

# Let

*The Story of the Sale of Yosef,  
His Ascendancy to Power,  
and Bnei Yisrael's Descent  
into Mitzrayim*

# My

# Nation

*A compilation  
of Talmudic  
and Midrashic  
sources*

# Descend

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# 1

# The Dispute



Yaakov's household was a sanctuary of holiness and spirituality. All of his children, without exception or reservation, were righteous people of the highest caliber. They were the foundation pillars upon which the future Jewish People would be constructed.

Nonetheless, the brothers were not identical. Each one had his own strengths and talents, his own singular contribution to make to the collective blend that would become the Jewish People.

This was the great strength of the nascent Jewish People, but at the same time, it was also at the root of the dispute that would threaten to undermine the establishment of the Jewish nation from the very beginning. Each individual brother and each set of brothers (i.e. divided according to their mothers) had a particular affinity for

the singular strengths and powers they brought respectively to the collective whole. They understood their own strengths and powers as no one else did, and they also appreciated more than anyone else the extreme value of their contribution to the entity.<sup>1</sup> The dispute among the brothers concerned the balance of their respective contributions to the future Jewish People.

The form of the dispute was not personal. All the brothers were far greater and more righteous than the greatest sages of subsequent generations. They were the architects of the Jewish People, the patriarchs of the individual tribes, known to history as the *Shevatim*, the exalted *Shivtei Kah*. It is inconceivable that they would be concerned with petty jealousies. The strife described in the Torah can only be understood on the deepest spiritual levels.<sup>2</sup> They were not concerned about the possible personal favoritism of their father but rather about favoritism to one particular contribution or set of contributions that might diminish the others and thereby create an imbalance in the makeup of the Jewish People.

It is important to keep in mind that the superficial descriptions of the dispute between Yosef and his brothers should be viewed only as clues to the deeper spiritual dispute that was altruistic in nature. When the Torah states that the brothers hated Yosef, it does not mean that they had personal animosity toward him<sup>3</sup> but rather that they were concerned about the direction in which he seemed to be steering the development of the Jewish People, a direction that in their opinion would lead to chronic deficiencies if it upset the proper balance referred to above.<sup>4</sup>

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1. This would be evident in the blessings Yaakov would give his children before his departure from the world.

2. The proof is that they enjoined the Almighty Himself to join the council of ten, as described in Chapter 4 of this book. Clearly, they were not motivated by petty jealousy.

3. See, however, Radak on *Bamidbar* 13:32.

4. This would be comparable to a minute flaw in a foundation that could collapse an entire building.

With this in mind, we can gain a little perspective on the story of Yosef and his dispute with his brothers.<sup>5</sup>

Leah's sons perceived the seventeen-year-old Yosef as a contender for the ultimate leadership role of the family and the future nation that would emerge from it. They saw indications to this effect in Yosef's deportment, which bespoke an acute awareness of *tzelem Elokim*—that he was made in the image of God.<sup>6</sup> Yosef paid serious attention to the grooming of his hair and his eyes, and he walked with measured steps.

There were other indications as well. After Yosef's courses of Torah study and commercial training were completed, his father appointed him as his representative in all family and business affairs. Yosef was now in charge of the family business, which was raising sheep, and his brothers technically worked for him.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to this, Yosef took upon himself the mantle of authority given to him by his father and reported their alleged wrongdoings to his father.<sup>8</sup> The brothers, all of them perfectly righteous, felt that their actions were fully justified and beyond reproach, but Yosef held them to a higher standard—the same standard he demanded of himself.<sup>9</sup>

As time went on, Yosef's brothers felt an increasing disquiet about him. The sons of Leah disagreed with the position of privilege and authority in the household he enjoyed as Yaakov's favorite son. This perspective was eventually shared by the sons of the handmaidens as well. They also found Yosef's practice of reporting about his older brothers unacceptable.<sup>10</sup>

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5. Because of the sensitive nature of this subject, I have chosen to summarize the events that took place rather than give a detailed account of the circumstances that led to the sale of Yosef.

6. *Yefeh To'ar; Ya'aros Devash*.

7. *Targum Yonasan, Midrash haGadol*, Abarbanel on *Bereishis* 37:2.

8. Seforno, *Bereishis* 37:2.

9. *Gur Aryeh, Bereishis* 37:2.

10. Ramban, *Chizkuni*, Radak, *Tzeror haMor* on *Bereishis* 37:2–3. This would

This struggle was, of course, not the kind of spiteful strife that often occurs in situations of sibling rivalry. An observer would not have detected any outward signs of hatred, because there was no personal hatred. The basis of their struggle was intellectual and spiritual rather than emotional.<sup>11</sup>

## The Woolen Tunic

Yaakov thought as a matter of course that it was proper to single out one of his sons for special attention, just as Yitzchak had favored him over his brother Eisav and Avraham had favored Yitzchak over Yishmael — and indeed just as the Almighty favored the Jewish People over the nations of the world. Following the same pattern, Yaakov was favoring Yosef over his brothers.<sup>12</sup>

Yaakov's intent was clear. Reuven had forfeited the role of firstborn years before with the incident involving Yaakov's beds,<sup>13</sup> and now Yaakov was grooming Yosef to assume the mantle of firstborn and leader of the family as Yaakov's successor. His intention to appoint Yosef as his distinguished head of household became perfectly clear when he awarded Yosef with a special woolen tunic, the *kesones passim*.<sup>14</sup>

According to some opinions, it was long-sleeved, embroidered, heavily ornamented and woven in a beautiful, multicolored pattern of vertical stripes.<sup>15</sup> Some say that this tunic had been handed

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inevitably lead to what the Torah called the hatred and jealousy the brothers had toward Yosef. The numerical value of the word Yosef is the same as the word *kinah* (jealousy): 156 (*Chasam Sofer*).

11. Rav Shemuel Rozovsky.

12. Zohar, *Vayeishev* 182. Additionally, Yaakov foresaw Yosef's noble destiny, and in his mind Yosef was actually displaying that very nobility (*Shelah*).

13. *Bereishis* 35:22.

14. See Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:3; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8.

15. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8 with *Yefeh To'ar*; Ibn Ezra; Radak; Rav Avraham ben haRambam. The tunic had long sleeves that reached to the palm of the hand, suggestive of the word *passim*, a variation of the word *pas*, which means palm.

down from Adam generation after generation until it reached Eisav, and that when Eisav sold his birthright to Yaakov he also gave him the tunic.<sup>16</sup>

The tunic was truly a symbol of royalty, nobility and leadership, a true mark of distinction,<sup>17</sup> and when Yaakov conferred it

The long sleeves also suggested nobility for people who did not perform manual labor. In this case Yosef would stay home and not go out into the fields to work (*Me'or Einaim*; Mahrzu; *Midrash Torah*). According to some opinions, it was a long coat that reached to the bottom of his feet (*Midrash Aggadah*; *Lekach Tov*). See *Shabbos* 10b, which says that it weighed two *sela'im*, the equivalent of three ounces. According to other calculations, it weighed 24 grams and approximately .85 oz. See Shach in *Choshen Mishpat* 88:1, and *Yoreh Deah* 294:6

Maharsha suggests that this is an exaggeration, since a tunic would have to weigh more than that. Another opinion holds that just the fabric around the cuffs was made out of wool, and this is what weighed two *sela'im* (Rashi; *Yefeh To'ar*). Others posit that the entire *kesones passim* was nothing more than fine, woolen cuffs (*Da'as Zekeinim*). Still others add that it was made not of wool but of silk (Rav Saadiah Gaon). See Rabeinu Bachya; Ibn Ezra; Radak; *Targum Yonasan*; *Lekach Tov*; *Aggadas Bereishis* 60; *Mishnah Nega'im* 11:6 for additional translations of *kesones passim*. It can be understood as a "full-sleeved robe", a coat of many colors, an ornamented tunic or a fine, woolen cloak (Rav Aryeh Kaplan). Included in its many colors were green and blue. Some add that Yaakov gave Yosef two articles of clothing, a *kesones* and *passim* (Rokeach). According to *Seichel Tov* and *Ha'amek Davar* all the brothers had a tunic, but they were jealous of the additional wool cuffs that Yosef received on his. Others suggest that in fact the *kesones passim* was similar to an undershirt (Alshich; *HaKesav vohaKabbalah*). See *II Shemuel* 13:18.

16. *Kli Yakar*, *Zera Baruch* on *Bereishis* 37:3. See also *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *ibid*. The *kesones passim* had similarities to the clothing of the Kohen. In fact Yosef's tunic, undergarment, traveling coat and pants alluded to the four articles of clothing the Kohanim wore. Since the firstborn originally performed the service, it was only logical that the clothing eventually worn by the Kohen recalled the *kesones passim* to some extent. See Ramban, *Shemos* 28:2.

Yosef was given the birthright from Yaakov and was thus qualified for priestly duties. It was not until the sin of the Golden Calf that these duties were given over to the Kohanim, who came from the tribe of Levi.

The *bigdei kehunah* atoned for the sin of *lashon ha-ra*. The brothers removed the clothing of Yosef so that it could not protect him from his sin, making him vulnerable to the snakes in the pit, which by no coincidence are the punishment for someone who speaks *lashon ha-ra* (*Yedei Moshe*).

17. *HaKesav vohaKabbalah*, *Bereishis* 37:3. See Ramban, *Shemos* 28:2. The tunic represented Yosef as the leader of the home above all the other brothers, as

on Yosef, the discontent of the brothers grew once more.<sup>18</sup>

It bears repeating that the brothers considered their misgivings justified.<sup>19</sup> In actuality though, the gift of the tunic was indeed nothing more than an affectionate gift for a child born late in his father's life. Although Binyamin too was born late in Yaakov's life, Yosef was the first child Rachel bore him, and as such, he was the beneficiary of the burst of love in Yaakov's heart at the time.<sup>20</sup>

The word *passim* is formed of four letters — *peh*, *samech*, *yud* and *mem* — which are an acronym for the travails Yosef would endure during his personal exile from his family. He would be sold to Potiphar (*peh*), to merchants known as Socharim (*samech*), to Arabs known as Yishmaelim (*yud*), and to Midianites (*mem*).<sup>21</sup>

The relationship between Yosef and his ten older brothers con-

it was the custom in that time to dress the master of the household or head servant in a notable garment. See Seforno, *Bereishis* 37:3; *Me'or Einaim*, p.90; Mahrzu on *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8.

