

## PARASHAT HASHAVUA

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## PARASHAT VAYESHEV

### “And Yisrael loved Yosef” Rav Shimon Klein

#### Introduction

These are the generations of Yaakov: Yosef was seventeen years old when feeding the flock with his brothers, and the lad was with the sons of Bilha and with the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives. And Yosef brought an evil report of them to their father. And Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, for he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat with long sleeves. (*Bereishit* 37:2-3)

The story of Yosef and his brothers is a dark and painful episode in the history of the Jewish People. A son is sent by his father to his brothers, and they conspire to kill him. Eventually, they decide to sell him instead. How are we to understand the brothers' conduct? And what is Yosef's role in what takes place? In this *shiur*, we will examine the verses closely and try to attain deeper insight into Yosef, the brothers, and what really happened.

#### Not “One of the Guys”

“These are the generations of Yaakov: Yosef was seventeen years old...” These introductory words arouse our expectation that the text will go on to list Yaakov's sons. Instead, we encounter the story of Yosef and his experiences. Yosef is placed at the center; around him are the brothers, feeling offended and battling over their place. “Yosef was seventeen years old” – the noting of this detail at the outset seems to be telling us that the story has something to do with his age, his adolescence. Had Yosef been either older or younger, events would perhaps have taken a different turn.

The narrative opens by setting the scene in seemingly repetitive terms: Yosef was “feeding the flock with his brothers” and “the lad was with (*et*) the sons of Bilha and with (*ve-et*) the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives.” The first expression refers to his

relationship with all his brothers; the second focuses on his relationship with the children of the handmaids. In the latter, the word “*et*” is used instead of the more common “*im*” to mean “with,” implying that they are physically together but emotionally distant. Yosef joins his brothers and the sons of the handmaids, but he does not feel part of them. Yosef would shepherd along with his brothers, but unlike them, his heart is not in his work in the pasture.<sup>1</sup> “And the lad was with the sons of Bilha and with the sons of Zilpa, his father’s wives” – he is a “lad” (*na’ar*) alongside the sons of the handmaids. He feeds the flock with “his brothers;” he spends his youth with “the sons of Bilha and the sons of Zilpa.”

“And Yosef brought an evil report of them (*dibatam ra’a*) to their father” – the Masoretic cantillation places an *etnachta* (pause) before this clause, such that it applies to both preceding clauses. In other words, Yosef spoke badly of all his brothers to their father. He reports not “to his father,” a conspiratorial sharing of his feelings by virtue of his closeness to Yaakov, but rather “to their father.” He tells Yaakov out of a commitment to the truth; Yaakov should know what his sons are doing. The expression “*dibatam ra’a*” expresses a judgmental attitude towards his act; the text is critical of Yosef’s conduct here.

“And Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, for he was the son of his old age, and he made him a coat with long sleeves” – notably, the text uses the name “Yisrael,” denoting Yaakov’s destiny (as conveyed by the angel [32:29] or as bestowed by God [35:10]), rather than his person. What the text is describing is not the natural love of a father for his son, but rather the love of “Yisrael,” looking to the future greatness for which his son is destined. His love for Yosef “more than all his children” is a relative matter. This love is not a psychic movement directed towards Yosef, but rather his stance with regard to all his sons, reflecting his choice of leader.

“For he was the son of his old age” – Several questions arise here. In what way is the “son of one’s old age” special? Seemingly, the love for this son of his old age would make sense if it was “Yaakov” who loved him. But what does the fact that Yosef is the “son of his old age” have to do with the love of “Yisrael” for him? We might propose that Yaakov is already old; the other brothers have already grown up and made lives for themselves, while Yosef still occupies the special place of a “son of old age.”<sup>2</sup> There is some sort of inner bond – not from

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<sup>1</sup> This is expressed later in his dream about the family binding sheaves, engaged in agriculture.

