

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

PARSHA PERSPECTIVES

Short Divrei Torah on Parshas Vayeishev

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רפואה שלמה פעסל בת גאלדא / לזכות חילינו

THE TZADDIK'S FLAME

Reb Noson of Nemirov

"Yaakov dwelled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan. These are the generations of Yaakov: Yosef..." (37:1-2)

Yaakov wondered how he could overcome Eisav - until he recognized the power of Yosef. Yaakov is compared to the "fire," but Yosef is the "burning flame and smoke" that consumes. (Rashi)

Yaakov wished to dwell in tranquility. Immediately, the troubles with Yosef and his brothers began. (Rashi)

This applies to every person who sincerely attempts to draw close to G-d, for he must realize that he faces difficulties. He can overcome these difficulties through the strength of the tzaddik (represented by Yosef), who possesses the power to overcome the opposition (Eisav). Yosef gained this strength because, despite his descent into slavery, he remained steadfast in his devotion to G-d and overcame all the obstacles to His service. For these reasons he was called Yosef (יֹסֵף): "G-d has gathered in (אסף, asaf) my shame [of sin]" (Bereishis 30:23), and "May G-d add (יֹסֵף, Yosef) to me another son" (ibid., 30:24); Yosef, the tzaddik, will be able to bring others close to G-d. Thus, "Yaakov" - the intellect - when it "dwells" and delves into G-d's service, will face opposition. But when "Yosef" - the flame - is kindled to serve G-d, then the opposition can be confronted and defeated. (Likutey Halakhot II, p. 153a-155a)

REACHING FOR NEW HEIGHTS

Reb Menachem Mendel of Rimanov

"These are the generations of Yaakov..." (37:2)

The reason it says, "These are the generations (toldoseihem) of Yaakov" is to teach us that a Jew must never be satisfied with his momentary spiritual status, but must constantly strive toward higher spiritual goals. The word toldoseihem signifies the dictum "The offspring (toldos) of the Tzaddikim are their good deeds" (see Rashi on Bereishis 6:9).

CONNECTING THOUGH HARDSHIPS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"These are the generations of Yaakov..." (37:2)

The Chassid Ya'avetz (beginning of Avos) writes that Yaakov Avinu was so holy and so deserving that the Torah could have been given to him at Har Sinai. This is just a slight clue as to Yaakov's perfection and his level of kedushah (holiness).

Yaakov Avinu wished to achieve excellence in Torah and avodas Hashem. His goal was to reach perfection to the maximum extent possible in This World and establish a close relationship with Hashem, a deveikus (attachment) that could bring true meaningful Torah life to the world. Nevertheless, Hashem did not allow Yaakov to reach his perfection under peaceful conditions. This would have caused an important element to be missing from both the Torah and his life.

Similarly, Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg zt'l says that it is a mistake to think that success in Torah will grow from a point of contentment and pleasure. In the midst of hardship, we cry out to Hashem, we beseech the Almighty with our heartfelt tefillos. By intensifying our davening and remaining steadfast in our learning, we draw closer to Him. Only from mesiras nefesh will come salvation and success.

This is the purpose of Torah. Torah is avodah, actual work, not just plain study. Yaakov Avinu desired a bit of rest between one ordeal and the next - all for Hashem's sake, all for the Torah. Of course, Yaakov had the most honorable and pure intentions. But Hashem knew exactly what was best for his ultimate success in This World and the Next. Hakadosh Baruch Hu decreed for him twenty-two years of grief over the loss of his favorite son, and this resulted in the departure of the Shechinah from him. During those years of suffering, how much more beloved did Yaakov Avinu become to Hashem, and how much more did Hashem love Yaakov's Torah! How much more Yaakov Avinu must have prayed, and how much more pleasing those prayers were to Hashem! Those tough times made Yaakov Avinu greater, wiser and so much closer to Hashem.

ATTAINING PLEASANTNESS

Rebbe Nachman

"These are the generations of Yaakov..." (37:2)

There is a state of spiritual reality called the Noam HaElyon (Divine Pleasantness), through which all bounty (such as livelihood and good health) come into being. One can arouse the Divine Pleasantness by giving charity.

This idea is alluded to in the verse, "These are the toldos (generations or descendants) of Yaakov: Yosef." The descendants are the bounty. Yaakov corresponds to charity, as in the verse "You have done justice and charity with Yaakov" (Tehillim 99:4). And Yosef corresponds to the Divine Pleasantness (as reflected in his handsome physical appearance; see verse 39:6).

Thus, this verse can be read as meaning that bounty results when one gives charity and arouses the Divine Pleasantness. (See Likutei Moharan II, 71)

KEEPING IT UNDER WRAPS

Reb Yitzchak of Vorka

"...and Yosef brought evil report of [his brothers] to their father." (37:2)

Yosef did not actually bear tales of the conduct of his brothers to his father. But by his own conspicuous righteousness, he caused Yaakov to be displeased with his other children's conduct. If a father has one child whose conduct is exemplary, the shortcomings of his other children will stand out more and he will rebuke them for not being as good as their sibling.

Thus, although he was not guilty of tale-bearing or desirous of shaming his brothers, Yosef was punished because he should have performed his good deeds so quietly and unostentatiously that even his father should not have noticed them.

SPREADING AWARENESS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Yisrael [i.e. Yaakov] loved Yosef more than all his [other] sons." (37:3)

Yosef's mother, Rochel, was the true spiritual complement to Yaakov, for she was able to express Yaakov's abstract spiritual inspiration in every aspect of daily life. Yosef inherited this ability from his mother, and even surpassed her, possessing the ability to spread Divine consciousness even in settings that were utterly antagonistic to it.

Yaakov's aspiration in life was to fulfill the patriarchal vision of a world filled with Divine consciousness. He knew that his other sons could only imagine expressing holiness in settings that were already holy. It was inconceivable to them that holiness could survive and even subdue the realm of anti-holiness.

Yaakov designated Yosef as his successor rather than one of his other sons, not as an act of favoritism, but as a lesson to his other sons.

The same lesson applies to us as well: to value the ideal of applying spiritual inspiration to the material world and to develop our abilities to do so. (Bi'urei HaZohar, vol. 1, pp. 168-176; Likutei Sichot, vol. 3, p. 832) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

MULTICOLORED LIGHT

Reb Noson of Nemirov

"He [Yaakov] made for him a multicolored coat." (37:3)

Because Yosef would interact with so many different types of people, from tzaddikim to wicked people, he needed to be able to cloak the light of G-d in various ways, colors, etc. (Likutei Halakhot 1, p. 14a)

THE SPIRITUAL MENTOR

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Yosef] said to [his brothers], 'Please listen to this dream I had.'" (37:6)

Yosef's two dreams seem to convey the same idea. The reason for the apparent repetition is that they symbolize two distinct stages in the relationship between each generation and its leaders.

Sheaves of grain are made up of individual stalks, which grow discreetly from one another, each in its own groove. Binding them into sheaves symbolizes our first task in life: gathering together all of our capacities and talents and uniting them in the work of holiness. Once we have become a "sheaf" we need to seek guidance and inspiration from a "Yosef," a spiritual leader.

As we mature spiritually, we reach a higher level: having risen above earthly consciousness, we regain our soul's original heavenly consciousness and shine like a "star." Yet even on this level, we should not rely on our own achievements for inspiration, for this can lead to stagnation and complacency. Rather, we must still continue to turn to our "Yosef" - i.e., our spiritual mentor - for further insight and inspiration. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 3, pp. 805-810. See also Hitva'aduyot 5744, vol. 2, p. 715; Likutei Sichot, vol. 15, p. 345) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

BINDING PHYSICAL WITH SPIRITUAL

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Yosef] said to [his brothers], 'Please listen to this dream I had.'" (37:6)

Yosef had two dreams: one about physical matters (binding sheaves) and one about spiritual matters (the heavenly bodies sun, moon, and stars). Nevertheless, both dreams shared the exact same message.

