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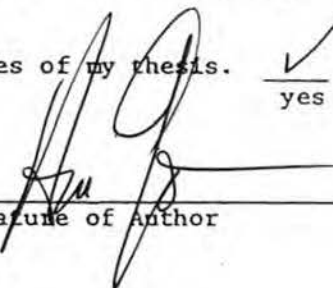
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Towards a Literary Understanding of the Story of Joseph and His Brothers

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Ordination
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Referee, Professor Susan Einbinder

Digest

Presented in this thesis is a critical literary analysis of the story of Joseph and his brothers. By closely examining the Hebrew text along with its rabbinic commentaries and modern scholarly interpretations, we are able to come closer to understanding the Biblical authors' intentions. Through an annotated translation as well as concentration on a number of "key" themes, hopefully, one will become exposed to the significant aspects of this story.

The first chapter is a translation and commentary on chapter 37 of Genesis. This thesis concentrates most deeply on that chapter, so I presented a personal translation of the chapter in order that the reader would understand the text in the way that I have.

Chapter two deals with Joseph's two dreams and the implications that they had. I postulated that the dreams serve as the "bookends" of the story for the story is set in motion by the brothers' anger that was incited by the dreams, and then it comes to a close when the dreams are realized.

Chapter three is concerned with the events leading up to, during, and immediately after Joseph is thrown in the pit in Dothan. The pit has become the defining feature of the story of Joseph. Thus, the chapter deals with many of the nuances concerning the episode at the pit. Additionally, many other areas of interest are discussed in this

chapter like the questions surrounding the strange man that Joseph meets in Shechem as well as the perplexities concerning the Ishmaelites and Midianites.

Chapter four is marked by a look at the use of the literary device of doubling throughout the story. The Joseph narrative has an unusually large number of instances of doubling whether it be a single word, a verse, or even an entire situation, and they all serve many purposes. The beauties of this literary device are mentioned in this chapter and the roles they serve are suggested as well.

Finally, the characters and situations in the narrative are explored through a modern psychological lens in order to point out the dysfunction within the family. A number of terms used to describe the family are taken from contemporary psychological thought and applied to our Biblical family. Interestingly enough, I discovered that they parallel a modern family in a great number of ways.

This thesis answers many individual questions, but raises more than it answers. It, by no means, is an all inclusive work. The process of analysis of the Joseph story is a never-ending pursuit. And those who partake in the study of this story will find it enriching and exciting.

Dedication

Rabbi Herbert Channan Brichto

(1925-1996)

זִכְרֵ צְדִיק לְבִרְכָּה - Blessed be the Memory
of the Righteous

Introduction

There are three people whose inspiration helped me to write this paper. The first is Norman Cohen, provost of Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion. At the 1996 Union of American Hebrew Congregations Biennial, Norman conducted a three part lecture series about the story of Joseph. I was so enlightened and moved by his teaching that I fell in love with the story. I mention him first because I do not want to understate his inspiration.

Susan Einbinder, professor of Hebrew Literature at the Cincinnati campus of HUC-JIR and my thesis advisor inspired me in many of the same ways that Norman did, but also in other ways as well. Susan met with me on countless occasions to listen to my ideas and to discuss them with me as well. Every week we met for coffee and Torah. And each time our meetings were concluded, I felt more focused and more prepared to take on the next task of my project.

Susan inspired me in other ways as well. She showed me, by her actions, how to love the work that I was doing. She demonstrated to me how much the literature of Torah meant to her and it trickled to me in the process. In fact, sometimes it trickled to others as well.

One afternoon Susan and I were meeting at Big Sky bakery, as we usually did. At this meeting we were to read from the *Mikraot G'dolot* to discover how a number of the commentators treated the text. As we

finished, one woman who had been sitting at a table near ours said, "I have never seen the study of Torah done as beautifully as this." The woman truly summed up my feelings as well. Susan made the study of Torah exceptionally beautiful for me.

The final and perhaps most important and powerful inspiration was Rabbi Channan Brichto, z'l. Channan suggested the topic of studying Joseph from a literary perspective to me. As a very sick man, he met with me regularly to start the ball rolling. Channan introduced me to the writing of Thomas Mann, and he helped me by by facilitating my quest for the right "questions."

At one of the first meetings with Channan, he forced me in his gentle yet abrasive way to read the story, asking myself as I was reading what the "key" questions were. Though he passed away close to a year before this project was completed, his voice and spirit have remained with me each time I have read the story.

Using the "key question" method I have undertaken the study of the Joseph story. I have focused most closely on chapter 37, the first chapter of the story. This chapter struck me as the most rich and exciting of them all. Love and hate are manifested abundantly. Mystery and deception are presented in the story as well. So many aspects of good literature can be found within this story and within the first chapter specifically.

However, what makes this story more remarkable than other works of literature is that it has aspects which cannot be found in regular works of literature. According to W. Lee Humphreys, in his literary study of the Bible, every work of literature has five characteristics. The first is that they are all fictional. They all have plots with tension and a resolution. They are all prose. They are all the products of one author. And, they all serve as entertainment.

The Joseph story contains all of these characteristics. Perhaps the aspect of single authorship could be called into question, but if we consider the final redactor of this story the author, then it does have the quality of being written by a single author.

However, as I mentioned earlier, the Joseph story has some unique characteristics. To begin, when we consider that despite the fact that it occupies a disproportionately large space in the Bible compared with stories of the other patriarchs, it still is an extremely short story as compared with other works of prose literature. Similarly, despite the fact that there is considerably more detail in this story than in any other story of the patriarchs, still, the detail is limited compared with other works of literature.

Thus, when we read this story, we are forced to let our minds fill in some of the missing details. Fortunately, what there is, is enough to give us a starting point. Additionally, there are elements of this story which are simply difficult to fully understand. Take for instance the

Ishmaelite/Midianite issue which I will discuss in greater length in chapter three. First it tells us Joseph will be sold to the Ishmaelites, then it says he will be sold to the Midianites. Finally we read that the Midianites sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. As frustrating as this may be to the reader, the frustration of clear reading is indeed part of the story's goal, and has enriched the commentary traditions as well.

One final aspect of this story which makes it intriguing is that it has a subsequent versions. The Koran writes about the story of Joseph. The story can be found in Surah 12 and it is titled "Yusuf". It concentrates on the episode in Potifar's house, but it still treats the events prior to the occurrences with Potifar's wife. Thus, it offers us a unique opportunity for comparison.

The fact that we have many renditions of the Joseph story might lead us to think that the story is historically grounded and that it is not a literary work at all. Julian Morgenstern discusses this issue in his book. He believes that there is little about this story which is historical. He believes that the only possible historical aspects to this story are found once Joseph is in Egypt, and even there, the historical accuracy is in question. Morgenstern and other have suggested that parts of the Potifar story have the potential to be accurate because Potifar is documented in ancient Egyptian history.¹

¹ Morgenstern page 23.

Morgenstern also admits that there is some evidence that a semite acted as chief counselor to pharaoh and that there is even some mention of the name "Joseph". He says that there was a governor of a grain producing region of Egypt with a name similar to "Joseph". However, this governor is recorded to have been oppressive and unjust,² qualities which we would not expect Joseph to display. Though, often times people are remembered after their death differently from the reality of their life.

In any event, the evidence that is presented to authenticate the Joseph story only serves to offer evidence for parts of the story, not the story as a whole. Thus, even if parts of the story are true, the complete story still serves a higher purpose must still be considered fictional.

One final note before we begin looking at the story in greater detail is that while the Joseph story can be considered a "complete and self contained narrative,"³ we must understand many events prior to the story which help in our reading of the story. The four events which I choose to point out are the massacre in Shechem ⁴(chapter 34), Rueben's sexual encounter with Bilhah (chapter 35:22), Jacob's experiences with Laban (Chapters 29-31), and Jacob's deception of Isaac (chapter 27).

² Morgenstern page 288-289.

³ Dahlberg page 128.

If these events are understood along with the story of Joseph itself, the chapters that follow may be of help in bringing out new insights in the understanding of Joseph.

Chapter 1

"Translation and Commentary"

Before I embark upon translating chapter 37 in its entirety, I would like to describe my method. I will take each verse, and sometimes each phrase, and comment on them separately. I will offer the opinions of different scholars as I go along. Ultimately I will arrive at a translation for each verse and this is the translation I would like to use for the rest of this paper. Often times discrepancies occur when people have different understandings of a scriptural verse.

Additionally the ambiguities which will arise in the difficulties of biblical translation, will serve as launching point for the body of this paper. For, in so many cases, simply reading a word with a different meaning can answer many a question as well as surface many a problem

37:1 וַיָּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִגְדֵּי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

Meanwhile, Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived, in the land of Canaan. This vav consecutive should be translated as "meanwhile" because it follows a verse detailing with the settlements of the children of Esau. Now, the Bible moves on to Jacob and his dwelling places. As if to say, "Now that we have finished speaking about Esau, let's move on to Jacob."

This is the family story of Jacob. Many scholars¹ translate the word, "תּוֹלְדוֹת", as "line" or generations. Thus rendering the translation, "This is the line of Jacob." These scholars base their translation on previous usages of the word, "תּוֹלְדוֹת", usages in which the word introduces a genealogy. Such as in the case of the sons of Noah (Gen. 10:1-11:9), Terach (Gen. 11:27-25:11), Ishmael (Gen. 25:12-18), and Esau (Gen. 36:1-43).

However, there are other places in which "תּוֹלְדוֹת" translates into the word "story". The story of the creation of earth (Gen. 2:4), the story of Adam (Gen. 5:1), and the story of Noah (Gen. 6:9) are three examples of this usage. Since there is no genealogical account in our verse, I am persuaded to understand it as "the story of Jacob" instead of "the line of Jacob."

יֹסֵף בֶּן־שִׁבְע־עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן

At seventeen years of age, Joseph shepherded his brothers at the place of the sheep. Most translators postulate that this verse should be understood as Joseph was tending the flock along with his brothers.² However, this is not the case, for the Hebrew clearly shows us that

¹ Scholars such as E.A. Speiser and JPS.

² Scholars such as Victor Hamilton, Speiser, JPS, and Fox.

Joseph was supervising his brothers. This understanding would be seemingly problematic due to the next phrase.

וְהוּא נֹעַר אֶת-בְּנֵי בִלְהָה וְאֶת-בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה נְשֵׁי אָבִיו

Since³ he was a servant to the children of Bilhah and the children of Zilpah, his father's wives. If Joseph was the supervisor then why was he a servant to them? The answer lies in the fact that this is to be read parenthetically. It is a reminder of the way things once were. It has no bearing on the present status of Joseph as a supervisor, except to show how Joseph has changed as he has gotten older.

וַיָּבֹא יוֹסֵף אֶת-דִּבְתֵּיהֶם רָעָה אֶל-אָבִיהֶם:

And Joseph brought his father bad reports about them.

3 וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִכָּל-בָּנָיו כִּי בֶן-זְקֻנִּים הוּא לוֹ

וַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים:

So Israel loved Joseph more than all the brothers (for many reasons) one reason was that he was a ben z'koonim. So he made him an ornamented tunic. By virtue of the fact that it is somewhat obvious that Joseph wasn't the favorite just because he was born in Jacob's old age, I claim that there were a number of reasons. That is why I used the term "one reason."

4 וַיֵּרְאוּ אֲחָיו כִּי-אֵתוּ אֶהָב אָבִיהֶם מִכָּל-אֲחָיו

³ Brown, Driver, and Briggs refer to this vav as the circumstantial vav. Page 253(k).

וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבֵּר לְשָׁלָם :

When his brothers saw that it was him(Joseph) that their father loved more than the other brothers, they came to hate him so much that they couldn't speak peacefully with him.

5 וַיְחַלֵּם יוֹסֵף חֲלֹם וַיַּגִּד לְאֶחָיו וַיֹּסֶפּוּ עוֹד שָׂנֵא אֹתוֹ :

One time, Joseph had a dream, which he told to his brothers.
"This only added to their hatred of him."

6 וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם שְׁמְעוּ-נָא הַחֲלֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חֲלַמְתִּי :

He said to them, "please listen to this dream that I had."

7 וַהֲנִה אֲנַחְנוּ מֵאֲלֵמִים אֲלֵמִים בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה

"It was truly amazing, we were binding sheaves in the middle of a field." Within this verse we find a repetition of the word "וַהֲנִה" three times. It would be cheapening the value of this word if it was merely translated as "behold" each time. Certainly, that word was placed in those places to help impart the mood of Joseph as he was relating his first dream.

וַהֲנִה קָמָה אֲלֵמִתִּי וְגַם-נִצְבָּה וַהֲנִה

תִּסְבִּינָה אֲלֵמֶתְכֶם וְתִשְׁתַּחֲוֶינָה לְאֵלֵמִתִּי :

"Suddenly, my sheaf rose up and stood perfectly upright." "And then, your sheaves circled around mine and bowed down to it."

8 וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אֶחָיו הַמֶּלֶךְ הַמִּלֹּךְ עָלֵינוּ אִם-מִשׁוֹל הַמִּשְׁלָב בָּנוּ

So his brothers responded, "Do you indeed propose to reign over us? Do you indeed feel that you will rule over us." Ibn Ezra makes a distinction between the words "Maloch" and "Mashol". He claims that reigning over someone is what a king does and a king is chosen by the people. While a ruler seizes power and is not chosen by the people. Therefore the distinction is necessary.

וַיִּסְפּוּ עוֹד שְׁנָא אֹתוֹ עַל-חֲלֻמֹּתָיו וְעַל-דְּבָרָיו :

"So this only added to their hatred of him. Not just his dreams, but also his words." Most scholars translate this phrase "... for his talk about his dreams." However, it is my ascertain that this phrase suggests that the dream offered two reasons to hate Joseph. The dream of dominion itself as well as the fact that Joseph told the dream. I will most certainly address the issue of Joseph's telling of the dream later in this paper.

Rashi agrees with my translation, but for a different reason. He states that the brothers hated Joseph for both his dreams and his words. The words not being those that were used to tell his dreams, but rather the ones that were used to bring the bad reports to Jacob back in verse two.⁴

⁴ Rashi comment on the words "וְעַל-דְּבָרָיו"

9 וַיַּחלֶם עוֹד חֲלֹם אַחֵר וַיִּסְפֹּר אֹתוֹ לְאֶחָיו

וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה חֲלֵמָתִי חֲלֹם עוֹד

Then he had different dream which he told to his brothers. He said "Look, I had a different dream."

וְהָנֶה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְאַחַד עָשָׂר כּוֹכָבִים מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לִי:

"This time, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

10 וַיִּסְפֹּר אֶל-אָבִיו וְאֶל-אֶחָיו וַיַּגֵּעַר-בּוֹ אָבִיו

When he told it to his father, with his brothers present, his father rebuked him. Since his brothers had already heard the report of the dream, Joseph really wasn't telling them rather he was just telling his father. It so happened that they were present at the time.

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מָה הַחֲלֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חֲלַמְתָּ

הֲבֹא נִבֹּא אֲנִי וְאַמְנָן וְאַחִידָה לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לְךָ אֶרְצָה:

He(Jacob) asked him(Joseph), "What is the meaning of this dream. Will I and your mother and your brothers bow down to the ground to you."

11 וַיִּקְנֹאוּ-בּוֹ אֶחָיו וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת-הַדְּבָר :

Yet while the brothers were envious of him, his father kept the matter in mind.⁵ The brothers hated Joseph in the previous verses, but now they were envious of him because they knew that no one would be so insolent as to tell a parent about a dream in which that parent was bowing down to the child unless it was true.

12 וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶחָיו לְרֵעוֹת אֶת־צֹאן אֲבֵיהֶם בְּשָׂכָם:

So (following the telling of the dream to the family), the brothers went out to Shechem and they pastured their fathers flock.

13 וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא אֶחָיִךְ

רְעִים בְּשָׂכָם לָכֵה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֲלֵיהֶם

Then Israel said to Joseph, "Look, your brothers are pasturing the flock in Shechem. Come, so I can send you to them."