<sup>2</sup> From Yaakov’s point of view, the birthright need not necessarily go to the firstborn. After all, Esav had been the firstborn, but he himself had bought it from him, and he had also taken the blessing from him through deceit. Now, too, the son who is chosen will be the one who is best suited, and not necessarily the eldest. Attention should also be paid to the fact that Yaakov’s choice of Yosef is made when Yosef is seventeen years old, when it is already clear to him how well suited Yosef is and how closely he follows his father’s path. In the background there is the fact that Reuven, the eldest, has committed a grave violation of his father’s honor. As we read in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (I 5:1-2), “And the sons of Reuven, the firstborn of Yisrael (for he was the firstborn, but, since he defiled his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef, the son of Yisrael – but not so as to have the birthright attributed to him by genealogy; for Yehuda prevailed over his brothers, and from him came the chief ruler, though the birthright went to

the primal place of a firstborn, but from a place of closeness to the son who embodies the advantage of maturity, causing the father to view Yosef as the son who, more than any of the brothers, will continue his path.<sup>3</sup> This description brings us back to the introductory statement, “And Yisrael loved...,” a stance that represents a worldview, a love that is the answer to the question, “Which son is the successor?” – a question familiar to any student of *Sefer Bereishit*. “And he made him a coat of long sleeves” – Yaakov’s love is not just an emotion. It is solid fact, in the form of a garment that symbolizes Yosef’s preferential status.<sup>4</sup>

The two verses we have examined suffice to clarify several facts: Yosef is one of the brothers, but he does not really belong; he is not a player on the same playing field. He shepherds “with” (*et*) his brothers in the technical sense alone; he is not “with” (*im*) them in spirit. At the same time, he is a youth “with” (*et*) the children of Bilha and Zilpa; he is not part of them. When he sees something improper among his brothers, he reports it to “their father.” The presentation of all of this as the opening scene of the story points to a realm that operates in Yaakov’s house separately from, or alongside, the domain of the father – the domain of the brothers.<sup>5</sup> Yosef is allied with his father; he reports to him on what

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Yosef).” From a broader perspective, Yaakov’s special relationship with Yosef may be traced to his love for Rachel, Yosef’s mother, and perhaps the fact that Yosef was also Rachel’s firstborn son. (In this sense, Yosef is the elder “son of Yaakov’s old age”, while Binyamin was the younger “son of his old age”.)

<sup>3</sup> An interesting *midrash* draws many ties between the life of the father and the life of the son: “These are the generations of Yaakov. Yosef...” – [The verse is formulated thus] because the events of Yosef’s life mirrored the events of Yaakov’s life. Just as the mother of Yaakov was barren, so the mother of Yosef was barren. Just as Yaakov’s mother gave birth to two sons, so Yosef’s mother gave birth to two sons. Just as Yaakov’s brother hated him, so Yosef’s brothers hated him. Just as Yaakov’s brother sought to kill him, so Yosef’s brothers sought to kill him. Just as Yaakov was a shepherd, so Yosef was a shepherd. Just as Yaakov was blessed with wealth, so Yosef was blessed with wealth. Just as Yaakov left *Eretz Yisrael*, so Yosef left *Eretz Yisrael*. Just as Yaakov married a wife outside of *Eretz Yisrael*, so Yosef married a wife outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. Just as Yaakov begat children outside of *Eretz Yisrael*, so Yosef begat children outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. Just as Yaakov was elevated by a dream, so Yosef was elevated by a dream. Just as Yaakov was the cause of his father’s household being blessed, so Yosef was the cause of his master’s house being blessed. Just as Yaakov was commanded, so Yosef was commanded. Just as Yaakov went down to Egypt, so Yosef went down to Egypt. Just as Yaakov was embalmed, so Yosef was embalmed. Just as Yaakov had his bones taken up, so Yosef had his bones taken up. Just as Yaakov was parted from his father for 22 years, so Yosef was parted from his father for 22 years, as it is written, ‘And Yosef was seventeen years old...’, and it is written, ‘And Yosef was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh’ (*Bereishit* 41:46). Add the seven years of plenty, and then two years [out of the seven] of famine, such that Yosef was 39 [when Yaakov came down to Egypt]. Deduct 17, and we are left with 22 [years that they were parted]” (*Pesikta Zutreta*, *Vayeshev* 37).