This teaches us that a Jew's physical and spiritual affairs should not be separated from each other, each having its own separate "message." Rather, a person should align his physical and spiritual affairs to complement one another. For example, a person's physical activities, such as eating and drinking, should be done for the sake of Heaven, in order to better serve Hashem.

SEEING THE GOOD

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"And he [Yaakov] said to him [Yosef], 'Go and see how your brothers are.'" (37:14)

Rav Simcha Bunim of Pshischa (Kol Simchah) offers an alternative explanation to this pasuk. He explains that Yaakov encouraged Yosef to recognize the strengths of each of his brothers instead of noticing their weaknesses.

Yaakov wanted Yosef to see what made each of his brothers shaleim - complete, rather than highlight what each of them was missing. Yaakov had hoped that if Yosef approached his brothers with this mindset, they would more likely get along and have shalom - peace.

Rav Simcha Bunim is reminding us of the attitude and approach we are to have when working and interacting with other people. Instead of focusing on their deficiencies, we should look to accentuate their positive abilities and talents. In this way, we are more likely to love each and every Jew, which will help unify Klal Yisrael as a whole.

PROTECTED AGENT

Ohr HaChaim

"...and bring me back word..." (37:14)

Yaakov knew that his other sons hated Yosef and he was afraid that they may do him harm. But he also knew that "agents sent out on a mission to perform a good deed will come to no harm."

He therefore said to Yosef: "Come and I will send you to them" (37:13), thus appointing him as an agent to perform a good deed; namely, to do honor to his father by carrying out the latter's command to go and visit his brothers.

But then it occurred to Yaakov that Yosef would be in danger on his return journey, for it was then that his mission would have been completed. According to one view, "agents sent out on a mission to perform a good deed will come to no harm only in their going forth but not on their return."

Yaakov therefore explicitly commanded Yosef to "bring me back word" so that his return journey would be part of the errand on which his father had sent him.

THE MASTER PLAN

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And he [Yaakov] sent him [Yosef] from the valley of Chevron and he came to Shechem." (37:14)

The Rokeach writes that Parshas Vayeishev contains 112 pesukim, just like Perek 92 of Tehillim, Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbos, contains 112 words. Rav Matisyahu Salomon shlit'a explains the significance of this correlation.

In Parshas Vayeishev there appear to be many great people making "mistakes." How could Yaakov show favoritism to Yosef? How could the shevatim accuse and sell their own brother? How could Yehudah get involved with Tamar?

The answer is hinted to us in the words, "And he [Yaakov] sent him [Yosef] from the valley of Chevron." Rashi points out that Chevron is not a valley, but a mountain. Rather, the word "eimek" should be interpreted homiletically as "deep counsel," and since Chevron is the burial place of Avraham, it refers here to Avraham Avinu.

The understanding then is that Yaakov sent Yosef based on "the counsel of Avraham." This was Hashem's way of carrying out the bris bein ha'besarim, His promise to Avraham that his children will one day be slaves in Egypt.

All the "mistakes" of the righteous in this parshah are not mistakes at all. They are simply Hashem's way of moving His pawns to carry out His Master Plan. Nothing happens by chance. Every single movement is a Divine manipulation so that the purpose of the world can come to fruition.

Chazal tell us that Hashem showed Adam HaRishon all the future events of the world. Every incident, past and present, was shown to Adam with a clear understanding of the big picture of world history. With great emotion, Adam sang the 112 words of Tehillim 92, declaring his awe of hashgachah pratis (Divine Providence). These words were corresponding to the 112 pesukim in Parshas Vayeishev in which so many acts of hashgachah pratis take place.

We often wonder about the "mistakes" that occur in the world. Let us remember that everything is part of the Master Plan that is being carried out by the Master of the World.

CARING LEADER

Radamsker Rebbe

"Go see how your brothers are faring and how the herd is doing." (37:14)

This pasuk teaches us that a true leader must concern himself not only with the spiritual matters of his people, but also with how they earn a living.

ANCESTRAL STRENGTH

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"He sent [Yosef] from the valley of Chevron." (37:14)

Rashi points out that Chevron is located in a mountainous region of Eretz Yisrael, as the Torah emphasizes with the travels of the meraglim (spies): "They went up through the Negev and came to Chevron." Hence, the words "me'emek Chevron - from the Valley of Chevron" - are puzzling.

Noting this difficulty, Rashi explains that the Torah is referring to the Me'aras HaMachpeilah in Chevron and the "eitzah amukah - profound, deep advice" of Avraham Avinu, who is buried there. When Yosef was sent away from Chevron, it was in order to fulfill the Heavenly decree of galus that Hashem had revealed to Avraham Avinu. What is the "advice" aspect?

R' Moshe Wolfson shlit'a explains:

We must remember that when Yosef left Chevron to find his brothers, he was taking the first step of a journey that would lead him and all of Klal Yisrael into exile in Egypt. Chevron, in other words, was the point of departure for the entire galus. The fact that the galus began in Chevron was a profound bit of advice from the hidden depths of Chevron - our Avos, who are buried there. How?

Chevron is the place that would give the Jewish People the power to endure the exile, because of Avraham and Sarah who are buried there. Even after their deaths, the Avos and Imahos continue to infuse strength into us, their children. It is precisely because of this that we continue to survive the exile, even until the present day.

Thus, it was the will of Hashem that the galus should begin in Chevron. Chevron has stood by us in every generation, for Chevron declares that even in a time of darkness and exile, we are still connected to G-d through our holy ancestors. That is the "eitzah amukah" of Chevron - the deep advice for why the galus should start specifically there.

SPECIFIC GOALS

Kotzker Rebbe

"...a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, 'What do you seek?'" (37:15)

When Yaakov sent Yosef to the fields to locate his brothers, he met the Malach Gavriel, who asked him, "What are you looking for?"

The angel was teaching Yosef a lesson that whenever he found himself "wandering" in the paths of life, confused and unsure of himself, he should first clarify his objectives and aspirations.

The first tactic on the road to certainty and success, is to clarify what exactly "he is looking for" in order to achieve his goals.

WANTING WHAT HASHEM WANTS

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

"...a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, 'What do you seek?'" (37:15)

Yaakov sent Yosef to Shechem to check on his brothers, who were there with their flocks. Yosef went searching for them, and he met a man (identified by Chazal as an angel) who asked him, מה תבקש - What do you seek?"

Yosef replied, את אחי אנוכי מבקש - It is my brothers that I seek" (37:16).

The Divrei Yisrael of Moditz suggests reading the word אנוכי in this pasuk as an allusion to אלוקיך ה' אנוכי - Hashem Himself. He explains that what אנוכי מבקש - what Hashem wants from us, is אחי - that we act toward one another as brothers, that we live together in peace, harmony and unity. This is, ultimately, the primary expectation that Hashem has of us.

This is not only what Hashem wants of us, but also what we should want of ourselves.

The Kotzker Rebbe explains the man's question - מה תבקש - as one which is directed toward each and every one of us. We should always ask ourselves, "What do I want? What are my goals? What are my aspirations?" We can learn a great deal about a person from his ambitions, from what he pursues, from what he feels he is lacking in his life. And so we should be asking ourselves these questions to find out who we really are. The proper response to the question of מה תבקש is את אחי אנוכי מבקש - that we should aspire toward unity and fraternity, peaceful relations with other people. We need to make this a priority, a goal that we pursue. We should not be looking to instigate conflicts and sow tension and divisiveness; to the contrary, we should be seeking את אחי - loving, peaceful relationships with our fellow Jews.