18. Alshich, *Bereishis* 37:4. This led to their jealousy of the spiritual heights he was attaining through the leadership that was given to him by their father Yaakov. The ensuing events serve as an object lesson in the pitfalls of favoritism, even when it is benign and justified. Yaakov's favoritism led to jealousy and hatred, and eventually to the descent of the Jewish People into exile in Egypt. Many question how this was possible, since it had already been decreed from the time of Avraham that the Jews would go into exile. Tosafos suggests that had it not been for the quarreling between the brothers, the oppression and slave labor would not have been so severe. Others suggest that the decree was to be exiled as wanderers in a land that wasn't theirs, similar to Avraham's experience. It was only because of the brothers' hatred of Yosef that they ended up in Egypt (*Chiddushei haRan*; *Eitz Yosef*). See *Shabbos* 10b; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8; Rambam, *Hilchos Nechalos* 6:13; *Midrash haGadol*, *Bereishis* 37:3.

19. See *Shelah*.

20. Tosafos, *Bereishis* 37:3. On a more mystical level, Yaakov had a prophetic vision that Yosef would one day be a king, and therefore he made him a garment worthy of royalty. He had no indication that Binyamin would ever sit on a throne (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38).

21. Rashi, *Gur Aryeh* on *Bereishis* 37:3; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8. Another opinion suggests that the word *passim* comes from the word *payis*, which means lottery. This *kesones passim* was the cause of a lottery that Yosef's brothers made as to who would go to Yaakov and present him with the bloody coat. Yehudah "won" the lottery (*Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8).



tinued to decline, especially when Yosef started having prophetic dreams. This is not to say, of course, that dreams are invariably prophetic. On the contrary, most dreams are the result of thoughts the dreamer had that day during his waking hours, or they might be caused by other factors. They are generally little more than fantasies and illusions and bear minimal connection to reality.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, dreams about subjects which had not been on the dreamer's mind can contain some element of prophecy. Dreams can contain a sixtieth measure of prophecy, depending on the dreamer's level of righteousness.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, there is the issue of interpretation. The ramifications of most dreams are dependent on the interpretation, without which they are like unread letters. Some dreams, even if they are partially prophetic, are only indications of tendencies and not final results. The interpretations can influence these tendencies and steer them in a specific direction. Other dreams have a clearly defined message, but even so, a strong interpretation can modify or ameliorate the predicted results of the dream or even convert it from a negative to a positive message or vice versa. Only dreams that are unequivocal vehicles of prophecy, such as the visions of the great prophets, cannot be reversed by interpretation, although they too need to be interpreted to extract the divine messages and deliver them to the people.<sup>24</sup>

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22. See Tosafos, *Nedarim* 8a.

23. See *Sanhedrin* 30a; *Tosefta Ma'aser Sheini* 5:6; Rambam, *Hilchos Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:6; *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:41–45. (Since there may be an element of prophecy in a dream, it should not be taken lightly. If a person is concerned about a disturbing dream, he should say *hatavas chalom*, a declaration that the dream had only positive implications, in front of three people, who will confirm his interpretation. See *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 220.)

24. See Maharsha, *Ein Yaakov* and additional commentaries on *Berachos* 55a–57b, 10a. See also *Me'am Lo'ez*, in the name of *Teshuvos Rashba*, for his interpretation. See commentaries on *Bereishis* 40:16–22 for differing views on Yosef's interpretation of the chamberlain's dreams. See also Chapter 5 of this book for additional information on this subject.

Yosef's two famous dreams fell into this final category. They represented a prophecy of status and leadership, and Yosef responded by viewing himself in these terms and thinking about them constantly.<sup>25</sup> Dreams would thus play an important role in Yosef's destiny. His dreams—and the dreams of others—would lead to his downfall but also to his eventual triumph.<sup>26</sup>

## Eleven Sheaves of Wheat

The morning after he had his prophetic dream, Yosef immediately felt the need to tell his brothers about it.<sup>27</sup> He knew that the dream would likely upset his brothers, but he felt it was his duty to share it with them since it was an authentic message from Heaven. He chose his words carefully and began to speak.<sup>28</sup>

"In my dream," he began, "I saw that all of us were standing in the middle of a field and binding sheaves of wheat. The sheaves were lying on the ground next to us as we were working. Suddenly, my sheaf rose up and stood erect. Your sheaves gathered around my sheaf in a circle and bowed toward it. Then they prostrated themselves on the ground to it. And all this time my sheaf remained standing erect."<sup>29</sup>

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25. Rokeach, *Bereishis* 37:5.

26. *Midrash haGadol*, *Bereishis* 37:5, 41:1.

27. See *Lekach Tov*, *Bereishis* 37:5. The Midrash mentions another dream of Yosef's, in which ten candles surrounded one candle, trying but failing to extinguish it. The message was that the ten older brothers were eager to extinguish and eliminate Yosef but could not. See *Rav Ovadia Bartenuira al haTorah*; *Rav Chaim Paltiel*. See Rashi, end of *Vayechi*, and *Sifsei Chachamim* and *Gur Aryeh*, which state that Yosef had already had many dreams, but the Torah only mentions the ones that included his brothers. Others suggest that the Torah mentions only the dreams that actually came true (Riva; Radak).

28. Tosafos, *Ohr haChaim* on *Bereishis* 37:5.

29. See *Targum Yonasan*, Rashi, *Sefer Zikaron*, Radak on *Bereishis* 37:7. Others add that the brothers' sheaves could not stand themselves in the upright position like Yosef's sheaf. They thus gave the impression that they were bowing (Tosafos).

After Yosef finished relating his dream and its interpretation, the brothers once again believed that this was just another example in which Yosef sought to have a dominant role over them.<sup>30</sup> The brothers made it clear to Yosef that they would never accept his reign, leadership or authority over them.<sup>31</sup> They saw Yosef's dreams as an obstacle to Yehudah's destined royalty.<sup>32</sup>

As it turned out, the brothers did participate unintentionally in the interpretation of Yosef's dream when they said, "Will you indeed reign over us (*hamaloch timloch aleinu*)?" and, "Will you rule over us (*im mashol timshol banu*)?" The words themselves, although uttered ironically, confirmed that the intent of the dream was to predict that Yosef would reign over them.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, since the brothers dismissed the dream, the fulfillment of its promise was delayed for twenty-two years.<sup>34</sup>

## The Heavenly Bodies Bow Down

A few months later, Yosef had another spectacular dream that he immediately recognized as prophetic.<sup>35</sup> He realized, however, that if he asked his brothers to listen they would refuse, so he went ahead and began telling it. Once he started, they listened, intently.<sup>36</sup>

"I had a dream last night," he said quickly, "in which the sun, the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me. I was standing in

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30. Tur, *Bereishis* 37:8.

31. Ibn Ezra, Rabeinu Bachya, Ramban, *Toldos Yitzchak*, Abarbanel, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:8.

32. *Ohr haChaim*, *Bereishis* 37:8.

33. Zohar, *Vayeishev* 183; Rabeinu Bachya, *Bereishis* 37:8.

34. See *Yalkut Reuveni*, *Bereishis* 37:8. In fact some commentaries suggest that their hatred delayed the dream's fulfillment for twenty-two years (Zohar). Others add two more causes for the delay: Yaakov's eventual rebuke and his doubt about the dream (Tur).

35. *Moshav Zekeinim*, Tur on *Bereishis* 37:7.

36. *Ha'amek Davar*, *Bereishis* 37:9.

the eastern portion of the sky, and the constellations in the west descended in the heavens so that they appeared to be bowing down to me.<sup>37</sup> I understood that the sun represented Father, the moon represented my mother, and the eleven stars represented all of my brothers.<sup>38</sup> This dream has taken the prophecy to a new and higher level.<sup>39</sup> In my first dream, all of you, my ten older brothers, were bowing to my sheaf of wheat, but in this dream, my father, mother and younger brother were also bowing down and not to my wheat but to me."<sup>40</sup>

Yosef was finished, and he waited for his brothers to respond, to comment on his interpretation.<sup>41</sup> But they didn't. They decided that the best course of action would be to let Yaakov deal with it, since he had made an appearance, at least metaphorically, in Yosef's dream.<sup>42</sup>

## Yaakov's Reaction

As the brothers had expected, Yosef shared this second dream with his father, who played an important role in it.<sup>43</sup> In the presence of his brothers,<sup>44</sup> Yosef recounted the entire dream to Yaakov, including his interpretation that his father, mother and

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37. *Bechor Shor*, *Bereishis* 37:9.

38. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:11; *Midrash haGadol*, *Bereishis* 37:9; *Midrash Shocheh Tov* 148.

39. Rokeach, Alshich, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:10.

40. Abarbanel, *Bereishis* 37:9. See *Ma'aseh Hashem*, which asserts that in actuality they all bowed to him. Yosef only used the constellations as a buffer to prevent his parents and brothers from feeling humiliated by their subservience toward him.

41. *Tzeidah laDerech*.

42. *Toldos Yitzchak*, *Bereishis* 37:10.

43. Radak, Ramban, *Hadar Zekeinim* on *Bereishis* 37:10; *Tzeidah laDerech*.

44. Rashi, *Lekach Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:10. See *Sifsei Kohen* as to why Yosef felt it necessary for the brothers to hear the dream twice. *Sefer haYashar* suggests that Yosef reported his dream only once, to his brothers and father together. See also *Ma'aseh Hashem*, which says that Yosef repeated the first dream to his father as well.

eleven brothers would bow down to him. The dream displeased Yaakov, and he rebuked Yosef in front of his brothers.<sup>45</sup>

What was Yaakov really thinking when he rebuked Yosef? There are two differing opinions regarding Yaakov's true reaction to the dream. According to one, he did not give great credence to the dream, and he rebuked Yosef for unnecessarily inciting his brothers.<sup>46</sup> Yet he didn't realize that the moon did not represent Rachel, Yosef's birth mother, but rather Yaakov's wife Bilhah, Rachel's handmaiden, who had raised Yosef like a mother after Rachel died.<sup>47</sup>

According to another opinion, Yaakov knew all along that the dream was authentic and that it contained an important prophecy. Through his own powers of prophecy, he knew that Yosef was destined for royalty, and he had expressed his confidence in Yosef's ability to fulfill his destiny by giving him the woolen tunic. The rebuke was only for the benefit of the audience.<sup>48</sup> By rejecting the dream and discouraging Yosef from sharing his dreams with his brothers, Yaakov felt he would minimize the growing rift between the brothers and Yosef. Not only would this bring much needed peace and harmony into his household, it would also remove an obstacle from Yosef's path to the fulfillment of his destiny.<sup>49</sup>

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45. Rashi, *Lekach Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:10.

46. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:11.

47. Rashi, *Lekach Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:10. Ramban disagrees with Rashi that Yosef's "mother" referred to Bilhah. It is Ramban's opinion that Bilhah too was no longer alive. He believes that the mother referred to in the dream is a generic reference to the household of Yaakov. Although the family as a whole would eventually bow to Yosef, the brothers and Yaakov would bow to him separately. See *Yefeh To'ar* for another opinion on this matter. While the first dream came true when Yosef's brothers bowed before him in Egypt, his second dream came true when Yaakov prostrated himself from his sick bed when Yosef came to see him before his death (*Moshav Zekeinim*, *Bereishis* 37:7).

48. See Rashi, *Lekach Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:10. See also Malbim. Even if Rachel were still alive, Yaakov would have rebuked Yosef just the same (Rashbam).

49. See Rashi, *Lekach Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:10. Interestingly enough, Yosef never responded to Yaakov's charges (*Midrash Torah*). Quite possibly, Yosef knew his father's intentions and therefore saw no need to respond.

Having been interpreted, the dream was now activated, and the events it predicted were set into motion.<sup>50</sup> As soon as his sons left the room, Yaakov took writing materials and recorded the exact time and place of the dream. Then he waited anxiously for the prophecy to be fulfilled.<sup>51</sup>

The subtle change in Yaakov was not lost on his older sons. Indeed, they saw it as further confirmation of the efficacy of the dream. Increasingly convinced of the validity of the dreams, the brothers heightened their antipathy for Yosef and their opposition reached a new level.<sup>52</sup>

## Sent on a Mission

Seeking peace and tranquility from the travails of Yosef, the ten brothers decided to go to Shechem since they used to live there and often took their sheep to pasture there.<sup>53</sup> Unified in purpose, the ten brothers took their flocks of sheep from Chevron to Shechem.<sup>54</sup>

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50. Rashbam, *Bereishis* 37:11.

51. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:11; Rashi, Seforno on *Bereishis* 37:11. All opinions agree that regardless of the views of *Bereishis Rabbah* or the Gemara in *Berachos* 55 (see footnote 24), Yaakov kept a watchful eye on the matter to see its eventual conclusion (see Ramban; Rabeinu Bachya; *Chizkuni*; Radak). Another opinion suggests that the phrase, "His father waited to see the outcome of the matter" (*Bereishis* 37:11), refers to his Father in Heaven. Hashem was waiting for the dreams to come to fruition (*Bereishis Rabbah*).

Some assert that while the Gemara learns from here that one should wait as long as twenty-two years for a good dream to come true, Yaakov already knew that the longest a true dream can be postponed is twenty-two years. He therefore noted the time so that he could mark the span (*Yefeh To'ar*).

52. See *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Abarbanel on *Bereishis* 37:11. Hashem was masterfully weaving a mosaic of events that would eventually lead to Yosef's brothers' having a direct role in his ascension to monarchy.

53. Ralbag, *Bereishis* 37:12. Shechem was some eighty kilometers (about fifty miles) away from Chevron (Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch).

54. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Bereishis* 37:12. It is no coincidence that the very place (Shechem) the brothers stood united in protecting their sister Dinah from evil people would be where they would stand united against the evil they believed was Yosef. Along with their decision to leave Shechem and go

Unaware that the brothers had actually gone to Dossan and not Shechem, Yaakov began to worry that the inhabitants of Shechem would attack his sons in revenge for the massacre of the population of Shechem.<sup>55</sup>

Yaakov asked Yosef if he could check on the safety of his brothers and report back to him on how they were.<sup>56</sup> Yosef gladly agreed to carry out his father's wish despite the uncomfortable situation posed by his brothers' antagonism.<sup>57</sup> Yaakov escorted Yosef for a while as he began his journey.<sup>58</sup>

As they walked out together, Yosef caught sight of cedars and asked Yaakov about them. Yaakov replied to Yosef saying, "You see those struggling little cedars? Someday they will be tall and sturdy trees, rich sources of the finest hardwood. They will be cut down, made into boards and used to construct a dwelling place for the Almighty, a sacred *Mishkan*."

"My descendants will keep those boards in storage for many years, and when the time is right, when they are ready to return to this hallowed ground on which my fathers trod, they will build the *Mishkan* for the Almighty out of these trees that I am growing for them in this field."<sup>59</sup>

Suddenly, Yosef noticed how far they had come and asked his father why he had escorted him such a great distance away from his home.

to Dossan, so went any hopes for the peace and harmony with Yosef that the brothers originally sought (*Chein Tov*).

55. *Targum Yonasan, Bechor Shor, Moshav Zekeinim on Bereishis 37:12.*

56. Rashbam, Rokeach on *Bereishis 37:13.*

57. Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra on *Bereishis 37:13.* See also *Avi Ezri* on Ibn Ezra. See *Bereishis Rabbah 84:13* concerning Yaakov's eventual regret of this request.

58. Some suggest that this occurred early the next morning. For when Yaakov met Yosef for the first time after twenty-two years, the first thing he did was say the morning *Kerias Shema*. It would thus be exactly twenty-two years since the morning they were separated (*Panim Yafos*).

59. See *Terumas haDeshen, Rav Ephraim al haTorah, Da'as Zekeinim on Bereishis 45:27; Bereishis Rabbah 94:4* and Rashi there.

Yaakov responded to Yosef by relaying the laws and significance of the *eglah arufah*.<sup>60</sup>

Father and son parted. Yaakov went home and Yosef headed out onto the road, confident that the Almighty would protect him.<sup>61</sup>

Divine providence was compelling Yaakov to act in a rather unusual manner. The Almighty deliberately clouded Yaakov's vision and judgment so that events would play themselves out in the manner that would lead to the fulfillment of the prophecy at the *Bris bein haBesarim*, the Covenant of the Parts. At that time, the Almighty had told Avraham that his descendants would be strangers in a land not their own for four hundred years. This period of estrangement had begun with the birth of Yitzchak, but the time had come to bring it to the next level—for the nascent Jewish People to vacate the Holy Land physically and descend into exile.<sup>62</sup>

## Yosef Seeks His Brothers

Traveling swiftly without any sense of dread or foreboding, Yosef went straight to the pastureland his brothers customarily used when they visited Shechem, but he found no sign of them at all.<sup>63</sup> Eventually, he lost his way completely. The best he could hope for was to retrace his steps and find his own way back to his father's house.<sup>64</sup> But divine providence would not allow him to go back with his mission unfulfilled.<sup>65</sup>

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60. For full details regarding the laws of *eglah arufah*, see *Sotah* 45a–b; *Devarim*, Chapter 21.

61. See *Chizkuni*, Tur on *Bereishis* 37:14. See *Da'as Zekeinim*, *Bereishis* 45:27. See *Torah Sheleimah* 45:91, 92, for further commentary on this subject.

62. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:13; Rashi, Rav Avraham ben haRambam, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:14; Zohar, *Vayeishev* 183. See also *Ha'amek Davar*. See Zohar *ibid.* for another reason Hashem designed these events to take shape as they did.

63. Rashbam, *Bereishis* 37:14.

64. *Seichel Tov*, *Bereishis* 37:15; Radal on *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38. See also Ramban, *Bereishis* 37:15. *Sefer haYashar* says that Yosef was lost in the desert.

65. Ramban, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bereishis* 37:15. See also *Aggadas Bereishis* 72.



Suddenly, Yosef saw a passerby standing in the road.<sup>66</sup> This ostensible passerby was actually the angel Gavriel who had assumed the guise of a human being in order to converse with Yosef and guide him toward his brothers.<sup>67</sup>

“You seem lost, my friend,” said the angel. “Might I be of assistance?”

“Perhaps,” said Yosef. “I came here looking for my brothers, and now I’m completely lost.”<sup>68</sup>

The angel gave Yosef directions to Dossan, and Yosef set off to find it.<sup>69</sup>

According to the Midrash, the exchange between Yosef and the angel went beyond its surface meaning. There were simultaneous undercurrents of other meanings to the words spoken between them. The angel that met Yosef was actually a composite of three angels—Gavriel, Michael and Raphael.<sup>70</sup>

66. *Targum Yonasan*, Ibn Ezra on *Bereishis* 37:15; Radal on *Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer* 38.

67. *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Vayeishev* 2; Rashi, *Levush Orah* on *Bereishis* 37:15. See Mizrachi on how Yosef knew it was in fact an angel. Others suggest that it was the angel Raphael and not Gavriel (Rosh; *Minchah Belulah*).

68. Seforno, *Bereishis* 37:16.

69. Some question why Yosef was not protected by the mitzvah of *kibud av v’eim*: If “*shelichei mitzvah einan nizokin* (those going to perform a mitzvah are not harmed),” why was he eventually harmed? Some say that in fact Yosef was not harmed since in the end, his whole ordeal was a blessing that just took time to come to fruition. Others suggest that since Yosef went beyond Shechem, which was his designated route, he lost his status as Yaakov’s *shaliach* (emissary) and was no longer protected. Still others posit that Yosef’s mission was only for that day, but he traveled for longer than that. Others add that Yosef was attacked by arrows and dogs and escaped both. At that point he should have returned, because he was in a situation where *shachiach hezeika* (danger was present). By refusing to return, he lost the protection his mission afforded him (see *Ohr ha-Chaim*, Alshich, Malbim, Tosafos, *Kesav Sofer*, *Chein Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:14).

70. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:13; *Midrash haCheifetz*, *Eitz Yosef*, Alshich, *Sifsei Kohen* on *Bereishis* 37:15. See *Eitz Yosef*, which says that each angel had a specific purpose here. One was to save Yosef from death, another to protect him from the snakes in the pit, and the third to facilitate his sale as a slave, which would eventually lead to his leadership (see *Chein Tov*).

“You seem lost,” said the angel Gavriel. *Your attempt to restore brotherhood and harmony to your household is a lost cause.*<sup>71</sup>

Yosef spoke now to the angel Michael. “I have been blundering around,” he said, “but I still seek to be reconciled with my brothers. Can you guide me in that direction?”<sup>72</sup>

“They have departed from here,” said the angel Raphael. *Yes, they have long since abandoned the possibility of salvaging the brotherhood.*<sup>73</sup> *They conspire against you and seek to rationalize an extreme solution.*<sup>74</sup>

Yosef was not deterred by any of the angels’ ominous hints. He chose to interpret their words literally and ignore any subtle double meaning that conveyed premonitions of disaster. Guided by the directions of the “passerby,” he set off to Dossan to find his brothers.<sup>75</sup>

One of the most fateful encounters in history was about to take place.

