

## The Selling of Yosef

### New Translation with Integrated Commentary

[Gen. 37:1] Yaakov settled in the land of Canaan, where his father was a sojourner. [2] Despite having many children, Yaakov saw Yosef as his true descendant, because he was the son of his first and true love, Rachel. Though Binyamin was also Rachel's, he carried the burden of being the one who caused her death, and was therefore fully embraced by Yaakov only after Yosef's disappearance. Yosef was assigned to work with the children of Bilha and Zilpa, because the sons of Leah harbored hatred towards him, as their mothers did towards each other. Yosef, still immature, would tell his father what his brothers did, painting them in a negative light. [3] Israel loved Yosef more than all his sons and made for him a special robe. [4] His brothers understood that he is favored over them and hated him. They could not bring themselves to greet him. [5-7] Yosef had a dream in which his brothers' sheaves were bowing to his. He believed that if he told his brothers the dream, they will accept it as prophecy and will start loving him, but it just intensified their hatred. [8] They told him: "do you really think that you will become our king and ruler?" and they now hated him more for both his dreams and his gossip. [9] He then had another dream and told his brothers that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to him. [10] His brothers did not respond, so he told it to them again in his father's presence. His father rebuked him: "what is that silly dream? Do you think that I, your mother, and your brothers will come to bow down to you?" [11] His brothers grew jealous of him, because they felt that the rebuke was not genuine, and that his father [not theirs!!!] is keeping the dream in mind, maybe even hoping for it to be realized.

[12] His brothers went to tend to their father's flocks in Shekhem. [13] Yaakov, who understood that he is causing tension between the brothers, and maybe felt Yosef's desire to be accepted by them, told him: "your brothers are with the flocks in Shekhem, can I send you to them?" He said:

“I am ready!” [14] He said: “go and see how they and the flocks are doing and let me know.” He sent him from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shekhem, but his brothers were not there. [15] A man found him wandering and searching in the field and asked him: “what are you looking for?” [16] Yosef said: “I am looking for the physical whereabouts of my brothers, but I am also craving their acceptance, I want to feel that I am their brother.” [17] The man said: “they left this place, I know that because I have heard them saying that they plan to go to Dotan. The man is anonymous, and the encounter demonstrates how fleeting moments can change the course of history. Had Yosef not met him, the slavery in Egypt and the Exodus would not have happened the way they did. Even after hearing the man, Yosef could have chosen to go back home, but he was desperate to meet his brothers away from his father’s sphere of influence, and so he followed them to Dotan. [18] They saw him from afar, and before allowing themselves to feel close to him, some of the brothers plotted to kill him. [19] To override the little love they had for him and their father, they verbalized their opinion of him: “here comes the master of dreams, [20] let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits, and see how his dreams would be realized then”. [21] Reuven heard that and saved him from them, saying: “we shall not kill him.” [22] Reuven said to them: “do not shed blood, just throw him into that pit in the desert, and do not raise your hand against him.” He said that with the intention of saving him from their hand and bring him back to his father, but he was afraid to say that, and his plan failed miserably. [23] When Yosef came to his brothers, they shocked him by grabbing him and stripping him of his robe, of his special, hated robe he wore as a symbol of being superior. [24] Yosef pleaded with them to have mercy, but they hardened their hearts and ignored him. They took him and threw him into the pit, which was devoid of water, thus assuring that he will die of thirst. [25] Disturbed by his screams and pleadings they went to sit in a remote place and eat their bread. Their meal was for some a vindication and for others an attempt to cover up for their nervousness following the wicked, treacherous act. They saw from afar an Ishmaelite caravan coming from Gilad in the north, carrying spices on their camels to sell in Egypt. [25] Yehudah, who was not aware of Reuven’s plan to save Yosef, devised his own plan and told the brothers: “what will we gain from killing our brother and covering up the murder?” [27] He understood that some brothers felt so strongly about Yosef, that they will not agree to save him and return him home, and therefore suggested: “let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and we will not raise our hand against him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers accepted his suggestion.