CAUSE FOR EXILE

Sassover Rebbe

"He [Yosef] was wandering in the field; the man asked him, saying, 'What do you seek?' And he said, 'My brothers do I seek'... The man answered, 'They [the brothers] journeyed on from here, for I heard them saying, 'Let us go to Dothan'... They [the brothers] saw him from afar; and before he came close to them, they conspired to kill him.'" (37:16-18)

As soon as Yosef left his father's house, he felt alone and lost. That is why he said, "I am seeking my brothers!"

When he was told that they were in Dothan, he understood that it meant Diaspora, for Dothan (Dosoynah) numerically is Diaspora.

Yet he wondered why the Israelites would be in the Diaspora. "They saw him from afar... they conspired to kill him" - he immediately understood that the reason for the Diaspora would be senseless hatred.

SHIELDS, NOT SWORDS

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

“And he said, ‘It is my brothers who I seek.’” (37:16)

Yaakov sent Yosef to check on his brothers, who were shepherding their flocks in the area of Shechem. Yosef encountered a mysterious man - whom Chazal identify as the angel, Gavriel - and the man asked him what he was looking for. Yosef replied, *את אחי אנוכי מבקש* - I am looking for my brothers. The mysteriousness of this encounter led many mefarshim to find deeper layers of meaning behind this brief exchange between Yosef and the angel.

Rav Yisrael of Modzhitz, in Divrei Yisrael, suggests that the word *אנוכי* (I) in this pasuk alludes to the Torah. The text of the Aseres Ha'dibros, which - as Rav Saadia Gaon famously taught - encapsulates the entire Torah, begins with this word. Moreover, the foundation of the entire Torah is *אנוכי*, the notion that Hashem exists and is present in our lives. His presence means that life has meaning and purpose, that we are to live our lives in fulfillment of that purpose, and in subservience to His will, which He communicates to us through the Torah. The very essence of Torah is captured by the word *אנוכי*, which speaks of G-d's existence and connection to each and every one of us.

The phrase *את אחי אנוכי מבקש*, then, can be understood to mean that what the Torah wants from us is *אחי*, brotherly love, *achdus*. The Torah, the Divrei Yisrael explains, must never be used as a weapon with which to hurt, knock down, humiliate, or destroy other people. To the contrary, it is to serve as our common language, as a source of unity, as the glue that binds us together. Torah is what we all share, and we must use it to promote love and affection among Klal Yisrael, and not, Heaven forbid, to sow division and tensions between different groups.

The Gemara in a number of places refers to talmidei chachamim with the term *בעלי תריסין*, soldiers carrying shields. Rav Kook found it very significant that talmidei chachamim are described as warriors carrying shields for protection, as opposed to troops wielding swords looking to kill. He explains that in every beis midrash, the students argue with one another. Invariably, different scholars are going to arrive at different understandings and have different ways of looking at a topic. This is an integral part of the Torah process. However, Rav Kook writes, when the talmidim argue, they must be holding shields, not swords. The goal must be not to harm the other person, but to defend one's own position. Intellectual debate must be conducted not with a desire to defeat the other party, but rather with the goal of “protecting” oneself, of upholding one's viewpoint.

Torah must never be used as a “sword,” a way to knock other people down. Arguing and debating has always been part and parcel of Torah learning - but the aim must be to arrive at the truth, to properly understand the *דבר ה*, and never to assert one's superiority over his fellow. Torah must be the glue that connects us to our fellow, and not, G-d-forbid, a force that divides us and causes friction.

TWO-WAY CONNECTION

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

“And he said, ‘It is my brothers who I seek.’” (37:16)

When Yosef was instructed by his father Yaakov to search for his brothers, he met a man who inquired as to who Yosef was looking for. Yosef responded with the words, *Es achai ani mevakeish* - “It is my brothers who I seek.”

Rav Avraham of Slonim (Toras Avos) explains these words of Yosef differently. He suggests that if one wants to merit seeing and recognizing Hashem as the One omnipotent and omniscient being, then a person has to unify and draw close to the other members of Klal Yisrael. This is the message behind Yosef's words, *es achai* - if I can develop harmony and unity with my brothers, then *anochi mevakeish* - I will find Anochi Hashem Elokecha, our One and only Creator.

In addition to learning Torah and davening, we must do our utmost to connect with and form unbreakable bonds with our fellow Jews to the right and to the left. If we want Hashem and the Torah's prominent presence in our life, it is incumbent upon us to ensure we overlook that which divides us and focus on that which unites us. In the merit of this approach, we will be able to feel the Anochi Hashem Elokecha throughout our lives.

SEEN FROM AFAR

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

“They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them, they conspired to kill him.” (37:18)

Concerning Yosef, the Torah records: “And his brothers saw him from a distance, and before he approached them they were plotting against him to kill him.” This was the real tragedy. Yosef's brothers saw him from afar. They had grievances against Yosef - some real, some imagined but they always saw him from afar. They never sat down with him to air their grievances face to face and confront him about the evil report which he brought to their father about them.

Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel zt'l (Hegyonos El Ami) quotes the Midrash Tanchuma (Vayigash 11): “Every distress that occurred to Yosef occurred to Tzion.” In reflecting on the fraternal enmity of the sons of Yaakov, it is apparent that the brothers quarreled with Yosef over words, over issues and matters without cause: “And they hated him” (37:4). Animosity existed first; then came the explanation and justification. Indeed, the distress that occurred to Yosef as a result of this unwarranted hostility occurred also to the Jewish people and to the Jewish homeland, to Tzion, from her enemies without and within.

Our greatest enemies have always been those who “see us from afar” and do not take the time or the initiative to see us up close, to learn what we are all about. They conspire to destroy us before we have a chance to come close, to establish harmonious relations with them.

PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

Ben Ish Chai

"They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them, they conspired to kill him." (37:18)

The pasuk tells us that when the brothers saw Yosef approaching from afar, they decided right then and there to kill him. But by the time he reached them, the plan had changed, and they ended up selling him.

We learn two things from this: First, never give up - when all seems lost, one never knows what might happen or how things could change in an instant. Second, when one comes to a decision in haste, wait a few moments and rethink the issue. You never know how the decision may be altered with a clearer mind.

UNBIASED EVALUATIONS

Rabbi Moshe Schochet

"They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them, they conspired to kill him." (37:18)

The Torah (37:18-36) recounts the infamous episode of Yosef being sold by his brothers. It is interesting to note that the brothers continued to change their plan as the story unfolded. Initially, the brothers intended to kill Yosef. After some consideration, they decided to throw him into a pit. Only a bit later did the brothers re-evaluate once again and decide to sell Yosef. Why did the brothers change their plan numerous times? Why didn't they just stick to the strategy that they had originally discussed?

Rav Moshe Don Kestenbaum (Olam HaMiddos) suggests a powerful insight. When a person makes a decision that is biased and without pure intentions, the person will not be able to take into account the whole picture. When we can't see the consequences of our actions initially, the plan will always end differently than we originally thought. If a person isn't approaching a decision with emes at the forefront, the results are guaranteed to be faulty. Therefore, as things begin to unfold, the plan will continue to change.

While there is no question that the brothers thought that their plan was l'shem shamayim, unfortunately they allowed some of their own personal feelings to get in the way. Those feelings prevented them from seeing things clearly, which caused them to make decisions that had potentially grave consequences. It is for this reason that their initial strategy continued to evolve and change, as they had difficulty seeing things clearly.

In life, we must approach every situation with the purest of intentions. We have to ensure that our perspectives are not blurred by our personal agendas. Instead, we need to keep an eye on keeping our intentions l'shem shamayim and emesdik in everything we do. With this in mind, we are sure to see the whole picture and make the best decisions for ourselves and our families.