71. Zohar, *Vayeishev* 144a.

72. See *Sifsei Chachamim, Bereishis* 37:17.

73. Rashi, Alshich on *Bereishis* 37:17. *Nasu mi-zeh* (They have departed from here): The Hebrew word *zeh* has a numerical value of twelve. The angel was telling Yosef, “Your brothers have departed from ‘here’ (*zeh*); they are no longer brothers of twelve. You have been eliminated from among the brothers. To them they are a group of eleven” (*Da’as Zekeinim, Bereishis* 37:17).

74. See Rashi, *Gur Aryeh* on *Bereishis* 37:17; Rashi on *Sanhedrin* 102a.

75. See Ramban, *Ohr haChaim*, Rabeinu Bachya, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:17. According to Ramban, it isn’t possible that Yosef was actually told that the brothers were seeking to kill him; otherwise, despite his desire to listen to his father, he wouldn’t have put himself in such a predicament. Abarbanel disagrees. He suggests that Yosef knew full well what the intentions of the angel were, but despite that, he went to do the will of his father and return his brothers to Chevron.

Malbim suggests that, realistically speaking, the brothers had no reason to be in Dossan. They were shepherds, and their objective was to pasture the sheep in the fields of Shechem. The only other possibility is that Dossan isn’t a place, but a play on words suggesting pretext and ways to kill Yosef—as the word *dossan* can also be understood to mean “pretext.”

See *Sanhedrin* 102a, *Sotah* 13b for Rashi’s explanation as to why Yosef is considered to have been sold in Shechem when in fact he was sold in Dossan. See also *II Melachim* 10:13–14, in which it is written that Dossan was in fact a city.

## Righteous Rationalizations

Before we can experience this impending encounter, we have to gain a clear understanding of who the protagonists were. These were not ordinary men by any stretch of the imagination. They were the *Shevatim*, the exalted patriarchs of the future tribes of the Jewish People and the foundation of *Klal Yisrael*. They were all pure and holy men who lived on the very highest spiritual levels.

For men such as these to even contemplate a death sentence or the abduction and sale of their brother, they must have been convinced that he was guilty of capital offenses and deserving of capital punishment. They must have acted out of sincere conviction rather than malice or a desire for revenge.

There are a number of reasons for their unanimous condemnation of Yosef. They sincerely believed that Yosef wanted to do them harm by slandering them to their father. If their father condemned them, they would lose a portion of their share in *Olam haBa*, the World to Come. Therefore, Yosef could legitimately be considered a *moser*, an informant, or a *rodef*, a deadly stalker, either one of whom is liable to the death penalty. In their own minds, the brothers were acting in self-defense, and according to halachah, if someone tries to kill you, kill him first.<sup>76</sup>

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76. There are several possible reasons the brothers felt Yosef was liable to the death penalty. One was his perspective on their violation of *eiver min ha-chai*, eating flesh from a live animal. As for the technical violation of this prohibition, there was a fundamental disagreement between the brothers regarding the legal status of Yaakov's family.

The prohibition of *eiver min ha-chai* applies to all people, Jew and non-Jew alike. But there is a difference. For Jews, it is not a capital offense, while for Bnei Noach, non-Jews, it is—as are all the *Sheva Mitzvos Bnei Noach*, the Seven Noachide Laws.

Yosef believed that he and his brothers, although the progenitors of the future Jewish People, still had the status of non-Jews. Thus, when he accused his brothers of eating *eiver min ha-chai*, he was in effect saying that they were liable to the death penalty. The brothers, however, believed that Yaakov's family already had the status of Jews. Therefore, even if they were guilty, they did

This was the mindset of the brothers as Yosef approached them in the pastures of Dossan.

## No Blood on Our Hands

As the brothers contemplated Yosef's fate, Shimon and Levi<sup>77</sup> sought to end Yosef's life without actually striking a direct blow to him.<sup>78</sup> But Reuven, as the older brother, insisted Yosef's fate not be decided without his approval.<sup>79</sup>

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not deserve to die, as Yosef contended. Invoking the law of the *eid zomeim*, by which a certain type of a false witness to a capital crime is himself put to death, the brothers condemned Yosef to death.

Other sources suggest that the brothers felt Yosef was liable to the death penalty because despite the prophetic nature of his dreams, they believed he was declaring himself a god to whom even the sun and the moon would bow down. If idol worship is punishable by death, they reasoned, then declaring oneself an idol should certainly be as well. Other authorities add that by claiming kingship for himself, and removing that destiny from Yehudah, Yosef was considered a *mored be-malchus*, a rebel against royal authority—an offense punishable by death.

See Seforno, Tosafos, *Ohr haChaim*, Alshich, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:17–18; *Sanhedrin* 72a; *Revid haZahav*, *Vayeishev*, on *Responsa Rosh* 17:1; *Parashas Derachim* 1:1.

77. See Rashi, *Bereishis* 49:5; *Targum Yonasan*, *Midrash haCheifetz*, *Oznaim laTorah* on *Bereishis* 37:19; *Tanchuma Yashan*, *Vayeishev*.

78. Rashi, Rashbam on *Bereishis* 37:18. See *Ohr haChaim*, *Tzeror haMor* on *Bereishis* 37:18, who interpret this to mean that while Yosef was “seeking” their brotherhood (see *Bereishis* 37:17), they saw Yosef as “far” from being considered their brother (*Bereishis* 37:18).

The brothers attempted to riddle Yosef with arrows measure for measure, as slander is compared to sharp arrows. See *Lekach Tov*, *Bereishis* 49:23; *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Seforno on *Bereishis* 37:18, 20; *Eitz Yosef* on *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:13; *Bereishis Rabbah* 98:23 and *Eitz Yosef* ad loc. For further commentary on the brothers' attempts to kill Yosef, see *Midrash haGadol*, *Seichel Tov*, Rabeinu Bachya, Ramban, Rokeach, Alshich, Tosafos, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bereishis* 37:3, 17–20; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:14. See Rashash on *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:14; *Pesachim* 118a. See also *Sanhedrin* 76b; *Aggadas Bereishis* 60.

79. Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:21; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:15. Other sources add that Reuven wanted to suggest that they not even harm him, but the brothers would have emphatically rejected that (see Ramban, *Bereishis* 37:22; Ramban, *Ohr haChaim* on *Bereishis* 42:22).

As the eldest, he would undoubtedly be the first to be accused and assigned blame for Yosef's death.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, since Yosef had taken Reuven's birthright, he had more motive than any of the other brothers to do Yosef harm. Most likely, he would be the prime suspect should anything happen to Yosef.<sup>81</sup> He refused to soil his hands with Yosef's blood.<sup>82</sup>

Reuven suggested that they throw Yosef in the pit and leave him there without any food or water.<sup>83</sup> Casting Yosef into the pit would allow fate to take its course. It would leave the destiny of his dream to divine providence. If he died, it would leave them guiltless of being murderers.<sup>84</sup> And in the event that he would survive, it would mean that the Almighty wanted him to live. It would mean that Yosef's dreams and their supposed prophecies were authentic. It would mean that Yosef was an innocent man.<sup>85</sup> The brothers all agreed with and accepted Reuven's suggestion, and set out to implement his plan.<sup>86</sup>

The Torah bears witness that Reuven's intentions were righteous in that he sought to rescue his younger brother.<sup>87</sup> And indeed, the Torah rewards him for his rescue efforts.<sup>88</sup>

Nonetheless, the Sages say that had Reuven known the Torah would record his heroics for all eternity he would have "carried

80. Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:21.

81. *Bereishis Rabbah* 83:15 with Radal; *Chizkuni* on *Bereishis* 37:22.

82. See *Toldos Yitzchak*, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:21–22.

83. *Midrash Mishlei* 1; Abarbanel, *Seichel Tov*, *Bechor Shor*, Ramban, Rashbam on *Bereishis* 37:20–22.

84. Abarbanel, *Ohr haChaim*, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bereishis* 37:21.

85. Radak, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *HaKesav vahaKabbalah* on *Bereishis* 37:20–22; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38 and Radal ad loc.

86. While the brothers agreed that this would bring about Yosef's death, Reuven had plans to remove Yosef later while he was still alive (*HaKesav vahaKabbalah*, *Bereishis* 37:21).

87. See *Tanchuma Yashan*, *Vayeishev*; Rashi, Seforno, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bereishis* 37:21; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:18.

88. See *Makkos* 10a.

Yosef on his shoulders all the way back to his father.” Unaware that he was in the limelight on the great stage of history, Reuven saved Yosef from death but left him in mortal danger. It was an incomplete achievement.<sup>89</sup>

## Cast into the Pit

The negotiations among the brothers came to an end just as Yosef arrived in their midst. The brothers grabbed him<sup>90</sup> and pulled off his woolen tunic,<sup>91</sup> but made sure to preserve it for use as evidence of a wild animal attack.<sup>92</sup>

Shimon<sup>93</sup> lifted Yosef and dropped him into the pit, which was twenty *amos* deep.<sup>94</sup>

The pit had no standing water in which Yosef might drown, nor, ostensibly, any living creature that might cause him immediate harm. It was just a harmless hole in the ground, but a very

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89. *Hadar Zekeinim*, *Bereishis* 37:21; *Vayikra Rabbah* 34:8. See *Reishis Chochmah* (Mitzvos 30). Reuven should have run and acted swiftly so that people would learn from him (*Yefeh To'ar*).

90. *Sefer haYashar*.

91. See Rashi, *Gur Aryeh*, Maharshal, *Chasam Sofer*, *Ohr haChaim* on *Bereishis* 37:23. See Ibn Ezra and Ralbag for differing opinions.

The *Chasam Sofer* says that the brothers believed Yosef's tunic made him impregnable to harm; the only way to harm him was to remove it. The brothers were afraid to touch Yosef's precious tunic while it was on him for fear of its holy attributes.

92. Rashbam, *Bechor Shor*, Ibn Ezra, Rokeach, *Lekach Tov*, *Seichel Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:23. See also *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:16 and commentaries.

93. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:16 and Mahrzav ad loc.; *Bereishis Rabbah* 91:6; *Seichel Tov*, Rabeinu Bachya on *Bereishis* 37:24; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38. Tosafos offers a view that both Shimon and Levi placed Yosef in the pit. See *Yefeh To'ar*. Other commentaries suggest that Reuven placed Yosef in the pit.