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הִנְנִי :

Joseph replied, "I am ready." While the word "הִנְנִי" literally means "hear I am", it would be meaningless to translate it that way here. In so many places in the Torah we understand "הִנְנִי" to be I am ready, and this is one of those cases.⁶

14 וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ־נָא רְאֵה אֶת־שְׁלוֹם אֶחָיִךְ

⁵The word "שָׂכָר," means "guard". Thus, translating it as "keep" is not a stretch. However, it is clearly in Jacob's mind where this matter was kept.

⁶ see ISh 3:16, Is 52:6, Is 58:9, Is 65:1

וְאֶת־שְׁלוֹם הַצֹּאן וְהַשִּׁבְנִי דָּבַר

וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ מֵעֵמֶק חֶבְרוֹן וַיָּבֹא שָׁכֶמָה:

So Jacob said, "please go and see how your brothers are doing and how the flock is doing, and then bring back word to me." So, he sent him off from the valley of Hebron and headed towards Shechem.

15 וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְסִנְהָ תַעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר מִה־תִּבְקֶשׁ:

Later, a man found him who was wandering around in the field. The man asked, "What are you looking for?"

16 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־אָחִי אָנֹכִי מִבְּקֶשׁ הַגִּידָה־נָא לִי אִיפֹה הֵם רְעִים:

"I am looking for my brothers," he replied, "Could you please tell me where they are pasturing?" It should be noted that there is a play on the words "אָחִי אָנֹכִי". These are the same words used in the Cain and Abel story. When God asks Cain where Abel, his brother, is, Cain responds "הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי", (Am I my brother's keeper?). While Cain asks God if he is his brothers keeper, Joseph wants to be the keeper of his brothers.

17 וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמָרִים גִּלְכָּה דַּתִּינָה

וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֵר אָחָיו וַיִּמְצָאֵם בְּדָתָן:

The man answered, "they have traveled on from here, for I heard them say 'Let's go to Dothan'". So Joseph continued on in search of his brothers and found them in Dothan.⁷

18 וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרֶחֶק וּבְשָׂרָם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ:

When they saw him from a distance, before he was close, they conspired against him to kill him.

19 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו הִנֵּה בָּעַל הַחֲלֻמוֹת הַלֹּזָה בָּא:

One said to his brothers, "Here comes that dreamer!" I have translated the plural "וַיֹּאמְרוּ" in a singular fashion. Most scholars translate this verse as "They said to one another."⁸ However, I believe that this translation is inaccurate, for I don't think that each one of the brothers could have said this very witty and sarcastic comment all at the same time. It is far too unlikely. It must have been said by one of the brothers to the group.

20 וַעֲתָה לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנִשְׁלְכֵהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת

וַאֲמַרְנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אָכְלָתָהוּ וְנֵרְאָה מִחַיָּהוּ חֲלֻמָּתוֹ:

"Now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these pits, and we can say that an evil beast ate him; and then we will see what will come of his dreams."

⁷ According to E.A. Speiser, Dothan is one days journey from Shechem.

⁸ Scholars such as Speiser, JPS, Hamilton, Fox, and Hertz.

21 וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיַּצִּלְהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא נִכְנֹוּ נַפְשׁ:

When Rueben heard this, he tried to save him from their hands, and he said "Let us not strike him mortally!" Even with just a cursory examination of the Hebrew verse, we see that there is no evidence for a translation in which Rueben "tried" to save Joseph from the hands of his brothers. It simply says that he saved Joseph. However, since many scholars translate this problem as "he tried to save . . ." ⁹ coupled with its clear fit into context, I have chosen to use it.

22 וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רְאוּבֵן אַל־תִּשְׁפְּכוּ־דָם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ

אֹתוֹ אֶל־הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בַּמִּדְבָּר

Then Rueben said to them, "Do not shed blood! instead, let's throw him into that pit, the one (over there) that is in the desert." I believe the end of this verse has an implied question attached to it. Rueben says, "throw him into that pit." The brothers then ask, "which pit?" - to which Rueben replies, that one over there in the desert."

וַיֹּד אַל־תִּשְׁלַח־יָדְךָ

"But do not lay a hand on him." The vav that is connected to the word "וַיֹּד" is known as the "adversative vav" and is translated "but . . . not". ¹⁰

⁹ Scholars such as Speiser, JPS, Hamilton, and Fox, Lowenthal.

¹⁰ Yerushalmi page 27

לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם לְהַשִּׁיבּוֹ אֶל-אָבִיו:

His purpose being¹¹ to save him from their hands, and return him to his father. It should be mentioned that there is a repetition of the words "וַיַּצִּלְהוּ מִיָּדָם" from verse 21.

23 וַיְהִי כַאֲשֶׁר-בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיַּפְשִׁיטוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף אֶת-כִּתְנֹתָיו

אֶת-כִּתְנֹת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו:

So when Joseph reached his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, I have chosen to translate "וַיַּפְשִׁיטוּ" as "they stripped him of", just like all Biblical translators. However, I am not convinced that this is necessarily correct. The word is in the *Hifil* (causative) form. Normally, a causative form shows the subject causing the object to do something. In this case, the brothers are causing Joseph to take off his tunic. Thus, perhaps this verse could be translated as "they made him take off his tunic."

However, it could also be argued that the causative nature of this word is evidenced in that the brothers caused Joseph to go tunicless. Additionally, the word "stripped" is used to reinforce the violent nature of the brothers.

¹¹ Literally, "לְמַעַן" means "in order that."

24 וַיִּקְחֵהוּ וַיִּשְׁלֹכֵהוּ אֵתוֹ חֲפָרָה וְהַבּוֹר רֵק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם:

and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now, the pit was empty, there was no water in it. The first word of this verse is not capitalized for it is the continuation of the previous verse which I ended with a comma.

25 וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֵאכֹל-לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ

וְהִנֵּה אַרְחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד

וְגַמְלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נִכְאֹת וְצִרֵי וְלֹט הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם:

They sat down to eat food, and looked up and they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, and their camels were carrying spice, balsam, and laudanum¹² bringing them down to Egypt.

26 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל-אֶחָיו מֶה-פֶּצַע כִּי נִהְרָג אֶת-אֶחָיו וְכִסֵּינוּ אֶת-דָּמּוֹ:

Then Judah said to his brothers, "What is the profit if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?" The use of the expression "covering up his blood" "וְכִסֵּינוּ אֶת-דָּמּוֹ" is an interesting one because it suggests that they only indirectly kill him by throwing him in the pit. They don't actually kill him. This expression is also interesting because not only do they not cover up Joseph's blood, but also they feel as if they should display the framed murderers blood. They do the exact opposite

¹² Yerushalmi

with the blood of the killed animal. They display it, for Jacob to see, on the tunic.

The same expression is used in the story of Job. In the book of Job chapter 16:18, Job cries out to the land not to cover up his blood. He doesn't want to die by other forces. If God is to kill him then let that happen.

27 לָכֵן וְנִמְכְּרֵנוּ לְיִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים וְיָדֵנוּ אֶל־תְּהִי בֹ כִי־אָחִינוּ

בְּשָׂרֵנוּ הוּא וַיִּשְׁמָעוּ אָחִיו:

"Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, then our hands will not be upon him. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh." His brothers agreed. Note the translation of the word "וַיִּשְׁמָעוּ". Often times in the Bible we find that the root "שמע" means more than just "hear". In a number of different places in the Bible it has come to be understood as "agreed" or "accepted".¹³ And, often times the expression "I hear you" becomes a vernacular expression meaning "I agree". Thus, instead of translating this word as "his brothers heard", our context would suggest that the variant translation would be more applicable. For the brothers did more than just hear Judah, they did as he said.

28 וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אָנָשִׁים מִדִּינִים סְחָרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ

¹³ See Ex. 4:31, Deut. 34:9, ICh. 29:23, IICh. 11:4 just to name a few.

וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִן־הַבּוֹר

At the same time, Midianite men, traders were passing through. They drew Joseph up from the pit. Despite the "Vav consecutive that begins this verse, I have chosen to agree with many scholars who translate it as "meanwhile".¹⁴ My translation (at the same time), is slightly different, but helps me understand the meaning of the Ishmaelite/Midianite problem which I will address later in this document.

וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף לִישְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף וַיְבִיאוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִצְרַיִם:

And they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and then they brought Joseph to Egypt. The Hebrew is confusing here. It is unclear who exactly sold Joseph. I believe that the lack of clarity comes to teach us the true meaning of the event. I intend to address this issue later.

It is also worthy to mention the selling price of Joseph. If we look at Leviticus 27:5, we find that it speaks of the actual value of different types of people. It says that the value of a man, between the age of five and twenty, is twenty pieces of silver. Thus we find that the selling price was accurate.

29 וַיָּשָׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל־הַבּוֹר וַהֲנִה אֵין־יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו:

¹⁴ Scholars such as Speiser and Fox.

When Rueben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not inside the pit, he rent his clothes The end of this verse is not the end of the sentence, and thus I did not put a period.

30 וַיָּשָׁב אֶל-אֶחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הַיֵּלֶד אֵינֶנּוּ וְאֲנִי אֵנָּה אֲנִי-בָא:

and then returned to his brothers. He said, "the boy is no more! And as for me, where am I to go?" The beginning of this verse is the continuation of the previous sentence and thus I did not use a capital letter.

31 וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת-כִּתְנֵת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחָטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת-הַכִּתְנֵת בַּדָּם:

So, they took Joseph's tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the coat in the blood.

32 וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת-כִּתְנֵת הַפָּסִים וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל-אֲבִיהֶם

וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מֵצָאנוּ הַכֶּרֶזָּה הַכִּתְנֵת בְּנֶךְ הוּא אִם-לֹא:

They had the ornamented tunic sent out and had it brought to their father. They said, "We found this, please attempt to recognize it as your son's tunic or not.

33 וַיִּכְרָה וַיֹּאמֶר כִּתְנֵת בְּנִי חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלָתָהּ שָׂרָף שָׂרָף יוֹסֵף:

He recognized it and cried, "My son's tunic, a wild beast has devoured him, Joseph has been torn to pieces.

34 וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלֹתָיו וַיִּשֶׂם שָׂק בְּמַחְנֵיו

וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל-בְּנוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים:

So Joseph rent his clothes and he put sackcloth on his loins and he mourned his son for many days.

35 וַיָּקָמוּ כָל-בָּנָיו וְכָל-בָּנֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיִּמָּאֵן לְהַתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר

כִּי-אֶרְדָּ אֶל-בְּנֵי אָבִי שָׂאֵלָה וַיִּבְכֶּה אֹתוֹ אָבִיו:

All his sons and all his daughters got up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. He said "I will go down to Sheol mourning for my son." And his father wept for him.

36 וְהַמִּדְיָנִים מָכְרוּאֹתוֹ אֶל-מִצְרַיִם לְפוֹשִׁיפַּר סֵרִיס פַּרְעֹה שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים:

Meanwhile, the Midianites sold him (Joseph) into Egypt, to Potifar, a courtier of Pharaoh, his chief steward.

Chapter 2

"Joseph's Dreams"

There are many possibilities to explain why the Joseph story is one of the most well known of all the biblical stories. One reason is that it is often taught in religious school. Perhaps it is because the story is written so well that people read it like pleasure reading. Perhaps the many popular renditions of the story have activated many people's interest in the original text. Or, who can doubt the effect that Andrew Lloyd Webber¹ has had on the popularity of this story.

Yet even if a person with only a limited understanding of the story were to consider its true focal point, he/she would find it difficult to narrow down to one event or verse. Jacob's favoritism of Joseph² sets this story in motion. Yet, it is the brothers' apparent sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites³ which caused Joseph's journey to Egypt. It was Joseph's ability to interpret dreams⁴ which marked his ascendancy to power in Egypt. Yes, there are so many possible moments in the story in which one could argue that the story hinges on that particular event.

However, I would argue that it is Joseph's dreams which is the matrix which generates the rest of the story. Each aspect, event, and

¹ "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat"

² Genesis 37:3

³ Genesis 37:28

⁴ Genesis 41:15-32

experience in some way hinges upon the initial dream sequence. This even includes the seemingly superfluous Judah and Tamar story.

I chose to limit my discussion to Joseph's dreams in this chapter, for the dreams serve as bookends for the story. The beginning marks the telling of the dreams and the end marks the realization of his dreams and everything in the intermediary chapters leads up to the climactic reconciliation and resolution of the dreams.⁵

We first must ask ourselves why Joseph even had these dreams. Had special favor been placed on Joseph by God, or did he try to influence his father's emotions when he tattled on his brothers? In other words, were these dreams placed in Joseph's head by God as part of a master plan to save the clan of Jacob, or was Joseph so self centered that he felt that he was simply superior to the rest of his family(including his father) and these imagined dreams supported his misconceptions?⁵ Perhaps both were true at the same time. There certainly is evidence to support both of these claims.

Sigmund Freud believed that "the symbolic nature of dreams is a disguise designed to protect the dreamer from recognizing attempts at wish fulfillment."⁶ And it was Carl Jung who said that "dreams functioned to reveal the unconscious mind and give expression to

⁵ Ackerman 88

⁶ "Dreams" entry in The New Columbia Encyclopedia (1975)

neglected areas of the dreamer's personality."⁷ Both of these early psychiatrists offered good evidence in support of the claim that Joseph put the dreams in his own mind. While they were not specifically talking about Joseph, their theories could very easily be applied to Joseph. Joseph dreamed symbolic dreams, which were manifestations of his personality - a personality that could be described as spoiled and pompous.

However, a biblical fundamentalist, one who would rather look at this story as all part of God's divine plan, would argue against these claims. For not only is it possible that God could have still manipulated Joseph's mind to have these, but God also intended for these dreams to reveal truths about the future.

The nature of Joseph's dreams was quite different from the other dreams that were dreamed in this story. In the case of the dreams of the butler, baker, and pharaoh, we read that first the dream is dreamed, then the dream is interpreted, and finally the dream is fulfilled. Both the baker and the butler were dealt with exactly according to Joseph's interpretation of their dreams. Similarly, once pharaoh's dreams were interpreted by Joseph, the first day of "plenty" immediately began.

However, this is not so for Joseph's dreams. For Joseph, first he dreamed, then the dream was fulfilled and only after that was he able to interpret the meaning of his dreams. For it wasn't until the

⁷ "Dreams" entry in The New Columbia Encyclopedia (1975)

beginning of chapter 45 when Joseph says, "it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you,"⁸ that his dream is interpreted. This line seems to mark Joseph's clear understanding of his dreams.⁹

False interpretations precede this moment of understanding. In the beginning of the story, the brothers, in fact, quickly interpret Joseph's dreams. They say "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?" On the surface, then, and like the other three dreamers in the story, Joseph had his dreams first interpreted and then fulfilled. However, I believe that the brothers did not fully interpret the dreams. They only partially interpreted them. In fact, they even misrepresented the dreams, and Joseph's dreams await his own much later interpretation.

One of the beauties of this story is the ambiguity of the text. Perhaps this presents evidence of multiple authorship of this story. I choose to think that it merely comes to show us that the characters in this story are truly "real". They jump to conclusions. They are self centered and thoughtless. I shall explain:

(3) So Israel loved Joseph more than all the brothers (for many reasons) one reason was that he was the child of his old age. So he made him an ornamented tunic. (4) When his brothers saw that it was he (Joseph) that their father loved more than the other brothers, they came to hate him so much that they couldn't speak peacefully (with him). (5) One time, Joseph had a dream, which he told to his brothers. This only added to their hatred of him. (6) He said to them, "please listen to this dream that I had." (7) "It was truly amazing, we were binding sheaves in the middle of a field." "Suddenly, my sheaf rose up and stood

⁸ Genesis 45:5

⁹ Genesis 45:5

perfectly upright." "And then, your sheaves circled around mine and bowed down to it." (8) So his brothers responded, "Do you indeed propose to reign over us? Do you indeed feel that you will rule over us." So this only added to their hatred of him - not just his dreams, but also his words.