IT'S ALL FROM ABOVE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them, they conspired to kill him." (37:18)

Although they neither intended it nor foresaw it, the brothers' actions led to Yosef's eventual rise to power and the survival of Yaakov's entire family.

Yosef's experience vividly demonstrates that whether we realize it or not, everything that happens to us is orchestrated by G-d for our benefit.

It is therefore foolish and unproductive to be angry with those who appear to be harming us. Although they may indeed be guilty for their actions, they cannot do anything to us that G-d does not will.

Rather, we should learn from Yosef, who repaid his brothers' evil with kindness, continuing to love them despite their hatred toward him.

(See Tanya, chapter 13, end; Likutei Sichot, vol, 20, pp. 187-194) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

NECESSARY HUMILITY

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Reuven said to them, 'Do not shed blood; throw him into this pit.'" (37:22)

Yosef's brothers studied the Torah and tried to live by it, but their righteous indignation caused them to distort the Torah's teachings.

Since they studied the Torah with insufficient humility, they failed to absorb its wisdom properly. Therefore, when it came to their brother Yosef, they applied the Torah's teachings erroneously (see Brachos 34b). Unable to countenance any perspective other than their own, they arrogantly concluded that the Torah required them to kill Yosef.

The brothers' lack of humility is alluded to in the phrase that describes the pit into which they chose to throw Yosef: "The pit was empty; there was no water in it."

Water is a metaphor for the humility required in studying the Torah. As the Talmud (Taanis 7a) states, the Torah is compared to water because "just as water seeks its lowest level, so does the Torah only endure within one who is humble."

From this we see how crucial it is to cultivate humility.

Without humility, we run the risk of distorting the Torah's teachings; with it, we are assured that we will interpret them properly.

(See Bereishis Rabbah 84:16. Likutei Sichot, vol. 15, pp. 324-328) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

SINFUL SNAKES

Avnei Ezel

"...and they cast him into the pit, and the pit was empty, there was no water in it." (37:24)

It did not contain water, but there were snakes and scorpions in it. (Rashi)

The water represents the Torah and the "snakes and scorpions" represent Satan's agents who seek to gain control of mankind.

We know that the Torah is the only extant remedy against the evil impulse, as the Sages (Kiddushin 30) put it: "I created the evil impulse, and I created the Torah as an antidote to it."

Where there is no Torah, there is room for Satan's agents.

This, then, is the thought that Rashi sought to convey in allegorical terms: "It did not contain water."

If there is no Torah, it is certain that "there were snakes and scorpions in it" - that the agents of evil that seek to harm people will be present and he will have no way of fighting them.

PROTECTIVE TORAH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"...and they cast him into the pit, and the pit was empty, there was no water in it." (37:24)

It did not contain water, but there were snakes and scorpions in it. (Rashi)

Allegorically, the pit represents the human mind and water represents the Torah.

This incident thus tells us that the surest way to keep our mind free of "snakes and scorpions" - negative and destructive notions - is to ensure that it is always full of Torah-related content, for "G-d's Torah is wholesome, restoring the soul." (Tehillim 19:8; Likutei Sichot, vol. 15, pp. 324-325, based on Bereishis Rabbah 84:16) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

THE REASON FOR SECRECY

Kotzker Rebbe

"Yehudah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?'" (37:26)

If an action must be kept secret, it is not based on truth.

As we see after the brothers threw Yosef into the pit, Yehudah rescued him by saying, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?"

In other words, if we need to hide the death of Yosef and conceal his blood through our secret, then it is clear that our actions are not completely honest.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And they sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty pieces of silver, and they brought Yosef to Egypt." (37:28)

Rav Elyah Lopian spoke of the comparison between Yosef and Yaakov's descent to Egypt: Yosef was brought there in disgrace as a slave, yet he ended up with incredible honor as the viceroy of Egypt. In contrast, Yaakov went down to Egypt in great honor and fanfare (Bereishis 45:24), yet this was the beginning of the exile of the Jewish People, resulting in their slavery.

We see from here, noted Rav Elyah, that we can never truly know where we are heading, and even when things seem disastrous, they can in fact lead to great salvation. And, even when we seem to be heading in the right direction, we are not guaranteed to actually end up there. Therefore, we must never rest on our laurels when things seem to be going well, and we must never give up when the situation seems hopeless.

Rav Eliezer Menachem Man Shach related the same message when he recalled his friends' reaction when he accepted the marriage proposal regarding Rav Isser Meltzer's niece. They were appalled that the best boy in the yeshivah would agree to a proposal without any financial backing. Many wealthy families were willing to offer a lifetime of full support if they would merit Rav Eliezer Menachem Man as a son-in-law. And indeed, Ray Shach's friends all married into wonderful families who were wholeheartedly dedicated to supporting their new son-in-law's diligent learning. "What would become of Eliezer Menachem Man and his Torah?" his friends worried.

In truth, however, with nothing tying them down, as soon as Word War II broke out, Rav Shach was quickly able to gather his few possessions and flee to safety. His friends, however, were tied down with many possessions and property which they owned. Without being able to cut their financial ties so quickly, sadly, they were unable to escape in time. (Ish L'Reiyeihu, Parashas Vayeishev 5778)

We see from here that no matter where our situation appears to lead, we can never know the future. As such, when we face seemingly insurmountable challenges, or even when things seem assured for the good, we must never become complacent in our total reliance on Hashem and constantly pray that He allows us to succeed.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

Reb Yosef Avraham Wolf

"[The brothers] sold Yosef for twenty pieces of silver..." (37:28)

Yosef was sold as a slave by his brothers, but his humiliation led him to become a great ruler. Tamar was rejected, but her rejection led her to become the mother of the dynasty of David Hamelech.

Any time we feel discouraged from unfortunate events in our lives, we are reacting prematurely. Our lowest moments can lead to our greatest fortune!

BLINDED BY HATRED

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"[The brothers] sold Yosef for twenty pieces of silver..." (37:28)

The Chasam Sofer, in Parshas Vayechi, raises a fascinating question about the story of the brothers selling Yosef as a slave, which we read in Parshas Vayeishev. The background to this question is the Gemara's description of Yosef's experience when he found himself tempted by his master's wife in Egypt.

Yosef worked as a slave for an Egyptian nobleman, Potifar, whose wife desired an intimate relationship with him. She repeatedly tried to lure him, but he resisted - until one day when he nearly succumbed.

The Gemara (Sota 36b) tells that Yosef was about to yield to Potifar's wife's advances when, suddenly, the image of his father - Yaakov - appeared to him and pleaded with him to refrain. This image empowered Yosef to resist and flee from Potifar's home.

The Chasam Sofer wondered why this did not happen also to Yosef's brothers before they committed what seems to be no less grave a sin - throwing their brother into a pit, and then selling him as a slave.

If Yaakov's image appeared to Yosef to stop him from sinning with Potifar's wife, why did his image not appear to the brothers to stop them from committing a heinous crime against their brother?

The Chasam Sofer presents a powerful - and exceedingly important - answer. He writes that Yaakov's image did, in fact, appear to the brothers, but they could not see it, because hatred has a blinding effect.

When a person is overcome by feelings of rage and enmity, he loses his sensibility. Many of us know people who ruined their lives, or caused themselves great harm, due to their hatred and contempt for somebody else. Hate causes people to say things they know they shouldn't say, and do things they know they shouldn't do.

If we allow ourselves to be consumed by jealousy, by resentment, by anger, by revenge, and by disdain for our fellow, we are endangering ourselves. We are like somebody walking in a busy city street blindfolded, unable to see the dangers that lurk.

Hate clouds our judgment, preventing us from thinking clearly and acting intelligently. The tragic story of Yosef and his brother reminds us to exercise extreme care not to allow ourselves to become "blinded" by feelings of hostility toward another person, to overcome these feelings so we can act sensibly and rationally.

