

The Prince and the Prison

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

Yosef was a highly successful prisoner. Almost immediately upon landing in jail, Yosef managed to "find favor" in the eyes of the minister of prisons (39:21). Shortly afterwards, the minister appointed him head prisoner and Yosef's career was back on track.

And the officer of the prison gave over to Yosef's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatever was done there, he was the doer of it. The keeper of the prison saw nothing of that which was under his hand... (39:22-23)

While Pharaoh's minister, the officer of the prisons, remained nominally in charge, Yosef constituted the real power behind the penitentiary throne. He made the decisions, ran things on a daily basis and, in the language of the Torah, did whatever was done there. While no doubt this constitutes a coveted position amongst the prison population, we may wonder how glorious a job it really is. What exactly are the doings that are done by an assistant warden in an ancient Egyptian jail?

Jail is not the first place where Yosef rose to prominence. Before prison, Yosef had done some time in the house of Potiphar. As alluded to previously, before his entanglement with Potiphar's wife, Yosef's career had progressed along the servant fast track. He quickly found a position in the house of Potiphar (39:2), bypassing the more common slave occupation of field hand, a short and nasty existence consisting of back-breaking hard labor. He "found favor" in his master's eyes (39:4), and just a few short verses after Potiphar purchases him, Potiphar appoints Yosef as head servant/slave. He places everything he has in "the hand" of Yosef and leaves him completely in charge (39:4-5). Like the officer of the prisons later on, Potiphar is now oblivious to the goings on in his domain.

And he left all that he had in Yosef's hand and he knew nothing of that which he had except for the bread which he ate... (39:6)

As in the prison later on, Yosef constitutes the real power in the house and fields of Potiphar. As the headman, the "charge d'affaires" of Potiphar, Yosef does all that needs doing. Except for the slightly mysterious bread, Yosef wields total control.

To outline this logically, the "headman" parallel that emerges from the sketch above consists of three fundamental components. In both the house of Potiphar and in prison, we can note "finding favor" in the eyes of the ruling authority (39:4, 39:21), the "placing" of authority into the "hand" of Yosef (39:4, 39:22), and the oblivious, know-nothing attitude of the real chief (39:6, 23). In addition, we can add a fourth element. In both cases the Torah informs us that Yosef was successful and attributes his success to God's assistance (39:3, 23).

Given the tight parallel above between Yosef's two headman positions, we should pay very careful attention to a set of crucial differences between the two stories. In the first, Yosef serves a man of great importance in the Egyptian kingdom. He acts as assistant to Pharaoh's captain of the guard (sar ha-tabachim), a man defined as "seris Pharaoh," a chamberlain of Pharaoh (39:1). He is in charge of Potiphar's entire estate (39:4-5), works in Potiphar's house, and is even privileged with private access to the lady of the house (39:7-11). In contrast, in the second story, Yosef is no more than the headman of an ancient Near Eastern jail, a miserable pit (40:15). He serves no important minister, inhabits no luxurious offices and enjoys no company except that of his fellow prisoners. His kingdom is a prison and his subjects are the wretched and condemned. Yosef has fallen fast and hard.

But if, in fact, God "is with" Yosef both in the house of Potiphar and in prison (39:3,21,23), if divine providence accompanies Yosef all along the way, why has God done this to him? What mysterious divine imperative propels Yosef downwards?

Rather than resorting to the obvious answers, let us complicate things a bit. Yosef plays the role of headman not twice, but in fact three times in Parashat Vayeshev. On the conceptual level, Parashat Vayeshev opens with another story of Yosef's success and meteoric rise to headman. Yosef is special to his father. Ya'akov elevates Yosef above his brothers and gives him a long-sleeved coat (ketonet pasim) (37:3), a garment worn by the children of kings (II Shemuel 13:18). Furthermore, Yosef enjoys special access to his father. While his brothers are away with the sheep in Shekhem, Yosef remains home with his father (37:12-13, Ramban 37:3).

Finally, Yosef serves as Ya'akov's supervisory agent. Ya'akov sends Yosef to check on his brothers and the sheep out in the fields of Shekhem (37:14). While Ya'akov might not have asked for the slanderous reports (dibatam ra'a) brought home by Yosef about his brothers (37:2), the surprise is the slander, not the report. Yosef, as the preferred son, acts as supervisor and charge d'affaires. As befits his role as second-in-command, he reports to the chief. Needless to say, Yosef's dreams reflect his headman role and, together with his coat and his supervisory role, constitute the cause of his brothers' animosity.

