



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Vayeshev (וישב, "and he settled")**
- **Chapters: Genesis 37:1–40:23**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah (i.e., Vayishlach) recounted how Jacob had wrestled with a mysterious Angel before returning to the Promised Land to be reconciled with his brother Esau. No longer named *Ya'akov* ("heel holder" [of Esau]), but *Yisrael* ("prince of God"), a transformed Jacob finally returned to Hebron to see his father Isaac, nearly 34 years after he had left home. However, on the way back home his beloved wife Rachel died while giving birth to his twelfth son Benjamin.

This week's portion begins with Jacob living back in the land promised to Abraham and Isaac with his 12 sons, but the narrative quickly turns to Jacob's favorite son Joseph, who was seventeen years old at the time. The Torah states that Jacob loved Joseph more than all his other sons since he was "the son of his old age," and he was the firstborn son of his wife Rachel. Indeed, Jacob made him an ornamented tunic to indicate his special status in the family.

As the favored son, Joseph's job was to oversee the activities of Jacob's concubines sons (Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher) and to bring "reports" about their activities back to Jacob. However, this role as the overseer and "favored son" was too much for the other brothers, and they soon became jealous of him and hated him. To make matters worse, Joseph related two dreams to his brothers that foretold that he was destined to rule over them, increasing their envy and hatred of him (the implication of the dreams was that all of Jacob's family would become subservient to him). Jacob rebuked Joseph for arousing his brothers' hatred, but he inwardly took note and waited for the fulfillment of the dreams.

One day, the brothers led their herds to pastureland near Shechem, the place where Simon and Levi, the two hotheaded sons of Leah, had earlier killed all the town's inhabitants on account of the violation of their sister Dinah. Jacob was apparently still concerned about the reputation he had in the area and sent Joseph to check up on their welfare. Joseph, however, learned that his brothers had left for Dothan, and followed them there.

Upon arriving in Dothan, the brothers "saw Joseph from afar" and immediately conspired to kill him. However, Reuben (the disgraced firstborn son) tried to circumvent their plan by suggesting that they merely throw him into a pit to "shake him up a bit" (secretly planning to come back later to rescue him). When Joseph finally arrived, they stripped him of his ornamented tunic and (as Reuben suggested) threw him into a nearby pit. Then they sat down to eat.



Soon the brothers noticed some Midianites driving a caravan bearing spices to Egypt, and Judah suggested it would be better to sell Joseph as a slave to them. The brothers agreed this new plan, sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver, and watched as Joseph was bound and taken away to Egypt.

Reuben, who apparently was away while all this happened, returned to find Joseph gone and tore his clothes in horror and dismay. The brothers then staged Joseph's death by dipping his special tunic into goat's blood and bringing it to their father, who (mistakenly) inferred that his son had been killed by a wild animal. Jacob then mourned Joseph for many days. But meanwhile the Midianites had sold Joseph to an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh named Potiphar, the captain of the guard.

The story of Joseph is then "interrupted" to relate an incident in the life of Judah, who had separated from his brothers, married a Canaanite woman named Shua, and had three children: Er, Onan and Shelah. When his eldest son Er came of age, Judah married him to a Canaanite woman named Tamar. However, Er was wicked in the eyes of the LORD and died childless. Judah then promised her his second son Onan (according to the custom of levirate marriage, that is, the brother of a man who dies childless is obligated to give a child to his brother's widow, to be raised in his brother's name with his brother's inheritance of land). Onan sinned by "spilling his seed" in order to avoid the obligation, and the LORD slew him for this. At this point, Judah was reluctant to give his third son to marry Tamar, but (misleadingly) told her he would do so as soon as Shelah came of age.

After realizing that Judah was not going to fulfill his promise to give his son Shelah in marriage to her, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced Judah himself. When Judah later heard that his daughter-in-law had become pregnant, he called for her to be burned at the stake, but when Tamar produced his pledge of payment to her for her "services," he publicly confessed that he was the father. Tamar then gave birth to twin sons, Zerah and Perez, the latter being a direct ancestor of King David (and through him, Yeshua the Messiah).