<sup>4</sup> There is one other place in *Tanakh* where a “coat of long sleeves” is mentioned. It is worn by Tamar, daughter of King David: “And upon her was a coat of long sleeves, for such robes were worn by the king’s daughters who were virgins...” (*Shmuel* II 13:18).

<sup>5</sup> The word “*echav*” (his brothers) is repeated over and over in this chapter, testifying to a realm that belongs to the brothers. It is a living, breathing “kingdom” of sorts, and its existence is expressed in many ways. Some examples: at a certain stage the brothers – as a group – leave Chevron and move to Shekhem. The story of the plot to kill Yosef, and afterwards to sell him, is

is happening in the other realm. The alliance is based on Yisrael's love for Yosef, with his preference taking physical, symbolic form in the coat, which in turn instills in Yosef the sense of being in a different place in relation to his brothers. He is part of the parental system in the household, not one of the brothers.

### The Brothers Respond

And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him. And Yosef dreamed a dream, and he told it to his brothers, and they hated him even more. And he said to them, "Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright, and behold, your sheaves stood round about, and bowed down to my sheaf." (37:4-7)

"And when his brothers saw..." – The text refers to them as "his brothers," rather than as "Yaakov's sons." In other words, the point of departure for their response is the relationship within the fraternal circle. This phrase precedes the mention of their hatred, and the reference to "his brothers" serves to arouse an expectation of fraternal equality. Since this expectation is not fulfilled and there is preferential treatment, hatred is born.<sup>6</sup> "For their father loved him" – "their" father, not Yosef's father. They have trouble with this reality in which their father shows preference for one of his sons. Seemingly, in keeping with the beginning of the clause – "their father loved him..." – the continuation should be "more than all *his sons*," but instead the text reads, "more than all *his brothers*." In the first part of the verse, the preference is described from the perspective of Yaakov, in relation to his sons. In the latter part, the text moves to the ramifications of this preference within the realm of the brothers. There is a system that is supposed to be egalitarian, but Yaakov has drawn Yosef out of the fraternal realm and given him a position of superiority.

The result is not long in coming. "They hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" – the first step is a hatred that burns in the heart, and its result is a ruining of communications, such that they can no longer speak peaceably. Theoretically, there could have been a situation of hatred while communication was still maintained, such that there would be some hope of repair. Speech has the ability to bridge differences and disagreements. But here the schism involves both the feelings of the heart and the level of interaction; there is no way of healing this hatred.<sup>7</sup>

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concocted within the group, and the secret of Yosef's sale was maintained by the group for 22 years. Yehuda goes down "from his brothers" – from the realm, or life system, of his brothers.

<sup>6</sup> Once this hatred surfaces, the brothers no longer refer to him as a "brother" (except for Yehuda, who continues to regard him as such).

<sup>7</sup> Attention should be paid to the fact that Yosef's name is not mentioned here; he is referred to simply in the third person, as "him," expressing distance and alienation.

“And Yosef dreamed a dream and he told it to his brothers” – This introduction to the next unit has Yosef addressing them as brothers and telling that he has had a dream. Their response is, “And they hated him even more.” The very fact that he seeks to tell them his dream is further reason for hatred. A dream symbolizes a person’s innermost wishes, and his wishes fan the flames of the hatred. “And he said to them, ‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed” – Yosef continues to invite them to listen, to enter his world. He seeks fraternal closeness instead of the hatred that he feels emanating from them.<sup>8</sup> There is no record of their response, whether positive or negative, and Yosef goes on to recount his dream: “Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field” – together, we were gathering and binding sheaves. “And behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright” – the sheaf that I was binding, my creation, arose; it gathered its strength and stood upright. “And behold, your sheaves stood round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.” My sheaf arose, and the response of your sheaves was to station themselves round about, and to bow down to my sheaf.