If so, Parashat Vayeshev turns out to possess an interesting structure. Yosef starts out as the assistant to Ya'akov, the headman of the family fated to form God's chosen nation and to realize the blessings of Avraham. But he falls fast and falls hard. We next find him as headman in Potiphar's house, albeit in exile, but in a position of power, prominence and prestige.

But even this is not to be. Yosef descends again, this time to prison. In stage three of the headman structure, we find Yosef supervising a prison. He is far from his family, far from blessing, and far from his dreams.

Once again, all of this is part of God's plan. But then again, there are infinite ways that God could have arranged Yosef's eventual control over Egypt. Why this way? Why the three-fold headman structure for Parashat Vayeshev? In other words, what is the meaning and message of Yosef's descent?

II

Parashat Vayeshev initiates a crucial turn in the book of Bereishit. While Ya'akov still appears in the parasha and is present until near the very end of the book, the story line is no longer about the forefathers. Rather, the remainder of the book concerns itself primarily with the story of Yosef and his brothers. Along with this change of characters comes a crucial shift in symbols and themes. For example, most of the action in the second part of Bereishit (12:1-36:43) has revolved around the issues of covenant, inheritance and blessings. Much of the story is about God's promises and the mysterious process of choosing an heir to the blessings. As of the beginning of Parashat Vayeshev, these themes more or less vanish. While covenant and blessings may sometimes crop up as hidden themes, God never appears to make promises and never chooses the next generation. Needless to say, all eleven of Ya'akov's children become the inheritors of the blessings. None of them is spurned, replaced or expelled.

To put all of this together, the story of the forefathers, the story of covenant formation and transmission, comes to an end at the beginning of Parashat Vayeshev. The remainder of the Book of Bereishit (37:2-50:26) concerns itself not so much with formation but with realization. The story of Yosef his brothers, which constitutes the remainder of the book, details the descent to Egypt and the beginning of the realization of the covenant of the pieces - sojourning and slavery (15:13). Everything in the rest of Bereishit connects to Egypt and the twisted path for getting there.

At first glance, Parashat Vayeshev seems to contain a striking exception to our newly established rule. Chapter Thirty-Eight serves up the strange story of Yehuda and Tamar. While Yehuda's family problems are quite interesting, we may wonder about the connection to the theme of the third part of Sefer Bereishit. What does Yehuda's neglect of Tamar (38:1-11), Tamar's playing of the prostitute (38:12-23), and the birth of Yehuda's sons Peretz and Zerach (38:24-30) have to do with Egypt and the theme of covenant realization?

This can easily be rephrased as a question about the structure of Parashat Vayeshev. Earlier I argued that Yosef occupies the role of "number-one man" three times in Parashat Vayeshev. He serves as supervisor, first in his father's house, later in Potiphar's house, and finally in prison. By working along these lines, Parashat Vayeshev can be grouped into three distinct units, each telling the story of Yosef and the outcome of his headman role. Mapping it out yields the following:

Unit One (37:1-36) - Yosef in his father's house, the termination of his position through the sale of Yosef by his brothers; the banishment of Yosef.

[??? (38:1-30) - The story of Yehuda and Tamar.]

Unit Two (39:1-39:20) - Yosef in the house of Potiphar, the termination of his position through his entanglement with Potiphar's wife; the banishment of Yosef.

Unit Three (39:21-40:23) - Yosef in prison, the failed termination and yet foreshadowing of the eventual termination of Yosef's position

through his encounter with the officers of Pharaoh and their dreams.

Yosef's brothers resent him not just for his privileged status in their father's house. They resent his pretensions to leadership and future royalty.

We really should not need the brackets and question marks above to make the obvious point. The story of Yehuda and Tamar just doesn't seem to fit into Parashat Vayeshev. Why is it here?

III

Before trying to get a better grasp on the structure of Parashat Vayeshev, let us consider the end of Parashat Vayishlach and the transition to Vayeshev. Parashat Vayishlach ends with a long section detailing the descendants of Eisav (36:1-43). As if this were not mysterious enough, the last subsection of "Toldot Eisav" (36:31-43) lists the kings who ruled in Edom. We may be inclined to dismiss the inclusion of these sections in the Torah as an example of a phenomenon that may be termed "witnessing." God has promised Avraham that he shall be the "father of many nations" (av hamon goyim) and that "kings shall come from you" (17:5-6). While the special covenant of brit mila, including "the land that you dwell in" (17:8), will remain the unique possession of one line of Avraham's descendents, other lines will achieve nationhood, control territory and be ruled by kings. Consequently, the Torah includes "Toldot Eisav" and its line of kings. The Torah bears witness to the accomplishment of God's promise.