After this unseemly account of Judah and Tamar, the portion resumes the saga of Joseph. Despite the injustice and treachery of his brothers, the LORD was "with Joseph" and blessed everything he did. In fact, soon he was promoted to be the head of Potiphar's entire household affairs.

The Torah describes Joseph as a handsome man and soon Potiphar's wife began soliciting him to have an affair with her. Joseph steadfastly refused her repeated advances, but one day she threw herself upon him when no one was in the house. When Joseph tried to flee from her grasp, she caught him by the garment and pulled it off of him before he ran away. Humiliated and defeated, she then decided to slander Joseph and falsely accused him of attempted rape to her husband.

Potiphar was understandably outraged (at his wife?) and threw young Joseph into the royal dungeon, but again God showed him favor there and he immediately gained the trust and admiration of his jailers, who appointed him to a position of authority in the prison administration.

The portion ends with episodes in Joseph's life that eventually would bring him to the attention of Pharaoh himself. While in prison, Joseph met Pharaoh's wine steward and chief baker, both incarcerated for offending their master (according to Rashi, a fly was found in the goblet prepared by the butler, and a pebble in the baker's confection). Both men had disturbing dreams which Joseph correctly interpreted; in three days, he told them, the wine steward would be released but the baker would be hanged. Joseph then asked the wine steward to advocate for his release with Pharaoh. Joseph's predictions were fulfilled, but the wine steward forgot all about Joseph...



Parashah Questions



1. What does *vayeshev* (וַיֵּשֶׁב) mean? (Gen. 37:1) ¹
2. Why did Jacob dwell in Hebron in Canaan? ²
3. What do the sages say about Jacob's desire to "settle" in the land? ³
4. Why does the Torah say, "These are the generations of Jacob," and then go on to discuss Joseph? (37:2) ⁴
5. What was Joseph's job in the family? ⁵
6. How old was Joseph when he went out to check on his brothers? ⁶
7. How does the Torah describe Joseph's report of his brothers to his father? ⁷
8. Why did Jacob love Joseph more than his other sons? (37:3) ⁸
9. What special present did Jacob give Joseph, and why? ⁹
10. Why did the brothers hate Joseph? (37:4) ¹⁰

¹ The word *vayeshev* means "and he settled," from the verb *ישב*, "to dwell."

² Earlier we read that Jacob went to Hebron and Esau went to the land of Seir (35:27). Here the Torah repeats that Jacob settled in the land of Canaan where his father lived (i.e., Hebron), to allude to the fact that Isaac protected Jacob and his family from Esau.

³ They say that Jacob encountered great testing because he was willing to "settle" in the land rather than to see himself as a "stranger" and temporary visitor (as did Abraham and Isaac).

⁴ This alludes to the fact that Joseph was to be regarded as the first born son of Jacob (rather than Reuben). Also this alludes to the fact that it was Joseph who was responsible for the most important episode of Jacob's life, namely his emigration to Egypt.

⁵ He was in charge of the sons of the two concubines (Bilhah and Zilpah), namely Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

⁶ Joseph was 17 years old.

⁷ Joseph's report is called a "bad report" (*דְּבַר רָעָה*), which has overtones of *lashon hara*, defamation, etc. According to midrash, Joseph told Jacob that the sons of Leah were eating unclean meat and flirting with the local girls, and moreover that they were mocking the sons of the concubines as "sons of slaves," even though Jacob had given both women their freedom before he married them....

⁸ "Because he was the son of his old age" (*כִּי בֶן־זְקֻנִים הוּא*). Jacob also undoubtedly loved Joseph because he was the firstborn son (*bechor*) of his beloved wife Rachel. Joseph was also said to be highly intelligent and a Torah scholar who studied directly from his grandfather Isaac from the time he was a very young child. For this reason Joseph is called *ben zekunim*, the son of a "Torah sage," even though Benjamin was the youngest son.