“And his brothers said to him, Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us? And they hated him all the more for his dreams and for his words.” They hate him for the dreams themselves, the arrogance towards the brothers that they represent, and also “for his words” – his lack of sensitivity in recounting such dreams to them.

Why is it so important to Yosef to tell them his dreams? Why is he not more sensitive to their feelings? We shall return to this question after addressing the next stage of the textual account.

### **A Man to Whom the Sun and Moon Bow Down**

And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it to his brothers, and said: “Behold, I have again dreamed a dream, and behold, the sun and the moon and the eleven stars bowed down to me.” And he told it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him, and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow down ourselves to you, to the earth?” And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind. (v. 9-11)

Unlike the situation surrounding his first dream, this time Yosef does not ask his brothers to listen. It is clear to him that they will not, and he is forced to break through into their world to make his voice heard. In contrast to the first dream, which was preceded by two introductory verses, this time, all that he says is contained in a single verse. Do the brothers hear him? Seemingly not. We might imagine him breaking into their sphere, forcing his dream upon them, and their responding by blocking their ears. This being the case, he prepares himself

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<sup>8</sup> His appeal to them occupies a whole verse by itself, hinting perhaps to its importance and to his desire that the brothers listen to him.

anew, and in the next verse he retells his story, this time not only to the brothers: “And he told it to his father and to his brothers” – Yosef seizes an opportunity when their father is present and his brothers will not be able to reject him, and he forces his dream upon them all.

Let us now turn our attention to the dream itself. The sun, the moon, and eleven stars all bow down to Yosef. The great luminaries, perceived as gods by other nations and cultures, are imagined by Yosef as bowing down to him. On a different level, his father, mother, and eleven brothers prostrate themselves before him. The reader is left incredulous: what on earth is Yosef thinking? What sort of image does he have of himself? Attention should be paid to the development between the two dreams. In the first, his own status is equal to that of the brothers who, like him, are gathering sheaves. The sheaves are the human enhancement or molding of that which grows naturally in the plant kingdom, and the idea emanating from the dream is, “Your creations/actions bow down to my creations/actions.” In the second dream, Yosef occupies a completely different status from them. He is not one of the stars, one of the heavenly bodies, but rather himself, Yosef. The sun, moon and stars are the family members, bowing before Yosef. The heavenly bodies belong to the sphere of *beria*; they are elevated far beyond this world. And Yosef envisions this heavenly host bowing before him.

The first response comes from Yaakov: “And his father rebuked him, and said to him, ‘What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow down ourselves to you, to the earth?’” Yaakov reacts to the idea of the whole family bowing before Yosef, rather than to the imagery of the sun and the moon. But what about the brothers? After the father’s rebuke, they respond with jealousy: “And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.” This is a new situation, unlike what has come before. Yosef has taken up a superior stance; his father has heard him and has sounded a partial rebuke. The brothers understand that there is something to this dream, and they are jealous. Yaakov, too, understands that there is more to the matter, and he keeps it in mind, filing it away for the long term.

Earlier, we wondered about Yosef’s lack of sensitivity towards his brothers, and now we see how far his disregard for their feelings extends, to what extent he fails to see what his words are doing to them. From the first dream, we infer a fundamental desire for communication, with Yosef addressing himself to them as “his brothers,” adopting a fraternal attitude and attempting to have them listen to him. However, the content of his dream is unacceptable to them; they cannot listen to it. The second time, Yosef takes a different route, ensuring that they will be exposed to his dream, whatever it takes. What is the meaning of this insensitivity? Where does it come from?

