



Parashat Vayeshev – A Whodunnit in Several Acts

Rabbi Jim Rogozen

Headmaster

Rogozen@grossschechter.org

Earlier this week the 7A class and I read through the story of how Yoseph's jealous brothers, out tending flocks, conspired to kill him when he came to visit them. We already knew that they sold him to a passing caravan heading down to Egypt, but we wanted to uncover each brother's role in the drama. I asked them two questions, "Who did it?" and "What did they do?"

If you read carefully, as we did, you'll note that all but two brothers wanted to kill Yoseph right away, and then show his bloody coat to his father as proof that an animal had attacked him. The two exceptions were Reuven and Yehuda. Reuven wanted to put him in a pit, so that he could get him later and bring him home. Yehuda suggested they sell him to the passing Ishmaelite traders. Which of the two brothers was more compassionate? Heroic?

Some of the students pointed out that Reuven's plan was only a temporary solution: if Yoseph were returned home, the brothers would simply find another opportunity to get rid of him. Yehuda's plan, on the other hand, would permanently move Yoseph (to Egypt), far away from his angry brothers. Perhaps, they suggested, Yehuda is the real hero.

We then talked about the longer-term implications of the three plans (kill him, drop him in a pit, sell him). Had Yoseph been killed immediately or at a later opportunity, Jewish history as we know it may have turned out very differently. For it was Yoseph's arrival in Egypt that set off an important chain of events: Yoseph's "grain storage plan" saves Egypt during a drought, his family comes down to Egypt, the Israelites eventually become enslaved to Pharaoh, God sees their suffering, sends Moshe, they leave Egypt, receive the Torah, then enter the Holy Land. Selling Yoseph allowed all of that to happen. The very character traits that angered his brothers, and almost got him killed, helped Yoseph in Egypt...and the rest is history.

So Yehuda's plan worked. But why Yehuda? Two possibilities. One, Yehuda received a *n'vu'ah* (a prophecy) that helped him see the long-term plan. Two, he was simply quick on his feet – "get that kid Yoseph out of here" – nothing deeper than that.

There is a third answer, but first a little field trip, to the end of the book of *Breisheet*, to Yaakov's death-bed blessings to his children. Reuven, the first son, doesn't come out so well. Yaakov criticizes him for his liaison with one of Yaakov's concubines. The second and third sons, Shimon and Levi, also draw critique for their attack on Schechem. It is the fourth son, Yehuda, who receives big heaps of praise. In fact, Yaakov says that leadership of the

Jewish People will always rest with Yehuda's descendants. Could this be due to Yehuda's role in getting Yoseph down to Egypt? Probably not. Yaakov didn't know the end of the story: about the Israelites becoming slaves, leaving Egypt, and receiving the Torah. This prediction seems out of place. So now we have another mystery to solve!

So what's the third alternative explanation of Yehuda's role, and how does it explain his blessing? Here goes:

We know that the Israelites were organized by *shvatim* (tribes, named after Yakov's sons). After wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites entered the Land and spread out to the various tribal lands assigned to them by Moshe. There is a theory that posits that each tribe's storytelling was very similar, but that they often highlighted the Biblical characters that came from their own tribe. As invaders conquered the northern territories, all of the Israelites moved south. As they came together, leaders wanted to unify the Jewish People, which meant that the various "versions" of Torah stories had to be blended into one common text. This final version of the Bible was, according to the theory, consciously edited to reflect the (then) current realities (of around 400 BCE). Guess which tribe's land everyone was living in at that time? Yehuda! It would make sense then, that the story of Yoseph's brothers was "edited" to make Yehuda the brother whose solution was the one that paid off in the end. This also explains how Yaakov could "predict" which tribe would be the source of future leadership. Was it really Yehuda who saved the day? Maybe it was really Reuven? In terms of the "big picture" all that mattered was that Yoseph, then his family, got down to Egypt to set up the "big Exodus story."

It was a pleasure studying with the 7th graders, attempting to distinguish between the actual text (*peshat*) from interpretation (*drash*), as well as trying to separate the details from the big picture.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Jim Rogozen

AS A FAMILY:

Each of three explanations we discussed has its pros and cons; each of them will resonate differently, depending on the reader. Imagine how the youngest and oldest children in your family will react! I encourage you to study each week's *parasha* with your children...there's always more than meets the eye!

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S PARSHA TRY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What did Yaakov give to Yoseph?
2. How many dreams does Yoseph have?
3. What were his dreams?
4. How do you think the brothers felt about Yoseph?
5. How do you think the brothers felt about their father, Yaakov?
6. What do the brothers do to Yoseph?
7. Were all of them involved?
8. How was each guilty?

9. Who is Tamar?
10. What is her relationship to Yehuda?
11. What happens to Yoseph in Egypt?