94. See *Tamid* 1:4 and *Tosafos Yom Tov* ad loc.; See *Torah Temimah*, which uses the *mishnah* in *Tamid* to establish that the pit in question was twenty *amos* deep. Determining the depth of the pit helps explain why Yosef could not escape on his own and why the brothers didn't see that there were snakes inside. See Tosafos on *Sanhedrin* 45a, s.v. *mah*; *Bava Kamma* 50a. See also *Ma'aseh Hashem*.

deep one from which there would be no escape.<sup>95</sup> Reuven knew the pit would keep Yosef safe until he could come back and spirit him away.

But the brothers were mistaken. Although there was indeed no water in the pit, there were quite a few snakes and scorpions.<sup>96</sup> The murky shadows in the depths of the pit had prevented the brothers from noticing these crawling creatures, especially because they spent most of their time concealed in nooks and crevices in the walls of the pit.<sup>97</sup> In any case, Yosef remained miraculously unharmed.

## Sold into Slavery

Afterward, Reuven took leave of his brothers and left to go back home to attend to Yaakov. Others say that he went off to fast and repent for disturbing his father's bed.<sup>98</sup> After Reuven left, the nine remaining brothers sat down to break bread to celebrate the return of peace and serenity in their lives.<sup>99</sup> Only Yehudah sat off by himself, his face clouded in thought. He knew that one day his descendants would reign as kings of the Jewish

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95. Ramban, Rashbam, *Chizkuni* on *Bereishis* 37:24.

96. *Shabbos* 22a; *Targum Yonasan*, Rashi on *Bereishis* 37:24. The initials of the Torah's words "*V'ha-bor reik ein bo mayim*" spell out "Avraham," for it was in Avraham's merit that Yosef would be saved (*Chasam Sofer*).

97. Ramban, *Bereishis* 37:24. According to an entirely different version of the story, Reuven was fully aware that the pit into which they were about to throw Yosef was full of snakes and scorpions. Nonetheless, this was the best he could do in his attempt to dissuade his brothers from murdering Yosef in cold blood. Reuven had saved Yosef from certain death and relegated him to the hand of the Almighty. See *Ohr haChaim*, Alshich, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Tzeror haMor* on *Bereishis* 37:21; Tosafos; *Rav Ephraim al HaTorah*, *Bereishis* 37:24; *Berachos* 33a; *Zohar* 185.

98. Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:29; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:19; *Zohar*. According to some, Reuven planned to return and extract Yosef from the pit under cover of night. *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*; *Tanchuma*, *Vayeishev* 2.

99. Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, *Chizkuni* on *Bereishis* 37:25,28; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38; Rashi, *Seichel Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:25; *Tanchuma*, *Vayeishev* 2. See also Tosafos on *Bereishis* 37:25; Rashbam on *Vayikra* 19:26.

People, and he felt that as the progenitor of royalty it was incumbent on him to speak his mind about the events unfolding around him.<sup>100</sup>

Yehudah couldn't bear the thought that while his brothers were eating, Yosef was suffering in the pit.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, to Yehudah, it seemed completely inappropriate that while they were busy blessing the Almighty, Yosef was left to starve. It seemed blasphemous, as it is written, "*Botzeia beirach ni'eitz Hashem*" — To steal and bless is to anger the Almighty.<sup>102</sup>

"*Mah betza?*" What have we to gain by causing Yosef's death and concealing his blood?<sup>103</sup>

They would gain nothing by this extreme act of fratricide.<sup>104</sup>

Yehudah suggested that they sell him. If the goal was to free themselves of Yosef's persecution and the threat of his dreams, selling him would secure that goal. It would surely end any thoughts of his dreams coming true. What's more, it would keep their consciences clear of bloodshed.<sup>105</sup>

100. *Sifsei Kohen*, *Bereishis* 37:26. See also *Seichel Tov*, *Bereishis* 37:26; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:17.

101. *Tosafos*, *Bereishis* 37:26.

102. *Tehillim* 10:3. See also *Sanhedrin* 6b. Others add that Yehudah was questioning what would become of their "*betza*" — the acronym of the words *boker* (morning), *tzahorayim* (afternoon) and *erev* (evening) — if they killed Yosef, i.e. all their morning, afternoon and evening prayers would be deemed insignificant (see *Me'am Lo'ez*; *Tosafos*; *Rav Ephraim al HaTorah*).

103. See Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Seforno, *Seichel Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:26. See also *Ramban*; *Ralbag*; *Radak*; *Akeidas Yitzchak*; *Abarbanel*; *HaKesav v'haKabbalah*; *Malbim*.

104. See Rashi, *Seichel Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:26. Others add that the brothers were also concerned that if they killed Yosef, at the end of Yaakov's mourning period for Yosef he would be reunited with the spirit of the *Shechinah* and would prophetically see what had happened to his son. If Yosef were not killed, in contrast, Yaakov's mourning would never end, so he would never discover the truth (*Yefeh To'ar*; *Yad Yosef*). See Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:35, 45:27, and *Nachal Kadmonim* ad loc.

105. *Bechor Shor*, *Sifsei Kohen*, *Ma'aseh Hashem*, *Ohr haChaim*, *Ralbag*, *Akeidas Yitzchak* on *Bereishis* 37:25–26.



## The Sale Is Completed<sup>106</sup>

Just then, a long line of what appeared to be specks providentially appeared on the horizon. It was a caravan traveling in a southeasterly direction along the Gilead-to-Egypt trade route.<sup>107</sup> From afar, the brothers recognized it as an Ishmaelite caravan, which was usually accompanied by a contingent of Midianite merchants, who served as agents and brokers for the Ishmaelite Arabs.<sup>108</sup>

As the caravan drew near, the brothers were surprised by its pleasant fragrance. The caravans of the Arabs<sup>109</sup> usually carried petroleum, tar, resin and hides, extremely malodorous cargo. The

106. The sale of Yosef is a complicated subject. There are numerous opinions as to who sold him, to whom and how many times he was sold. After painstakingly reviewing the various commentaries on the subject and the complexities in the Torah's text concerning who bought and sold him, for the purposes of this book, I have decided to offer one generalized view of the events and then mention different opinions in the footnotes. As in my previous books, I do not in any way suggest that the above conclusions are final and the authoritative view of what actually took place. For readers' sake, however, I feel compelled to offer one clear view that will give them a compelling vision of Yosef's tribulations during this period. The view in the main text is based primarily on *Sefer haYashar*, with additional viewpoints that are consistent with his approach. The remaining opinions are in no way any less factual or important, and they will be duly noted.

107. Ramban, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Ha'amek Davar* on *Bereishis* 37:25. See *The Living Torah* by Rav Aryeh Kaplan (Brooklyn: Moznaim, 1981), which states that Gilead, a place famous for its spices, was on the trade route from Mesopotamia to Egypt. This route passed through Dossan.

108. Ramban, *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Seichel Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:25. See also *Ha'amek Davar*. It was customary for the Midianites and the Ishmaelites to travel together and do business together. They were relatives, descendants of Bnei Keturah (*Bechor Shor*; *Akeidas Yitzchak*; Abarbanel; *Ma'aseh Hashem*). See *Bereishis* 25:1–2 and Rashi ad loc.

109. See Rambam, *Peirush haMishnayos*, *Tevul Yom* 4:5. The word "Arab" comes from the Hebrew word *arav*. Some trace its origin to the fact that Arabs are children of a "mixed" (*me'orav*) lineage stemming from adulterous relations (*Tosafos*). Others add they are called Arabs because they dwell in the "plains" (*aravah*) of the desert (Rashi, *Yirmeyahu* 3:2). Another opinion suggests that they wait for "passing" (*avar*) caravans to buy and sell to (Radak). See also Rashi, *Bereishis* 25:3.

combined stink of the cargo, the camels and their unwashed camel drivers was choking. But strangely, this caravan emitted only the fragrance of precious spices, balsam for perfumes, and scented oils.<sup>110</sup>

As the brothers were speaking amongst each other, seven Midianite merchants detached themselves from the caravan and went exploring for water holes in the wild terrain.<sup>111</sup> They came across a pit on whose rim a number of birds had gathered, which seemed to suggest there was water in the pit. Much to their surprise, the pit contained no water, only a weeping boy of about seventeen years of age. They reported their discovery to the Ishmaelites, who ordered that the boy be extracted and brought to them.<sup>112</sup>

The Midianites pulled Yosef from the pit with ropes and examined him. He was clearly a handsome lad with a beautiful complexion.<sup>113</sup>

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110. See Rashi, *Targum Yonasan*, *Seichel Tov*, *Lekach Tov*, Ralbag, Abarbanel, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:25. Some of these were brought as cures for maladies such as snakebite (*Seichel Tov*; *Pa'aneiach Raza*). Other commentaries add that the cargo included carob or wax. It was in Yosef's merit that the merchants carried these items. These smells would rub off on him and linger wherever he went. The wife of Potiphar would trace this pleasant smell and follow it until she realized it was Yosef's pleasing perfume. She would be so enthralled with it that she would be tempted to sin with him (*Midrash Shir haShirim* 3).

See also Ramban, *Shemos* 30:34; Rashi, *Shemos* 43:11 with *Divrei David*. Since Yosef was to be carried off by this caravan, the Almighty ensured that he should at least not have to suffer any foul odor during his ordeal. See Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:25; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:17 with Radal, *Eitz Yosef*; *Mechilta*, *Beshalach*. See also *Tzeror haMor*, *Bereishis* 37:25. Under the circumstances, it would seem irrelevant what the caravan smelled like. But this indirectly hinted to Yosef that what was taking place was all for his benefit—events would ultimately lead him to become viceroy. As such, he was shown the proper respect due to his righteousness. See *Chasam Sofer*.

111. *Da'as Zekeinim*; Rashbam; *Moshav Zekeinim*; *Ha'amek Davar*; *Tzeror haMor*.

112. *Bereishis Rabbah* 86:1; *Da'as Zekeinim*; Rashbam; *Moshav Zekeinim*; *Tzeror haMor*; Rav Saadiah Gaon; Radak.

According to Rashi, the brothers removed Yosef from the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites.

113. *Bereishis Rabbah* 86:1; *Midrash Asarah Harugei Malchus*.

“Who are you?” they said. “Why were you in the pit? Who put you there?”

Yosef did not respond.

The Midianites tied a rope around him and led him away, unclothed.<sup>114</sup>

The brothers protested to the Midianites. “Why have you removed our renegade slave from the pit? Just because we decided to put him there doesn’t give you the right to snatch him away. Return him to us at once!”

“Wait a minute,” said the leader of the Midianites. “We found this boy, and we’ll take him. And that’s that.”