It seems that Yosef's behavior towards them comprises two elements. The first is an inner urge, perhaps something like a prophecy burning within him,<sup>9</sup> and he wants to share it with his family. The question of what this does to them does not concern him. We have already noted the special nurturing of Yosef as the "son of old age," how he was closer to his father in outlook than he was to his brothers. Accordingly, he is described as reporting to his father on their activities, based on the assumption that "it can't be that their father will not know what his sons are doing." The content of the dreams, culminating in the host of heaven, his parents and entire family, bowing down before him, is likewise connected to the special way in which he has been nurtured as someone whose natural place is on the adults' playing field. Another aspect of this fact is that Yosef enjoys his father's patronage and therefore is not exposed to the results of his actions and the damage to his relationship with his brothers. He tells the brothers whatever he feels in his heart, but does not really listen to their response, because he is not really one of them; he is not part of their society.<sup>10</sup>

### **On the Road to Shekhem**

And his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shekhem. And Yisrael said to Yosef, "Are your brothers not feeding the flock in Shekhem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." And he said to him, "Go, I pray you, see whether it is well with your brothers, and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me." So he sent him from the valley of Chevron, and he came to Shekhem. (w. 122-14)

Yaakov does not send his sons; they go of their own accord. It is not "the sons of Yaakov" who go, nor even "the brothers," but rather "his (Yosef's) brothers." This appellation serves to indicate the reason for their going: "his brothers" want to distance themselves from him. He is in Chevron, and they take themselves all the way to the region of Shekhem! The Masoretic text places an *etnachta* on the word "*echav*," thereby creating two different subjects of the verse: Yosef's brothers distance themselves from him, and – at the same time – they take their father's assets, his flocks, to graze in Shekhem. They distance themselves, as it were, with a declaration that this does not imply a permanent severance from their home; on the contrary, they remain loyal to their father and

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<sup>9</sup> This is how Yosef refers to his dreams when he recognizes his brothers in Egypt; he remembers the dreams and tries to bring about their realization: "And Yosef recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And Yosef remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and he said to them, 'You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land'" (*Bereishit* 42:8).

<sup>10</sup> If someone who is a brother among his brethren reports his brothers to their father, he will pay a price when he returns to his brothers, and the next time he will think twice before speaking badly of them. Yosef, in contrast, speaks badly of his brothers over and over again, but thanks to his father's patronage, their response need not concern him.

take care of his flocks. By means of this message, it would seem, they seek to reassert and assure their place in relation to their father.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, Yosef's father appeals to him: "And Yisrael said to Yosef, 'Are your brothers not feeding the flock in Shekhem? Come, I will send you to them.'" The heading, "Yisrael," imbues this mission with special importance, relating to the family's destiny. The introductory question, "Are you brothers not feeding the flock in Shekhem?" indicates his expectations of Yosef: "Are they not your brothers? Is the distance between you not lamentable?" It seems eminently reasonable that Yosef should be dispatched to them, to close the distance that has opened and widened. At this stage, there is no defined mission; the subject is the dispatch itself. Yosef responds with a single word – "*hineni*" (Here I am) – and in light of what happens afterwards, this word fills us with dread.

What is Yaakov thinking? Does he not imagine the possibility that the brothers will harm Yosef? And what is Yosef thinking when he answers, "*hineni*"? It is difficult not to conclude that Yaakov misreads the situation, that he lacks an understanding of the place of the brothers. Yosef's unqualified readiness likewise testifies to a wholehearted devotion, but also a lack of comprehension. Yaakov takes another step and defines Yosef's mission: "And he said to him, 'Go, I pray you, and see whether it is well with your brothers, and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me.'" Yosef's stance represents his worldview; he sets off as his father's emissary, going to check on his father's sons and to bring back word of them. One discerns a contradiction between Yaakov's two utterances. First, he says, "Are your brothers not feeding the flocks in Shekhem?" – suggesting that going to check on their welfare is the most natural thing in the world. But after Yosef expresses his readiness, Yaakov prefaces his request with the words, "Go, I pray you" – revealing a sense that this journey is not a simple matter. The description of the purpose of the journey, giving equal weight to the wellbeing of the brothers and the wellbeing of the flocks, likewise suggests minimal contact with the brothers, just as there will be minimal contact with the flocks. What Yaakov asks of Yosef, then, is that he go and establish that all is well, and then immediately return and notify him.<sup>12</sup>

And so "he sent him from the valley of Chevron, and he came to Shekhem." The expression "valley of Chevron" demands our attention, indicating, as it does, Yaakov's state of being as he sends Yosef off. Just as the prior reference to him as "Yisrael" served to cast the mission in a broader perspective,

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<sup>11</sup> This would seem to be the message of the *midrash* that states, "And his brothers went to feed *et* [direct object] their father's flock' – the dots that appear above the word *et* indicate that they went for their own benefit [literally, 'to feed themselves' or 'to take themselves to pasture']" (*Bereishit Rabba, Vayeshev* 84).

