

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה פו

א"ר לוי עבדא זבין ובר אמתא מזבין ובר חורין עבד לתרויהון.

Genesis Rabbah 86:1

Rabbi Levi observed: A slave buys, the son of a bondmaid sells, and a freeborn son becomes slave to both.

In the narrative unfolding of the biblical drama, the Joseph story accounts for the arrival of Jacob's sons and their descendants in Egypt. It also serves to introduce one of the main themes to emerge from the rest of the biblical story: the overturning of oppression with redemption.

As Rabbi Levi notes, Potiphar—who purchases Joseph in Genesis 39:1—was himself a slave of Pharaoh, but was empowered to purchase another slave. “The son of a bondmaid” refers to the caravan of Ishmaelites, the tribal descendants of Hagar, who purchase Joseph from his brothers (Gen. 37:25). Joseph, born free, becomes a slave to both in turn—and ultimately brings the story of oppression and redemption to a climax in Genesis.

The overturning of roles in this parashah is a prelude to the ultimate message of the Bible: hope. As Americans, we are comfortable with the worldview that Rabbi Levi observed in the parashah, the idea that even the most minor of players on the human stage is not trapped by the story of his or her birth. We, like Joseph, Potiphar, and the Ishmaelites, have roles to play beyond what might be expected from us given our “station in life.” Slaves will one day be free, and the uplift of the Joseph story is that although he became a slave for a time, he and his descendants were one day brought from freedom to redemption.

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yeishev

Genesis 37:1–40:23

December 17, 2011

21 Kislev 5772

## Parashah Commentary

**This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS.**

Male characters and voices dominate biblical literature, yet the near-absence of female characters is particularly striking in Parashat Va-yeishev. Here is the story of Jacob (his wives don't appear) and his 12 sons (his daughter doesn't appear) exploring the world of men—in the field, on the road, in the city, and in prison. These narratives are rough and even violent, and this tone carries over to the two stories in which women do appear: Judah's coarse treatment of Tamar and Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's unnamed wife, who physically accosts him.

The Torah sets up the story of Joseph by observing that he was “well-built and handsome” (Gen. 39:6). But it is not only on the outside that Joseph looks good. His resistance to the seductions of Mrs. Potiphar shows strength of character, as does his pious explanation that he is obliged to keep faith with both Potiphar—his master—and with God. In this story, Mrs. Potiphar lacks character (in both senses of the word); she is merely a foil to showcase the virtue of Joseph. He is no longer the spoiled boy prancing about in his fancy clothes and boasting of his dreamy destiny. Joseph has become a cool and collected man; he is now an efficient manager of other people's concerns.

If Joseph looks exceptionally good in chapter 39, this impression is magnified in contrast to the view that we have just been shown of his brother Judah in chapter 38. Judah repeatedly makes desperate decisions that result in catastrophes. It had been his idea in chapter 37 to sell Joseph into slavery; the traditional commentaries plausibly attribute to Judah the plan of dipping the tunic in the blood of a kid and presenting it to Jacob. In chapter 38, Judah “goes down” from his brothers, and the descent is figurative as well as literal. He subverts the levirate marriage of his daughter-in-law Tamar by denying her access to his youngest son, Shelah, even when the boy comes of age. In this way Judah harms not only Tamar, but also the memory of his first son, his lineage, and his reputation.

If Joseph looks good due to his sexual self-restraint with Mrs. Potiphar, Judah's hiring of a woman whom he assumes to be a prostitute looks terrible. The younger brother Joseph, alone in the world, has learned to master his urges and thus his

surroundings. The older brother acts from fear, loneliness, and lust.

Additionally, Judah is faulted for the inconsistency of his actions regarding Tamar. As a widower, he feels justified employing a prostitute, but the moment he hears that his widowed daughter-in-law has “whored” and become pregnant, he condemns her to be burned to death. Ramban is puzzled by the severity of this response and finally concedes that Judah must have been following a local code that is not consistent with the Torah.

Moreover, Tamar conducts herself with extraordinary courage and sensitivity even under the most trying of circumstances. As she is being led to the stake, she manages to inform Judah of his culpability without embarrassing him. She says, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?” (Gen. 38:25). In the Talmud (*Sotah* 10b), Tamar’s example is cited to make the point that “it is better for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than humiliate his neighbor.” The Rabbis admire Tamar’s willingness to die rather than accuse Judah in public. They also notice a literary cue in Tamar’s request that Judah “examine these (*hakeir na*).” It was with this same expression that Judah and his brothers presented Jacob with Joseph’s bloody tunic. Rabbi Hama says, in the name of Rabbi Hanina, “With *hakeir na* [Judah] informed his father; with *hakeir na* he was informed [by Tamar].” In the former story, Judah uses the expression to deceive his father; in the latter story, Tamar uses the phrase to disillusion Judah. There is poetic justice at play here.