[28] While the brothers were debating, Midyanite merchants passed by the pit. They heard screams, and when they approached the pit they found Yosef, naked and petrified. They pulled him up and for twenty silver coins, sold him to the Ishmaelites who brought him to Egypt.

[29] Reuven went back to the pit, but alas, where previously there was no water, not there was no Yosef in the pit. He tore his clothes in agony and despair. [30] He returned to his brothers and said: “the boy is gone! Me, what am I going to do? How can I face my father?” [31] Without saying a word, his brothers took Yosef’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. [32] They did not have the face or heart to present it to Yaakov, so they sent it with a messenger. They told him to deliver that message: “we have found this, please identify! Is it your son’s robe or not?” Their words pierced their father’s heart like poisoned arrows. He suspected that they are the culprits, but they have protected themselves from retribution by using the same elements he used to trick his father and brother, a goat and special garments. Had he confronted them, they would have asked him why it was fine for him to trick his father. He probably did not miss their labeling of Yosef as “your son”. Instead of calling him Yosef they used the opportunity to jab him for considering Yosef his only son.

[33] Yaakov identified the robe and said: “it is my son’s robe! A wild beast ate him! Yosef has been devoured!” [34] Yaakov tore his robes and girded himself with sackcloth, and he mourned his son for many years. [35] All his sons and daughters attempted to console him, but he refused to be comforted, saying: “When I go down to Sheol [the underworld] to join my son, I will still be mourning.” His father mourned him. [36] The Midyanites [מדִיָּאִיִּם] were the ones who sold him, through the Ishmaelites, to the Egyptian minister Potifar, the chief executioner, but the real reason for his suffering was the fight [מִדְּוָיִם] between the brothers.

Chapter 37 of Genesis leaves us with some insights about our interactions with others and about taking responsibility:

**The importance of communication and empathy:** Yaakov, immersed in his mourning for Rachel, failed to see that his preferential treatment of Yosef is alienating the brothers from him and from Yosef; Yosef failed to understand that he will not win his brothers’ friendship by flaunting his superiority, and did not realize how deep was their hatred for him; The brothers refused to empathize with their father and understand that it is his longing for Rachel that makes

him treat Yosef the way he did, and that if they showered the young orphan with love, he would return that love.

**Negligible things are sometimes impactful:** the random encounter with the man in the field and the additional value of Yosef's robe played a crucial role in the selling of Yosef and the eventual slavery in Egypt.

**One's actions come back to haunt him:** Yaakov tricked his father using goats and garments, and he was tricked by his sons in the same manner. In chapter 38, Yehudah will be similarly tricked by Tamar.

**Finally, we learn about responsibility and transparency:** Reuven and Yehudah both wanted to save Yosef, but since they were not able to confront the other brothers for fear of being overruled, they pretended to be with them, thus losing him completely. Had they stood up for him, they might have discovered that other brothers agree with them. Then, after Yosef has disappeared, the brothers cover up for it, instead of confessing their sin to their father. Had they done that, they could have searched for him immediately, and maybe even find him. By lying to Yaakov, they have erected a wall of suspicion between them, an ominous presence in their relationships with their father that took away the little connection they had. Years later, when they ask their father to send Binyamin in order to bring back the captive Shimon and some food for the starving families, he refuses, telling them: "You know that I only had two sons from my only wife. One has left me, and I had no choice but to believe that he was devoured. If you take this one as well [as you did to his brother], a disaster will surely befall him, and you will bring me down to Sheol with agony!" It is a clear and open condemnation. They would have been better off admitting their actions, but once you start covering up it is very hard to retract the lie.

May we learn from this tragic story to be communicative, receptive, and emphatic, to pay attention to the seemingly marginal things, and to be transparent and responsible.

Shabbat Shalom