<sup>12</sup> What causes the shift between the first utterance and the second? Perhaps it is Yosef's unreserved "*hineni*" that awakens new awareness in Yaakov. In a sort of exchange of roles, Yosef expresses wholehearted, unqualified dedication – thereby obliging Yaakov, as it were, to take a step back and hold Yosef's dedication in check, in view of the danger that it invites.

this expression lends his words meaning that goes beyond the simple level. The Sages of the *midrash* speak of the historical angle underlying the mission:

“And bring back word to me; and he sent him from the valley of (*emek*) Chevron...” – But is Chevron not located on a mountain? Why then is it written, “He sent him from *the valley* of Chevron”? R. Acha said: He went in order to carry out that profound (*amok*) counsel that the Holy One, blessed be He, had placed between Himself and the pleasant friend [Avraham], who was buried in Chevron: “And they shall subjugate them and afflict them [for four hundred years]...” (*Bereishit Rabba*, *Vayeshev* 84)

### **“And Behold, He Was Wandering in the Field”**

And a man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, saying, “What do you seek?” And he said, “I seek my brothers; tell me, I pray you, where are they feeding the flocks?” And the man said, “They have departed from here, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dotan.’” And Yosef went after his brothers and found them in Dotan. (v. 15-17)

“And a man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field” – Interestingly, it is not Yosef who is the subject of this verse, but rather the “man.”<sup>13</sup> It is the man who finds, and also the man who asks, “What do you seek?” Something of the confidence, the active voice, that has characterized Yosef up to this point has been lost. At home, he was the dominant party, while the brothers maintained a defensive position. Now, he is headed for their realm, and just a moment before the encounter, something happens to him. He loses his inner compass; he is led, rather than leading. “And the man asked him, saying, ‘What do you seek?’” – this is not a merely technical question. The man asks what is in his heart, and a meaningful dialogue develops between them. “And he said, ‘I seek my brothers; tell me, I pray you, where are they feeding the flocks?’” It is my brothers whom I seek; tell me, I pray you, where are they feeding the flocks?” This is a very special request, a utopian wish. “My brothers” – a longing for them precedes the “I seek.” In response to the man’s question as to what it is that he truly wants, Yosef expresses a primal desire for closeness. Then he translates this amorphous feeling into material specifics, asking where they have gone with the flocks.

“And the man said, ‘They have departed from here, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dotan’” – The man knows where the brothers have headed, and his response seems to hint to them distancing themselves even further from Yosef. So far, the brothers have moved from Chevron to Shekhem; now, they are

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<sup>13</sup> This verse contains an allusion to the command to restore lost property: “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering, you shall surely restore it to him” (*Shemot* 23:4). In this sense, Yosef is the “wandering,” lost item that is found by this man.

moving even further north, to Dotan. “And Yosef went after his brothers and found them in Dotan” – he goes not “to his brothers,” but rather “after his brothers.” He simply follows where they have already gone, assuming a secondary, mimicking, marginal position in relation to them – a marked difference from the relations that have governed them thus far. It is interesting to note that a moment before the fateful encounter, Yosef has adopted a new and different stance in relation to his brothers – not the superiority that he has maintained up until now, but rather a seeking of them, a desire to draw close to them, to follow them.