“Not so fast, my friend,” said Shimon. “Either you give us back our slave or blood will be shed here. And it won’t be ours.”

The Midianite sneered at Shimon. He unsheathed his sword, and immediately, the rest of his group followed suit.

The two groups lined up against each other, the Midianites on one side and the brothers on the other. Both sides watched each other warily, waiting for the imminent battle to begin.

Shimon stepped forward and let out a bloodcurdling war cry. The sound was so piercing that the ground virtually shook. The Midianites recoiled in fear and horror.

“Do you Midianites know who I am?” said Shimon.

The Midianites shook their heads.

“I am Shimon the son of Yaakov,” declared Shimon. “I am the one who almost single-handedly destroyed the city of Shechem and killed all of its male population. The Almighty helped me then, and He will help me now. If you want to live, return the boy to us. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Perfectly, sir,” said the Midianite leader without the slightest trace of arrogance in his voice. “But I think we can do business. If you want to, that is. As you yourself said, this lad is a renegade

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114. *Bereishis Rabbah* 86:1.

slave. Now, why would you want such a slave? Better to sell him to us. Then you'll be rid of him. As for us, have no fear. We'll know what to do with him. Just name your price."

Although the Midianites didn't know that the brothers wanted to sell Yosef, the latter indeed wanted to be rid of him quickly, and the Midianites' offer seemed attractive. They discussed it very briefly.<sup>115</sup>

"Our price," said Levi, "is twenty silver dinars."<sup>116</sup> They came up with this paltry figure because they wanted to minimize the length of the negotiations.<sup>117</sup> Twenty dinars would give each of them two dinars, just enough to buy a pair of shoes.<sup>118</sup>

115. *Sefer haYashar; Bechor Shor*; Rav Avraham ben haRambam. The question could be asked, if the brothers were so interested in getting rid of Yosef, why would they have stopped the Ishmaelites from taking him in the first place? It seems hard to fathom that they would want to make another couple of pieces of silver. Perhaps one can surmise that had he been taken he wouldn't have technically been considered a slave and, as such, his ability to rise to power would have still been possible, leaving the dreams still in effect. Making an actual sale enforced the notion that Yosef was now legally a slave and thus could never ever rule over them.

116. Twenty dinars is equivalent to \$75 in contemporary American society. Rav Aryeh Kaplan on *Me'am Lo'ez* offers another calculation and suggests that it was the equivalent of \$5.

117. *Da'as Zekeinim*; Ramban. It was at this point that the decreed exile to Egypt began (*Bereishis Rabbah* 84:18 and Radal ad loc.).

A slave is usually worth thirty shekels (dinars) but because this was a hasty and secret sale, ten shekels were deducted from the normal amount (Tur; *Pa'aneiach Raza*). See *Shemos* 21:32.

There are three views as to why Yosef was sold at such a low rate: 1) he appeared sick and emaciated; 2) the brothers were in a rush to get rid of him and weren't looking to bargain; 3) the secrecy and apparent paranoia on the brothers' part suggested that Yosef was stolen goods or at the very least the subject of an illegal sale (Rav Avraham ben haRambam).

118. *Tanchuma, Vayeishev* 2; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38. See also *Amos* 2:6. Although there were only nine brothers, since Reuven was away, they accepted Reuven's portion on his behalf, which would give each brother two shekels (Radal on *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*).

See *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* and *Da'as Zekeinim*, which are of the opinion that each brother received twenty silver coins, totaling two hundred. In fact the

The Midianites were amazed that the price was so reasonable, and they jumped to accept it. The deal was closed, and Yosef was bought for twenty dinars.<sup>119</sup>

As the Midianites rode off with their newly acquired Hebrew slave, they reconsidered their transaction and sought to cancel it. The boy was too good-looking to be a slave. Who would buy a slave that looked like a young duke? The boy, who obviously came from noble stock, had probably been abducted by these fierce tribal people, who then decided to get rid of him for a ridiculously low price. So what were they supposed to do with him? If they brought him to market, more likely than finding a buyer, they would be accused of kidnapping him.

The only option was to get rid of him at once. And to whom

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numerical value of *na'alayim* (shoes) is two hundred (*Sifsei Kohen*).

Some authorities offer an interesting observation about the brothers' purchase of shoes. One does not make a blessing on shoes, and the brothers did not want to commit the violation of blaspheming Hashem by making a blessing on property that was purchased through sin (*Me'am Lo'ez*).

Another *midrash* says that the brothers' receiving shoes symbolized that they were treading upon Yosef's dreams, putting an end to the ostensible fallacy that they were ever going to take place (see *Torah Sheleimah*).

Many views suggest that Yosef was sold for this paltry amount because he looked sickly and pale due to his fear of the snakes. Thinking he was a worthless investment, he was sold for only twenty pieces of silver (*Da'as Zekeinim; Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer; Tanchuma, Vayeishev 2*).

Tosafos is of the opinion that when Yosef was removed from the pit and no longer in danger, his complexion improved. Therefore, the brothers were looking to renegotiate the deal and were pacified by having shoes thrown in with the twenty silver coins Yosef was sold for. Others suggest that the angel Gavriel or Raphael, who was protecting Yosef from the snakes, placed a *kamea* around Yosef's neck, which miraculously brought clothing onto his body. The brothers, assuming Yosef was being sold unclothed, now saw him dressed and wanted to change the price due to his somewhat increased value. To compensate for Yosef's increased worth, shoes were thrown into the deal (*Midrash Asarah Harugei Malchus; Hadar Zekeinim*). *Midrash Asarah Harugei Malchus* says that Yosef was sold for four pairs of shoes.

119. Because Yosef, who enjoyed the status of a firstborn, was redeemed for such a low price, the redemption of the firstborn in the future would be for five shekels, also a very low price.

should they sell him? Why, to the Ishmaelites of the caravan. They would buy him no questions asked, especially at the low price the tribal people had offered.<sup>120</sup>

And this is exactly what the Midianites did. The Ishmaelites accepted the offer.<sup>121</sup> Yosef had become a slave traveling to Egypt

120. *Seichel Tov, Bereishis* 37:28. The Midianites would pay dearly for buying and selling Yosef. Years later Pinchas, a descendant of Yosef, would lead the war against the Midianites and wipe them out. See Rashi, *Bamidbar* 31:6.

121. The accepted opinion of Rashi is that Yosef was sold numerous times beginning with the Ishmaelites and followed by the Midianites, who in turn sold him to Potiphar in Egypt. The phrase "They hauled Yosef up from the pit" (*Bereishis* 37:28) refers to the sons of Yaakov, who took their brother out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites. There are, however, numerous questions. First, what was the role of the Midianites? Where did they fit in? Rashi tries to overcome this difficulty by suggesting a threefold sale (the brothers to the Ishmaelites to the Midianites to Egypt). Evidently Rashi identifies the Midianites mentioned in *Bereishis* 37:36 with these Midianites. But he provides no solution to the problem posed by *Bereishis* 39:1, that Potiphar bought him from the hand of the Ishmaelites.

Additionally, Rashi earlier cites the *midrash* in *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8, 22, and *Aggadas Bereishis* 60 that Yosef's *kesones "passim"* is an acronym of the four parties he was sold to (Potiphar, *Socharim* (merchants), Midianites and Ishmaelites) and not three. Because of these questions, many commentators have given other explanations on the subject, either by explaining Rashi or by offering their own opinions.

*Gur Aryeh* explains that the Midianites wore Ishmaelite clothing and were identified as Ishmaelites. These "Ishmaelites" then sold Yosef to other Midianites, since they had no interest in Yosef simply because their spice business was more important to attend to than the headache he caused them. This, though, does not address Rashi's suggestion that Yosef was sold four times.

*Da'as Zekeinim* offers a different view in explaining Rashi's position. While negotiations were taking place with the Ishmaelites to sell Yosef, Midianite traders passed by. After Yosef was removed from the pit to be sold to the Ishmaelites, the Midianites protested that they had first rights in the sale because he was removed from the pit to be sold to them. The Ishmaelites relented and sold Yosef to the Midianites, who in turn sold him to Potiphar in Egypt. This, however, doesn't resolve the discrepancy in the text.

*Da'as Zekeinim's* own view, however, is different. While the brothers were contemplating the sale to the Ishmaelites, the Midianites passed by and the brothers sold him to them. The Midianites in turn sold Yosef to the Ishmaelites, who followed by selling him to the Medanites, who then sold him to Potiphar. As we shall soon see, the Medanites sold him to Potiphar, whose suspicions,

in an Ishmaelite caravan. But he was not alone. The *Shechinah* accompanied him on his decent to Egypt to watch over him and protect him in his state of captivity.<sup>122</sup>

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however, required the Ishmaelites to guarantee that Yosef was neither stolen nor bought illegally by the Medanites. Needing both the Ishmaelites and the Medanites while Yosef was being transferred to Potiphar satisfies the discrepancy in which one verse says Potiphar received Yosef from the Ishmaelites and another says he bought Yosef from the Medanites (see *Chizkuni*). See *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:8.

Rosh, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Radak offer another resolution of the difficulty in Rashi: the Midianites and Medanites (and according to some opinions, the Ishmaelites) were all the same. As brothers, children of Keturah, their names are interchangeable. Thus Yosef was **sold four times to three people**, which satisfies both *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:22 and Rashi. See *Targum Unkelos*, *Bereishis* 37:28, 37:36. See also Rashi, *Bamidbar* 31:6; *Sifrei* 157.

Ramban regards the two caravans of Midianite merchants and Ishmaelites as one, in which the Midianites were the merchants and the Ishmaelites the camel drivers, so that the brothers first caught sight of the Ishmaelite caravan and when they drew near saw Midianite merchants: The brothers sold Yosef to the Midianites, who were well-versed in trade. Since the Ishmaelite camel drivers or haulers did not engage directly in trade, they merely offered their services to traders. Therefore, the contradiction suggested by “the Medanites sold him into Egypt and Potiphar bought him from the hand of the Ishmaelites” is resolved if we assume they both took respective roles in the sale. The Ishmaelites taxed the goods that were owned by the Midianites, thus satisfying both opinions that Yosef was sold to both. While the Ishmaelites held Yosef, it was the Midianite merchants who owned him.

*Midrash Rabbah* offers an additional opinion: Yosef was in fact sold **five** times. Before he was finally sold to Potiphar, Yosef was sold to the treasury of Egypt, which would authenticate the sale with the Ishmaelites. It was from this treasury that Potiphar bought Yosef. Yosef was thus sold to the Ishmaelites, then to the Midianite merchants, then to the Medanites, then to the treasury and finally to Potiphar.