As we see, verse 3 says that because Israel (Jacob) loved Joseph more than all the other brothers, he made him an ornamented tunic. When the brothers saw this display of affection, they hated him. Who is "him"? Whom did the brothers hate? Did they hate Joseph? This is certainly the way most translators have treated this verse. These translators base their opinion on the fact that Joseph is the obvious focus of the hatred. But, in my opinion, it is possible that the object of the hatred was Joseph.

The next verse (5) presents evidence to the claim that it was Joseph who was the object of the wrath of the brothers. For the end of the verse says, "... this only added to their hatred of him." Certainly the use of the word "הוֹאִי" suggests that the brothers had hated him before. In other words, the anger from the previous verse was directed towards Joseph.

Additionally, it seems to make psychological sense that the brothers would hate Joseph more than they would hate Jacob. For they want to hate Jacob or see him gone, they just want him to change. They just want more attention from him. On the other hand, if Joseph were to somehow vanish, their lives would be easier and more

pleasant. As we know, they will have an opportunity to vanish him for real. They will come very close to doing so as well.

But, these reasons are not necessarily conclusive to me. Yes, it is true that Joseph had brought evil reports to Jacob concerning the actions of the brothers, but no hate was mentioned concerning that act. Hatred is only introduced with respect to the favoritism involved here. And, who is responsible for the favoritism? Is it Joseph? Certainly not. It is Jacob. There may be a little anger directed at the person who was lucky enough to be favored, but in truth the anger is directed towards the one who did the favoring.

I believe that the meaning of the text lies in a compromise between the two thoughts. For in a dysfunctional family like Jacob's, many people are to blame for unhappiness and disharmony within the system. The anger and hatred were most probably focused towards both Joseph and Jacob. The ambiguity of the text adds to its brilliance. With respect to the fact that the previous verse suggests earlier anger towards Joseph, I believe that the brothers masked their anger towards Jacob because he was the patriarch of the family and while they hated him for favoring Joseph, they still gave him the respect that he deserved.

Another question which should be raised is found concerning verses 5 and 6. In verse 5, Joseph had a dream which he told to his

brothers. They hated him for it. Then, in the following verse, he again told them about his dream, and pleads with them to hear it. First of all, why did the brothers hate him for simply having a dream? It says that Joseph told them of the dream, but is that enough to hate someone so vigorously. Additionally, if verse four speaks of Joseph having a dream and telling it as well, why was the telling repeated in verse five?

Thomas Mann, in his brilliant book *Young Joseph*, believed that Joseph had many earlier dreams. However, he rarely spoke of them. Sometimes, he told them to his younger brother Benjamin, but usually he kept them to himself.¹⁰ Mann said that "(until the time of telling his dreams to his brothers) he had not talked in their presence of his dreams, though he had them for a long time." Furthermore he said, "in their private hours, he told his little brother even the most shameless ones (dreams), which otherwise he had the good sense to suppress."¹¹

Channan Brichto z"l argued that this was a classic case of what was called synoptic resumptive, that is, the treatment of one event two times.¹² Brichto used to say that one of the telling signs of the synoptic resumptive was a considerably more detailed account of the event in the second appearance. Clearly we see that verse seven gives an entirely more detailed account of the dream than does verse 5. Thus,

¹⁰ Mann 79.

¹¹ Mann 79.

¹² Brichto 13

Brichto would disagree with Mann. Mann would postulate the dream that is referred to in verse 5 was one of the many earlier dreams that Joseph had dreamed. It was an entirely separate dream than the one spoken of in verses 5-6. Conversely, Brichto believed that verse 7 was simply a synoptic resumptive treatment of verse 5, and thus the same dream.

Suprisingly, most commentators have chosen not to address this issue. They have preferred the understanding that verse 5 was Joseph telling his brothers that he had a dream and verse 6 spelled out the details of that dream. The only exception is the commentary of Sforino. He claims that Joseph told his brothers the dream in verse 5. Then, he said "שָׁמַעְתִּי" in verse 6. Sforino makes the comment that he told the dream again because he wasn't sure that the brothers fully understood what he had told them. Thus, Sforino would argue that verses 5 and 6 were the same dream.

While I would certainly never put it beyond young Joseph to act in a spoiled and nudnik-like fashion and tell the brothers the dream twice because he knew that it upset them. I am nonetheless influenced by Thomas Mann's reading. I believe that verses 5 and 6 describe two separate dreams. I believe that the two appearances of "telling" indicate two separate and distinct dreams. Furthermore, I believe that a first dream is necessary to justify the hatred that the brothers had towards Joseph in verse 5.

The last dream that Joseph had is found in verse 9 and again in verse 10. It speaks of the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. First, he told it to his brothers (verse 9). This time they didn't respond to it. They chose not to interpret it. Perhaps because they felt that they had already done enough self inflicted damage. They had already caused the first dream to have future impact. For it is written in the Babylonian Talmud on page 55b of *Masechet Berachot* that he who interprets a dream causes its realization.

I believe that the brothers refrained from interpreting and responding to Joseph's dream for a different reason. I believe that they kept their mouths shut because they wanted to make Joseph think that his dreams were reasonable. They wanted Joseph to tell his dreams to Jacob. Then Jacob's love for Joseph would give way to his rage. I mentioned earlier that the brothers just wanted Jacob's love and attention. This could be their way of getting it. I can imagine the brothers telling Joseph that "he had a beautiful dream." And that "he should tell it to his father." Joseph, naturally, was all too happy to retell the dream since the brothers were showing an interest in hearing it again.

Joseph retells the dream to his father and Jacob, much to the dismay of the brothers, interprets it. "Am I, and your mother, and your brothers to come and bow down to you?" The brothers were hoping that Jacob would not even dignify such arrogant thinking. Instead,

after a half-hearted rebuke, Jacob interprets the dream and ponders over it.

The dream and, more importantly, the interpretation perplexes me as well. How could Jacob's interpretation of Joseph's dream be possible? Jacob suggests that he and Joseph's mother (presumably Rachel) and the brothers would all bow down to him. For this interpretation to come true, Rachel would need to rise out of the grave for her role in the bowing down. The interpretation is impossible. Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin in the previous chapter.¹³

Ibn Ezra claims that the reference to "your mother" should be understood as representing Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. When Rachel died, Bilhah assumed the responsibilities of mother to Joseph and Benjamin.¹⁴ Certainly another possibility is that it referred to Leah, Jacob's second most dear wife. Julian Morgenstern argued something much different and quite interesting. He believed that it was possible that Rachel had not yet died.

He said that Genesis 30:25 implies that Rachel gave birth to Joseph at the end of the first fourteen years that Jacob spent with Laban. Morgenstern claims that according to Genesis 35:18, Benjamin was born on the return to Canaan six years later. Thus there is only a difference of six years between the two of them.

¹³ Genesis 35:19

¹⁴ Ibn Ezra's comment on Genesis 37:10

According to Genesis 41:46, Joseph was thirty years old when he began serving Pharaoh. We also know that the brothers came down to Egypt the second time, nine years later (seven years of plenty and the first two years of famine). Thus, Joseph was nearly forty years old and Benjamin was thirty three. Yet, the text seems to imply that Benjamin was still a young lad when he came down to Egypt. Morgenstern concludes that perhaps the sequence of the Bible is flawed and that Rachel gave birth to Benjamin after Joseph had his second dream. Perhaps Joseph's second dream and Jacob's subsequent interpretation of it were not so outrageous after all.¹⁵

Finally, perhaps Jacob offered his interpretation of the dream including Joseph's mother in order to ridicule the dream. In other words, Jacob responded sarcastically because he was so appalled by the content of the dream.

Regardless, of our understanding of the content of the second dream, the reaction to the dream is important. It says that Jacob "שָׁמַר אֶת-דִּבְרֵי" ¹⁶ He kept the matter in mind. What did he keep in mind? What is the meaning of the word "דִּבְרֵי"? It could be one of or a combination of many things. Perhaps he kept in mind that the brothers were angry. Earlier in verse 11 it says that the brothers were

¹⁵ Morgenstern 292-293

¹⁶ verse 11.

envious of him. Most likely, the brothers envied him because they knew that the dream would come true. If Joseph had the audacity to tell his father that insolent dream and his father dignified it with an interpretation, there must be some legitimacy for it.

Perhaps Jacob kept in mind that his son would some day rule over the family. In other words, he kept in mind the content of the dream that was just related to him by the son that he had been showing favoritism towards. Another possibility is that Jacob kept in mind the fact that Joseph had the nerve to relate such a dream. Or finally, perhaps he kept in mind that Joseph had feelings of elevation within his own family. He felt that he had a higher status than even Jacob himself. Finally, perhaps Jacob realized that due to the astrological nature of the dream, it must have been prophetic.

Despite the ambiguity of the phrase שָׁמַר אֶת-הַדָּבָר - he kept the matter in mind), it seems clear that it is nonetheless important. For immediately after this verse, the brothers leave home. They could no longer live in a household with a brother like Joseph and a father like Jacob. Notice the next verse in the text¹⁷. It says that the brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. While it is reasonable to assume that they simply went to Shechem to feed the flock like they had always done, I do not believe that this was like all the other times.

¹⁷ verse 12.

At closer examination, the Masoretic text places an etnachta underneath the word "וַיִּנָּח". This marking has become a symbol for a pause in the text. Perhaps we are to understand that the brothers left the house because they simply couldn't stand living there anymore. And, they tended the flock that they brought with them as well.

While it is possible that the brothers overreacted to the situation, they were justified in their frustration and anger. I can't help but wonder why Joseph told the dreams in the first place? What made him relate these dreams to his brothers when they clearly demonstrated him placing himself above them? According to the legend in the Koran, Joseph told the dreams to his father first. Upon hearing them, Jacob implored Joseph not to tell his brothers, but he did anyway. Jacob realized the danger in telling these dreams to the brothers, but Joseph did not heed his words.¹⁸ Perhaps Joseph was oblivious to the possible repercussions of telling the dreams. Perhaps he felt a higher need to tell them. Nonetheless, Joseph told the dreams to his brothers and to his father. According to the Koran, he told his father first. According to the Bible, he told the brothers first. No matter which version you choose to follow, Joseph's choice was questionable.

¹⁸ Koran Surah XII.

Julian Morgenstern suggested that Joseph told the dreams to his brothers because, just like his evil reports in 37:2, he delighted in talking and presenting himself as superior to the brothers.¹⁹ Along those same lines, Joseph needed to justify the coat that he received from his father. If he presented dreams that demonstrated his superiority, he would be able to better explain the gift of the coat.

As mentioned earlier, the Talmud says that when a dream is interpreted by someone other than the dreamer, it is destined to come true. Could Joseph have told the dreams in order for them to be realized? Had he kept the dreams to himself, he would not have been elevated to the status which he perceived to apply to him, an elevated status. Perhaps then, Joseph was looking for his dreams to be interpreted, and that is why he told his dreams to his brothers.

Additionally, since Joseph's dreams divinely validated the special status that Jacob bestowed upon him. He thought that if he told the dreams to his brothers, they would understand why Joseph was receiving special treatment and hopefully they would forgive him.²⁰

It is also possible that Joseph was oblivious to the fact that telling the dreams would cause a problem. However, this would only explain why he told the first dream. The response of the brothers to that dream would send enough of a message to Joseph that he shouldn't tell the other one. (Still, Thomas Mann believed that Joseph had "no notion

¹⁹ Morgenstern 283.

of the torment which his dream was causing to his brethren.”)²¹ But he did tell another one, and he even told it twice.²² Perhaps since the second dream included his father and his mother, he wanted to test it out on his brothers, first, before he told such a dream to Jacob. In verse 9, when he told it to his brothers, they did not respond to him at all. They did not say a word. The brothers did not want to dignify the dreams any more than they had done already. Joseph, however, understood their silence to be acceptance and so he told it to his father as well.

The final possibility for Joseph to tell the dreams to his family is that he thought that it might help to restore family relations. In verse 2 it says that “וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלוֹם” they couldn’t speak peacefully with him.” This element of fraternal hatred and neglect was due to the preferred treatment that Joseph got from Jacob. Joseph thought that by telling the brothers his dreams, he could impart to them the providential care that he would provide. Thus, “שָׁלוֹם” would be restored, and “שָׁלוֹם בֵּית” could be accomplished.²³

As I mentioned earlier, Joseph’s dreams serve as bookends for this story. The telling of the dreams serve as the beginning and the

²⁰ Lowenthal 18.

²¹ Mann page 345

²² Genesis 37:9-10

realization of the dreams serve as the end. In chapter 42, verse 6 we now have new circumstances. Now, twenty-one years have passed and Joseph is the vizier in Egypt. Joseph has endured the pit, Potiphar's house, the prison, the seven years of plenty, and the first two years of famine. The brothers, in search of food, come down to Egypt, and they find themselves before their brother Joseph, but they do not recognize him.

In the verse, we are told that "the brothers came to him and they bowed down low with their faces to the ground." Taken at face value, it seems that Joseph's dream is realized. In Joseph's first dream, he said that the brothers were all sheaves of corn and that their sheaves bowed to his sheaf. Now, it had become a reality. The brothers bowed down themselves. What makes it even more interesting is that in the dream, the brothers bowed down as corn. In other words, the sheaves represent the symbol of food which will cause the brothers to bow down.

So, the story should end here. The dream has been realized. Our bookend can be placed. But the story does not end here. Joseph realizes that there is a problem. Not every brother had bowed down. Benjamin did not make the trip with the rest of the brothers. The dream, in fact, had not yet been fulfilled. Joseph needed to get Benjamin to bow down to him as well.

²³ Lowenthal 17.

So Joseph created a scheme to get Benjamin down to Egypt. He would imprison every brother but one and send that one brother back to Canaan to retrieve Benjamin. Joseph says in 42:16, "Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain confined." But after three days, Joseph changes the plan. In 42:18 Joseph says, "If you are honest men, let one of your brothers be held in your place of detention . . . but you must bring me your youngest brother."

Why did Joseph change the plan? What caused him to release all the brothers save one, instead of keeping all the brothers but one. One explanation is that Joseph was initially acting punitively. He wanted the brothers to relive the hardships that he had endured. At least one of the hardships - prison. But, Joseph's main purpose now is not to punish the brothers, but rather to see the dreams fulfilled.²⁴ Additionally, perhaps Joseph was afraid that had only one brother been sent home, Jacob would have believed that the return of the brothers was a lost cause and there was no way he would let Benjamin out of his sight.

One final thought connected with Joseph's change of the plans is that while the change is ostensibly aimed at fulfilling the dream, he is subtly forcing the brothers to relive their earlier crime. He now has a plan to frame Benjamin and he will put the brothers to a test to see if

²⁴ Alterman 91.

the next time they will save their brother instead of selling their brother into slavery.²⁵

When the brothers returned with Benjamin they "bowed low before him (Joseph) to the ground."²⁶ Now, the first dream, had been fully fulfilled. Each and every brother, including Benjamin, had bowed down before Joseph. But the story does not end here either. The reason for this is two-fold. One reason is that Joseph's second dream has not been fully fulfilled. The eleven stars have done their bowing, but the sun and the moon have still yet to bow. The second, and perhaps more important reason is that Joseph chooses to use this opportunity to test the brothers and see if they have changed or not.

Joseph still needs to reveal himself to his brothers. It is something for which he has waited patiently for a long time. But the way he reveals himself has yet to be determined. It all depends on the attitudes of the brothers. Have they changed or are they the same ruthless people that they were in Dothan?

Joseph decides that he will set up a second chance for the brothers to redeem themselves. Joseph ordered that his goblet be placed in Benjamin's sack in order to frame Benjamin and therefore put the brothers to the test. How would they respond this time? Would they forsake the youngest brother, the one who was now the favorite of their father, as they did in Dothan? Or, would they

²⁵ Alterman 92.

demonstrate behavior that was different. Had they changed, or were they the same?