⁹ Jacob gave Joseph an ornamented tunic (*ketonet passim*: *כֵּתָנֶת פְּסִים*), to indicate his special status in the family. This long colorful coat was made of silk and woven with beautiful patterns and figures.

¹⁰ When they understood that Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons, the brothers became jealous and hated him out of envy. The sages also say that by describing him as a "lad," the Torah implies that Joseph was a bit vain about his appearance and perhaps a bit arrogant.



11. List some ways that Joseph resembled his father Jacob. ¹¹
12. What was the dream Joseph shared with his brothers, and how did they react to it? (37:5-8) ¹²
13. How many dreams did Joseph share with his brothers? (37:8) ¹³
14. What other dream did Joseph share with his brothers, and what was the reaction of the father? (37:9-11) ¹⁴
15. Were the brothers justified in hating Joseph? ¹⁵
16. What does it mean that his father “kept the matter in hand”? (37:11) ¹⁶
17. Why does the Torah say the brothers were jealous of Joseph? (37:11) ¹⁷
18. Where was Shechem located? (37:12) ¹⁸
19. What were Joseph’s brothers doing in Shechem? ¹⁹



¹¹ Both had a mother who was initially barren and then had two sons. Both were considered the firstborn of their mothers (Jacob was regarded as such by Rebekah from the beginning). The mothers of both had troubled pregnancies and childbirths. Both had brothers who hated them and wanted to kill them. Both lived in exile from their homeland. Both had a special love for Rachel, Jacob’s chosen bride... For these reasons Jacob loved and identified with his son Joseph.

¹² The brothers’ bundles of wheat bowed down to his bundle of wheat. His brothers (prophetically) interpreted the dream that Joseph would reign and rule over them – and they hated him even more for the dream. Note that midrash says that Joseph interpreted the dream to mean that the time would come when the brothers would have to come to him for food. Note also that the word *hinei* (behold!) is mentioned three times in 37:7, alluding to the three times when the brothers would later come to Egypt and stand before Joseph.

¹³ We are not sure, though the text says, “they hated him all the more for his dreams” (plural). This implies that before Joseph shared the dream about the sheaves he had shared some other dreams with his brothers...

¹⁴ The sun (Jacob), the moon (Rachel = “your mother” or Bilhah, who raised Joseph as her own son after the death of Rachel), and the eleven stars (the other brothers – including Benjamin – all bowed down to him. Jacob then scolded Joseph for sharing the dream, though he prophetically interpreted his son’s coming rule in Egypt. The brothers, on the other hand, were made furious and even more jealous.

¹⁵ This is a discussion question.

¹⁶ The Hebrew text (אָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדְּבָר) can mean 1) that Jacob believed that Joseph’s dreams would come true, or 2) that God the Father guarded the promise revealed in the dream to his son.

¹⁷ The brothers realized that the dreams were prophetic and that divine providence was at work. The brothers also understood that Jacob believed the dream that Joseph would “rule over his brothers,” even if there was some question as to whether Jacob believed that Joseph would rule over him, and this caused them to be jealous.

¹⁸ Shechem is located about 35 miles north of Jerusalem and first appears in Gen. 12:6-8 regarding the “great tree of Moreh” and Abraham’s altar to the Lord there. Later, the sons of Jacob avenged their sister’s rape by annihilating the inhabitants of this region, and still later Joseph was kidnapped and sold near there. Joshua 24:32 identifies the general area of Shechem as the resting-place of Joseph after the Exodus.

¹⁹ They went to tend their father’s sheep. Note that the Hebrew text is unusual here (וַיִּלְכוּ אֲחֵיו לְרֹעוֹת אֶת־צֹאן), and the mark “et” is written with dots over it in the Torah scroll (to indicate a contrary). The sages say that the brothers primary purpose for going to Shechem was to plot what to do with Joseph...