THE REMEDY COMES FIRST

Reb Meir Leibush Malbim

"[The brothers] sold Yosef for twenty pieces of silver..." (37:28)

The sale of Yosef HaTzaddik marked the beginning of the exile of Yaakov Avinu and his family into Egypt. Since all the subsequent exiles suffered by the Jewish people are tied together to one another, the sale of Yosef was actually the advent of the entire concept of galus for Bnei Yisrael. Thus, immediately following the sale of Yosef, the Torah tells us the story of Yehudah and Tamar to teach us that Hashem always provides "the remedy before the sickness." He chose this time to plant the seeds of Mashiach Ben Dovid, who will be a descendant of Yehudah and Tamar.

WE BELONG TO HASHEM

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[The brothers] sold Yosef for twenty pieces of silver..." (37:28)

The Torah considers our firstborn sons to "belong" to G-d, requiring us to "redeem" them from Him by paying twenty silver pieces (five Biblical shekels) to a descendant of Aaron, the first priest (Bamidbar 18:16). This rule, which is still practiced today, is meant to remind us that everything we possess really belongs to G-d, and that therefore we should use all our possessions for holy ends.

In addition, the redemption price of twenty silver pieces is meant to remind us how Yosef - Rochel's firstborn - was sold as a slave for that price (Yerushalmi Shekalim 2:3; Bereishis Rabbah 84:18). Yet despite the sale, Yosef was never truly enslaved - for, as G-d tells us, "The Israelites are My servants" (Vayikra 25:55). On account of our inviolable bond with G-d, we can never be truly enslaved to anyone else.

The redemption price of the firstborn is thus fixed as the price for which Yosef was sold into slavery. This teaches us that both we and all we possess belong irrevocably to G-d, and can never be enslaved to any other master. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 20, pp. 185-190) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

RECOGNIZABLE DIFFERENCE

Sefas Emes

"And he [Reuven] returned to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone,' and he cried." (37:30)

We can see the difference between a righteous individual and a wicked one. When Yaakov took the birthright away from Eisav, Eisav was ready to kill him. Not so in the case of Reuven: Reuven knew that his brother Yosef would take the birthright away from him; nevertheless, he wanted to save him.

TEARS OF THE WORKING SOUL

Rabbi Dovid Gurwitz

"All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted... Thus, his father bewailed him." (37:35)

There are two episodes in Parshas Vayeishev with distinct, articulated forms of sadness. The first is when Yaakov said, "I will go to my grave mourning for my son. And his father wept - va'yabuch eso." The second is when Yosef saw the baker and the butler depressed - zo'afim.

Rav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch zt'l opens whole new worlds for us as he develops the fascinating word etymology of these two words. In both, he finds a deep connection to the soul...

"Bachu" - crying - is related to "bekah," split, "pekah," open, and "pekaech," burst open - all expressing breaking free from the inside. "Bachu es" means the following: continuously weeping over the thing itself, keeping it in one's heart, maintaining this sadness, and expressing it in a tear. It is interesting that the English word tear - as in crying - also means ripping open.

Here, Rav Hirsch, the true poet of the souls, expresses one of his most memorable insights: Tears coming out - "bachu yoztei" - sounds like breaking through - "bekah" - with sweat - "yezah." Tears, he says, are the sweat of a working soul, and sweat is the tears of a working body!

OPPRESSED BY ENVY

Chizkuni

"The Midianites sold him into Egypt..." (37:36)

Just as Yosef was sold as a slave into Egypt because his brothers had envied him, so too, years later, the Hebrews became slaves to the Egyptians because the Egyptians had envied them, saying: "Behold, the people of the Children of Israel are too many and too powerful for us" (Shemos 1:9).

Indeed, all the slavery and oppression that the Jewish people have suffered in its long history are the result of envy on the part of non-Jews.

UNWAVERING LOYALTY

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

"Yehudah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar..." (38:6)

The Torah interrupts the story of Yosef with the story of Yehudah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. After the untimely death of Tamar's husband Yehuda's oldest son - she married the second son, following the law of yibum (levirate marriage). But the second son also passed away, and it was expected that Yehudah's third son, Sheila, would marry her. Yehudah, however, was afraid of allowing Sheila to marry her, and so she remained alone.

Finally, she posed as a prostitute and stood along the road when Yehudah was traveling, in order for him to solicit her services, so she would conceive and bear children from her husband's family member. This union resulted in the birth of twins, one of whom - Peretz - would turn out to be the ancestor of King David, and thus of Mashiach.

Rav Soloveitchik noted the remarkable trait that Tamar bequeathed to us, on account of which she was chosen to be the mother of Mashiach:

"Tamar was a heroic woman, a great woman. G-d gleaned and gathered beautiful things from throughout the world - gems, noble emotions, heroic capabilities. What could Tamar do that others could not? She could wait; she possessed the heroic ability and patience to wait without end..."

"Tamar waited many years. She was lonely, forsaken, forgotten by everyone. Seasons passed. All her friends married, reared families; all contact with them came to an end; people treated her with ridicule and contempt. Sheila married; Yehudah had forgotten her. And yet she waited and never said a word. Wasn't she the incarnation of Keneset Yisrael, which has waited for her Beloved hundreds and thousands of years under the most trying circumstances? Did not Tamar personify the greatest of all heroic action - to wait while the waiting arouses laughter and derision?"

"...Tamar showed the strength of waiting and hoping, of having faith even when she became the subject of mockery. She sat as a widow in her father's house, waiting for Sheila. Tamar remained faithful and loyal. In her simplicity and naivete, she instinctively trusted Yehudah. She could not tear herself away from him; something fateful, incomprehensible, tied her to him. Something larger would come of it... The strength of absurd loyalty is the... foundation of the concealed world of the kingdom of the House of David, of the idea of the Messiah."

Tamar's example is what has given Am Yisrael the strength, resolve, courage, and faith to wait and retain our trust in Hashem throughout centuries of bitter exile.

Just as she waited patiently for Yehudah, without betraying her trust, so has Am Yisrael continued to wait for the Almighty. We, like Tamar, have been ridiculed and scorned for our "absurd loyalty" for all these years, but we ignore the mockery and the contempt and remain faithful and confident in our ultimate redemption.

This, Rav Soloveitchik explains, is why Tamar is the matriarch of Mashiach - because she teaches us about the unbridled faith and unlimited patience that is needed for us to realize our dream of Hashem's ultimate return to us.

SOULFUL CRAVINGS

Baal Shem Tov

"When Yehudah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she covered her face." (38:15)

The word for face, panim, indicates penimiyus, internal. Outwardly, she appeared to be seeking material gratification, but her inner intent was to be elevated to sanctity through her soul's attachment to Yehudah's soul.

This reflects the mystical purpose of our interactions with materiality - food, drink, and so on:

G-d created everything with words, as our Sages state, "The world was created via ten utterances" (Avot 5:1). G-d's words, "yehi rakia - Let there be a firmament!" (Bereishis 1:6) created the heavens and constantly sustains them. The same goes for, "Let the earth produce creatures!" (ibid., v. 24), "Let the earth produce vegetation!" (ibid., v. 11), and so on. These Divine utterances are further stimulated by our own utterances: When we recite a blessing over a fruit with concentration, pronouncing G-d's holy name, the Divine energy that sustains that fruit awakens, and it energizes our own souls.

It is stated, "Hungry and thirsty, their soul enwraps itself in them" (Tehillim 107:5). Why did G-d design us with cravings for food and drink? Because the Divine energy within materiality longs to be reattached to sanctity. Food appeals to our corporeal senses to arouse our appetite and thirst, but only so that we can reconnect its soul to sanctity. Physical appeal is a garb, disguising the quest of the sparks to reconnect with G-d. Do not be misled into focusing on the materiality; realize that it is soul calling unto soul.