Judah's passionate speech at the beginning of Parshat Vayigash²⁷ proved to Joseph that the brothers had in fact changed and Joseph realized that he could now reveal his true identity to them. So, this could also be a suitable place to end the story. Not only have the brothers been reunited, and not only has the dream been realized, but also Joseph's dreams have now been interpreted. Judah had no idea that in offering to remain enslaved so that Benjamin could return to his father, he was helping Joseph understand the meaning of his own life.²⁸ Joseph now realized that his purpose was to preserve the lives of his family members.²⁹

But, as I mentioned earlier, the sun and the moon have still yet to bow down before Joseph. Thus, we have the final part of our story. This is the section in which Jacob and his entire family journey to Egypt to be with Joseph.

Jacob came down to Egypt to be with his son Joseph in his final days, but he made it clear to Joseph that he wanted to be buried in Canaan in the same place that his father and grandfather were buried. When Joseph agreed to his dying father's request, it says, "וַיִּבְרַח" (Genesis 45:26).

²⁶ Genesis 43:26.

²⁷ Genesis 44:18.

²⁸ Alterman 104.

²⁹ Genesis 45:5,7.

וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־רֹאשׁ
bed." Finally, Jacob had bowed down. Finally the dream had been realized. Even Jacob had bowed down.

The obvious problem of Joseph's mother never bowing down still remains. Perhaps this one can never be accomplished. Rambam however, attempts to answer the problem. He says that since Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah are all dead when Jacob goes down to Egypt, the "moon" never bows down to Joseph. Therefore, Rambam concludes, that the moon represents all the additional people that came down to Egypt with Jacob other than the sons. Thus, we have a moon that symbolically bows down.³⁰

If there is one message that I learn from this chapter on dreams, it is that human beings simply cannot thwart divine purpose. The brothers did everything in their power to separate themselves from the favored son, the master dreamer. But, it was to no avail. They were destined to bow down to Joseph. Neither killing Joseph, nor throwing him into a pit, nor selling him into slavery could change God's divine plan.

It says in 37:20:

וַעֲתָה לְכֹוּ וְנַהְרִיגְהוּ וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת
וְאִמְרֵנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלָתָהוּ וְנִרְאָה מִדֵּי־יָהּ חַלְמָתוֹ:

³⁰ Rambam 454.

"Now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these pits, and we can say that an evil beast ate him; and then we will see what will come of his dreams."

Rambam teaches us that it is not the brothers who are speaking the last phrase of this verse (and then we will see what will come of his dreams), rather it is God who is saying these words.³¹ In other words, Rambam believes as I do, that no matter what the brothers tried to do, God's divine plan would ultimately become the reality.

³¹ Rambam 457.

Chapter 3

"The Pit"

While my previous chapter focused on Joseph's dreams, the bookends of the story, this chapter focuses on the events leading up to, during, and immediately after the frightening episode at the pit. For it is this experience which forces us to wonder if Jacob's family will ever be complete again.

Before we can begin discussing the pit, we must first speak of the events that occurred before Joseph arrived in Dothan. I mentioned in the last chapter that after Joseph told his second dream to his father, in Genesis 37:11 it says that Jacob simply "שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדְּבָר" "kept the matter in mind." The brothers were sufficiently convinced that Joseph had gone too far and that Jacob was going to finally punish him, that Jacob's inaction was unbearable. Thus, they packed up their bags and headed to Shechem. They knew that in Shechem they would be far from their unfairly privileged brother.

Following the brothers abrupt departure, Jacob called for his son, Joseph, and sent him off to check on the brothers and to bring back word concerning their work. This responsibility should most likely remind the reader of an event earlier in the story. This is similar to the responsibility Joseph had at the beginning of the story when he brought

back bad reports to Jacob.¹ But, it is difficult for me to believe that Jacob sent Joseph just for the purpose of overseeing the work of the brothers. I believe Jacob sent Joseph for a bigger reason. Jacob sent Joseph to his brothers for reconciliation. He wanted to restore the peace in the house. He wanted the family to be whole again. It says that the brothers were *‘לֹא יָכְלוּ דַבֵּר לְשָׁלוֹם*,² they were unable to speak a word of *shalom* to Joseph. Once Joseph told his father the dream that he had dreamt, Jacob understood what those previously mentioned Hebrew words meant. He knew that the brothers were angry with young Joseph.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that it isn't clear what *‘שָׁמַר אֶת-הַדָּבָר* means. What is the "matter" that Jacob kept in mind? If one understands it as Jacob keeping in mind the fact that the brothers were angry at Joseph, then it only follows that he would be interested in seeing that a reconciliation took place. Additionally, if we look back into Jacob's past, we understand that it is a value of his to reconcile with estranged family members. Just five chapters earlier we saw Jacob attempting to heal the wounds he had thoughtlessly inflicted on his brother, Esau.³ Now, he wanted to see his son Joseph do the same.

¹ Genesis 37:2

² Genesis 37:4

³ Genesis 32:4ff

There were differences between Jacob's condition and Joseph's condition. The most apparent one is that Jacob protected his most prized family members in the rear of the caravan when he set out to see Esau again. Had Esau acted hostilely, the family members in the rear would have had a better chance at escaping. In the case of Joseph, there was no escape for him. The prized possession was the focus. Yet, despite the differences in the two situations, Jacob still valued the potential for reconciliation.

I believe that Jacob saw a reflection of himself in his son, Joseph. I pointed out the fact that both of them had sibling conflicts. But that is not the only similarity. They were both younger siblings, and both were favored by a parent. In Joseph's case, we know that Jacob favored him. In Jacob's case, his mother Rebekah favored him.⁴ They both had chance meetings with angels. Jacob wrestled with an angel⁵ and many commentators believe that the strange man whom Joseph encountered in the field was also an angel.⁶ Finally, they were both dreamers. Jacob dreamed about a ladder with angels going up and down.⁷ And as for Joseph, we need no reminder of his active dreaming.

So, it is reasonable to assume that Joseph set out for Shechem to reconcile with his brothers. It is interesting that the brothers are said to

⁴ Genesis 25:28

⁵ Genesis 32:25

⁶ Genesis 37:15

⁷ Genesis 28:12

have gone off to Shechem when we know that they are really in Dothan. Possibly the brothers originally set out for Dothan because they had lived there for a period of time, but when they got there, they realized that the fields were not so fertile and so they continued on to Dothan. Channan Brichto would argue that point. He said that Shechem was an area that was rich for grazing. Dothan was not even comparable.⁸

This may be the "p'shat" (literal) understanding of the text, but I believe that there is greater importance to the mention of Shechem than simply that it was their original destination. "Shechem" foreshadows the events that will befall Joseph in just a short time to come. The word "Shechem" reminds us of the massacre that occurred there, when Simeon and Levi slaughtered the entire community because Hamor's son, Shechem, raped their sister, Dinah.⁹ Now, a new type of slaughter is in the works. But this time it is Joseph who will be the recipient.

One final possibility is that Shechem might simply have been too dangerous for Jacob's sons to settle given the circumstances of the massacre. It is certainly possible that when they arrived in Shechem, they noticed that there were many people who still remembered the not so distant past deeds.

⁸ Discussions with Rabbi Channan Brichto (January 1996)

⁹ Genesis 33:18ff

Nevertheless, when Joseph arrives in Shechem, he doesn't find his brothers. To his good fortune, a man, who was wandering through the field, notices Joseph. This man plays a very crucial part in our story. On the most simple level, if this man does not show up, the rest of our story does not take place. It is this man who points Joseph in the right direction when he doesn't find his brothers.

We need to ask why he has come to be known as a strange man. The only thing that is strange about him is that he seems to just appear and disappear without any trace at all. Joseph is the actual stranger. He is the one who does not live in Shechem. If anyone should be considered a stranger and foreigner, it should be Joseph. Further, the man knew that Joseph did not belong there because he approached him to help him. Thus, this man must have been from there since he knew that Joseph was lost and did not belong there.

But this man was more than just a person from Shechem because he not only knew Joseph, and knew that he was lost, but he also knew the brothers. He had paid attention to where they were journeying and then was able to direct Joseph to them. So, who is this man? Eric Lowenthal argues that he may have been an old herdsman of Jacob's during the time that he and his family lived there.¹⁰ In a comment on verse 15, Rashi suggested that this man was the angel

¹⁰ Lowenthal page 22

Gabriel. I believe that this is the same angel who wrestled with Jacob in chapter 32.

Before I discuss the dialogue between Joseph and this man of the field, it is important to note that many people would argue that the final redactor of the Bible added this unusual encounter in order to smooth out the rough edges of a story with more than one author. If one considers the possibility that one author wrote that the brothers were heading to Shechem to pasture the flock while another author wrote that the brothers were heading to Dothan to pasture the flock, we, the readers find ourselves in need of something to connect the two stories.

The purpose of the man therefore, is to bring us to Dothan, to bridge us from author "A's" story to author "B's" story. The "Form Critical Analysts" who study the Bible as a work by the hands of many authors do not treat the whole story as a single piece. I am studying this story by looking at it as a single unit. Thus, my reading is with an eye towards giving the final redactor credit for leaving the two versions in the story.

The dialogue itself between Joseph and this man is worthy of mentioning because it is important and in my opinion, quite beautiful. It not only serves as a very important bridge between Shechem and Dothan, but it also has words in it which echo expressions made by

earlier characters in Genesis. The sub-story begins with Joseph stumbling across this man.

וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְהָנָה תְּעָה בְּשָׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר מַה־תִּבְקֹשׁ

Later, a man found him who was wandering around in the field.

The man asked, "What are you looking for?"

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־אָחִי אֲנֹכִי מִבְּקֹשׁ הַגִּידָה־נָא לִי אֵיפֹה הֵם רְעִים

"I am looking for my brothers," he replied, "Could you please tell me where they are pasturing?"

Ibn Ezra suggests to us that we should add on to the end of this verse the words "אִם תֹּדַע", "if you know". Ibn Ezra found it suspicious that Joseph would ask a total stranger if that person knew where his brothers were. Why would he think that anyone he encountered would know such information.¹¹

I would like to mention again the play on the words "אָחִי אֲנֹכִי". These are the same words used in the Cain and Abel story. When God asks Cain where Abel, his brother, is. Cain responds: "אָחִי אֲנֹכִי", (Am I my brother's keeper?). While Cain asks God if he is his brothers keeper, Joseph wants to be the keeper of his brothers.

One more interesting aspect to this verse is the fact that he tells the man that he is "seeking his brothers." Julian Morgenstern

¹¹ Ibn Ezra page 348

mentioned that this line serves to foreshadow events that will take place in Egypt. Joseph will be seeking his brothers when he is in Egypt, to reconcile with them and to see if the family can be whole again.¹²

17 וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמֹרִים יֵלֶכְה דֹּתָן

וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֵר אָחָיו וַיִּמְצָאם בְּדֹתָן:

The man answered, "they have traveled on from here, for I heard them say 'Let's go to Dothan'". So Joseph continued on in search of his brothers and found them in Dothan.¹³

Many commentators have struggled with the expression "נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה", "they have traveled from this." Why was this expression used? Rashi and Ramban both agree that the brothers are fleeing from their responsibilities as brothers. They are traveling from "brotherhood." Rashi and Rambam correctly note the emotions and feelings of the brothers towards Joseph at the present time. I however, feel obliged to mention that their feelings are not permanent. They are temporary thoughts. This is clear to me by the experiences of the brothers in Egypt. When the brothers come down to Egypt to procure grain for the second time, they are reunited with Joseph. They found themselves forced to make sense of their relationship with their brother whom they thought was no longer living. The brother who

¹² Morgenstern page 280

¹³ According to E.A. Speiser, Dothan is one days journey from Shechem.

incited jealousy and hatred from them. Yet, they are not dismayed by this turn of events, rather they are quite happy and excited.

The understandings that Rashi and Rambam present for the meaning of these words is quite wonderful and helps me to make sense of the verse. However, I believe that there is more to the expression than what the commentators postulate. I believe that they were fleeing from Joseph's dreams and that serves as the reason for the unusual expression, "נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה". What could the "זֶה" represent? I believe that it is a play on the earlier use of that same word in verse 6, which reads:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם שְׁמְעוּ-נָא הַחֲלוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חָלַמְתִּי:

He said to them, "please listen to this dream that I had."

The sixth word of this verse is "זֶה" (this). I believe that when the man in the field says to Joseph, "נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה", he is hearkening back to the dream that Joseph had. He is telling Joseph that the brothers are trying to get as far away from the dream as possible. The brothers are aware of the fact that if a dream is interpreted then it will come true. And, they know that Joseph's dreams were interpreted. Thus, in order to keep the dreams from being fulfilled, they needed to get as far away from him as possible because they did not want to find themselves in a position to bow down before him as the dream predicted. If we take the

views of the commentators and combine them with this other possibility, we are given a nice understanding of the unusual expression voiced by the man in the field.

When the brothers saw Joseph approaching them in Dothan and realized that they were still unable to get away from Joseph, they devised a new plan to separate themselves from their younger brother and keep the dream from becoming a reality. In verse 20, they say:

וְעַתָּה לְכוּ וְנַהְרִגְהוּ וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת
וְאָמַרְנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אָכְלָתוֹ וְנִרְאָה מִזֶּה יִהְיֶה חֲלֻמֹּתָיו:

"Now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these pits, and we can say that an evil beast ate him; and then we will see what will come of his dreams."

They are forced to devise an alternative plan to rid themselves of Joseph. The first plan was to simply leave home and get as far away as possible. Since Joseph followed them, they came up with option two.

"Kill him and throw him into a pit" then we will see about "הַזֶּה חֲלֻמֹּתָיו".

This magnificently placed verse shows us something which is not explicitly said until the end of the book of Genesis. Joseph says to the brothers in Genesis 50:20:

וְאַתֶּם חֲשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹהִים חֲשַׁבָה לְטוֹבָה

"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

Joseph finally acknowledges something that we may or may not have known until then. God was the one who was controlling the events of this story. If God meant for Joseph to rule over his brothers, then it was inevitably and inexorably going to occur. No matter how Joseph or the brothers tried to control their own destiny. Thus, the placement of the man in the field, whether he was an angel or just a normal human being, was part of God's plan. As Nehama Leibowitz points out, it is God that controls the events and circumstances within the story. "The narrator was going out of his way to show the divine intent behind Joseph's encounter with his brothers."¹⁴

God placed the man there in order to insure that Joseph would find his brothers. Had the brothers gone from Dothan to a new place before Joseph got there, God would have placed another agent in Dothan leading him to the new location. And conversely, had Joseph arrived in Shechem without anyone directing him to Dothan, he might have returned home to Jacob thinking that he would never find the brothers. The story, as we know it, may never have taken place.

¹⁴ Leibowitz page 337.

After Joseph's meeting with the man in the field, he headed towards Dothan to find his brothers. One of the questions which Channan Brichto raised was why Joseph put his ornamented tunic on when he approached his brothers. We as readers know that the tunic was one of the things that irked the brothers. They were jealous of him and the tunic served as a symbol of their jealousy and hatred. So, we are faced with another question. Why did he put on this ankle length, chemise shaped gown, with embroidered stitches and diagonal stripes?¹⁵

Thomas Mann continually speaks of Joseph being happy-go-lucky and oblivious to the feelings of those around him. In his reading, he suggests that it is certainly possible that Joseph still did not realize that the brothers were angry with him. Mann continues in his work, Young Joseph by claiming that Joseph had been wearing the tunic all along. He did not put it on once he began approaching his brothers. Instead, he had been wearing it ever since he left Jacob in Hebron. Mann writes, "since he had inherited (the Ketonet), he reasoned, since it was his own, why not show himself in it on his travels?"¹⁶

Eric Lowenthal adds another opinion as to why Joseph put on his tunic upon approaching his brothers. Lowenthal suggests that it was because Joseph wanted reconciliation with the brothers on his

¹⁵ Lowenthal page 17.

terms. He wanted the brothers to know that if apologies were going to be exchanged, he still was not going to compromise by giving up the tunic. He believed that it was his property and that he could do whatever he wanted with it, including showing it off.¹⁷

The aspect of clothing in this story is not a minor inclusion. While the tunic serves as the object of the wrath of the brothers, it also has a number of more subtle roles as well. Clothing has served to disguise people's identity in this story and throughout the Bible.¹⁸ When Joseph's brothers come down to Egypt to procure grain, they come face to face with their own brother, but do not recognize him because of the clothing that he is wearing.¹⁹

In the story of Judah and Tamar, Tamar dresses up like a harlot and Judah does not recognize her due to the clothing that she is wearing.²⁰ Earlier in Genesis, Jacob is the one in disguise. He puts on animal skins on his arms in order to deceive his father Isaac into thinking that he is his brother Esau. All in the hope of getting the blessing.²¹

And of course, when no one was around to witness the "sexual harassment", Potiphar's wife caught Joseph by his tunic in an attempt

¹⁶ Mann page 162.