20. What was unusual about Jacob’s mission to send Joseph to his brothers? ²⁰
21. From where (i.e., what place) did Jacob send his beloved son? (37:14) ²¹
22. Who was the man that found Joseph wandering in the fields? (37:15) ²²
23. What did this man say to Joseph? (37:16-17) ²³
24. When the brothers saw Joseph, what did they do? (37:18) ²⁴
25. Who said, “Here comes the master of dreams!” and what was their plan for Joseph (37:19-20) ²⁵
26. Who saved Joseph’s life by saying he be thrown into the pit alive? (37:21-22) ²⁶
27. When Joseph came before his brothers, what did they do? (37:23-24) ²⁷
28. Why does the Torah say the pit was empty; there was no water in it? (37:24) ²⁸
29. What did the brothers do after they threw Joseph into the pit? ²⁹



²⁰ Both Joseph and his father understood the brothers hated him, and yet Joseph was willing to God and Jacob was willing to send his beloved son... Joseph “set his face like a flint” and went to seek his brothers, despite the risk. If Jacob had merely wanted to see how his sons were doing, Jacob could have sent any number of his servants to make the inquiry – but he willingly sent his son into a place of danger...

²¹ Since Hebron is located on the top of a mountain, the “Depth of Hebron,” may be translated as the “depths of fellowship” (Hebron means fellowship). Jacob sent out his beloved son “from the depth their fellowship” to search for his missing children.

²² Some say this was an angel who had disguised himself in order to help Joseph meet his destiny.

²³ The man/angel first asked Joseph what he sought, and Joseph realized he was seeking the love of his brothers... The man then warned him that his brothers had “moved on,” hinting that they were seeking to kill him, and the reference to Dothan was perhaps “code” that they were seeking a religious justification for doing so. Note the dedication of Joseph here, as he chose to keep looking for his brothers despite “blundering about” in the fields.

²⁴ The immediately conspired to kill him. The midrash says that the brothers first set the sheep dogs on Joseph because one who slanders another should be thrown to the dogs...

²⁵ Tradition says it was Simeon and Levi who said this to one another (the Hebrew says “one man said to the other, ‘Here comes the dreamer!’”). The brothers actually said, “Here comes the master (baal) of dreams; let’s kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” The Holy Spirit said, “Yes, let us see whose word will prove true: yours or Mine.”

²⁶ Reuben heard the plot to kill Joseph and argued against the idea. He said, “Let’s not strike down our [own] soul” (לֹא נַכְנִי נַפְשִׁי), by which he meant that the brothers should not harm themselves by murdering their brother. The midrash says that Reuben said, “if his dreams are true, Joseph should not be harmed, since God loves him and has a special plan for his life; but even if his dreams are untrue, he should still not be harmed because it is both impious and would devastate his father.” Therefore Rueben came up with the alternative plan of throwing him into a pit, though he intended to return later to pull him out and return Joseph to his father.

²⁷ They stripped him of his colorful tunic and threw him into a pit. Joseph was thrown naked into the pit.

²⁸ The redundancy is meant to say that while there was no water in the pit, there were other things – snakes, scorpions, spiders, and other deadly creatures. God protected Joseph, as he did Daniel in the lion’s den.

²⁹ They sat down and “broke bread” together, which was prophetic of the blessing of bread Joseph would later give.



30. Who came up with the idea to sell Joseph into slavery? (37:25-27) ³⁰
31. To whom was Joseph sold and for how much? ³¹
32. What did Reuben do after he discovered Joseph was no longer in the pit and that his brothers sold him to the Ishmaelites? (37:29-30) ³²
33. What happened to Joseph's special tunic? (37:31-33) ³³
34. What did Jacob infer from the bloody tunic? (37:33-35) ³⁴
35. Why did Jacob refuse to be consoled? ³⁵
36. Who were Jacob's daughters? (37:35) ³⁶
37. Who sold Joseph to Potiphar in Egypt? (37:36) ³⁷
38. How far away is Egypt from Canaan? ³⁸

³⁰ Judah came up with the idea to sell his brother once he saw the Ishmaelite caravan approaching. Notice that the Ishmaelites were carrying precious spices, which betokened that God's Spirit would accompany Joseph to Egypt.