THE QUILL OF LIFE

Reb Noson of Nemirov

"What guarantee should I give you?" he asked. 'Your seal, your cloak, and your staff which is in your hand,' she replied." (38:18)

With three things the world was created: With a sefer (ספר, book - i.e., the Torah), a sofer (סופר, scribe - i.e., G-d), and a sippur (סיפור, story - i.e., the history of mankind). (Sefer Yetzirah 1:1)

In the holy writings, these three things are referred to as the parchment upon which the book is written, the ink that is inscribed in the book, and the quill that writes the book.

These three things correspond to the three items that Yehudah gave Tamar as collateral. The cloak corresponds to the sefer - i.e., the "skins" upon which a book is written. The seal represents the sofer, the medium of the ink. The staff is the sippur, the quill that writes the book.

The Torah is written on parchment with ink from a quill. The tongue is also said to be the quill that inscribes the story upon one's heart. When a person is willing to accept the sanctity of the Torah, he draws the G-dliness that is present in creation and tells his own sippur - his deeds that proclaim G-dliness. (Likutey Halakhot VII, p. 252)

CONSIDERATION TOWARDS OTHERS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"She was taken out, and she sent word to her father-in-law saying, 'By the man who these belong to I am with child.' And she said, 'Please identify whose are this signet ring, this cloak and this staff.'" (38:25)

Tamar refused to publicly shame Yehudah by announcing that he was the father of her children. Her willingness to be killed instead of shaming Yehudah is the Gemara's source for the tenet "One should let himself be thrown into a fiery furnace rather than shaming someone in public" (Sotah 10b).

From this Gemara, Rabbeinu Yonah learns that one literally has an obligation to allow himself to be killed, because he compares the sin of embarrassing someone with murdering them, for when a person is humiliated, his red complexion turns white as the blood leaves his face - precisely the same way that a murderer causes the blood of his victim to leave his body (Shaarei Teshuva, Gate 3, 139).

The Ben Ish Chai develops this idea further and suggests that embarrassing someone in public has more of a destructive consequence than murder since the victim will feel the pain of humiliation every time that he recalls the incident, and certainly whenever he sees someone who was present at the time. By contrast, the victim of a murder only suffers once.

Even though the Tur and Shulchan Aruch do not consider this halacha definitive, we nevertheless realize just how thoroughly we must consider our words and actions, lest they cause someone embarrassment. Therefore, it is no wonder that the Belzer Rebbe showed such concern in this area in the following story which took place at his home on Seder night during the War.

There were still members of the city yet to be deported by the Germans, and many had gathered in the home of the Rebbe. Since food was scarce, everyone was sharing their plate with the person sitting next to them. All ears were directed towards the Rebbe as he spoke of faith and redemption. And then, as the Rebbe was about to take a spoon of soup that he was sharing with his mother, she inadvertently dipped her matza into the soup.

His students around the table were aghast at the thought of their Rebbe about to eat gebrochts (matza that has come in contact with a liquid, which the Belzer Rebbe was very stringent not to eat during Pesach). Without batting an eyelid, the Rebbe continued to eat his soup as if nothing had happened.

After the meal, his students approached him to ask how he could have eaten something that he was always so stringent about. The Rebbe's response was simple: "What?! I should keep a custom and embarrass my mother?!"

HOLY TACT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Yehudah] named him [Tamar's firstborn] Peretz." (38:29)

The Messiah is descended from Yehudah through his and Tamar's son Peretz. In order to understand why it was necessary for the Messiah to enter the world in such a seemingly scandalous way, we need to recall that G-d only created evil in order for there to be free choice. In order for free choice to exist, the forces of evil and the forces of good have to be perfectly balanced.

When the messianic line was about to enter the world, the forces of evil "argued" that the balance was about to be tipped against them. Therefore, the union that would bear the ancestor of the Messiah had to occur in a way that the forces of evil would consider beneficial to them.

Just as in military strategy, an army sometimes pretends to retreat in order to draw the enemy into a vulnerable position, the forces of holiness here yielded a seeming victory to the forces of evil in the form of this seemingly sinful act, in order to gain the upper hand. (Derech Mitzvotcha 32-32b; Ohr HaTorah, Bereishis, vol. 6, pp. 1096b-1097a) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

BREAKING THROUGH

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Yehudah] named him [Tamar's firstborn] Peretz... he named him Zerach." (38:29-30)

The name Zerach ("shining") alludes to the sun, which shines constantly, while the name Peretz ("breaking through") alludes to the moon, whose light periodically "breaks through" its diminishment and disappearance (Sefer HaBahir 197).

Metaphorically, the sun represents consistently righteous people, whose Divine light shines without fluctuation.

The moon represents people who have strayed from the proper path but mend their former ways and return to G-d, transforming their diminished light into increased light.

Because of their challenges, "returnees" reach a higher spiritual level than the consistently righteous (Brachos 34b; Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 7:4).

Thus, Peretz, who is associated with the moon and is therefore the archetype of repentance, preceded Zerach and was the firstborn.

For the same reason, Peretz is the ancestor of King David, whose inspiring Psalms express the great yearning and poetry of repentance. Through King David, Peretz is the ancestor of Mashiach, who will "break through" the walls of exile, ushering in the Redemption by inspiring and teaching the whole world to repent. (Likutei Sichot vol. 30, pp. 188-189) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

GROWING FROM CHALLENGES

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"Yosef had been taken down to Egypt." (39:1)

Ancient Egypt was the world's foremost bastion of paganism, a land thoroughly steeped in sophisticated, virtually irresistible idolatry. The chances were nil that Yaakov's small family of monotheists could spiritually survive there - let alone grow into an independent, monotheistic nation.

G-d therefore arranged for Yosef to descend to Egypt ahead of his brothers and rise to greatness there, when Pharaoh would eventually appoint him to be viceroy. As viceroy, Yosef took measures to weaken the influence that Egyptian culture would have on his family when they would arrive.

As a result, even the Egyptians who lived after Yosef could not corrupt the Jewish people. On the contrary, the Jews flourished there both physically and spiritually, remaining separate from the Egyptian culture - even during their enslavement. (See Vayikra Rabbah 32:5; Midrash Lekach Tov on Devarim 26:5)

We thus see that seemingly tragic events, such as Yosef's sale into Egyptian service, are meant to be catalysts for the larger process of physical and/or spiritual redemption.

Recognizing this, we can then seize the opportunities for personal growth inherent within our challenges. (Sefer HaMa'amarim 5654, p. 107; Sefer HaMa'amarim Melukat, vol. 5, pp. 259-260) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisnefsky

WHETHER RICH OR POOR

Tosafos, Daas Zekenim

"Hashem was with Yosef, and he was a prosperous man, and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian." (39:2)

An alternative rendering of this passage is: "Hashem was with Yosef when he was a prosperous man, and also when he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian."

There are people who can serve G-d only when they are poor. As soon as they become wealthy, they forget Him. (Compare with: "Yeshurun waxed fat and kicked" - Devarim 32:15.)

Others serve G-d as long as they lack for nothing, but as soon as they lose their wealth they act according to the adage that "poverty confuses a person's mind."

Yosef was not so. The Torah testifies that "Hashem was with Yosef." Yosef clung to his G-d when he was a prosperous man and also when he was in the house of his master the Egyptian, when he was no more than a humble slave at Potiphar's home. Thus, Yosef passed both tests - that of wealth as well as that of poverty.