¹⁷ Lowenthal page 23.

¹⁸ Ackerman page 102.

¹⁹ Genesis 42:8

²⁰ Genesis 38:16

²¹ Genesis 27:23

to seduce him a second time. And when she failed, she did not let go of his garment, rather, she kept it in her hand.²²

In all of these examples, clothing is donned in order to disguise identities or at least to emphasize the gap between appearance and the reality of the circumstance. Is it possible that Joseph, also, was looking to disguise himself? I suspect not. For the brothers had already seen Joseph in the coat, Joseph knew they would most certainly recognize him immediately. But, perhaps it was a subconscious behavior by Joseph because he knew what awaited him in Dothan.

One final explanation for Joseph's unusual donning of his tunic as he was approaching his brothers can be arrived at if we take a close look at Genesis 46:29. This explanation is opposite of the notion that the clothing disguises people's identity.

Jacob has made the journey to Egypt and as he is about to see Joseph for the first time the text says, "וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו" (and he (Joseph) appeared to him). This is unusual because the word "וַיֵּרָא" is only used for God. It reflects a theophany. James Ackerman points out that now that Joseph is dressed in "royal splendor", the word may be appropriate.²³

Thus, when Joseph approaches his brothers in Dothan he is reminded of the dreams that he has had. He remembers that he will be

²² Genesis 39:12

²³ Ackerman 105.

their protector and that they will bow down to him. Therefore, to reinforce his feelings of being superior to them, he puts on the tunic. It was done as a reminder to everyone. The clothes make the man. He was now wearing royal garb and he planned to act the part. And, Eric Lowenthal suggests that we should not translate "בַּעַל הַחֲלֻמֹת" in Genesis 37:19 as "master of dreams" but rather we should understand it as "the dreamer who sees himself as master."²⁴

It is interesting to point out how clothing represents the rise and fall of Joseph. When he does not have nice clothing on, we can expect a rise in his stature and when he does have nice clothing on, we prepare for a disappointment. When Joseph arrives in Dothan, as we know, he is wearing the tunic. Immediately afterwards, he is stripped of the tunic and is thrown in a pit. Now that he does not have his tunic, he is drawn up from the pit and brought to Potifar's house where he rises in stature. Since Potifar gave him everything, we can assume that it included nice clothing.

But, beware of the disappointment which lies ahead. When Joseph is dressed up in nice clothes, something ominous is at hand. In this case it is the wife of Potifar. Potifar's wife after her second attempt at having an affair with Joseph failed, stripped him of his garment.²⁵ This led to Joseph's imprisonment. After a few years in prison, Joseph again rises in stature. This time it is due to his ability to interpret the

²⁴ Lowenthal page 24.

dreams of pharaoh. And, thanks to his interpretive ability, pharaoh dresses him up in robes of fine linen.²⁵ Now, we must wait and worry if Joseph is not ripe for another downfall and disappointment.

Our discussion of the pit is not yet concluded. One of the more perplexing aspects of the circumstances at the pit, not to mention the entire story of Joseph, is the confusion regarding the sale of Joseph to the nomads who passed the brothers enroute to Egypt. Who were these people? Who exactly did the buying and selling of Joseph? Why, amidst a story with such detail and clarity, are we left baffled in search of the truth?

The Bible says:

They sat down to eat food, and looked up and they saw a **caravan of Ishmaelites coming** from Gilead, and their camels were carrying spice, balsam, and laudanum bringing them down to Egypt.

Then Judah said to his brothers, "What is the profit if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?"

"Come, **let us sell him to the Ishmaelites**, then our hands will not be upon him. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh." His brothers agreed.

At the same time, **Midianite men**, traders were passing through. **They drew Joseph up from the pit**

And they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and then they brought Joseph to Egypt. . . . Meanwhile, **the Midianites sold him (Joseph) into Egypt**, to Potifar, a courtier of Pharaoh, his chief steward.

As one can see, judging by the bold face print, it is not clear "who did what" in the story. Did the Midianite traders draw Joseph from the

²⁵ Genesis 39:12

²⁶ Genesis 41:42

pit or did the brothers do it? Did the Midianites sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites or did the brothers do so? Those we claim that the Bible is the product of multiple authors use this story to help support their argument. One author believed that the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites and the other author believed that the brothers sold him to the Midianites. I prefer not to justify the problems by explaining them as products of multiple authors, rather I incline towards explaining the difficulties by integrating them into the text and studying it as a whole. So, I will offer a number of potential explanations to this problem, ending with my own preference.

Ibn Ezra argues that the Midianites and the Ishmaelites were the same people. In a comment on verse 28, he says that they were the same people because in the book of Judges it says that the kings of Midian . . . they were Ishmaelites.²⁷ Thus, Ibn Ezra believed that there is no inconsistency. It was just two ways of referring to the same people.²⁸

Rambam suggests that it was a case of mistaken identity. He said that originally the brothers looked out into the distance and believed to see Ishmaelites because they recognized the camels. However, they were wrong; it was in fact the Midianites who they saw in the distance. They were leasing the camels from the Ishmaelites. Rambam

²⁷ Judges 8:22-24

²⁸ Ibn Ezra page 351.

continues by saying that after the Midianites took Joseph, they sold him to the Ishmaelites.²⁹

Channan Brichto offered a different explanation for this difficult verse. He said that the Midianites and Ishmaelites were closely related and so they traveled together. Brichto pointed out that Ishmael, the namesake of the Ishmaelites, was the son of Hagar, Sarah's handmaid and the first woman to give birth to a son of Abraham.³⁰ As for Midian, Brichto added, he was the son of Abraham's second wife, Keturah.³¹ They were half-brothers. They were sons of the same father but different mothers. Thus, Brichto pointed out, it is likely that they were traveling together.

While I believe that all of these understandings are helpful and they are all possible explanations for the text, I would also like to add my personal reading of this scene. After the brothers threw Joseph into the pit they sat down to have a meal. This eating location was far enough away from the pit that they couldn't see it. As they were eating, the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelites approaching. Seeing them approach and knowing that they had a reputation as slave traders, Judah suggested that they sell Joseph to these Ishmaelites. Reuben, wanting to save Joseph before this sale could take place,

²⁹ Rambam page 459.

³⁰ Genesis 17:15

³¹ Genesis 25:2

offered to draw Joseph from the pit. So he began walking to the pit to get Joseph and save him.

Meanwhile, a caravan of Midianites were passing by the pit, they noticed Joseph and drew him up. This was happening at the same time that Reuben was coming to save him. In other words, Reuben was coming a little too late. When Reuben got to the pit and found the pit empty with no Joseph in it, he panicked and rent his clothes. He realized that he was too late. Meanwhile, the Midianites who were in possession of Joseph sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and the Ishmaelites brought Joseph down to Egypt.

In attempting to understand the feelings of the brothers as they were devising a plan to get rid of Joseph, we can truly only study two of them. Of all the brothers, Reuben and Judah are the only two who are given non-passive characteristics. They have speaking and thinking roles. So, let us look at Reuben and Judah.

Reuben wishes to save Joseph from the beginning. He knows that he will be to blame if Joseph does not arrive home safely. Of course, he is wrong. We know that Jacob did not blame him when Joseph was presumed dead. Nonetheless, Reuben believes that he will be blamed and so he must devise a plan to save his younger brother. We read in verse 22 that he suggests that they cast a living Joseph into one of the pits instead of casting a dead Joseph into the pit. He hoped

that when the brothers were sleeping or when they were working in the fields, Reuben would have a free moment to return Joseph.

Eric Lowenthal points out that originally Reuben wanted to save Joseph without conceiving of a plan to throw him into a pit. "Let us not strike him mortally," he says. He waited a moment for the brothers to respond to him. Since they remained silent, he then said, "Do not shed blood! instead, let's throw him into that pit, the one (over there) that is in the desert." Perhaps Reuben originally hoped that the brothers would cool down from their hot-headed feelings. Unfortunately for him, they did not. So Reuben had to alter his statement and devise a plan. This explains the inclusion of the word "וַיֹּאמֶר" two times without interruption. Whenever two or more appearances of "וַיֹּאמֶר" occur without interruption, it indicates that the speaker scrutinizes the effect of his words before he continues.³² Other examples of this in Genesis can be found in 9:25, 15:2, 16:9, 19:9, 20:9, 30:27, 41:38, and 47:3.

The bloodthirsty brothers agreed to this change of plan because they believed that Reuben's idea was even more wicked than their plan. Channan Brichto believed, relying on the interpretation of Rashi, that throwing someone into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions was more merciless and torturous than just killing him.

³² Lowenthal page 25.

Everything had been going according to Reuben's plan until the Ishmaelites came by and Judah suggested selling Joseph. Now Reuben's plan was altered. He needed to think fast. He rushed to the pit and found that Joseph was gone. When he returned to the brothers and discovered that Joseph was on his way to Egypt, he cried, "as for me, where am I to go?"

Reuben was the only brother to display despair at Joseph's disappearance. It may have simply been that he felt that Jacob would hold him responsible. Or, more likely, Reuben thought that returning Joseph to Jacob from the hands of his evil brothers would redeem himself in the eyes of his father. Reuben had made a very big mistake earlier in his life. As we read in Genesis 35:22, during Jacob's journey to Hebron, Reuben had sex with Rachel's handmaid, Bilhah, and Jacob found out. Jacob, most likely, was very angry with Reuben and never fully forgave him for his act, recalling of course the infamous "blessing" given Reuben by his father. Thus, we deduce that Reuben had a lot to gain by returning Joseph to his father.

It seems to make sense that Reuben's anguish at Joseph's disappearance was not because he ached over Joseph's pain, but rather because he ached over his missed opportunity to redeem himself. Again, his words were "now, where I am going to go?" What is he going to do now that his chance for Jacob to forgive him is lost.

Judah is different. Unlike Reuben, Judah has a great deal to gain by Joseph's disappearance. Reuben, while being the first born and having every reason to resent his younger brother who is receiving favored status, was in no position to gain that special status from Jacob because of his incident with Bilhah. Simeon and Levi, the next two oldest sons had been scarred by the events in Shechem.³³ Therefore, Judah, the fourth oldest was next in line for special status so long as Joseph was not around.

Judah, being a somewhat responsible and mature person did not want to see Joseph killed, but he did want to see him away from the family. Thus his plan did not entail saving Joseph and returning him back to Jacob. Rather, Judah suggested that they sell him to the Ishmaelites, "After all, he is our brother, our own flesh."

Ibn Ezra questioned Judah's statement about being of the same flesh. He said that they shared a father, but did not share a mother. Were they really of the same flesh? Ibn Ezra concluded that Judah meant to say that Joseph is as our own flesh.³⁴ In either case, it is clear that Judah wanted to save Joseph from being murdered, but he did not want him returned to Jacob.

After selling Joseph to the Ishmaelites/Midianites, the brothers slaughtered a goat and dipped the tunic into its blood. Their scheme was to trick Jacob into thinking that a wild animal had devoured their

³³ Genesis 34:25ff

brother. They presented Jacob with the tunic and asked him to examine it and tell if it was Joseph's tunic or not, as if they had never seen the tunic before and could not themselves recognize it.

Jacob's response to them is quite interesting. He says:

צִתְנַת בְּנֵי חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלָתָהּ טָרֶף טָרֶף יוֹסֵף

"My son's tunic, a wild beast has devoured him, Joseph has been torn to pieces."

To begin with, this is the only time in the Bible that we find three Final *Fehs* in a row! The recitation of the verse in Hebrew is very lovely, courtesy of this instance of alliteration. However, from a plot line perspective, I find those words to be troubling. Why did Jacob immediately conclude that Joseph was dead based upon a bloody tunic? One is reminded of O.J. Simpson, I'havdil, who also immediately took at face value the report of the slaying of a loved one and asked not one searching question of detail. The brothers never told him that Joseph was devoured by an animal. They simply presented him the tunic and asked if he recognized it.

It is interesting to note the symbolism of a person being substituted for a person. In the case of Joseph, we see that his brothers use the blood of an animal to deceive Jacob and suggest that Joseph is dead. Jacob himself also used animal skins to disguise himself and

³⁴ Ibn Ezra page 351.

deceive his father into blessing him instead of Isaac. And Isaac of course, had a ram substituted for himself when he was on the alter to be sacrificed.

Perhaps Jacob knows that the brothers are lying or trying to cover up the truth. Jacob responded far too impulsively to the circumstantial evidence which was presented to him. He should have questioned the brothers and attempted to determine the specifics of the situation. I can only assume that if in our modern day, a parent lost a child and was presented with a bloody garment of the child, the parents would not immediately assume that the child was dead because the parent would want to cling to a shred of hope. I believe they would conduct an investigation first. Jacob does not do so. He immediately begins the mourning process. As if he believes that there is no hope for Joseph to be alive.

One other possibility is that he was doing this in order to convince the brothers that he felt Joseph was dead, when in fact he knew that God had bigger plans for the boy. James Ackerman supports my claim by saying that Jacob, who claimed that he would go down mourning to Sheol to seek out his dead son, will find himself going down to a different type of Sheol to reunite with his living son.³⁵ In fact, Mann claimed that Jacob referred to Egypt as Sheol.³⁶ Nonetheless,

³⁵ Ackerman page 105.

³⁶ Mann page 27.

Jacob knew that God was behind all of the events befalling Joseph and that in the end the divine plan would come through.

Chapter 4

"Doubling, and the Maturity of Characters"

Though it will seem as if this chapter has two focuses, I believe that they are one in the same. The beginning looks at the elements of doubling in our Joseph story and then goes on to study the maturity and development of our main characters. They are connected because the maturity and development of the characters is measurable when we see them confronted with similar situations as before, and observe if they make choices to act in new or old ways. In other words, we have an opportunity to study them through time and see how they have changed or remained the same.

We begin by studying the elements of doubling in the story. Doubling occurs when a word, phrase, story, or event is repeated. One use of doubling is for emphasis. When the brothers come to Egypt for the first time to procure food, Joseph immediately labels them as spies.¹ Again, a few verses later, Joseph repeats his earlier claim that his brothers are spies.² James Ackerman believes, as I do, that this is a case of doubling for emphasis.³

¹ Genesis 42:9

² Genesis 42:14

³ Ackerman page 87.

Another use of doubling is to retard the plot. An author's need or desire for the literary technique of doubling can cause action in the plot which would not have normally occurred. For instance, the need for doubling delayed the brother's recognition of Joseph. The doubling caused the brothers to return to Jacob and convince him to let go of Benjamin to bring him down to Egypt. The doubling caused Benjamin and the rest of the brothers to endure the accusation of thievery. The doubling caused the story to go on longer than necessary.⁴

Doubling has other literary purposes as well. It serves to foreshadow some situations and remind us of others. I mentioned in the previous chapter that the use of the city of Shechem a second time foreshadowed what was to befall Joseph when he arrived in Dothan. It was the memory of the massacre in Shechem which foreshadowed for us the pain and humiliation of Joseph in the pit.

Similarly, other parts of our story evoke earlier events as well. Joseph decides to keep Simeon in Egypt and send back the rest of the brothers to get Benjamin. As the brothers are returning home, they check in their sacks of grain and find the money that they had brought down as payment stored away inside.⁵ This money that was gained in the context of losing a brother echoes in plot their plan, a few chapters earlier, to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. While the Hebrew word

⁴ Ackerman page 88.

⁵ Genesis 42:27

“סֶדֶק” is commonly understood as “money” it nevertheless is found in both of these contexts.