³¹ Joseph was sold to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver (about 7.5 ounces – enough to buy each of the brothers a pair of shoes). The Ishmaelites later sold him to the Midianites, who in turn sold him to Potiphar in Egypt (see Gen. 37:27, 37:36). See Amos 2:6 regarding the prophetic overtones of this.

³² Reuben tore his clothes in grief. He was distraught and said: "The lad is not there, and I - where will I go?" Note that the midrash states that part of the reason Reuben wanted to rescue Joseph was because Joseph's dreams included him (as one of the eleven stars), and the loss of Joseph would then mean the dreams would be disregarded by the family – and Reuben would lose his status as one of the brothers.

³³ The brothers tore the tunic in many places and pierced it with their spears and swords. They then dipped it into the blood of a goat and sent it to Jacob, so that he would be deceived into thinking Joseph was dead. According to midrash, the brothers cast lots to decide who should present the tunic to Jacob, and the lot fell on Judah.

³⁴ He assumed that a wild animal had killed his son. Jacob then tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son "many days." According to tradition, Jacob actually mourned for 22 years, since Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold and was 30 when he stood before Pharaoh (41:46). This is 13 years. Now add the seven years of abundance in Egypt (this gives 20 years) now add the two years *before* Jacob emigrated to Egypt. Some of the sages say these 22 years were to atone for Jacob's neglect of his parents while he was with Laban. According to the Talmud the phrase "thus his father wept for him" (37:35) refers to Isaac, who mourned for the loss of Joseph (but who prophetically knew that he was still alive).

³⁵ This is a discussion question. Didn't Jacob believe in the immortality of the soul or the resurrection? Some have said that the lack of consolation was meant to be a sign that Joseph was in fact still alive... Others have said that he blamed himself for the death of his son, since he sent him on the dangerous mission in the first place.

³⁶ Jewish tradition states that many of Jacob's sons had twin sisters who were not identified in the Torah.

³⁷ The Midianites. Joseph was apparently sold a number of times. First he was sold to the Ishmaelites; the Ishmaelites sold him to traders, and the traders sold him to the Midianites, who finally sold him to Potiphar. The midrash says that God told the brothers, "You sold your brother as a slave; by your loves the time will come when your descendants will all say, 'We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.'"

³⁸ A ten day journey of roughly 250 miles. Why didn't Joseph attempt to send a message back home? Caravans made this journey all the time, and Joseph was resourceful... Some say that Joseph heard the brothers swear the "dread oath" not to tell Jacob what happened to Joseph, and Joseph considered himself bound by this oath.



39. What happened to Judah at about this time? (Gen. 38:1) ³⁹
40. What was the name of Judah's wife? (38:2) ⁴⁰
41. What were the names of Judah's three sons? (38:3-5) ⁴¹
42. Who was Tamar? (38:6) ⁴²
43. Why was Er put to death by the LORD? (38:7) ⁴³
44. What is "levirate marriage" (yibbum)? ⁴⁴
45. Why was Onan put to death by the LORD? (38:9) ⁴⁵
46. What is "Onanism"? ⁴⁶
47. What is *karet* (כַּרֵּת) judgment? (Lev. 20:21) ⁴⁷
48. Why did Judah postpone Tamar's marriage to Shelah (38:11) ⁴⁸
49. What did Judah do after the death of his wife? ⁴⁹



³⁹ Judah moved away from his brothers in the land of Canaan, perhaps because he could not stand seeing his father grieving and his brothers blamed him for the scheme to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites.