But there seems to be more to it than this. The list of kings begins with the statement, "These are the king who ruled in Edom before a king ruled over the Children of Israel" (36:31). The mention of the kings of Edom seems to bear some connection to the existence of royalty and kingship in Israel. Moreover, the beginning of Parashat Vayeshev also seems to take up the topic of kingship in Israel. Part of the action involves Ya'akov giving Yosef a ketonet pasim as a symbol of his love (37:3). But this is not an innocuous symbol. As pointed out earlier, a long-sleeved coat is a royal garment, worn by the children of kings of Israel. Finally, we have the dreams. When Yosef reports his dream of bowing sheaves to his brothers (37:6-7), they reply as follows:

Shall you indeed be king (ha-melokh timlokh) over us? Shall you indeed have dominion over us? (37:8)

If so, it appears that the seam between Parashat Vayishlach and Parashat Vayeshev, the transition between the second part of the book (12:1-36:43) and the third part of the book (37:1-50:26), consists of the symbols of royalty and the topics of leadership and kingship. This is no accident. As pointed out previously, the thematic shift consists of a move from the stage of covenant transaction and transmission to a stage of fulfillment and realization. This means that the future is no longer the inchoate destiny of a single individual. The future now belongs to a group, a nascent nation. There already now exists a group, bound up concretely with the historical reality of the unfolding divine plan. But every group that functions in the real world, that navigates the stormy seas of history, requires leaders. By no surprise, the topic of leadership becomes paramount in Sefer Bereishit. By no surprise, the topic is formulated in the symbolism of kingship, foreshadowing the future of the family's descendents, the nation of Israel.

All of this should help us with the structure of Vayeshev. In keeping with the theme of leadership and kingship, the stories are primarily about Yosef and Yehuda, the two once and future leaders. Yosef attempts to rule in the house of Ya'akov and later does rule during the family's time in Egypt. In parallel, Yehuda leads during the sale of Yosef, and later on, during the famine and confrontation with the Egyptian viceroy. These leadership roles foreshadow much of the future history of Israel. The house of David descends from Yehuda ([Bereishit 38:29](#), [Ruth 4:18-22](#)); the line of Yeravam, the rebel king of the secessionist tribes, descends from Yosef ([I Melakhim 11:26](#)); and Shaul, the first king of Israel, descends from Binyamin ([I Shemuel 9:1-2](#)), Rachel's other child.

In this light, the inclusion of the story of Yehuda and Tamar in the parasha need no longer disturb us. The story ends with the birth of Peretz (38:27-34), a variation on the younger replacing the older theme prevalent in the book of Bereishit. The infant manages to burst out first, despite the fact that his brother had already stuck out his hand. While the older-younger motif no longer signals replacement and expulsion from the covenant, in its modified form here in the third part of Sefer Bereishit, it signals distinction and the line of leadership. Just as Peretz replaces Zerach, so too Yehuda occupies a central role in the narrative, thereby "replacing" Reuven and telegraphing his leadership role.

Let us try to move from the level of textual space and literary markers to the level of character. After all, the story of Yehuda and Tamar is not just about devoting time to Yehuda and noting the unusual birth of Peretz. It is also, and primarily, about the character of Yehuda.

The central action of the story revolves around Yehuda's treatment of Tamar. Oblivious to the evil nature of his sons Er and Onan, and hence to the real cause of their deaths, Yehuda attributes their deaths to his daughter-in-law Tamar (38:6-11). She is bad luck. Consequently, Yehuda decides not to fulfill his legal and moral duty of commanding his remaining son Shela to marry Tamar (38:11). Yehuda operates from the perspective that nothing could possibly be amiss in his own house. His sons could not possibly have been struck down by God and he is certainly justified in banishing the "bad luck" woman from his family.

But Tamar does not accept Yehuda's decision. She disguises herself as a harlot, contracts a deal with the unknowing Yehuda, and, pregnant with Yehuda's child, disappears from the crossroads, returning to her life as a young widow (38:13-19).

In the climax of the story, Yehuda learns that Tamar is pregnant. Without even the slightest hesitation, he pronounces the death penalty (38:24). At the very last minute, upon being taken out to be burnt, Tamar sends Yehuda his cord, seal and staff that she had received in her guise of harlot as guarantee of payment. She is pregnant by the man who owns these items (38:25). Yehuda pronounces judgement one more time and spares Tamar's life.