Another example of doubling serving as a reminder of previous events occurs when the brothers set out for Egypt a second time with Benjamin. We read that among the items that they were bringing with them as gifts for Joseph were gum, balm, and laudanum.⁶ Again, upon hearing about these gifts, we are reminded of the Ishmaelites bringing Joseph down to Egypt because they were carrying the same things.⁷

Doubling is a beautiful and powerful literary device. When we read similar words or phrases, and when we notice similar scenes and events, it helps to bring out the beautiful intricacies of the story. It makes a simple story of brotherly envy into a sophisticated story with nuances and subtleties.

Finally, doubling can be important as a contrast to events that are not doubled. One example of this can be found in pharaoh's dreams. The fact that they are doubled indicates that they will come true.⁸ In fact, Joseph even mentions it himself when he says, “As for pharaoh having the same dream twice, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and that God will soon carry it out.”⁹ In other words, the doubling is not just a literary device, rather it also serves as a driving part of the story.

⁶ Genesis 43:11

⁷ Genesis 37:25

⁸ Ackerman page 89.

Doubling can occur in many different ways and many different degrees. It can occur as a repetition of a word. It can occur as a repetition of a phrase. It can occur as a repetition of a story. And, it can occur as a repetition of a situation.

When we examine the instances of doubling of a word, we can look at Jacob's expression upon seeing the bloody tunic that the brothers show to him. He says, "טָרַף טָרַף יוֹסֵף;" Joseph has been torn to pieces. The repetition of the root "ט ר ף" serves to emphasize Jacob's feelings. Certainly the verse could have been written with only one use of the root, but both were used nevertheless.

Doubling of words is something which is found throughout the Bible. Doubling of phrases, stories, and situations however, is considerably more intrinsic to the Joseph story. With respect to the doubling of phrases, we see examples once Joseph is in Egypt. In one example, when Joseph is interpreting pharaoh's dreams, Joseph says, "God has told pharaoh what he is about to do." Just a few verses later he repeats the same phrase almost word for word.¹⁰ Perhaps this is a formulaic response or perhaps it is the authors attempt to show Joseph's understanding of God's presence in the story.

Also, we find another example of this in the first visit the brothers make to Egypt. Joseph accuses the brothers of being spies and

⁹ Genesis 41:32

¹⁰ Genesis 41:25,28

then tells them what they need to do in order to vindicate themselves.

The verses read:

Verse 15: "By this you shall be put to the test: unless your youngest brother comes here, by Pharaoh, you shall not depart from this place."

Verse 16: "Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remained confined, that your words may be put to the test whether there is truth in you."¹¹

It is true that these verses are not exactly the same. The second verse not only adds considerably more information, but the second verse also finds the words of the brothers being put to the test not they themselves. However, the similarities are striking. In fact it seems as if the two are essentially saying the same thing. I believe that Joseph repeats his point because he wants to add to the anxiety of the brothers. The brothers are not spies and they know it. Joseph's repeat accusation only adds to their stress.

One final place in which we observe the doubling of a phrase comes when the rations that the brothers brought from Egypt had been eaten entirely. In Genesis 43:3, Jacob tells his sons to return to Egypt to get more food. Judah replies, "the man warned us, 'do not let me see your faces unless your brother is with you.'" Then, two verses later, Judah repeats the same exact phrase, word for word. This shows how scared Judah is coupled with how clear Joseph's message was to the brothers.

¹¹ Genesis 42:15,16

Similarly, there are a number of cases in which the story itself is doubled. One example comes when Joseph is in prison with the baker and the chief cup-bearer. After Joseph interprets their dreams he tells the cup-bearer not to forget him "for I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews; I have not done anything that they should put me in the dungeon."¹² In this case, Joseph recaps what happened to him over the last three chapters. It may not have been the full truth, but it certainly was a episode of doubling. The deviations are noteworthy, but do not alter the story: I read it as Joseph's paraphrase of his life. Even though he was in jail and seemingly had plenty of time on his hands to relate his entire story, often times when people talk about themselves they tend to give "highlights."

A second example comes when the brothers return to Jacob from Egypt and report to him what happened there and on the way back. They say, "The man spoke harshly to us and accused us of spying . . . we said that we are honest men and are not spies . . . there were twelve of us but one is no longer and the other is home with our father . . . the man then said to us to leave one of our brothers there . . . and bring back our youngest brother."¹³ This is a recapitulation of the brothers' entire experience in Egypt. We as readers do not need to read it again. In other biblical stories, recapitulations like this one are not often used

¹² Genesis 40:15

¹³ Genesis 42:31-34

although they are common in epics. The Joseph story with its brilliant detail uses the device of doubling as the brothers tell what happened.

My final example comes during the brother's return trip to Egypt. When they see Joseph, whom they still do not recognize, they immediately tell him of the money sacks that they found in their bags of grain when they first came down to Egypt. They said, "we came down once before to procure food, but when we arrived at the night encampment and opened our bags, there was each one's money in the mouth of his bag . . ." ¹⁴ This is a recapitulation of the events of the previous trip to Egypt. It is done so the brothers can plead innocence if the Egyptian officials accuse them of stealing the money.

Other examples of plot doubling can be found when the brothers try to convince Jacob to send Benjamin in their care, ¹⁵ and when Judah gives his passionate plea to Joseph to save Benjamin. ¹⁶

Doubling can also occur with respect to situations. Throughout the story, we notice events happening in pairs. Three sets of dreams occurred in pairs. First Joseph dreamed twice, then the baker and the cup-bearer had a dream together, and finally, pharaoh dreamed twice. Joseph is confined twice - in the pit and in prison. The brothers make two trips to Egypt. They find money in their grain bags twice. There are two attempts to send Benjamin with them to Egypt. There are two

¹⁴ Genesis 43:20-21

¹⁵ Genesis 43:7

¹⁶ Genesis 44:18-34

invitations for the family to settle in Egypt. Two Egyptians entrust their affairs in Joseph's hands - the jailer and Potifar. Potifar's wife seduces Joseph and accuses him twice. Joseph serves two powerful prisoners and two years pass between their dreams and his release.

However, some of the most interesting cases of situational doubling can be best described by an expression that James Ackerman uses - "measure for measure".¹⁷ This is the doubling in which the brothers find themselves reliving some of the horrible experiences that Joseph went through. This is the doubling which is delaying the fulfillment of the dreams.

This notion of measure for measure begins when the brothers come before Joseph on the first trip to Egypt. Joseph is unrecognizable to them. This is the beginning of the retribution to the brothers. For immediately after they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, they tricked Jacob by dipping the tunic into the blood of a goat and showing it to their father. So when the brothers did not recognize Joseph in Egypt, it was a case of the deceivers being deceived by the outward appearance of something or someone.¹⁸

The next stop along the comes at the same time that it says that the brothers did not recognize Joseph. We read that Joseph "spoke harshly to them." This is similar to the treatment that the brothers showed to Joseph when they "could not speak a friendly word to

¹⁷ Ackerman page 91.

him."¹⁹ Again, it is measure for measure. The brothers are finding themselves in the same situations that Joseph found himself in.²⁰

A few verses later, Joseph accuses the brothers of "coming to see the nakedness of the land." Ackerman points out that in the Bible, "'nakedness' consistently occurs in texts referring to sexual misconduct."²¹ It was Joseph who was accused of sexual misconduct with Potifar's wife. Now, he accused the brothers of the misconduct. In fact, just as Joseph was thrown in jail for those actions, so to are the brothers thrown in jail.

This jailing re-enacts more than just the time when Joseph was thrown in jail, but also the time when Joseph was in the pit. For, the word "בֹּר" (pit) is used both to describe the pit that Joseph was thrown into as well as the prison in which Joseph was incarcerated.²² Again, the brothers are suffering measure for measure. The suffering itself may not be equal to the suffering that Joseph endured, but the nature of the suffering remains the same.

Since the Bible offers us no assistance in explaining what the brothers were experiencing when they were first thrown in jail, I have tried to come to my own conclusions. I believe that while the brothers are in jail, they are forced to decide which one of them will be freed to

¹⁸ Genesis 37:32 & 42:8

¹⁹ Genesis 37:4 & 42:7

²⁰ Ackerman page 91.

²¹ Ackerman page 91.

²² Genesis 40:15

return to Jacob and tell him that the rest of the brothers are in jail and that in order to free them Benjamin must come down to Egypt. They realize that Jacob would think that if all the brothers are imprisoned, Benjamin would meet the same fate. Their acknowledgement of Benjamin's status as favorite son means also that they anticipate Jacob's unwillingness to send him. Thus they begin to recognize that they may die in prison. This is the same feeling that Joseph must have been feeling as he lay helpless in the pit.²³

Joseph changes his mind. He wants Benjamin to be brought down to Egypt and he knows his father well enough to assume that if all the brothers but one are imprisoned, and that one returns to Jacob to get Benjamin, then Jacob will not agree to send Benjamin. So, Joseph decides to change the plan and keep only one of the brothers and allow the rest to return to Jacob to get Benjamin. Joseph believes that the chances are greater that Jacob will be convinced to let Benjamin go down.

The brothers are faced with the misfortune of having to return to Jacob and report to him that Simeon has been kept in Egypt. They need to bring back the news that another brother has been lost.²⁴ Only this time, the news is sad for everyone, not just for Jacob as in the first instance.²⁵

²³ Ackerman page 91.

²⁴ Ackerman page 92.

²⁵ Genesis 37:32

After the food runs out, Jacob realizes that the brothers must return to Egypt to get more grain. However, as mentioned, Jacob pretends that Benjamin is not the issue. He pretends that sending Benjamin is not the key factor in releasing Simeon and getting more food. Perhaps senility was setting in and he forgot that Benjamin was a factor. Perhaps he hoped that the brothers forgot the awful terms of return to Egypt. Or, perhaps he was simply in denial. Nonetheless, he initially told the sons to return to Egypt without Benjamin.

At this point, Reuben steps in. He remembered that he was unable to demonstrate any leadership at the pit to save Joseph. He remembered that he had lost his chance to return Joseph to Jacob and restore Jacob's confidence in him. So he pleaded with Jacob to send Benjamin in his care. We read in Genesis 42:37 that Reuben said if he does not return Benjamin safely, he gave Jacob permission to kill his two grandsons (Reuben's children). This also was an example of measure for measure. The first time that Jacob's favorite son was in Reuben's care, he had no personal sacrifice at stake. However, this time, he children were at stake.

Jacob refused this senseless offer and Judah was finally able to convince his father to send Benjamin in his care. James Ackerman points out an interesting irony at this moment. Jacob says,

“וְשָׁלַח לָכֶם אֶת־אֲחֵיכֶם אַחֵר וְאֶת־בְּנֵימִי”. Most translators agree that this verse should be understood as “God will release your other brother

(Simeon) and Benjamin. Ackerman suggests that perhaps Jacob knew that Joseph was alive and well in Egypt and that this plea should have an extra comma. Thus it should be read, "God will release your brother (Simeon), the other (Joseph), and Benjamin."²⁶

At any rate, the brothers traveled down to Egypt and found themselves in the most powerful of all the measure for measure doubling devices. After speaking and eating with all the brothers, including Benjamin, Joseph planted his silver goblet in Benjamin's bag. Earlier, just before the brothers were put in jail, Joseph said to them that "they would be put to the test, unless your youngest brother comes here . . . "²⁷ While it seemed to the brothers as if the test was to see if they were lying or not about the youngest brother. In fact, the test was only to become known to them once they brought their youngest brother to Egypt.

The true test was the culmination of the plot doubling device. So much of the doubling that occurred was for the purpose of the final episode of doubling. Joseph set up a test to see if the brothers would make the same mistake in Egypt as they made at the pit. They found themselves in an unusual situation. They were forced to choose again. They were in a position in which they were reliving the events of the past. They were forced to choose if they would abandon another

²⁶ Ackerman page 90.

²⁷ Genesis 42:15.

favored son or defend him.²⁸ And this time, they changed. They defended the favored son instead of abandoning him.

It appears as if there was a definite change in the brothers. Other than Judah, I do not know how much they changed. But it seems clear to me that all of the brothers were united in their desire to protect Benjamin instead of sacrificing him.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the beauties of this story is that we are are graced with tremendous detail. We can trace the development and maturity of some of our characters. Personally I feel that the brothers changed. Unfortunately, I am unable to truly analyze the growth of all of the brothers because most of them do not have speaking roles. However, I am able to make some judgments about Judah and Reuben. It is my intention now to discuss their development as well as the development of Jacob and Joseph as well.

Reuben is a very intriguing character. His actions at the pit seem to be the most heroic of all the brothers. He did not actually save Joseph, but it was his intention to save him. Had the caravan of Ishmaelites not walked by, he most likely would have succeeded in his plan to return Joseph to Jacob. Thomas Mann writes that Reuben is genuinely distraught by Joseph's disappearance from the pit.²⁹

Reuben cries, "now where am I to go?" We can look at this line in many ways. One way to understand this line is that Reuben does

²⁸ Ackerman page 97.

not know how he will be able to report such news to Jacob. Another way of treating this line is that Reuben did not know where to go in his life now that Joseph was no longer part of the family. Still another way of understanding this line is that Reuben was so scared of the repercussions of Joseph's death (Reuben at the time of his saying this line did not know that Joseph had been sold by the brothers) that he did not know where to hide. And one final way of understanding it²⁹ is that Reuben was so delirious from finding Joseph missing that he could not put a thought together.

That Joseph was not in the pit meant he was presumably dead. I think that Reuben truly loved his younger brother. I fully believe that Reuben was conscious of the fact that in returning Joseph to Jacob safely, he would redeem himself in Jacob's eyes from his mistake with Bilhah. But, I do not feel as if that was his motivating factor in attempting to save Joseph. Based on my reading of Tomas Mann, I think that Reuben loved Joseph and did not want to see him harmed

Up until now, Reuben is a hero. He separated himself from his evil brothers. He did not give in to the peer pressure. However, when the story is looked at in its entirety, Reuben does not mature and grow. Rather, if anything, he becomes more childish.

When the brothers are jailed in Egypt, they are forced to choose one from themselves who would be freed and forced to return to Jacob

²⁹ Mann page 416.

to bring Benjamin to Egypt.³⁰ The brothers were scared. They thought that they might die in prison. In desperation they thought back to their crime at the pit and concluded that their present condition was their punishment. The situation called for the oldest brother to show some leadership

So, Reuben spoke up. But he did not act like a leader. He did not accept full responsibility, like a leader should. He did not even accept shared responsibility, like a brother should. Instead, he said (chapter 41:21-22), "Did I not tell you to do no wrong to the boy? But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood." Reuben had a chance to be the leader, but instead he offered a querulous expression of innocence. Perhaps Reuben was not so deserving of the special status awarded to the first born.

Additionally, Reuben was wrong on two counts. The first is that he never said to the brothers "Do no wrong to the boy." He only said to them, "Let us not take his life." These two expressions are very different. One says not to kill Joseph, but doing other harmful things is acceptable. The other says that nothing harmful should be done to the boy.

Reuben's second error is to claim that the brothers "paid no heed to him." In fact they did. Reuben suggested that instead of killing Joseph, they throw him into a pit. The brothers did just as he said.

³⁰ Genesis 42:19

They did not kill Joseph, they simply threw him into a pit. Reuben's expression of innocence is based solely on his thoughts and not his words. The reader of the story knows that Reuben did not want Joseph harmed, but the brothers were not clear concerning that.

When Joseph changes his mind and lets all the brothers but Simeon return to Jacob, Reuben is given yet another opportunity to assert his leadership. The brothers report to Jacob what has happened to them and told him that they needed to bring Benjamin back with them. Jacob refuses the request of the brothers, so Reuben steps in as self appointed leader. He says, "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my care and I will return him to you."³¹

Reuben breaks the silence because he is, as Jacob notes later in the story, "unstable like boiling water."³² His overstatement to kill his two sons demonstrates his inability to tolerate the alternative. Reuben would rather have his father kill his two sons than see Benjamin lost as well as Joseph. Yet Reuben's words only make the matter worse. Why would Jacob feel comfortable with the potential of losing Benjamin because he could kill his two grandsons if Benjamin was not returned. However, Reuben's overstatement was an example of his love for his father and his brother. He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to maintain the family

³¹ Genesis 42:37

Judah's condition was quite different from Reuben's. Whereas Reuben showed a lack of growth throughout the story, Judah showed the opposite, Judah demonstrated a great deal of growth and maturity. We begin a look at Judah by studying some of Thomas Mann's thoughts from his book, Young Joseph. It seems clear that Mann's initial opinion of Judah was that Judah was strong-willed and easily annoyed. He writes that Judah was not pleased to hear Joseph's dreams and even suggested to Joseph that since the dreams were Joseph's and did not concern the brothers that Joseph should just keep quiet.³³ However, during the experiences in Hebron with the family, Judah never actually speaks.