See Rabeinu Bachya; *Bechor Shor*; *Moshav Zekeinim*; Riva; Seforno; Alshich; *Ohr haChaim*; *Pa'aneiach Raza*; Malbim.

Regardless of the different interpretations, this cannot be overlooked: Yosef was sold into the hands of the children of Avraham and Keturah, traditionally known as Hagar. As the the forebears of the Ishmaelites and the Midianites were children of Hagar—herself an Egyptian princess—it only made sense that the Ishmael-Midian relationship had Egypt as a common interest, and that the caravans were thus heading in that direction (see *Gur Aryeh*).

122. *Hadar Zekeinim*; *Midrash haGadol*, *Bereishis* 39:1.

## Sworn to Secrecy

After the deed was done, the issue of paramount importance facing the brothers was to preserve the secrecy of what had transpired. The brothers, therefore, took a solemn oath that they themselves would never divulge to Yaakov or anyone else what had been done with Yosef on this day. They also swore to secrecy anyone else who might have known anything, on pain of death.

The brothers wanted to give the oath the full force of an oath sworn in the presence of ten people, but Reuven being absent, there were only nine brothers present. And so they enjoined the Almighty Himself to join the council of ten and give the oath its added weight.<sup>123</sup>

Yitzchak, Yaakov's father, also honored the oath, even though he knew prophetically the whereabouts of Yosef.<sup>124</sup>

Yaakov enjoyed very strong powers of divine inspiration, and normally he would have been able to discern Yosef's whereabouts, just as Yitzchak had. But the Almighty's design required that Yaakov remain in the dark so that the sale of Yosef would

123. *Tanchuma, Vayeishev* 2; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* 38; *Midrash haCheifetz, Bechor Shor, Hadar Zekeinim*, Rashi on *Bereishis* 37:25, 26, 33. This was not an unheard-of concept by any means. Avraham, in his attempt to save the city of Sodom, wanted to include Hashem as one of the righteous to complete a list of ten righteous individuals. See *Bereishis* 18:28 with Rashi and commentaries. See also Rabeinu Bachya, *Bereishis* 37:32.

124. *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer; Tanchuma, Vayeishev* 2; *Yefeh To'ar*. As will be evident later, Binyamin too was aware of Yosef's whereabouts through a prophetic vision.

According to some opinions, this powerful oath prevented Yosef from contacting his father during the twenty-two years he was away in Egypt. See *Sefer Chasidim; Moshav Zekeinim; Shalshales haKabbalah*.

In fact, some suggest that Yosef himself was present when the ban was issued. Yosef could have easily returned to his father or contacted Yaakov via messenger or letter, if not for the oath.

According to Ramban, it was only a six-day journey from Chevron to Egypt, clearly a short enough distance in terms of maintaining contact with one's family. *Yalkut Reuveni* cites an opinion that it was a four-day journey.



eventually lead to Yaakov's going down to Egypt and trigger the 210-year phase of the Jewish exile.<sup>125</sup>

In a certain sense, the divine scheme that was unfolding was an act of mercy toward Yaakov.<sup>126</sup> The literal fulfillment of the decree of exile and bondage would have entailed that Yaakov be brought down to Egypt in the chains and collar of a slave. But because of his great merit, he was spared the public humiliation. Yosef was brought down to Egypt in his stead as an abject slave,<sup>127</sup> and Yaakov eventually came down as an honored sage whose beloved son, the virtual king of Egypt, sustained him and protected him from hunger and deprivation.<sup>128</sup>

## History Judges Yehudah

There can be no question that Yehudah saved Yosef's life by suggesting that the brothers sell him into slavery. But did that make him a hero or not?

The Sages have differing opinions regarding this question.

According to some opinions, Yehudah does not deserve to be praised. Once he had gained his brothers' attention, Yehudah should have brought Yosef home to his father rather than offer a compromise not much better than the one offered by Reuven.<sup>129</sup>

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125. See *Sifsei Kohen*, *Sifsei Chachamim* on *Bereishis* 37:33. Furthermore, Yaakov was not permitted to know Yosef's whereabouts, or even that his son was alive, so that he would suffer through twenty-two years of separation from his son, measure for measure for the twenty-two years he had been separated from his own father. *Sefer Chasidim*, *Sifsei Chachamim* on *Bereishis* 37:33.

The twenty-two years of separation multiplied by the ten brothers responsible for selling Yosef is 220. The Jewish People were supposed to remain in Egypt for 220 years because of what the brothers did to Yosef. However, ten years were subtracted from the exile because the brothers suffered the disgrace of having to be buried in Egypt (*Zohar*; *Yalkut Reuveni*).

126. See *Hoshea* 11:4.

127. See *Shabbos* 89b and Rashi ad loc.; *Bereishis Rabbah* 86:2.

128. See Maharsha, Ben Yehoyada on *Shabbos* 89b.

129. In support of this view, our Sages offer a homiletic reading of the verse "*Botzeia beirach ni'eitz Hashem*" (*Tehillim* 10:3), which means that to steal and

The arithmetic supports the likelihood that Yehudah could have achieved complete success. Of the nine brothers present, four were the sons of the handmaidens and had a reasonably amicable relationship with Yosef. Although they had joined the sons of Leah in the plot, Yehudah's eloquence could have persuaded them to change their minds. Then those four together with Yehudah would have been the majority opinion, and they could have carried the day and saved Yosef from any dire treatment.<sup>130</sup>

Yehudah's failure was in the final compromise he offered, because he could have accomplished so much more.<sup>131</sup>

Other Sages suggest that Yehudah's first impulse to save Yosef, like Reuven's, was indeed praiseworthy. In his courageous stance against his brothers, he showed leadership qualities. He would continue to fulfill this leadership role many years later when he would stand up to the viceroy of Egypt on behalf of his family. These qualities would also be manifest in his descendants, who would become the future kings of the Jewish People.<sup>132</sup>

Five hundred years after this, during the Roman exile, the Ten Martyrs, ten of the greatest Sages of the generation, would be

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bless is to anger the Almighty. Instead, they read it as saying, "Whoever praises the one that said, 'Mah betza,' referring to Yehudah, angers the Almighty." See *Sanhedrin* 6b with Rashi and *Yad Ramah* ad loc. See Maharsha here and *P'nei Moshe* on *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 1:1, 4:7, for their views on this subject. See also *Tanchuma Yashan, Vayeishev*.

130. *Meshech Chochmah, Vayeishev*. The four children of the maidservants plus Reuven and Yehudah would have totaled a 6:4 majority in favor of saving Yosef entirely. Yehudah was the swing vote, and it was in his power to return Yosef home.

131. See Maharsha, *Sanhedrin* 6b; Tosafos, *Bereishis* 37:25. See Rashi, *Sotah* 13b. See *Reishis Chochmah*, *Mitzvos* 22, for further detail on this matter.

Various commentaries discuss the measure-for-measure retribution given to Yehudah. Some question why Yehudah, who at the very least acted in a more virtuous manner than his brothers, should be ridiculed and singled out for his actions. See Maharsha; *Iyun Yaakov*.

132. See *Seichel Tov, Bereishis* 37:26; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:17. See also *Sefer Chasidim* 504. See *II Shemuel* 5:4; *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:949; *Tzeror haMor, Bereishis* 37:27; *Midrash Tehillim* 10.

executed in a gruesome manner as a result of the sin of the sale of Yosef.<sup>133</sup>

## A Time to Mourn

Long after nightfall, after the brothers had already retired to their tents, Reuven came down from the hills and stealthily approached the pit into which Yosef had been thrown.<sup>134</sup>

He called out to Yosef but there was no answer. He lowered himself into the pit and saw that it was empty. There was nothing there—no person, no corpse.<sup>135</sup>

Reuven felt, as the oldest brother and the one who suggested the pit in the first place, that he was responsible, and as such, he couldn't relax until Yosef's whereabouts could be determined.<sup>136</sup> Overcome by grief and remorse, Reuven tore his garments and went off to notify his brothers.<sup>137</sup>

Informed by Reuven regarding Yosef's disappearance, the brothers decided to tell Reuven what they did. Since he was a charter member of the conspiracy, the oath of secrecy did not exclude him from knowing, and once they told him, he would also be bound to secrecy.<sup>138</sup>

It was now time to address Yosef's absence and what to say to

133. Rabeinu Bachya, *Bereishis* 37:27; *Midrash Asarah Harugei Malchus*. Only the merit of Avraham saved an additional eight hundred scholars from being executed at the same time (*Yalkut Reuveni*). For more on this subject, see Rabeinu Bachya, *Yalkut Reuveni*, *Chemas haChemdah*, *Sifsei Chachamim* on *Bereishis* 37:33.

134. *Tanchuma*, *Vayeishev* 2.

135. See *Ma'aseh Hashem*; *Sefer haYashar*.

136. *Ohr haChaim* on *Bereishis* 37:30. For more on this subject, see *Panim Yafos*, *Chizkuni*, *Tur*, *Pa'aneiach Raza*, *Hadar Zekeinim* on *Bereishis* 37:30.

137. *Midrash haCheifetz*, *Alshich* on *Bereishis* 37:29. Some suggest that Reuven had not come to these conclusions just yet. He hoped Yosef had been removed from the pit so he could eat something, and on that assumption, he went to his brothers to see if in fact Yosef was there (*Tzeror haMor*).

138. *Tanchuma*, *Vayeishev* 2; *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*. See *Sefer haYashar*, which says that only after the brothers included Reuven in what happened did they issue the ban. According to this opinion, Hashem was not included in the ban.

Yaakov. The brothers all agreed that they would come up with a unified story that would explain Yosef's absence; one that made it certain that he was dead, but one that explained why there was no body.<sup>139</sup> After reaching a consensus, the brothers instituted their plan. The brothers took a kid goat from their flocks, slaughtered it and collected its blood in a large pan. They mangled Yosef's tunic until it looked like it had been pawed by a wild animal. Then they dipped the tunic into the blood of the young goat, giving it a convincing look that it had been attacked by a wild beast.<sup>140</sup> Upon their return home, the brothers decided that the sons of the handmaidens would bring the tunic to Yaakov, while Yehudah would be their spokesman.<sup>141</sup>

## Proof of Death

With solemn faces, two sons of the handmaidens entered Yaakov's home and presented Yosef's bloody tunic before him.