And Yehuda recognized/knew (va-yaker Yehuda), and he said: She is more righteous than I; for I have not given her to Shela my son. (38:26)

This time Yehuda passes judgement not on Tamar but on himself. Whereas previously Yehuda had assumed his own righteousness and the righteousness of his sons, here Yehuda realizes that his actions have not been justified nor his sons righteous. If he has been with Tamar and still remains alive, then she is not "bad luck" and he is guilty. His sons died of their own sins and he has neglected his duty. The bubble of self-righteousness has burst.

In making his pronouncement, Yehuda displays the virtue of humility. As Rashi points out (38:25), Tamar did not publicly disclose to whom the stick and signet belonged. By sending an apparently private message to Yehuda, she allowed him the possibility of covering up. He could have avoided the public humiliation of reversing his judgement and admitting he consorted with "harlots." He could have continued to play the role of righteous patriarch and avoided confessing the neglect and tricking of his daughter-in-law, as well as any public acknowledgement of his own sons' evil. Instead, Yehuda admits.

This behavior marks a radical shift for Yehuda. As outlined above, previously Yehuda had acted arrogantly, condemning Tamar rather than his sons and sentencing her without hesitation. Similarly, he previously had been concerned with his public image, sending his friend the Adulamite to make payment to the harlot and expressing concern "lest it be for a shame" (38:20-23) when she could not be found and his possessions retrieved. Now, though, he exhibits humility in place of ego, and acknowledgement of others in place of image.

All of this fits well with our previous interpretation of the story as one linked to leadership, marking Yehuda as monarchical material. "Parashat Ha-melekh," the section of Devarim that defines the criteria and rules for the king, lists but one fundamental character issue. Buried amidst the warnings about too many wives, too much gold and the requirement to maintain a personal copy of the Torah, we are informed of the purpose of all this:

...that his heart not be lifted up above his brothers... so that he may prolong the days of his kingdom, he and his sons in the midst of Israel. (Devarim 17:20)

Leadership and kingship are about and depend upon the virtue of humility.

V

Before closing, let us return to our point of origin. Earlier on, I argued for reading Parashat Vayeshev as possessing a tripartite structure of "headman" stories. Consequently, I raised questions regarding the meaning of Yosef's descent and the insertion of the Yehuda and Tamar story in an otherwise cohesive structure. Reading Parashat Vayeshev as also concerned with marking the leaders/kings and as interested in emphasizing the leadership criterion of humility helped resolve the inclusion of the Yehuda and Tamar story. With this in hand, let us turn back to Yosef and the problem of his descent.

Does Yosef possess the virtue of humility necessary for leadership and royalty? A quick review of the first headman story, the early years of Yosef in the house of Ya'akov, should determine the answer.

Yosef is the favored son. Whether due to virtue and ability, his being almost the youngest, or his being the firstborn of the beloved Rachel, Ya'akov loves Yosef more than he loves his other sons (37:3). The brothers resent it. They resent the favoritism and its future implications. They hate Yosef and cannot even speak peaceably to him. But what is Yosef's attitude to the family dynamic? While the text gives us no explicit information, we may glean quite a bit by reading between the lines. At the very least, he seems to feel no qualms about speaking ill of his brothers to their father (37:2), a move which seems to reinforce his claim to superiority. He is above them, sits in judgement upon them and reports on them.

Moreover, immediately after informing us of the brothers' resentment of Yosef's status and their hatred of him, the Torah tells us about Yosef's dreams (37:5-10). Despite the obvious implications of the dreams and the fact that his brothers are already not talking to him, Yosef insists on telling his dreams to his brothers. He grandly proclaims, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed" (37:6). Even after the brothers chastise him for his royal pretensions (37:8), Yosef does not desist. When he dreams again, this time not just of bundles of straw bowing down to him, but of the entire cosmos prostrated before him, he immediately informs his brothers (37:9). In sum, Yosef naively glories in his position and visions. Without regard to his brothers' response, he acts the prince, certain of his position and convinced of his destiny. He is not humble.

To rephrase this in the language of Devarim, Yosef's heart IS elevated above his brothers. It is almost no surprise that his brothers see the dreamer coming (37:19), strip him of his royal coat (37:23) and defiantly pronounce, "See now what will become of his dreams" (37:20).

If so, this may be the meaning of the descent pattern in Parashat Vayeshev. In structuring this pattern, both the parasha and divine providence provide an ironic comment on Yosef's pretensions. Yosef viewed himself as a prince, a ruler now and in the future. He prides himself on his talent, his position and his destiny. But how the mighty have fallen. Yes, he is a headman. Yes, he is a ruler - but not of his family and not of the future nation of Israel. He who elevated his heart above his brothers rules not even the house of Potiphar. He rules only a prison.