Soon after, during the experiences in Dothan, we are afforded the opportunity to study Judah's first words. After the brothers have thrown Joseph into the pit, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming their way. Judah says, "What is the profit if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, then our hands will not be upon him. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh."³⁴

Here, as Reuben did a few verses earlier, Judah attempts to save Joseph's life. And like Reuben, the brothers agree to his suggestion, for already Judah is asserting himself as the leader of the brothers.

³² Genesis 49:4

³³ Mann page 339.

³⁴ Genesis 37:26-27

Following the experience in Dothan, we are introduced to a strange change in the story. Chapter 37 concludes with Joseph being sold to Potifar in Egypt, and chapter 39 begins with the story of Joseph in Potifar's house. Chapter 38 was inserted between the two chapters and its relevance to the narrative has perplexed people for a very long time.

Chapter 38 is a story which supposedly takes place concurrently with Joseph's experiences in Egypt. The chapter tells a story of Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. Tamar marries Judah's oldest son, Er. Er was displeasing to God, so he was killed. By the principles of the Levirate marriage³⁵, Judah gave his next oldest son Onan to Tamar. However, he felt guilty about having sex with Tamar, so he never inseminated her. This displeased God as well so he was killed.

As one can imagine, Judah was reluctant to give his next and final son, Shelah, to Tamar, for he feared that Shelah would meet the same fate as his other two brothers. So Judah withheld Shelah from Tamar for some time. When Tamar decided that Judah was never going to give her Shelah, she decided to play a trick on Judah.

Tamar dressed up as a harlot one day and set out to seduce Judah. Judah saw her by the side of the road and had sex with her without knowing who it was. When they finished, Judah offered her his staff, seal, and his cord as collateral until he was able to return to her and pay her a kid(goat).

³⁵ When a widow's husband dies, the next unmarried brother marries the widow.

Soon after, Judah sent an Adullamite to her to redeem the pledge but he was unable to find her. When he returned to report to Judah that he was unable to find the harlot, Judah decided to forget the entire thing and let her keep the staff, seal, and cord.

Three months later, Judah was told that Tamar was pregnant by harlotry. Judah immediately sent for her in order to be killed. When she arrived before Judah she showed the staff, seal, and cord and said, "I am with child by the man to whom these belong." Judah realized that she was in the right and he was forever changed by this incident.

This story is absolutely essential in understanding the story which surrounds it. The events in this story marked Judah's growth and maturity, and changed Judah from just another brother to the leader of the family. For one thing, Judah was now able to identify with his father's grief of losing a son and potentially a second one. However, the story with Tamar served another purpose as well.

Remember that after the brothers' first trip to Egypt, Reuben acted impulsively and without leadership. Judah, on the other hand acted with leadership. After Jacob refuses Reuben's plea to send Benjamin in his care, Judah is able to bring Jacob back to his senses by demonstrating that his protective favoritism for Benjamin will destroy the future generation of the family of Israel. By not sending Benjamin, he was putting the family in jeopardy.³⁶

³⁶ Ackerman page 102.

Whereas Reuben spoke of killing his two sons, the next generation, Judah spoke of preserving the next generation. Judah said, "Send the boy in my care, and let us be on our way that we may live and not die - you and we and our children . . . you my hold me responsible . . . if I do not bring him back . . . I shall stand guilty before you forever."³⁷

Judah did two things by uttering these words. He asserted himself as leader of the brothers by taking full responsibility for Benjamin's return. The family knew that the onus was on Judah. Reuben, on the other hand, put the responsibility on the shoulders of his two sons. Thus, they would have been the ones to truly suffer if Benjamin was not returned. Reuben would have felt guilty and sad, but would not have been accountable.

Judah did one other wise thing when he uttered his words to Jacob. He spoke words that meant something to his father. He spoke words of continuation of the family not destruction of the family. Judah knew about the promises that had been made to Abraham and Isaac. Promises that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. And Judah knew that these promises were important to Jacob. In fact, Judah repeated words the exact same words that Jacob used just a chapter earlier. Jacob said, "Go down and procure rations . . . that we may live

³⁷ Genesis 43:8-9

and not die."³⁸ Judah repeated those same words of life. He said, "Send the boy in my care . . . that we may live and not die."³⁹

The events of the second trip to Egypt cemented the fate of Judah. He had grown and he was the natural leader. When the brothers were brought back to Egypt and Benjamin was accused of stealing the silver goblet, it was Judah who stepped forward and gave the passionate plea to Joseph. Judah's speech showed that the loss of a brother would be the death of Jacob.⁴⁰

As for Jacob, his maturity is harder to chart for he was already an elderly man when the story begun. But, even an old person has the capacity to grow. And, I believe that when an elderly person grows, it is more impressive, for that person has had a lifetime of experiences to shape their being. A change in behavior at an old age shows a tremendous amount of strength.

We know a great deal about Jacob before the Joseph story. He was the second born of a set of twins. He stole the birthright from his brother Esau. He, like Joseph, was a dreamer. He lived with his uncle Laban. He fled from Laban's house and settled in Hebron. However, I believe that two other things shaped the person that he was. The first is that he was the favorite son of his mother, Rebecca.⁴¹ Jacob learned from his mother that picking favorites among your children

³⁸ Genesis 42:2

³⁹ Genesis 43:8

⁴⁰ Ackerman page 103.

⁴¹ Genesis chapter 27.

was an appropriate thing to do. Jacob used his mother's model as a way for him to lead his own life. He picked favorites; first Joseph, and then Benjamin.

The second experience in his life which shaped his behavior was his experience with Laban. Laban was a trickster and a scoundrel. He made Joseph work for him for unreasonably long periods of time and he even gave Leah to Jacob as a wife despite the fact that Jacob loved Rachel. This experience caused Jacob to be an angry person who was very distrustful of people.

Both of these events caused Jacob to favor Joseph and be suspicious of his other sons. In fact, of all his sons, he had a strange suspicion of the sons of Leah, for it was Leah who was the object of Laban's first deception.

When the brothers returned from Dothan with Joseph's tunic bloodied, Jacob refused to be comforted by his children. He separated himself from his other children even more. One could say that he even held a dead Joseph superior to the other living brothers. This happens not only in literature, but in life as well.

Some time later, the famine set in about Canaan. Jacob knew that there was food in Egypt so he sent all his sons but his new favorite, Benjamin, down to Egypt to procure food. He restrained from sending Benjamin, even though I am sure that Benjamin would have wanted to be like the other brothers, because he feared that the journey down

to Egypt was dangerous. It was no problem to send his other sons into a dangerous situation, but Benjamin, he would not send.

When the brothers returned with the news that Simeon had been held captive there, it may have upset Jacob, but it was not sufficient for him to risk losing his favorite son. Reuben pleaded with him, but he did not change his mind. Then Judah tried to change his mind.

As discussed earlier, Judah spoke to him about life, about future generations. Judah spoke about the good of the Israelites, the future Jewish people, and not just the good of himself. Because of these words, the old and tired Jacob was convinced. He grew. He learned that his picking favorites was jeopardizing the lives of many people. If he did not send Benjamin, then everyone would die. Perhaps he even learned that picking Joseph as his favorite in the beginning, caused a great deal of pain and anguish. Jacob matured, even in the latter days of his life. No easy task for a person to accomplish.

Joseph's life was marked by a great deal of maturity. I believe that his life can be divided into three stages. The first stage was the time up until he was thrown into the pit. Until that point, Joseph might possibly be characterized as a brat. He never worked in the fields, he simply supervised the work in the fields. He wore nice clothing without any regard for the feelings of his brothers. He

thoughtlessly told his brothers, and even his father, dreams that he had regarding his superior status. In general, he was spoiled.

But then he was thrown into the pit. He was frightened, and more importantly, he was humbled. So, when he was brought down to Egypt, he was no longer the self-centered and spoiled kid that he was in his father's home. It was his time in Potifar's house which marked the second stage in Joseph's maturity, a stage which was known for a more humble and righteous Joseph. And, he would be tested. Potifar's wife made advances towards him two times.

In both cases he resisted her advances. In the first case, she said to him, "lie with me." But he refused her saying, "How could I do such a thing?" She came on to him a second time as well. Again he resisted, but this time Potifar's wife was not so happy with his refusal. She grabbed hold of the garment he was wearing and accused him of sexual improprieties.

The Koran gives a wonderful account of the events following her accusation. It says that when Potifar was told of the story he did not believe that his wife was telling the truth and that Joseph was guilty. He arrived at this conclusion by concluding that since the garment was ripped from behind, she must have been lying. For he must have been trying to run from her. Had it been torn from the front, it would have proven that she was struggling from his advances.⁴²

⁴² Koran Surah 12.

Immediately after, Potifar's wife assembled a group of women together and gave them all knives. She then brought Joseph into the room full of women. When they saw him, they were so overwhelmed by his beauty that they slit their hands. Therefore, she argued that Joseph should be taken to jail since he didn't obey her.⁴³

Ultimately, Joseph asked God to send him to jail because he was afraid that he would give into the temptation of these women and thus be "ignorant", a term the Koran uses very strongly.⁴⁴ In any event, the experience at the pit made him more humble and more righteous and he demonstrated this new-found maturity in Potifar's house.

Joseph's time in jail marked the second period of growth for him. In jail he began realizing the influence that God played in his life. Until his time in jail, Joseph truly did not appreciate God's presence in his life. Only one time did he mention God's name,⁴⁵ even though Genesis 39:1-5 mentions that the "Lord was with Joseph" five times. These were the first five verses of Joseph's experience in Egypt.

In jail however, Joseph begins understanding God's role in the workings of his life. When the baker and cup-bearer ask Joseph to interpret their dreams, he replies, "Surely God can interpret. Tell me (your dreams)."⁴⁶ And so later on, when Pharaoh asks Joseph to interpret his dreams, Joseph fully understands the role that God is

⁴³ Koran Surah 12.

⁴⁴ Koran Surah 12.

⁴⁵ Genesis 39:9

⁴⁶ Genesis 40:8

playing in his life. In the nine verses that Joseph speaks during the period that he is before Pharaoh, he mentions God's name five times.⁴⁷ This is certainly a dramatic increase of usage from the previous chapters

Joseph's new understanding of God serves as the chief characteristic of the third stage of his life. Perhaps it is his ability to see God's presence in such a horrible place which earns him the title, Joseph the *Tzadik* , Joseph the Righteous.

⁴⁷ Genesis 41:16,25,28,32(2x)

Chapter 5

“The Dysfunctional Family”

When one reads the story of Joseph through a modern lens, it is hard not to be struck by the psychological and emotional dysfunction within the family. Perhaps that is one of the reasons that this story is so popular. When we read it, so often we are reminded of events in our own families or relationships. We see that we are not the only ones suffering with family problems. And, we see that even our patriarch Jacob suffered like we do.

My intention in this chapter is to suggest a number of characteristics of psychological and emotional dysfunction and show how they were manifested within Jacob's family. In my estimation, to understand the story from a literary perspective, we must understand why the characters acted in the ways that they did. In many cases, when we look at the circumstances surrounding the lives of our characters, their actions are very consistent with modern day thinking. In fact, in some cases, we should use the characters in this story as paradigms for our own behavior. Examples of this will be offered throughout this chapter.

So, I will structure this chapter by first offering the modern psychological or sociological term along with a definition, and then illustrating it with examples from our story.

Family Transmission Process

According to the Family Transmission theory as developed by Murray Bowen, behaviors and patterns in a family are handed down from generation to generation. Bowen postulated that we observe and learn our behaviors from our parents. Additionally, he claimed that in many cases we are unable to change the patterns set forth by our parents even if we want to do so. To put these words into our biblical context, Jacob is not entirely to blame for some of his behaviors because these same patterns were demonstrated in earlier generations.¹

Jacob remembered the stories he was told about his grandfather, Abraham. He remembered hearing about how Abraham favored Sarah over Hagar, and that he even sent Hagar out of the house because of the rivalry between the two women.

Jacob heard the stories of Abraham favoring his father Isaac over his uncle Ishmael. And, of course, how could Jacob forget about the favoritism that his own father Isaac showed towards Esau? Jacob wanted his father's blessing much more than did his brother, Esau. But, it did not matter because Isaac favored Esau.

¹ Goldenberg page 48.

However, Jacob's mother, Rebecca, created a counter-dynamic to this scenario. She clearly favored Jacob, and even orchestrated a plan to trick her husband into giving Jacob the blessing. It is these patterns of favoritism that led Jacob to picking his favorite. And Joseph was not the only favorite that Jacob picked; Jacob also favored Joseph's mother, Rachel.

When Jacob was in Laban's house, he served Laban for more than fourteen years because he favored Rachel over Leah. In fact his love and favoritism were so great that his time of service seemed like only a few days.² So, we note that Jacob's favoring of Joseph was not his first instance of this behavior.

Family Systems

This term is used to understand family dynamics. A family is like a mobile. When all parts of the mobile are working effectively, the mobile stays in balance and swings around healthily. If however, one part of the mobile is broken, the entire mobile is thrown into disarray and imbalance. Time is needed to put it back on course.

The same happens in a family. When all members of a family are healthy and acting normally, the family runs harmoniously. But if something happens, like the death of Rachel, everyone in the family is

² Genesis 29:20

effected dramatically. It takes much time to recover and reposition each one of the family members within a stable system.

In the case of Rachel's death, there was no time to recover and heal. No time was available to reposition the family members within the system. Instead, the family continued to live in imbalance. In fact, no one went to comfort Joseph, Rachel's son, Jacob, her beloved husband, or even Leah, her sister. Certainly, denial like this does not make for a functional family.

Separation and Individuation/Family Fusion

These two terms are closely linked and so I have included them as one entry. "Separation and Individuation" are terms that describe a child's need to remove himself (I use the masculine because I am ultimately referring to Joseph) from his parents and begin living an independent life. Family Fusion describes a condition in which a family is so dependent on another family member that he would not be able to exist if they were separated.³

In the case of Jacob and Joseph, family fusion led to Jacob's inability to let Joseph separate and individuate himself. Jacob never really wanted Joseph out of his sight. Every so often, he would let

³ Goldenberg page 148.

Joseph go out into the fields with the brothers, but only in a supervisory role.

Furthermore, Jacob demonstrated this same behavior with respect to letting Benjamin go down to Egypt with the brothers.⁴ If Jacob was so fused with Benjamin, we can only assume that he was even more so with Joseph. It was only the priority of family reconciliation, which Jacob valued, that allowed Jacob to release Joseph and send him to Shechem to his brothers.

Co-dependence

Co-dependence is a term used to describe a condition in which people take care of others at the expense of taking care of themselves.⁵ Jacob was a classic co-dependent. In the beginning of the story we read that Joseph brought evil reports to his father regarding his brothers. No one responds to these charges that Joseph brings against them. The brothers do not respond and neither does Jacob himself. Perhaps the brothers do not respond because they don't think that it would do any good. Perhaps it is because they were in the wrong. Or, perhaps the charges were simply too trivial. Nonetheless, they did not respond. As for Jacob's lack of response we can attribute the same possibilities. But, for Jacob, we should add to that list of possibilities that he was

⁴ Genesis 42:38

rewarding Joseph's negative behavior and preventing him from suffering the consequences of his actions.