⁴⁰ We don't know, though she was the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua (שׁוּא). According to some of the rabbis, Shua was not a Canaanite, since the patriarchs all were opposed to Canaanite marriages. Rather the word Canaanite here should be understood to mean "merchant" or "trader."

⁴¹ Er (עֵר, "protector") the firstborn; Onan (אֹנָן, "vigorous") the second born, and Shelach (שֶׁלַח, "petition") the third born son.

⁴² Tamar (תָּמָר, "palm tree") was Judah's daughter in law whom he married to his firstborn son Er. According to some of the rabbis, Tamar was actually an Israelite, though this is dubious. Tamar is significant because her union with Judah resulted in the birth of Peretz, a descendant of King David and of Yeshua the LORD.

⁴³ According to Rashi, his sin was emitting semen in vain as a means of keeping his wife from getting pregnant in an attempt to preserve her beauty.

⁴⁴ Yibbum (יִבּוּם) is a type of marriage in which a woman marries one of her husband's brothers after her husband's death (if there were no children) in order to continue the line of the dead husband. In other words, the child who would be born would be named after the deceased. The term "Levirate" comes from the Latin word *levir*, meaning "husband's brother." The concept is drawn from the Torah, in Deut. 25:5-6.

⁴⁵ He died for the same reason as his brother Er, that is, for emitting semen in vain, though in Onan's case his motive was perhaps worse, since he did not want to produce an heir for his deceased brother....

⁴⁶ Onanism is the illicit or unlawful emission of semen (i.e., through coitus interruptus, masturbation, nocturnal emission, and so on). According to the sages, emitting semen in vain is likened to bloodshed, and one who does so is subject to *karet* judgment and has no portion in the world to come. Masturbation, in particular, is thought to defile the body and the issuance is considered *tumah*, a type of death-like substance.

⁴⁷ *Karet* is the judgment of being "cut off," that is, to die a premature or unnatural death...

⁴⁸ Judah was afraid his son would die, since she had already caused the death of his two other sons... He therefore told Tamar to wait as a widow until Shelah "came of age," at which time he would perform *chalitzah*...

⁴⁹ He visited his friend Hirah who lived in Adullah, a Canaanite royal city, to go shear sheep in Timnah.



50. What did Tamar do when she heard that her father-in-law went up to Timnah to shear his sheep? (38:13-14) ⁵⁰
51. Why didn't Judah recognize his daughter in law? ⁵¹
52. Why did Judah proposition Tamar? ⁵²
53. What "security" or pledge did Tamar ask from Judah in exchange for payment for her "services"? (38:17-19) ⁵³
54. When Judah later found out that his daughter-in-law was pregnant due to immorality, what did he say should be done to her? (38:24) ⁵⁴
55. What did Tamar do when they came to execute her sentence? (38:25) ⁵⁵
56. Why did Judah say that Tamar was more righteous than him? (38:26) ⁵⁶
57. What were the names of Tamar's twin boys? (38:27-30) ⁵⁷
58. This entire account of Judah and Tamar interrupts the narrative of Joseph and the chronology of the events is uncertain. Discuss. ⁵⁸