ALWAYS A JEW

Sefas Emes

“And he [Yosef] was in the house of his Egyptian master” (39:2)

No matter what circumstances Yosef found himself while in his master's house, he was always himself. He did not change. Thus a Jew must behave - no matter what should happen to him, he should always behave as a Jew.

SPIRITUAL BEAUTIFICATION

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“Yosef was beautiful in form and complexion.” (39:6)

Yosef's physical beauty was a reflection of his inner, spiritual beauty - his uncompromising dedication to the ideals of the Torah. By virtue of his own spiritual perfection, Yosef was able to fulfill his Divine mission: bringing others closer to G-d. Like Yosef, we are all called upon to bring others closer to G-d. In order to succeed as Yosef did, we must try to be, like him, spiritually “beautiful in form and complexion.”

This does not mean we should wait until we achieve spiritual perfection before reaching out to others; perfection is relative, and compared to those who know less than we, we are “beautiful” enough to inspire them. Nevertheless, we must also remember that if we neglect our own spiritual growth, others will take note, and as a result be less inclined to take our words to heart. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 1, p. 79) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

BACK TO HIS TRUE SELF

Lenchener Rebbe

“Yosef was beautiful in form and complexion.” (39:6)

Rashi makes the following comment: “Once Yosef saw himself in a position of authority, he began to change his manner of eating and drinking, and started to curl his hair. The Holy One, blessed is He, said, ‘Your father is in mourning and you curl your hair?’” How it was possible that Yosef, knowing his father's sorrow, should be concerned with mundane things such as food, clothing, and his hairdo? When Yosef tried to teach the ways of G-d to the Egyptians dressed as a Jew - that is, as a foreigner - no one would listen to him. Therefore, he decided to change his clothing and his hairstyle, hoping the Egyptians would listen to him. Instead, Zlichah, Potiphar's wife, tried to seduce him.

The pasuk continues, “And she caught hold of him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me!' But he left his garment in her hand, and he fled and went outside.” Yosef went home and started to reflect on his behavior. He came to the conclusion that because he was dressed as an Egyptian, Potiphar's wife wanted to take advantage of him. At that point did he “leave his garment and fled.” He resumed his original behavior.

OBSTACLES OF HOLINESS

Lubavitcher Rebbe

“[Yosef's] master's wife cast her eyes on Yosef.” (39:7)

Yosef's master's wife had noble intentions in trying to seduce him. This incident demonstrates that beneath the surface even of circumstances that seem antagonistic to holiness there is a holy purpose.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi offers the example of someone deliberately trying to disrupt us when we are immersed in prayer.

In such a case, we should not allow the person to disrupt our prayers. On the contrary, we should recognize that G-d has sent this person as His messenger to stimulate us to pray with even greater concentration. (Igeret HaKodesh 25)

The disruptive person himself, like all of existence, is rooted ultimately in holiness, and is therefore motivated by a subconscious desire to serve G-d. It is only his conscious self that distorts this desire and expresses it in a form that outwardly opposes holiness.

The same principle is true with regard to all obstacles that we encounter:

Rather than being discouraged by their antagonistic veneer, we should perceive their essence, i.e., that they are not obstacles to holiness but its servants. (Likutei Sichot, vol. 1, pp. 79-81) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

REMAINING STEADFAST

Rabbi Yitzchak Breiter

“But [Yosef] refused...” (39:8)

The cantillation note on the word vayema'ein (he refused) is called the shalsheles, which is a long, drawn-out, and repetitive note.

This is because, when tempted by sin, one must remain steadfast and refuse again and again.

TAKING A FIRM STAND

Sefas Emes

“But [Yosef] refused and said to his master's wife, “Behold, my master, relying on me, does not concern himself with what is in the house... there is no one greater in this house than I...” (39:8-9)

When someone tries to talk someone else into sinning, the first thing one must do is refuse without going into details or engaging in debate on the reasons for the refusal.

Only after having made it clear that one refuses to sin may one cite reasons for refusing, as Yosef did (“...my master, relying on me, does not concern himself with what is in the house... there is no one greater in this house than I... how can I do this great wickedness...” and so forth).

REMEMBERING YAAKOV

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Yosef told Potiphar's wife,] 'How could I commit such a great wrong and also sin before G-d?'" (39:9)

Being a servant, Yosef was obviously at the mercy of his master's wife. Potiphar's wife intimidated Yosef with all sorts of threats, including death, if he would not acquiesce to her seduction (see Yoma 35b; Bemidbar Rabbah 14:18). But then Yosef saw an image of his father Yaakov's face in front of him, from which he understood he was obligated to resist her temptations.

Yaakov's face reminded Yosef that our individual sins are not only our own personal matters, for which there might be mitigating rationalizations; they affect the moral balance of all reality.

When confronted with temptation, it is tempting to convince ourselves that nobody will know about it, that it is technically justified, that succumbing to it is only a temporary setback and that we can later repent, and so on. In such moments, we too must "envision the image of Yaakov," that is, remember that our actions are not merely the isolated deeds of individuals in isolated times and places.

Our deeds have cosmic ramifications; they can harm or heal the entire world. (Hitva'aduyot 5721, vol. 1, pp. 262-265) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

BECOMING A "YOSEF"

Reb Noson of Nemirov

"She spoke to Yosef day after day, but he would not listen to her..." (39:10)

Yosef (יוסף, Yosef) represents the additional (נוסף, nosaf) sanctity that a person can gain when he withstands a test.

Each person can become a Yosef on a daily basis, by adding holiness into his day. (Likutey Halakhot I, p. 268)

TIME FOR WORK

Reb Simchah Bunim of Pshischa

"It was on that day, that he entered the house to do his work..." (39:11)

The attribute of Yosef is "yesod," which is a reference to proper moral conduct.

Thus, when the Torah tells us that Yosef came "to do his work," he was in fact fulfilling his purpose in This World.

With the wife of Potiphar, Yosef now faced the greatest challenge he ever had in this realm. After daily enticements by his master's wife when they were alone in the house, here was his chance to do his work, the work that he was meant to fulfill on this earth.

PICTURE PERFECT

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"It was on that day, that he entered the house to do his work. No man of the household was there in the house." (39:11)

At a gathering of the great leaders of European Jewry in the early part of the twentieth century, a roving photographer circulated around the large meeting hall and snapped pictures of the great rabbanim, Roshei Yeshiva, and Chassidische Rebbes.

This was in the days prior to modern-day snap cameras, and in order to take a picture, one had to set up the entire apparatus on a tripod. This allowed anyone who did not wish to have his picture taken to easily avoid the camera.

The great Rogatchover Gaon, R' Yosef Rosen zt'l, was one of those people who repeatedly ducked out of the way to avoid being caught on camera.

Observing the Gaon's obvious attempts to turn away from the camera's lens, the renowned Lubliner Rav, R' Meir Shapiro zt'l, was amused, but also a bit disappointed.

Boldly, he approached the Rogatchover Gaon. "Permit me to suggest that the great gaon has overlooked a midrash," he pointed out with reverence.

The Rogatchover was startled. "What midrash are you referring to?" he asked, surprised at the notion that he might have forgotten something.

R' Meir Shapiro smiled at him. "The midrash states that on the day that no one was home and the wife of Potiphar attempted to seduce Yosef Hatzaddik, he saw the 'd'mus d'yukno shel aviv' - likeness of his father, Yaakov, and was able to tear himself away from her advances."

"This same likeness was the image that Hashem engraved on His Heavenly throne. Why? Because Hashem knew that one day there would be no one left with a true Jewish appearance, and when he'd want to see what a real Jew looks like, He would be able to stare at the image of Yaakov."

R' Meir's tone now became pleading. "Please listen to me, Rogatchover Gaon. There will come a time when no one will remember what a real, true Jew should look like. Unfortunately, times are changing, and images of honest, G-d-fearing Jews will be hard to come by."