But there is more to it than this. I would argue that this very pattern of descent, the providential mocking of his pretensions and pride, effects a change in Yosef. Let us take a look at the bare bones but significant characterizations of Yosef in the second and third headman stories.

In protesting the advances of Potiphar's wife, Yosef manages to refer to the fact that "there is none greater in the house than me" (39:9), twice mentions the fact that everything has been entrusted to his control (39:8-9), and once refers to his master's ignorance. While this is all part of a profession of loyalty on Yosef's part (39:8-9), Yosef is acutely aware of his status and position. He then tumbles once again.

The final headman story, Yosef's ruling of the prison, presents a different picture. Although the disgraced ministers of Pharaoh have been placed in Yosef's hands along with all the other prisoners (39:22, 40:4), the Torah describes Yosef as "serving them" (40:4). He inquires after their welfare and sad moods (40:5). He serves, rather than rules, those placed in his charge.

Finally, this new humility may also be discerned in Yosef's offer to interpret their dreams. He ascribes the power of interpretation to God (40:8). While this may not seem surprising to us, it is shocking in the context of ancient Egypt, a land abounding in sorcerers and magicians. Even Yosef himself lauds his sorcerer's powers when playing the Egyptian viceroy for his brothers (44:15). Lauding his magical powers would certainly have gotten him out of the pit much faster. Needless to say, the "officer of drink" forgets the powerless youth and his humble request for help (40:23).

In sum, we have here the same humble Yosef who, when ascribed the power of dream interpretation by Pharaoh, responds that it is God and not he who possesses answers (41:16). We have here the very same Yosef who later humbly tells his brothers that it was all God's plan, that his entire position in Egypt exists for the sake of saving lives and providing for his family (44:5-8). We have here someone suitable for leadership, who acts with humility, whose heart is with his brothers.

Request for Discussion

At the suggestion of Rav Ezra Bick, coordinator of this shiur, I am replacing the standard "Further Study" section with a "Comments" section this week. Please feel free to comment on one or all of the issues raised or some other aspect of the shiur. I will be glad to respond.

1) The shiur above constitutes an attempt to explain the structure of Parashat Vayeshev as revolving around issues of leadership, the Yehuda-Yosef tension and the attribute of humility. While I am quite sure of the overall direction, I remain uncertain of the last section of the shiur, in which I argued for the redemption of the character of Yosef. Ten years in prison can change a man. Or maybe not. Please reread the section. How convinced are you? Is it necessary to redeem the

character of Yosef in this way? Can you think of additional evidence that relates to the issue of Yosef's character?

2) Please read the following outtake from the shiur.

A hint of pride can also be noted in the structure of the Potiphar story. Right after describing Yosef's rise and right before describing Yosef's entanglement with Potiphar's wife, the Torah informs the reader that "Yosef was of good appearance and good looking" (39:6). Perhaps the mention of Yosef's beauty is meant to serve as merely a preface to the upcoming seduction. It explains why Potiphar's wife was so insistent. Or perhaps the final clause of verse six serves as more than just a preface. It serves as a bridge between Yosef's rise to power in the first half of the Potiphar story (39:1-6) and his fall in the second half (39:7-20). In the language of Rashi (39:6), "When he saw himself rise to ruler he began to eat, drink and groom his hair... God said, 'I will unleash upon you this bear.'"

What do you think of this midrash? What do you think of the argument suggested in the outtake? Can you think of any other readings for mentioning Yosef's beauty?

3) The full text of the Rashi quoted above reads as follows: "When he saw himself rise to ruler he began to eat, drink and groom his hair... God said, 'Your father is mourning and you are grooming your hair! I will unleash upon you this bear.'" Rashi implies that Yosef's second descent is due to his not contacting home. What do you think of this point? Why didn't Yosef contact his family at this point? What is Rashi's opinion on this issue?

4) Here is another outtake:

In an almost ironic comment, the Torah informs us, "And from the time that he appointed him over his house and all that he had, God blessed the Egyptian's house because of Yosef, and the blessing of God was upon all that he had, in the house and in the field" (39:5). Even if Yosef cannot be headman in the future nation of Israel, he can still be headman in the house of Potiphar. Even if he cannot participate fully in the realization of the blessings of Avraham, at least he can serve as a source of blessing for others (12:2-3, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14).

Can one fulfill the blessings of Avraham even partially while in exile?

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