Rabbi Barukh HaLevi Epstein expands on the Talmud’s attention to the literary cue *hakeir na*, noting (in the footsteps of Bereishit Rabba and Rashi) that both stories involved the prop of a goat (*Torah Temimah* to Gen. 38:25, note 30). He observes that this is an example of the rabbinic maxim *middah k’neged middah* (measure for measure). God’s justice is demonstrated when a person is punished (or rewarded) in a way that mirrors their initial act. Rabbi Epstein observes that the two stories share an additional connection: in both cases the end result of the ugly incident is positive and even redemptive. Joseph needs to be enslaved in order for Israel to relocate to Egypt and eventually be redeemed. Tamar needs to conceive a child through Judah in order to start the line that will lead through her son Peretz down to King David. Thus two redemptive events are set into motion by shameful incidents. Does the fact that Jacob’s family needed to end up in Egypt and that Tamar’s descendant would become the quintessential king of Israel excuse the horrible family transgressions that set these events in action?

Let’s rephrase the question: if you could accomplish a great result for your people but only by acting in a morally repulsive fashion that would be recorded and read aloud every year in every Jewish community for the rest of our history, would you do it? Probably not. Still, our final judgment of Judah must include his moral growth over the course of the parashah. To his credit, Judah admits error at the last moment and even praises the righteousness of Tamar. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes, “Judah applauds Tamar’s action, and God rewards it” (*Reading the Women of the Bible*, 274). This new Judah will continue to act responsibly for the rest of Genesis, and will eventually demonstrate complete repentance in Parashat Va-yiggash when he offers himself as a slave in place of Benjamin. One possible translation of the name Judah, or Yehudah, is “the one who admits error.”

Parashat Va-yeishev focuses on the maturation of two brothers, Judah and Joseph. Although women are not the primary focus of this narrative, it is hard to miss the role of Tamar as the catalyst for Judah’s moral growth and for his subsequent change in behavior. She refuses to sit by passively as the men of her family act irresponsibly and destructively. Her brave actions transform Judah and, through him, the entire extended family of Israel. It is not too much to claim that

Tamar’s confrontation with Judah teaches him how to reconcile with Joseph. Tamar emerges from the shadowy morals of our parashah to become a principled guide, a mother, the ancestor of David, and the matriarch of the messianic line.

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.*

## A Taste of Torah

### A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

This week’s parashah, Va-yeishev, opens with the word *settled* and closes with the word *forgotten*. In between these two poles, the intriguing interplay between Jacob and his sons and among Joseph and his brothers unfolds—Jacob recklessly gifts a treasured coat to his “favored” son; Joseph’s ego is inflated by his raiment and grandiose dreams; the naïve brother sparks the ire of his siblings; and finally the brothers plot to do away with the egotistical Joseph. Consequently, Joseph (and indeed his whole nation) descends into physical enslavement in Egypt, and father Jacob disintegrates into the throes of emotional servitude. The beloved son is perceived to be no longer. Jacob, whose one desire was for peace and calm, is thrown into the shackles of loss. Indeed, one of the most heartbreaking and poignant images in all of Torah is that of Jacob mourning over the perceived loss of his beloved son Joseph: “Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, ‘No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.’ Thus his father bewailed him” (Gen. 37:34–35). How may we understand Jacob’s refusal to be comforted or consoled?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch elaborates,

He refused to be consoled. One cannot actually console anybody. One can only offer them reasons for consolation which they themselves must take to heart to effect a change in their mood. But he refused even to try to bring about a change in himself . . . not that he thought he would die of grief, but he thought that he would have to mourn his son all his life . . . Jacob might also have reproached himself. After such a terrible occurrence one criticizes oneself very sharply and does not forgive oneself for the slightest slip . . . Jacob would go on weeping over the thing itself which would constantly be in his heart. The effect of what one is carrying in one’s heart shows itself by a tear stealing out of the eye from time to time. Even when not weeping, he still bears it in his heart. (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 552)

Hirsch highlights three aspects of Jacob’s refusal to be comforted: numbness to the goodwill of others, survivor’s guilt, and a gnawing and constant emptiness in his heart. First, Jacob cannot accept or be transformed by the kindness of others. Typically, in the midst of illness or crisis, a community is there to lift the victim and/or her family from despair. This, in turn, effects transformation and the turning to hope. Second, Hirsch imagines Jacob reproaching himself, recounting every twist and turn in the story of his son Joseph: If only he had not given Joseph that coat. If only he had not sent him to Dothan. Self-flagellation erodes the will of our forefather. Third, the constant absence in his heart prevents Jacob from moving toward healing. Thanks to the wisdom of Samson Raphael Hirsch, Jacob’s profound pain is brought into clearer focus—and with it, the parent’s pain of losing a child is understood on a deeper emotional and psychological level.

*The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.*