### **“And They Saw Him From Afar”**

And they saw him from afar, and even before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, “Behold, this dreamer comes. Come now, therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, ‘An evil beast devoured him,’ and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” (v. 18-20)

“And they saw him from afar, and even before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him” – The brothers see Yosef from a distance, and from a position of distance they conspire to kill him. Why? The reason is not given explicitly, but the context suggests that what leads them to this extreme suggestion is the “distance” itself, the long process of distancing that has brought them to this point. “And they said one to another, ‘Behold, this dreamer (*ba’al chalomot*) comes” – the dreams themselves are mentioned later on, but the reference to Yosef at this stage as a “*ba’al chalomot*” is somewhat demonizing, and perhaps has some bearing on the nature of the solution that they propose: “Come now, therefore, let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, ‘An evil beast devoured him’ – and we will see what will become of his dreams.” There are three statements here. First, “Come now, let us slay him” – “come now” denotes a transition from one position to another, giving expression to the fact that killing Yosef is not a self-evident solution. The second stage involves creating a cover story to explain his disappearance: “And we shall cast him in one of the pits, and we shall say, ‘An evil beast devoured him.’” Finally, “we shall see what will become of his dreams.” The brothers smirk at the contrast between Yosef’s great dreams and a corpse cast into a random pit, between the dream and its realization.

How distant the stance of the brothers is now from that of Yosef; how great a chasm separates them. Yosef walks alone from Chevron to Shekhem in search of his brothers. On the way he becomes lost, making place in his heart for thoughts of them and longing: “I seek my brothers.” Finally, he appears to them from afar. They are not aware of what is going on in his heart, but even if they were, it would seem that it is already too late. Their hatred is too strong and they already have a clear plan in place – to kill him and to cover up the traces of their deed by claiming that a wild animal devoured him. Such is the extent of the

chasm separating their separate worlds at that moment. As the episode unfolds, there is a softening in the position of the brothers: first through Reuven, who prevents them from killing Yosef with their bare hands, and later through Yehuda, who prepares the ground for Yosef's sale.

## **A Summary of Sorts**

In this *shiur*, we have looked at familiar verses that describe what happened between Yosef and his brothers up until the fateful encounter in Dotan, which ended in catastrophe. We identified some features of Yosef's character and spiritual worldview. Yosef is nurtured by his father and elevated above his brothers, and this fact creates two movements in his psyche. One entails his assumption of grand proportions. He is perceived as his father's successor, as his emissary in relation to the brothers, as stating the truth plainly and openly, with no accounting to anyone and no apologies. This attitude is projected into his dreams, which take him far, depicting him as someone who stands above and beyond the natural world, and even above the rest of his family. Eventually, after many years, his dreams will become reality; he will sit on the viceroy's throne in Egypt, God will accompany him in all that he does, and he will be able to sustain his entire family during the difficult years of famine.

The second inner movement concerns the ramifications of this sense of importance on his relationship with his brothers. They find their father's preferential treatment of one brother unbearable. The results are hatred, jealousy, and – eventually – a conspiracy to kill him. Yosef's lack of involvement in the fraternal realm and his failure to assume responsibility for the relationship between them are unforgivable – and he pays a heavy price, exiled far from his family for many years. Ultimately, this rejection becomes part of the family's journey; the far-away Yosef grows to become second to the king of a huge empire. Amazingly, he grows in the spiritual realm, too, thanks to the constant presence of God, Who accompanies him wherever he goes,<sup>14</sup> and to his withstanding the tests by virtue of which he becomes known as “Yosef the Righteous.” His return to the bosom of the family carries the potential of a fresh, new encounter between the elevated world that Yosef inhabits and the brothers, between Yaakov's family and the man who exists far above and beyond the accounting of this world.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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<sup>14</sup> “And the Lord was with Yosef, and he was a successful man, and he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand... And it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Yosef's sake, and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had in the house, and in the field;” “And the Lord was with Yosef, and showed him mercy, and gave him favor in the sight of the officer of the prison... The keeper of the prison did not look to anything that was under his hand; because the Lord was with him, and that which he did, the Lord made it to prosper” (39:21-23); and more.