Please," R' Meir said in a tone that was purely irresistible, "allow these people to take your picture and record your image for posterity. In the future, the world must see what Jews were meant to look like!"

The Rogatchover was impressed with this logic and yielded to the younger rabbi's wisdom. Due to the entreaties of the Lubliner Rav, we have his picture today.

TESTED FOR GREATNESS

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"It came to pass on a certain day when [Yosef] went into the house to do his work... that she caught him..." (39:11-12)

Why was Yosef subjected to this test of character? To see whether he was truly fit to become Egypt's ruler. By passing the test, Yosef proved that he was the exemplar of righteousness, and would be able to rule over that land of impurity and immorality without succumbing to its corrupting influence himself.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Reb Noson of Nemirov

"She grabbed him by his garment..." (39:12)

The implication is that the Evil One catches a person "by his garment," causing him to pursue the material cloaks of this world.

On a deeper level, this alludes to man's tendency to assume that appearance equals essence. Defying this impression is the tzaddik, who seems like an ordinary person but is actually someone far greater and loftier. The tzaddik's "cloak" of normalcy conceals his true essence.

OUT OF THIS WORLD

Sefas Emes

"But he left his garment in her hand, and he fled, and went outside" (39:12)

Yosef left his worldly habits and fled from those desires and "went outside" of this worldly behavior.

EVEN IN DARKEST DEPTHS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

"And he placed him in the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were jailed. He remained there in prison." (39:20)

In the year 1798, the Russian government, acting on a malicious and false tip from informants, arrested the world-renowned Baal HaTanya, R' Shneur Zalman of Liadi zt'l, founder of Chabad, and placed him in a prison cell in St. Petersburg.

The story of his miraculous release came about, according to one of the many accounts, when the ruler of Russia, Czar Pavel I, felt an urge to meet the great tzaddik in person and find out what he and his chassidim were all about.

The Czar dressed himself in peasant's clothing, so that the rebbe should not recognize him, and descended into the dungeons of the prison, under the pretense of bringing him his dinner.

As soon as the Czar walked in, the Baal HaTanya stood up and immediately recited the blessing made when one is in the presence of royalty: "Blessed is He that allots from His honor to flesh and blood." When the Czar was informed as to the meaning of this blessing, he was startled, impressed by the rabbi's superior intuition. Then, in an effort to maintain his charade, he flushed angrily. "From where do you have the audacity to even think that the great and mighty Czar of Russia would ever come to lower himself to visit a Jew in prison? Your words alone are treasonous and demand severe punishment!"

"Do not be angry," said R' Shneur Zalman in a soothing manner, "For even G-d, the King of all Kings, entered a lowly jailhouse when he felt it was absolutely necessary."

The Czar sneered, "What are you talking about? Some more of your Hasidic fables and wives' tales! I've heard all about them."

"If his majesty will permit me," explained the rebbe, "I will explain my words. The Bible, in fact, states this explicitly. About Yosef Hatzaddik, the great Yosef, future ruler of Egypt, it is written: "He was placed in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were jailed." Immediately after these words it says: "And G-d was with Yosef." Obviously, G-d, the greatest of Kings, did not feel it beneath his dignity to visit Yosef in jail. Why should your majesty?"

The Czar was so impressed with this answer that his attitude toward the rebbe changed, and on 19 Kislev the Baal HaTanya was released. Until today, Lubavitcher chassidim celebrate a Yom Tov on that very day.

RIPPLE EFFECTS

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

"And [Yosef] asked Pharaoh's courtiers who were with him in the prison of his master's house, saying, 'Why are your faces downcast today?'" (40:7)

It is astonishing to consider that the launch of Yosef's appointment as ruler of Egypt were with these words. Yosef saw two prisoners looking sad and asked what was wrong. If we think a little deeper, we can imagine that this must have been a very subtle sign. After all, could we imagine someone not looking a little depressed after being thrown into prison and awaiting a possible death sentence?

Yet, Yosef sensed something was particularly disturbing these men and came to offer his support. And it was this seemingly small act which began Yosef's rise to greatness, for his query led to the cupbearer telling Pharaoh about Yosef, which led to Yosef interpreting Pharaoh's dream and ultimately becoming Egypt's viceroy (Bereishis 41:40).

We see from here how one small act can change the future of the entire world.

Rav Osher Zelig Rubenstein, a Rosh Yeshivah who dramatically impacted tens of thousands of lives, would share a personal example of this phenomenon.

He recalled his younger years being more interested in sports and business than Torah. His father was saddened by his son's total disinterest, and upon his son's graduation said the following, "I've bought you a train ticket so that you can learn at the Telshe Yeshivah in Cleveland. This is my last try with you. If you don't 'get it' there, you're on your own."

Excited at the prospect of being "on his own," he agreed to his father's request and traveled to Telshe in order to quickly reach the next stage of his life - university.

Rav Osher Zelig reached Telshe in a colorful shirt and dungarees and peeked into the yeshivah only to be shocked by a scene of black pants and white shirts. He quickly turned to leave realizing that he would not last a moment in such a place but was stopped by an outstretched hand.

"Shalom Aleichem," said the stranger, "are you new here?" The young Rav Osher explained that he was just passing through, but when his new friend said that they were just about to have lunch, and he should join them, Rav Osher, realizing how hungry he was, said, "Why not?" and sat down to join them.

Rav Osher would often recall this story, and with tears in his eyes, told his audience, "I sat down to lunch, and I stayed for seventeen years! What would have happened if that young man hadn't stuck out his hand to the strangely dressed modern-orthodox kid? What would have been with the tens of thousands that I have been blessed to teach? What would have been with the shidduchim I've helped make? With the advice? With the counseling?"

We never know how impactful our actions can be, so let us be sure to seek out opportunities - even small ones - to help others in whatever way we can.

SMALL DEED, BIG IMPACT

Lubavitcher Rebbe

"[Yosef] asked Pharaoh's servants, 'Why are your faces so downcast today?'" (40:7)

Yosef had suffered horrible humiliations. It would have been logical for him to become absorbed in his own pain, angry at the world. But Yosef did not become bitter. He remained sensitive to others and to his Divine mission in life. Not only did he perceive the anguish of Pharaoh's servants, he reached out to help them. To Yosef, the fact that G-d had arranged for him to notice someone in need indicated that it was his duty to help.

As the result of this one, seemingly minor good deed, Yosef became the viceroy of Egypt, and was able to save the civilized world from famine. We see here, once again, the unimaginably far-reaching results that can come from one small good deed. (Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah 3:4; Sichot Kodesh 5734, vol. 1, pp. 208-213) - Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Wisniewsky

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman

"...and you will place Pharaoh's cup into his hand, as was the manner when you were his butler." (40:13)

An alternative rendering of this passage is: "...and you will place Pharaoh's cup into his hand, following the original ruling when you were his butler."

What is the connection between "ruling" or "law" and a butler's services? Actually, according to Egyptian law, the butler had not committed a punishable crime. The chief baker, who had been imprisoned when a pebble was found in the pastry he had baked for Pharaoh, was guilty of a misdemeanor because he had been negligent when sifting the flour. But when a fly fell into the wine the chief butler had poured for Pharaoh, this couldn't be construed as being caused by the butler's negligence.

However, that Pharaoh became angry with his chief butler and imprisoned him was all part of G-d's plan to free Yosef. As the Midrash put it: "The Holy One, blessed be He, caused the master to be angry with his servants in order to bring about Yosef's deliverance." So Pharaoh had his chief butler imprisoned falsely.

But once the butler had promised to remember Yosef, and G-d's purpose had thus been fulfilled, the "original ruling" was reasserted, and the chief butler was not liable to punishment for what had happened to Pharaoh's wine.

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