כי גר יהיה זרעך:

But Chevron is on a mountain, as the verse says, "they went up to Chevron"! But here it means, rather, from the deep council of the righteous person, Avraham, who is buried there, to fulfill the decree said to him at the covenant between the parts: "your offspring will be sojourners in a foreign land."

Why would Yaakov send his 17-year-old son on a lonely mission to find his brothers in, of all places, Shechem? This is the city that Shimon and Levy had just destroyed! And if Yaakov was worried about his ten

older boys, how could he send this one younger son alone? This was a very dangerous place for all of Yaakov's sons, most certainly for a lone son. But, as Rashi explained, there was a different agenda here.

In reality, Yaakov sent Yosef to his brothers, the beginning of the story, to fulfill the decree of Hashem to Avraham. This *had* to happen.

When Yosef didn't find his brothers in Shechem, he became lost in the field. At this point a "man" saw him and asked him "what do you seek?" Who was this man who just happened to be where Yosef needed him at the right time and had the exact information that Yosef was seeking? Rashi tells us that it was the angel Gavriel. Yosef needed to find his brothers to fulfill the decree of Hashem to Avraham, so Hashem sent an angel to achieve that result.

There seems to be a contradiction here, however. On the one hand, Hashem has set the agenda, to send Yaakov to Egypt. But, on the other hand, the brothers are faulted for not having listened to Yosef's cries and supplications. If this was the agenda, were they not just actors in the play, needed to bring about the objective? Why blame them for their actions?

The Baal HaAkeida (1420-1494) explains how these two concepts are consistent.

While Hashem's goal will always be achieved, He does not decree or determine the nitty gritty of how it will happen. It could happen in a myriad of ways, and Hashem uses us to carry it out. When our actions, the individual free choices that we make on a day-to-day basis, are useful to Hashem for His purpose, He uses our choices to accomplish His objective. When in the throes of making a decision between right and wrong, we are totally unaware that our seemingly unimportant choice may just fit into the tapestry of events and indeed, achieve Hashem's

objective. This is true in the case of both a good deed which brings forth a good result, and a bad deed which brings forth a negative result.

Therefore, although Yaakov needed to go down to Egypt, if the brothers had acted as they should have, he would have gone down in a different way. Once they made the wrong choice, Hashem used it to accomplish his objective.

This is the explanation of what the Sages say:

פסיקתא זוטרתא (לקח טוב) ויקרא פרשת אמור דף סט עמוד א
אמרו חכמים מגלגלין זכות על ידי זכאי וחובה על ידי חייב

Hashem brings about good things through good people, and bad things through bad people.

Hashem uses us, through our day-to-day decisions, as His agents. When Hashem has something good to accomplish, He looks to the people whom He knows will make the right choices to get it done. The same is true for the bad. When Hashem wants something bad done, He will turn to someone who always makes the wrong choices to get it done.

The Malbim (1809-1879) agrees with the Baal HaAkeida in principle; he maintains, however, that the story with Yosef and his brothers is an exception to the rule. In this case specifically, if not for the hidden agenda of getting Yaakov to Egypt, the brothers would not have misinterpreted Yosef's intentions and would not have gone to the extreme that they did. Additionally, because their thoughts and intentions were pure and completely for the honor of Heaven, under normal circumstances, if they were mistaken, Hashem would have somehow indicated to them that they were wrong to save them from a sin. Therefore, once the brothers concluded that Yosef was out to kill them, they were compelled to follow through; it wasn't their fault. That is also why Yaakov couldn't perceive the danger in sending Yosef on this mission. Hashem prevented him from seeing the danger.

From all that we have learned, it is clear that Yosef's the brothers' sale of Yosef was not simply a reaction to their jealousy of him. It was planned in Heaven, and the brothers, using their best judgment, were Hashem's agents to carry out His divine plan.

This idea applies to our lives today. Our Sages concur that we currently live in the time called "the footsteps Mashiach." The idea is that Mashiach is so close that we can hear his footsteps as he comes down the hall. When we choose to follow Hashem's path and do the mitzvot, Hashem weaves these actions into the tapestry of actions needed to bring the Mashiach. When the Mashiach finally comes, we will all see how, through our seemingly insignificant good choices, Hashem used us as His agents to bring him, may we all merit to see him speedily in our times!