

# Parashat Vayeshev וישב

**Torah: Genesis 37:1–40:23**

**Haftarah: Amos 2:6–3:8**

## A Father's Mistake

### General Overview

Resh Lakish said in the name of R. Eleazer b. Azariah: "A man must not make a distinction among his children, for on account of the coat of many colours which our ancestor Jacob made for Joseph: They hated him." (Bereshit Rabbah 84.7)

The book of Genesis is a masterful piece of literature. Too often we get caught up in analysing the characters or deciphering the meaning and we forget to notice the beauty of style and the craft by which the writer composed this book.

That Genesis is a literary work of art becomes clearly evident in this parasha where we begin the story of Joseph. It is at once a story of irony, suspense, sadness, and joy. It is perhaps one of the greatest tales illustrating the sovereignty of God. Nechama Leibowitz also emphasizes this point when she writes:

On the surface, the actors in the story make their own way in life, set in motion their own plans, succeed or fail, start again, all on their own initiative. That is the immediate superficial impression. In fact, however, it transpires that it is the Divine Providence which is carrying out, through mankind, its own predestined plan.<sup>1</sup>

### Exposition

This parasha is part one in the story of Joseph. In it we will see the beginnings of the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that his descendants will sojourn for many years in a land which is not theirs and then come back to the Promised Land. As we study this section of the story we will look at:

- I. A Father's Mistake
- II. A Brother's Mistreatment
- III. A Nobleman's Manservant
- IV. A Divine Master Plan
- V. A Son's Mess

In this excerpt from Parashat Vayeshev, we will focus on section I, A Father's Mistake.

#### I. A Father's Mistake

When our sidra opens, Joseph was only seventeen years old. Though he was old enough to be married, he appears to be quite immature in his emotions and world outlook. Yet despite his youth, he was entrusted with the enormous burden of bearing the stigma of being his father's favourite of twelve sons. For example,

we read in 37:3, “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all of his sons....” That is too much of a burden for anyone to bear, let alone a teenager.

To make matters worse, Joseph was also extremely gifted by God. He had the ability to both hear the voice of God in dreams and to interpret those dreams, not to mention his administrative talents.

Thus, the text tells us that when Joseph heard a dream from the Lord, he showed no hesitation in announcing its interpretation to both his father and his envious brothers. Unfortunately for him, his brothers interpreted those dreams to mean that he lifted himself above his family members.

However, upon closer examination, this was not the intention of the dreams. The first dream, the one about the sheaves, merely indicated that his brothers would have to bow to him as the ruler in Egypt when they requested food from Egypt. Hence he was not lifting himself above them. His dream was merely a prophecy of what would actually happen when they came to him (not knowing it was him) for help.<sup>2</sup>

All of these circumstances led to a very troubled household. At least three times in chapter 37 alone, we learn that his brothers hated him (verses 4, 5, 8), and once it says that they were jealous of him (verse 11).

Moreover, it did not help his cause that, in his immaturity, Joseph would “bring evil reports about them [his brothers] to his father” (verse 2). Sometimes the apparent brashness of Joseph even angered his doting father and “his father scolded him” (verse 10).

Thus, this parasha opens with a description of a very problematic Joseph. He became the object of his brothers’ hate and envy, not because he exercised God’s gifts, but because he walked in God’s gifts through the immaturity of youth and carried about him the fruits of favouritism.

### ***A Royal Tunic***

Perhaps the best symbol of this patriarchal favouritism was the coat of many colours that Jacob had made for Joseph. What was this piece of clothing? The Hebrew text in 37:3 is surprisingly vague. According to BDB this *katonet passim* (פסים כתנת) was merely a “tunic,” (*katonet*, כתנת), the “principal ordinary garment of men and women worn next to a person.” A *katonet passim* is one that was “reaching to the palms and soles”.<sup>3</sup> However, the LXX and Targum Jonathan both render this term “a coat of many colours.” Furthermore, the only other time this same Hebrew phrase is used in the Tanakh is in 2 Samuel 13:18, where it describes a royal garment worn by a virgin daughter of a king.

There are at least two examples from antiquity that might shed some light on what Joseph’s coat may have been. First, there was a discovery of an Egyptian tomb painting at Bene-hassan, dating from about 1890 BCE “featuring a Semitic clan with men and women wearing multicoloured tunics draped over one shoulder and reaching below the knees.”<sup>4</sup> Secondly, there is “a mural fresco in the palace of King Zimri-lim at Mari, in southeast Syria, [that] shows figures dressed in garments made of many small rectangular panels of multicoloured cloth.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, one scholar suggests that, “in the patriarchal age, Semitic chiefs wore coats of many colours as insignia of rulership.”<sup>6</sup> This comment fits

the use of this garment in 2 Samuel, where virgin daughters of the king wore them, attaching a royal connotation to this kind of a garment.

Perhaps these are examples of Joseph's famous coat of many colours. We do not know for certain whether or not the tunic had many colours. Indeed, there is much we do not know about this famous garment. However, what does seem evident from the text of Genesis, is that Joseph had made himself disliked by his brothers for reporting on them; and Jacob, in giving him a coat of many colours, marked him for chieftainship of the tribes at his father's death.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that Joseph was destined for a life of difficulties, partly because of his own immaturity, but mostly because of his father's mistakes in raising him. The opening midrash of this week's commentary summarizes Jacob's mistakes in raising Joseph when it says,

A man must not make a distinction among his children, for on account of the coat of many colours which our ancestor Jacob made for Joseph: "They hated him." (Bereshit Rabbah 84.7)

## **II. A Brother's Mistreatment**

Jacob indeed made the error of favouring Joseph over his other sons. He also made another mistake, although this time it was not because of any fleshly pattern in his life; it was an unwitting mistake. The brothers were away pasturing their flocks in Dotan (37:17), about a four or five days' walk from the family home in Hebron. Jacob sent Joseph to them in order to check on their welfare. Little did he know that in doing so, he was not to see Joseph again for many years.

Actually, the instructions that Jacob gave to Joseph were very profound. The Hebrew text tells us that Jacob wanted Joseph to "see to the shalom" of his brothers (37:14). This has both practical and prophetic implications.

Practically speaking, Jacob was asking Joseph to see if his brothers were in need and to see if their well-being was in order. Mind you, these were the ones who hated Joseph! Yet, Jacob was asking him to look out for their shalom, meaning, their well-being and wholeness. This would illustrate what Yeshua would mean by loving one's enemies.

Prophetically speaking, this is exactly what Joseph is being called by God to do for his whole family on many different levels. Eventually, as the ruler in Egypt, Joseph would look out for their well-being during the years of drought. In addition to that, he would also be the one to initiate a peaceful reconciliation between them, resulting in healing the hurts of the family.

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<sup>1</sup> Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit*, 394.

<sup>2</sup> We owe these interpretations to Rabbi Alan Ullman of Rodef Torah School of Jewish Studies, Newton, MA (USA). We heard them in a class on this passage given by him in May 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* ("BDB"), 509, 821.

<sup>4</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 285.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, 142.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.