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- ⁵⁰ She took off her widow's clothing, covered herself with a veil, and sat near a place called "Two Wells" where whoever wanted to go to Timnah had to pass. When she realized that Shelah had come of age but was not given to her as a husband, she decided to find another way to bear Judah's descendants, even through prostitution!
- ⁵¹ She was so modest that she kept her face veiled whenever she saw Judah in the past. Moreover, Judah would never have expected to see his daughter-in-law there in Timnah, sitting as a harlot at the side of the road.
- ⁵² According to the sages prostitution was technically "legal" until the Torah was given at Sinai. Nonetheless, this episode is difficult, since Tamar understood who Judah was and therefore willingly committed incest with her father-in-law (since Er was technically still her husband).
- ⁵³ Tamar asked for Judah's signet ring, his wrap (or cloak) and his personal staff – these were very precious items to be given as security for the promise of one goat!
- ⁵⁴ Judah wanted her to be taken out of her house and burned at the stake for her immorality (talk about a double standard). Apparently Judah sentenced her to death because she brought shame to his family name.
- ⁵⁵ She brought forth Judah's pledge – his signet ring, cloak, and staff – and explained that by the man who owned these things was she pregnant. Of course she was vindicated and Judah had to confess they were his things. Note that Judah had deceived his father by showing him Joseph's coat dipped in the blood of a goat, and Tamar likewise deceived Judah with a goat...
- ⁵⁶ For two reasons: 1) Because he did not keep his part of the bargain regarding his son Shelah, and 2) because Tamar did what she did because she believed in the royal line and wanted to be part of it.
- ⁵⁷ Zerach (זֵרַח, "shining"), the firstborn (who had his arm tied with the scarlet thread by the midwife) and Peretz (פֶּרֶץ, "bursting forth"), who later became a descendant of King David, Isaiah, and Yeshua. Tamar gave birth to twins to take the place of her two husbands who had died.
- ⁵⁸ This is a discussion question. It is likely that Judah's marriage took place long before Joseph was sold into slavery, since when the family later emigrated to Egypt, Peretz (Judah's son from Tamar) already had two sons of his own (see Gen. 46:12). Others claim the Torah here is in chronological order (i.e., Judah married *after* Joseph was sold) and people often had children at an extremely young age in Biblical times. At any rate, the Torah interrupts the story of Joseph here because "God always brings the remedy before the plague," and the descendant of Peretz – the Messiah – was the ultimate liberator of slavery in Egypt.



59. Who was Potiphar and how did he come to know Joseph? (Gen. 39:1) ⁵⁹
60. What was special about Joseph? (39:2-6) ⁶⁰
61. How was Joseph tested in Potiphar's house? (39:7-19) ⁶¹
62. How did Joseph overcome the incessant seduction of Potiphar's wife? ⁶²
63. How long did Joseph suffer this temptation? (39:11) ⁶³
64. Why did this woman finally grab Joseph's tunic? (39:12) ⁶⁴
65. Why did Joseph "leave his garment in her hand" and flee from her? ⁶⁵
66. Why didn't Potiphar kill Joseph after his wife told him that he tried to rape her? ⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Potiphar was an officer of the Pharaoh and captain of the guards. Apparently he purchased Joseph from the Ishmaelites, even though the Torah states it was from the Midianites (37:36). Potiphar did not trust the Midianites and therefore required the Ishmaelites attest that Joseph was for sale.

⁶⁰ The LORD was "with Joseph" (וַיְהִי יְהוָה אִתּוֹ), which meant that the Divine Presence pervaded his life and blessed all that he put his hands to do. The Divine Presence also protected him from sin and immoral influences. Whenever Joseph handled merchandise, it was blessed, and Potiphar's household prospered because of him.

⁶¹ Though he was made an "overseer" of Potiphar's house, Joseph was relentlessly tested by Potiphar's wife, who sought to have an illicit affair with him. The midrash says this was "payback" either for Joseph's earlier slander of his brothers to his father (i.e., that the brothers were flirting with the Canaanite women while they tending their flocks) or because Joseph became vain and spent too much time fixing his hair and admiring his appearance when he was younger... On the other hand, some of the sages say that it was providential that all this happened to Joseph, since God was doing him a favor by getting him out of the evil household of these immoral people (or God was preparing him to be Pharaoh's faithful "right hand" man). The sages also say that the most difficult thing for a young man to do is to control his sexual desire, and therefore Joseph's test was not unlike the test that Isaac faced at the Akedah.

⁶² He swore by God's Name that he would never commit such a sin with her, and he "refused" her advances to the point that he would not longer ever look at her at all. If you are tempted to sin, think it over and carefully ask, "What am I going to do?" If you overcome your passion you are considered a strong man: "Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov. 16:32).