For another example of Jacob's co-dependence we need to look at the part of the story in which the brothers were so angry with Joseph that they could not speak a friendly word to him.⁶ Jacob observed this behavior but did nothing about it. Then, when Joseph relates his second dream to his father, Jacob reprimanded him but did not punish him for his insolence or thoughtlessness. Even though he knew that the brothers would be furious with him, he did not punish Joseph. Thus, Jacob took care of Joseph when the better decision would have been to look after the family's needs, which were his own. Normally, one would expect that a parent would step in and help to cure the problem that arose within the family. Jacob however, chose to ignore any problems that Joseph might have been causing and thus condoned his son's actions by virtue of his silence.

Additionally, Jacob rewarded Joseph's behavior by giving him more opportunities to demonstrate his spoiled and childish patterns. We all know that if Joseph had not gone to Shechem and then to Dothan, he would not have been thrown into the pit. But, perhaps the reason for not going on that journey is not to preserve being thrown into the pit, but rather because Joseph's journey to his brothers would only cause Joseph to continue acting in his immature fashion. In other

⁶ Goldenberg page 320.

words, Jacob gave Joseph another opportunity to be spoiled in front of his brothers. Jacob helped to foster the negative attributes by giving them additional opportunities to manifest themselves while still buffering him from the consequences.

Boundaries

In a functional family, members of the family must understand their boundaries. A boundary is an "abstract delineation between parts of a (family) system defined by implicit or explicit rules regarding the actions of others."⁷ In other words, a person must know where "you end and I begin." Joseph did not have a good understanding of his boundaries. Telling his dreams to his brothers was an example of this. He should not have told them for it only served to unnecessarily hurt them and not help them at all. Telling the dreams crossed the boundary of appropriateness. For Joseph did not think of what the possible repercussions of telling the dreams would be.

We test our boundaries by exhibiting behaviors, observing the consequences and then judging if the consequences of the behavior are worth re-experiencing in order to do the behavior again. Joseph told his dream to his brothers and they became angry with him. Instead of acknowledging their response to his dream and not repeating the

⁷ Genesis 37:4

experience, he ignored their response and told them a second dream anyway.

The brother's response to the second dream was to keep silent. I discussed, in chapter two, many of the reasons why they may have kept silent. Nonetheless, they kept silent as a means of responding negatively to Joseph's telling of the second dream. Since showing anger did not keep Joseph from telling his dreams, perhaps passive aggressive anger might.

But this time, Joseph interpreted their reaction as acceptance of the dream. Thus, he felt that he had not crossed any boundaries. And so, he told his father his second dream. It says that his father "rebuked" him for telling the dream. Perhaps that is the reason why he never told another dream when it is safe to say that he must have had other dreams.

Finally, Joseph realized that his behaviors were inappropriate and that they crossed boundaries. No longer was the boundary an abstract delineation, now it had become concrete. When Jacob rebuked his son for telling the dream to him, he formalized the boundary. Until that point, the boundaries had only been abstract. Perhaps Joseph needed boundaries to be established for him in order for him to know what they were.

⁷ Goldenberg page 320.

Extreme Behavior

As one might assume, this behavior is marked by actions which are extreme, uncompromising or thoughtless.⁸ Spousal and child abuse are both examples of extreme behavior. In these cases, the perpetrator is unable to react to a situation in any other way but in an extreme fashion.

Of course, when we think about extreme behavior, we focus ourselves on the brothers. They were angry with their younger brother and most likely their father as well. In five verses, we are told three times that the brothers hated Joseph.⁹ In the first instance, I believe that their quickness to hate Joseph was unjustified. Joseph brought evil reports against the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah and he was given a beautiful gift by his father. These actions could spark jealousy, but hatred seems a little strong. Perhaps in the past, Joseph had acted in a way towards his brothers which would validate their hatred. Just because we do not read of other examples does not mean that they did not occur. Still, it is also possible that the brothers acted quickly to anger. Often times when a group has a common enemy impulsive actions and extreme behavior occurs. Perhaps that is what happened in this case.

⁸ Goldenberg page 213.

⁹ Genesis 37:4-8

And of course, who can forget the extreme behavior at the pit? Joseph was nearly killed and thrown into a pit to die. If Reuben had not spoken up and suggested that the brothers not kill Joseph, Joseph would be dead and the story of the Jewish people would not exist as we know it.¹⁰

But, the brothers were not the only ones who were guilty of extreme behavior. Joseph also made some extreme decisions. It says that Joseph tended the flocks with the children of Bilhah and Zilpah and that he brought back to Jacob evil reports about his brothers. We do not know what the reports were. Perhaps it was that the brothers were quarreling with each other.¹¹ Or perhaps he told his father that his brothers were ganging up on him.

Channan Brichto suggested that Joseph told his father that his brothers were doing bad work in the fields, for Joseph was the supervisor of the fields. Louis Ginsberg believes that Joseph was reporting to Jacob that the brothers treated the beasts under their care with cruelty and that they were guilty of "casting their eyes upon the daughters of the Canaanites."¹² Nonetheless, of all the possibilities that we have for what the evil reports were, none of them are truly so terrible that Joseph needed to be an informant. Joseph could have observed the behavior and not told his father.

¹⁰ When Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, it began the story of our people's existence in Egypt and thus our exodus from Egypt and settlement in Israel.

¹¹ Lowenthal page 16.

¹² Ginsberg page 5.

Julian Morgenstern believed that if Joseph had truly been interested in correcting his brothers' faults, then it would have been appropriate for him to tell his father of all the things his brothers were doing. But instead he told his father of the brothers' actions for his own pleasure. He wanted to represent himself as better than they were.¹³ And therefore, Joseph was guilty of reacting in an extreme fashion. In fact, Morgenstern continued by saying that Joseph was thus guilty of breaking the commandment that says, "You should not go off as a talebearer against your countrymen."¹⁴

Power and Control

This is a situation in which one member of a family has influence, authority, and control over outcomes or even members of a family.¹⁵ When one member of a family has an unusual amount of power it commonly leads to dysfunction in that family. When there are questions as to who has power or control of a family, it leads to difficulty within the family. Also, when more than one person is trying to seize power and control of a family, difficulties are prone to occur. In the case of Jacob's family, both of these circumstances occurred.

¹³ Morgenstern page 283.

¹⁴ Leviticus 19:16

¹⁵ Goldenberg page 328.

Even though Jacob was the patriarch of the family, the brothers knew that Joseph was favored and felt that he had the power in the family. There are many reasons for this assumption. We find in the text that Joseph was favored because he was the son of his father's old age.¹⁶ But, that is not the only reason that he was favored. For, Benjamin was younger than Joseph, yet he was not loved more than Joseph.

Joseph was known to be well built and quite handsome.¹⁷ Perhaps this was a reason for him being favored. Another possibility is that he was the first born son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. The brothers knew that Jacob had a favorite wife and she was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Thus Joseph could have been favored for that reason.

Or finally, we read that "Jacob loved Joseph more than the other brothers" immediately after we read that Joseph brought the evil reports to Jacob. Perhaps Jacob favored Joseph because he was his informant. Whenever Jacob needed to know what was going on in his family, he could count on Joseph to report to him.

Due to the favoritism that Jacob showed towards Joseph, the brothers were convinced that Joseph had the true power in the family. Thus, the brothers hope to rid themselves of Joseph was not just to keep the boy and his dreams as far from them as possible, but also to

¹⁶ Genesis 37:3

reestablish Jacob as the person with the power in the family. Consequently the brothers were continually trying to establish themselves as "in-line" for favored status or inheritance. Reuben thought that he could become the favorite son of Jacob if he could return young Joseph to his father from Dothan.¹⁸ And, Judah felt that he could become the favorite son of Jacob if he could lead the brothers into Egypt for the second time and return with food, Benjamin, and Simeon.

As we see, Jacob's family was dysfunctional. It serves as an example for us as to how we should not behave. But, Jacob did demonstrate one behavior worthy of mentioning. As I have mentioned before, Jacob "שָׁמַר אֶת־הַדְּבָר" (shamar et ha-davar). He kept the matter in mind. In an earlier chapter I discussed the many possibilities for the meaning of this expression. Perhaps the interpretation that I did not mention was that Jacob kept in mind that his family was dysfunctional. He understood that there needed to be some changes.

Thus, when Jacob was confronted with making the choice of sending his second favorite, Benjamin, down to Egypt, he made a decision that was not according to his instinct, but rather according to the good of the family.¹⁹ He had kept in mind that he had been the

¹⁷ Genesis 39:6

¹⁸ Genesis 37:22

¹⁹ Genesis 43:13

cause of many of their family problems and he was committed to making a change, one that was not consistent with his sheltering instincts.

In today's age, we are very quick to understand ourselves and others through a number of psychological criteria. Perhaps, we are too quick to do so. It seems as if each and every person suffers from some type of psychological phenomenon which excuses a type of negative behavior which they demonstrate. However, 3000 years ago, when the Bible was thought to have been written, our modern day psychological terminology was neither understood nor applied to the circumstances. Nonetheless, it was potentially applicable.

In both time periods, ca.1000 BCE and 1997, people suffered from many of the same types of problems. Parents died prematurely both then and now. Parents favored some children and not others both then and now. Sibling rivalry occurred both then and now. Even power struggles occurred during both periods.

The Biblical author did not know about our modern day terminology, but we do and we are capable of reading the story with an enriched understanding of why the characters acted the way they did.

Conclusion

Julian Morgenstern wrote that "It can be readily seen that this story is a complete romance . . . it is sincere and convincing."¹

Depending on how one reads the story, these words may be true or may not necessarily be so.

This quote captures this essence of what this paper is about. It shows us how readers of different times have read the Joseph story from their own perspectives. Is this story convincing, like he says? From a literary perspective, it is very much convincing. From a psychological perspective it is also convincing. Similarly, it is convincing from a moral perspective and of course it is convincing from a theological perspective.

From other perspectives, this story is not so sincere and not so convincing. We certainly do not know if the events of Joseph's life occurred as they are reported to have in the story. Even if there is evidence that the character, Joseph, is an historical character, the events of his life may not have happened as they are recorded. Certainly Joseph's rise to power causes reasonable degrees of skepticism. Could a foreigner who was also a prisoner, really rise to such power in Egypt? Could Joseph really predict the future of Egypt like he did? Perhaps this story is not as sincere and convincing as Morgenstern suggests.

¹ Morgenstern page 24.

Thus, depending on how one reads this story, it will be either convincing to that person or not. The focus of this paper has been from a literary point of view while at the same time focusing on moral, theological, and psychological points of interest as well. The historicity of this story never was made a priority. Therefore, I agree with Morgenstern's words, I believe that it is both sincere and convincing.

I do believe that his claim that our story is a complete romance is on target. The story has so many of the characteristics of a romance novel. It has elements of love in the father-son relationship of Jacob and Joseph. It has important coincidences like the strange man who meets Joseph in the field in Shechem and the caravan of Ishmaelites/Midianites who traveled by the brothers in Dothan which sparked Judah's opinion to sell Joseph instead of killing him. It has a hero who goes on a quest which will ultimately strengthen his character. And finally, it has a happy ending in that Joseph and Jacob are reunited after nearly twenty years. Jacob, it seems, had thought his favorite son was dead. He never recovered from the loss as well. For Jacob, the ending was as happy as any he could ever dream.

The Joseph story is so rich and so developed that it would be a very arduous task to completely analyze the story. I chose to focus on chapter 37 and still I came up short of a complete analysis of even that chapter. My hope in writing this literary analysis was to study the text

and writings about it very carefully and then offer a guide in helping to read the story more closely.

I first offered a translation of chapter 37, the chapter which was my focus. It was important to me that my understanding of the meaning of the text was imparted to the reader. For, as I have mentioned, many meanings can be extrapolated from our text.

As I studied the story, I arrived at four interesting themes and used them as chapters. I first concluded that the dreams of Joseph were the framework of the story. If we did not understand Joseph's dreams as serving to guide him (and us) from place to place, we were missing the thrust of the story.

I also noticed that the events at the pit in Dothan served as a watershed moment in the story. Not only did it act as the separation between Joseph's time at home and his time in Egypt, and not only did it mark the beginning of the Israelite experience in Egypt leading to the Exodus and resettlement in Canaan, but it acted as a lasting memory for Joseph and his brothers which would recur during the brothers' two trips to Egypt.

Additionally, I was touched by the development and growing maturity of our primary characters and I wanted to elucidate on that subject as well. Unlike the stories of the previous patriarchs, the leading characters of this story all undergo development.

And finally, my modern day mind noticed the severe dysfunction in the family. Growing up with a mother as a social worker has made me more sensitive to the signs of dysfunction in a family. In the case of Jacob's family the signs were many, clear, and profound. Understanding the family life of the characters helps to better understand their actions throughout the story.

I mentioned previously that there are a number of earlier moments in Genesis which help us to understand the Joseph story. The massacre at Shechem and Reuben sleeping with Bilhah are just two of a great many moments. Thus, despite the fact that the Joseph story could most certainly be a story by itself, it still occupies a place within a bigger work of literature. Thus, I am led to wonder what its connection is to the larger story of Genesis.

The Joseph story is often seen as a bridge between the tales of the patriarchs and the exodus narrative, and it is thought to be included in Genesis to serve that very purpose. However, the Joseph story seems to exceed the requirements of merely being a bridge. The story is considerably longer than what would be necessary as a bridge, and the characters are sufficiently more heroic than what would seem necessary to bridge two books.

Bruce Dahlberg believes that the connection lies in the fact that this final story of Genesis is linked with the beginning of Genesis. He

noticed a number of striking language similarities which serve to offer evidence that the two stories being linked.²

A correspondence exists between the story of the Garden of Eden and the Joseph story. In the first story, in Genesis 3:5, the serpent declared, "You will be like God." Similarly, in Genesis 50:19, Joseph exclaims, "Am I in the place of God?" In Gen. 3:5, the serpent promised Eve that when she ate of the fruit, she would "know good from evil." And Joseph said to his brothers in Gen. 50:20, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

In Genesis 3:4, the serpent says to Eve that if she eats the fruit from the tree, "you will not die." And Joseph, perceiving that life was saved from the clutches of death says, "God meant . . . to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today"(Gen. 50:20).

In each of the cases, it seems that Joseph, in his conversation with his brothers, is responding to the words of the serpent in his conversation with Eve. While Dahlberg's observation is thoroughly insightful, I believe the connection is more inclusive of all of the stories of Genesis and not just the one concerning the Garden of Eden.

I believe that the words of chapter 50:20 articulate my feelings best. It says:

וַאֲנִי חִשְׁבֹתָם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹהִים חֲשֵׁבָה לְטוֹבָה

² Gros Louis page 129.

"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

This thought rounds out the teachings of the earlier portions of Genesis and makes the book a single unit of Jewish thought and doctrine. Not only did God create the universe for good, but also God controls the universe and guides it. Julian Morgenstern said that God has endowed us with free will and with the power to choose between good and evil. But he added that evil is not necessarily eternal.

"Somehow, in ways which we cannot comprehend, but the evidences we see in all life and history, and particularly in Israel's history, God changes the evil, which men do, into good."³

So, while the characters brought the story to a conclusion, the narrator makes it clear to us that those were only able to learn and grow because they were placed in a "cosmos that brings life out of death and transforms evil into good."⁴ The realization of the dreams along with the survival of the family during the famine comes to show us that human beings cannot thwart the divine intention and purpose.

As the title, which was inspired by Channan Brichto's most recent work, indicates, I have only begun to critically look at this story. In fact, most of my concentration was solely on the first chapter. There are still so many areas which are ripe to be studied.

³ Morgenstern page 291.

Joseph's experiences in Potifar's house are the subject of a great portion of the *Surah* concerning Joseph in the Koran. A close look at the two traditions in order to better understand what transpired would be a wonderful task to undertake.

Similarly, I would be truly interested in more closely studying the blessings that Jacob gave to his sons upon his deathbed. These blessings, if they could be called blessings in some cases, come to help us understand who these brothers were and what their personalities were like. The language used is beautiful and poetic, and has commonalities with other verses in Genesis.

Finally, I would truly be interested in studying how this story affected the future biblical stories. Of course we know that the beginning of the book of Exodus makes it clear to us that there arose a pharaoh who did not know Joseph. But, that does not mean that the story did not leave a lasting impression on the final books of the Torah as well as the rest of the *Tanach*.

⁴ Ackerman page 109.

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