"When we were ready to bring the flocks home," said Dan, "this is what we found, Father."<sup>142</sup>

"Do you recognize this garment, Father?" said Yehudah. "It looks familiar to us. Can you identify it? Is it the tunic that belonged to Yosef?"<sup>143</sup>

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139. *Bechor Shor*, *Bereishis* 37:20; *Sefer haYashar*.

140. See Rashi, *Targum Yonasan*, Radak, Ramban, Seforno, *Da'as Zekeinim*, *Hadar Zekeinim*, *Bechor Shor*, *Seichel Tov*, Abarbanel, Alshich on *Bereishis* 37:31–32; Zohar; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:7; *Sefer haYashar*. See Maharam Shif on *Gittin* 57b, who says that only when the blood of a kid goat and the blood of a human are seen together are they distinguishable from one another, but when not seen together they look very similar.

141. *Seichel Tov*, *Bereishis* 37:32. For more views on this subject, see *Targum Yonasan*, *Midrash haGadol*, *Chizkuni*, Ramban, Rokeach, Rashbam, *Tzeror haMor*, Radak on *Bereishis* 37:32. See also *Aggadas Bereishis* 60.

142. *Sefer haYashar*, *Seichel Tov* on *Bereishis* 37:32.

143. *Seichel Tov*, Rokeach, *Tzeror haMor* on *Bereishis* 37:32; *Sotah* 10b; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:19; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13. It would appear that the view of *Sotah* 10b, which states that it was in fact Yehudah who was responsible, still holds true even according to the opinions that it wasn't he who presented Yosef's coat to

Yaakov let out a piercing cry of pain and sorrow.

“It is Yosef’s tunic, of that there is no doubt. But look at it! It is tattered and bloody! My dear, beloved Yosef has been mauled and ripped to pieces by wolves or lions.”<sup>144</sup>

Staggering with pain, Yaakov tore his garments in mourning over his son. He took off his ordinary clothes and donned sackcloth, an act of penance, because he feared he was responsible for the loss of his son.<sup>145</sup>

Yaakov lamented over his lost son Yosef. Why had he sent him from the safety of his home all by himself to check on his brothers?<sup>146</sup>

Yaakov stared long and hard at the blood-soaked tunic, but something didn’t seem quite right. He tried to use his powers of *ruach ha-kodesh*, but the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, had departed from him when he was overcome by sadness.<sup>147</sup> There was little left to do other than mourn the loss of his beloved son.

The traditional mourning period over any deceased relative is seven days, known as the Shivah, which is followed by an extended period of restrained mourning. The maximum period of mourning of any kind is twelve months, after which the deceased fades somewhat from the heart of the bereaved.

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Yaakov. Yehudah was still considered the one responsible for the deception, because it was he who suggested that Yosef be sold, thus necessitating a cover-up in the first place.

144. *Bereishis* 37:33.

145. See Radak, Rokeach, Malbim on *Bereishis* 37:34. Hashem would punish the tribes for causing their father to rend his garment. They themselves would rend their garments in the future as well in the midst of a deception performed by Yosef. See *Lekach Tov*, *Bereishis* 37:34. See also *Bereishis* 44:13.

I have purposely used the word “loss” rather than death, because not only do we know Yosef was alive, but, as many opinions suggest, even Yaakov himself wasn’t sure Yosef was in fact dead.

146. Rokeach; *Sefer haYashar*; *Panim Yafos*.

147. See *Gur Aryeh*, *Targum Yonasan*, *Sifsei Kohen* on *Bereishis* 37:33; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:19 and *Yefeh To’ar* ad loc.; *Shabbos* 30b. See also *Reishis Chochmah*, *Ahavah*.

After the seven-day period,<sup>148</sup> however, Yaakov's mourning did not come to an end. He still mourned his son with the same intensity. Thirty days passed, and his mourning did not abate. A full year passed, and still, Yaakov mourned with the same heart-breaking grief he had felt on that very first day that he had learned of Yosef's death.<sup>149</sup> Yaakov would mourn without stop for the next twenty-two years—until he was finally reunited with Yosef.<sup>150</sup>

Although Yaakov had many reasons for his deep mourning, it is human nature that after twelve months the mourner tends to forget the deceased to a certain extent. The images and the

148. Rabeinu Bachya, *Bereishis* 37:34.

149. *Tosafos Berachah*, *Torah Temimah* on *Bereishis* 37:35. Yaakov saw the rest of his life stretching before him, steeped in mourning until he went down to his grave. Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:35.

Moreover, the future of the Jewish People was dependent on its being composed of twelve tribes. The Almighty had promised Adam that he would be the progenitor of the twelve tribes, and he could have been their father. But when he sinned, he lost the privilege, and it was relegated to a distant ancestor. Avraham thought that he would father the twelve tribes. For a while, he was even under the impression that the twelve sons he had by Hagar represented them, but the Almighty informed him that the twelve tribes would be descended from his son Yitzchak, whom Sarah would one day bear. This destiny had devolved on Yaakov, and now it seemed to have been lost; a terrible tragedy indeed. See Rashi with *Gur Aryeh*, *Kli Yakar*, *Midrash haCheifetz* on *Bereishis* 37:35. See also *Eliyahu Rabbah* 5; *Tanchuma Yashan*, *Vayeishev*. See *Bereishis Rabbah* 24:5; *Aggadas Bereishis* 72. See also *Ya'aros Devash* 15 for a full discussion of this matter.

150. See *Megillah* 17a and Rashi ad loc.; Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:34. Yosef was sold into slavery at the age of seventeen. He ascended the throne of viceroy at age thirty, after which there were seven years of plenty and two of famine before Yaakov arrived in Egypt. Yosef was thirty-nine years old at the time. This corresponded to the twenty-two years that Yaakov failed to honor his father and mother.

Many question why this was considered wrong on Yaakov's part when it was his parents themselves who told him to go to Lavan to find a wife. One of numerous opinions on this subject suggests that Yaakov should have left as soon as he married Leah. Deciding to remain with Lavan to marry Rachel was done on his own initiative rather than at his mother's request. Therefore, Yaakov was held accountable for not honoring his parents (*Sifsei Chachamim*). See *Chizkuni* for another opinion.

memories fade somewhat, and the pain eases. The mourner faces the reality of his loss and accepts that it will not be reversed. Life begins to return to normal. Yaakov, therefore, should have come out of his state of mourning after the full twelve months had elapsed. But he did not.<sup>151</sup>

Why didn't he begin to forget and recover?

It was because Yosef was still alive.<sup>152</sup> The rule that the deceased begins to fade away after twelve months applies only to people who are actually deceased. If, however, the supposedly deceased person is actually alive, he remains vibrantly alive in the minds of his relatives, and there is no limit to the amount of time he will be mourned.<sup>153</sup> Because Yosef was still alive, Yaakov could not extricate himself from his state of mourning.<sup>154</sup>

Yaakov's father, Yitzchak, who was still alive at the time, also wept along with his disconsolate son for the loss of his grandson. Yitzchak knew prophetically that Yosef was still alive, but he honored the ban that forbade anyone to reveal information about

151. Mahrzav on *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:21; *Tzeidah laDerech*.

152. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:21; Rashi, *Chizkuni* on *Bereishis* 37:35.

153. *Akeidas Yitzchak*, Rav Avraham ben haRambam on *Bereishis* 37:35; *Yefeh To'ar*; *Tzeidah laDerech*.

154. Some point out that Yaakov should have realized from this alone that Yosef was alive. Otherwise, why was he finding it impossible to stop mourning? One answer offered is that Yaakov was not aware of this concept (*Sifsei Chachamim*, *Bereishis* 37:35). Others suggest that Yaakov realized that even if he had survived, Yosef was in mortal danger and could have died at any time. Therefore, any time Yaakov felt the pain of bereavement could theoretically have been within twelve months of Yosef's death, so there was no way for Yaakov to know that Yosef was alive at any particular moment of his bereavement (*Divrei David*, *Bereishis* 37:35). According to some opinions, Yaakov continued to mourn for Yosef because he was not convinced that he was dead. He always hoped that he would someday find his lost son. In the meantime, he worried for his safety, always fearing that he might have sustained injuries or been subjected to the indignities of bondage (*Levush*, *Bereishis* 37:35).

According to other opinions, Yaakov did accept the evidence of Yosef's death. However, since he did not have a gravesite to visit, he could not achieve full closure and put his mourning to rest (*Gur Aryeh*, Abarbanel on *Bereishis* 37:35).

what had occurred. Therefore, Yitzchak only pretended to mourn in the presence of his son, but the tears he shed were genuine, because he knew he would never see Yosef again.<sup>155</sup> Yosef's younger brother Binyamin also knew prophetically that Yosef was alive, and he too honored the ban.<sup>156</sup>

The circumstances surrounding the cover-up of Yosef's abduction and sale into slavery had many features of measure-for-measure justice. The blood of a slaughtered animal was used to conceal the fate of Yosef, who had accused his brothers of eating *eiver min ha-chai*.<sup>157</sup> Yosef's coat was used to deceive Yaakov, who had deceived his own father Yitzchak by coming disguised in Eisav's coat and taking his blessings. Yaakov had prepared young goats to feed his father on that occasion when he had surreptitiously taken the blessings intended for Eisav, and now, the blood of a young goat was used to deceive him. Yaakov had caused Yitzchak to tremble on that occasion, and now he himself was trembling with grief.<sup>158</sup>

Yehudah would also suffer measure for measure. Yehudah had asked his father to identify Yosef's tunic. One day, he would be forced to identify as his own the garment he had given Tamar as security for her favors, and he would suffer great humiliation.

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155. *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:21; Rashi, *Bereishis* 37:35. See also Seforno. See *Moed Katan* 20b; *Yoreh Deah* 374:6. Yitzchak would die twelve years from this point, within a year of Yosef's ascending the throne in Egypt, which occurred the following Rosh Hashanah (*Seder Olam*; *Lekach Tov*; *Chasam Sofer*).

Some suggest that both Bilhah and Dinah died of heartbreak after the loss of Yosef (*Sefer haYovalim*).

156. *Midrash Tehillim* 15. See *Maseches Sofrim* 21; Rokeach, *Bereishis* 37:33. See also *Sefer haYashar*, which writes about a test Yaakov conducted to seek out Yosef's whereabouts.

157. Rokeach, *Bereishis* 37:31; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:12.

158. See Zohar 184a, 185a; Rokeach, *Tzeror haMor* on *Bereishis* 37:31, 32. See also *Sotah* 10b; *Bereishis Rabbah* 84:19; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13; *Tanchuma*, *Vayigash* 9, for how Yehudah too was subject to justice measure for measure.