

Parshat Vayeshev Gen. 37:1-40:23 Haftarah: Zechariah 2:14-4:7



*Joseph’s Trials:
Thrown into a pit*
←

Wrongly accused
→



Shabbat Shalom Sinai Members and Friends!

The Story of Joseph is the longest single story and one of the most famous narratives in the entire Bible: Chapters 37-50; from here to the end of Genesis. As you know, this story has inspired commentaries, interpretations and even a modern play. The story of Joseph and his brothers seems like is a cautionary tale about the disastrous results of family rivalry.

Genesis is filled with dreams, especially in this portion. In Biblical times, people thought that God communicated to people through dreams. There were professional dream interpreters. Even today, psychologists and people in general believe that dreams are important; they help us sort through the unconscious. Vayeshev begins and ends with dreams.

In Gen. 37:6-9, Joseph has two dreams, which he, his brothers and father all interpret as him ruling over them. The brothers already hated Joseph because he was clearly Jacob’s favorite son as evidenced by Jacob giving Joseph a “coat of many colors” (Gen. 37:3). Such a coat was symbolic of leadership among Semitic chiefs of the time, and was still in use the time of King David

As in the story of Cain and Abel, and hinted in the tale of Esau and Jacob, in Genesis 37 once again fratricide is contemplated. The brother consider murdering Joseph but then decide to throw him into a pit. Judah argues against murdering Joseph, instead suggesting selling him to the Ishmaelites In Gen. 37:18-30, rather than just have Joseph not return, the boys dip Joseph’s coat into blood and tear it apart, and tell Jacob that a wild animal killed him. Once Joseph arrives in Egypt, his troubles compound, but improve in Chapter 39, when Potiphar chooses him to run his estate. But then he is thrown into prison when Potiphar’s wife accuses him of molesting her. Yet in prison, he becomes a lead prisoner. Then we hear another dream story: the dreams of Pharaoh’s cup-bearer and baker, who are also in prison (Gen. 40:5-19). After Joseph interprets their dreams (Gen. 40), he asks the cup-bearer to put in a good word for him when he is restored to his position. But the man does not remember to do so, so Joseph remains in prison.

D'Var Torah Ellen M. Umansky, Ph.D.

Parashat Vayeishev introduces the Joseph saga. When it begins, Jacob's 11th son, Joseph, is a 17-year-old shepherd working in the fields alongside his older brothers. The text's description of him as a "youth," *na-ar*, is apt, both biologically and emotionally. As Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg writes: "Joseph behaves with the narcissism of youth, with a dangerous unawareness of the inner worlds of others" (Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* [Philadelphia: JPS, 1995], p. 253). He consciously tells Jacob malicious tales about the brothers and by wearing the beautiful, multicolored coat (or ornamental tunic) that Jacob has given him, flaunts the fact that he is the favorite son. It is thus not surprising that when Joseph's brothers see that their father loves him more than they, they come to hate Joseph (Genesis 37:4).

The medieval rabbis Rashi and Nachmanides (Ramban) excuse Joseph's behavior because of his youth, citing variations on midrashim such as *B'reishit Rabbah* 84:7, which describes Joseph as "penciling his eyes, curling his hair, and lifting his heel"...The nasty stories that Joseph tells Jacob about his brothers may well be true and his tale-telling, like his flaunting his appearance, expressions of childishness....

Joseph's early use of his gift to interpret dreams is similarly immature. The ways in which he describes their content reveal an egocentrism and indifference to the feelings of others that make the young Joseph a difficult figure to admire. When, for example, he tells his brothers about a dream of his in which they were all in a field tying up sheaves of wheat, when his rose and stood up straight while their sheaves paraded around and subsequently bowed down to his, it is no wonder that his brothers "hated him all the more for his dreams and for his words" (Genesis 37:8). Even more so, when he tells the brothers that he dreamt of the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him, his brothers come to detest him, for even before he provides an interpretation, Jacob, who is also a dream interpreter, rebukes Joseph for insinuating that one day he, Rachel (Joseph's mother), and the brothers would have to "bow down to the ground before" him (Genesis 37:10). It is thus understandable that after Reuben convinces his brothers not to kill Joseph, as they initially planned to do, they agree to seize him, remove the coat that he had flaunted before them, throw Joseph into an empty pit without water, and sell him to the Ishmaelites as a slave. The Ishmaelites then take Joseph down to Egypt where they sell him to Potiphar, one of the officers of the Pharaoh (Genesis 37:28-36).

Yet after Joseph is put in prison for sexually assaulting Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:11-20), an accusation that appears to be untrue, Joseph undergoes a significant change. For the first time, the biblical text describes God as being with Joseph. It is God's kindness that leads the prison warden to look favorably upon all that Joseph does, consequently appointing him as chief overseer (Genesis 39:21-22). Presumably, it is God's constant presence that gives Joseph a maturity and sense of humility that previously he did not possess. Thus, when the Pharaoh's imprisoned cupbearer (chief butler) and baker come to Joseph to interpret their dreams, Joseph first says: "Surely interpretations are in God's domain; but go ahead and tell them to me" (Genesis 40:8). And when they tell him their dreams, he interprets them truthfully and, it turns out, accurately with the self-aggrandizement of the past gone. To the cupbearer, whose dream, Joseph says, foretells his being restored in three days to his former position, Joseph simply requests that when all goes well for him he remember Joseph and ask Pharaoh to release him....

Self-centered, immature, and at times mean-spirited, Joseph does not yet display sufficient leadership qualities. It is only later, after experiencing the negative consequences of his words and actions towards his brothers, opening himself up to God's presence when in prison (although it is unclear whether he is aware that God is with him), and using his gift as an interpreter of dreams not to uninvitingly boast about his superiority but to thoughtfully and honestly help others learn about their future, that Joseph begins to show himself worthy of becoming a leader....By the end of this week's *parsha*, Joseph appears wiser, though naïve. The cupbearer forgets to speak to the Pharaoh about Joseph. Thus, "learning from his mistaken trust in the butler's gratitude, next time," notes Kass, "Joseph will take matters into his own hands" (p. 561). It is only then that Joseph actually will become a leader.

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For a little humor, here is a subtitled episode of the Israeli comedy show “The Jews are Coming.” Remember, it is a comedy, so don’t take it too seriously.

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=V-i-DMsFx6o&list=PLWQpVOrkrGSW_W7S6HXByWmmx9TKf8O7Y&index=3