⁶³ Her seductions lasted over a year... Joseph nearly succumbed to temptation when she arranged to be alone with him in the house, though Joseph saw that "no man was inside..." – including himself – and that reasoned that if he committed such a sin he would be an animal and no real man. Because of this, he prayed and his desire left him – God made him "no man inside..." meaning he removed the physical desire from Joseph.

⁶⁴ Whenever she spoke to him, Joseph would pretend not to understand a word she was saying, until she literally grabbed him by his shirt and attacked him. Notice this happened when they were alone – *yichud*.

⁶⁵ He was afraid he would have to wrestle her for it, and since she was still his mistress, he wanted to show her respect... "Flee also youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22). Providentially speaking, the garment became the means by which Joseph was judged guilty and removed from the household.

⁶⁶ Undoubtedly Potiphar did not really believe his wife's story... Some sages say that Potiphar's wife actually pled for Joseph not to be killed since she still loved him – and that is also how Potiphar learned the truth. Potiphar, however, imprisoned Joseph to "save face" and to make it appear that he was dealing with the scandal. A midrash says that Potiphar arrested Joseph and had him flogged, but as he was being whipped a miracle occurred, and a one year old baby began to speak in a loud voice, rebuking Potiphar for his treachery against innocent Joseph. This miracle cause Potiphar to untie him and sentence him to prison instead...



67. What happened when Joseph was first put in prison? (39:21-23) ⁶⁷
68. Who else was put into prison with Joseph, and why? (Gen. 40:1-2) ⁶⁸
69. What were the dreams of each and how did Joseph interpret these dreams? ⁶⁹
70. Despite Joseph's appeal to the wine steward to make an appeal to Pharaoh on his behalf after he was released, what happened? (40:23) ⁷⁰
71. How many years did Joseph remain in prison after interpreting the dreams of the wine steward and the baker? ⁷¹

Discussion Topics:

1. Nehama Liebowitz notes that the “certain man” who directed Joseph to find his brothers in Dothan (Gen. 37:15-17) was the providential key of the entire story of Joseph. Do you agree that this “certain man” was a providential agent sent by God to initiate Israel's bondage in Egypt?
2. Why didn't the brothers hate *Jacob* instead of Joseph?
3. In the genealogy of the Messiah given in Matthew (1:1-16), only four women (besides Mary) are explicitly named: Tamar (who seduced the father of her late husband), Rahab (a prostitute), Ruth (a Moabitess), and “the wife of Uriah” (i.e., Bathsheba, an adulteress). What characteristic(s) do you think unite these women? (see Ruth 1:16; 4:12; 1 Kings 1:13-31; Heb. 11:31; James 2:25).



For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Miketz** (i.e., Genesis 41:1-44:17)

⁶⁷ God was “with Joseph” and gave him favor in the eyes of the warden of the dungeon, who eventually made Joseph into his “right hand man” of the prison system! (Perhaps Potiphar – a chief executioner and captain of the guard - had put in a “good word” for Joseph so that he was given some preferential treatment there?)

⁶⁸ Pharaoh's chief wine steward and chief baker were imprisoned and charged with conspiring to poison the king. The Pharaoh was saved because he found a fly in his wine and a pebble in his bread. Regardless of their guilt or innocence, however, God used their plight to elevate Joseph: the chain of events leading to his release begins with their dreams and Joseph's interpretations.

⁶⁹ The chief wine steward dreamed he squeezed three bunches of grapes into Pharaoh's cup; the chief baker dreamed he had three baskets of bread on his head and a bird was eating from them; Joseph interpreted that in three days the butler would be restored to office, whereas the baker would be executed.

⁷⁰ He did not remember Joseph (לֹא־זָכַר); he forgot him entirely (וַיִּשְׁכַּח). This was thought to be punishment to Joseph for trusting in this man rather than in God for his eventual vindication and deliverance...

⁷¹ Two. The sages note that the butler “forgot Joseph” for two years because Joseph had asked him *twice* to remember him before Pharaoh: one year for each request.