

PARSHAT VA'YESHEV - Who Sold Yosef?

Could it be that the brothers DID NOT sell Yosef!
As shocking as this statement may sound to anyone familiar with the story of Yosef & his brothers; a careful reading of that narrative in Chumash may actually support this possibility!
In the following shiur, we explore this fascinating possibility (and its consequences) while taking into account some important geographic considerations.

INTRODUCTION

After throwing your brother into a pit to die, would you be able to 'sit down to eat'? The brothers did, so the Torah tell us (see 37:24-25)! But when they sat down to eat, the Torah DOES NOT inform us if they sat NEAR the pit, listening to Yosef's screaming and pleading; OR if they sat FAR AWAY from the pit - to enjoy some 'peace and quiet'?
So what difference does it make?

Believe it or not, this tiny detail affects our understanding of almost every aspect of the story that ensues. Our shiur will entertain each possibility - showing how this 'missing detail' may be what leads several commentators to conclude that the brothers may never have sold Yosef after all!

To appreciate why this 'minor detail' is so critical, we must first review the Torah's description of these events, making sure that we understand what everyone is planning, so that we can reach a logical conclusion regarding what everyone should be doing.

Before we begin, we must also point out that the distance between Hebron, where Yaakov is living, and Dotan, where the brothers are grazing their sheep, is about 100 kilometers. Therefore, the brothers are probably gone for at least several weeks. Certainly, they don't come home to Hebron to sleep at night, rather, they have set up a temporary 'campsite' in the Dotan area.

PLAN A - THE BROTHERS / FIRST DEGREE MURDER

Review 37:18-20, noting that as soon as Yosef arrives at Dotan, the brothers conspire to kill him. However, their plan concerning HOW to kill him is revised several times.

To show how, let's begin with the brothers' original plan to kill Yosef, as soon as they saw him [which we will refer to PLAN A]:
"They (the brothers) saw him from afar, and before he came close... they conspired to kill him. And they said to one another, behold the 'dreamer' is coming. Now, let's **kill him** and (afterward) throw his body into **one of the pits...**" (37:18-20).

Note how the brothers originally plan to commit first degree murder, by killing Yosef immediately and then 'bury him' in any nearby pit. Most likely, they plan to throw the 'body' in the pit in order to 'hide the evidence'. This way, when they next come home, they can simply pretend that they never saw Yosef - for if they brought home the dead body, their father would likely have accused them of Yosef's murder.

Although Reuven opposes Yosef's murder, he assumes that the brothers would not accept his opinion. Therefore, instead of arguing with his brothers, he devises a shrewd plan that will first postpone Yosef's execution, and later enable him to secretly rescue Yosef, and send him back home to his father.

[See further yun for an explanation of why specifically Reuven wants to save Yosef.]

PLAN B - REUVEN'S PLAN / SECOND DEGREE MURDER

As you read Reuven's plan, be sure to differentiate between what Reuven SAYS (to his brothers) and what Reuven THINKS (to himself):

"... And Reuven said... 'Do not shed blood, cast him into a pit [in order that he die] OUT IN THE 'MIDBAR' (wilderness), but do not touch him yourselves --'

[End of quote! Then, the narrator continues by informing the **reader** of Reuven's true intentions...]

"in order to save him [Yosef] from them and return him to his father." (37:22).

Reuven's 'official' plan (that the brothers accept) is to let Yosef die in a less violent manner, i.e. to throw him alive into a deep pit to die, instead of murdering him in cold blood. However, Reuven's secretly plans to later return to that pit and free him.

Note how Reuven even suggests the specific 'pit' into which to throw Yosef - "ha-bor HA-ZEH asher ba-midbar"! Most probably, so that he can later sneak away to that pit and save him.

[Compare this to the brothers' original plan to throw him into "one of the pits" (37:20) - possibly a pit closer by.]

Unaware of Reuven's true intentions, the brothers agree.

Yosef arrives, and - in accordance with PLAN B - the brothers immediately strip Yosef of his special cloak and throw him alive into the pit (see 37:23-24). Afterward, the Torah informs us, they sit down to eat (see 37:25).

WHERE ARE THEY EATING?

Until this point, the plot is clear. However, in the story that follows, there are two important details missing which totally affect our understanding of what happened next.

Detail #1 - WHERE did they sit down to eat?

Did they sit down to eat nearby the pit, or did they just leave Yosef in pit, and travel far away (possibly, back to their camp in Dotan) and eat their meal elsewhere?

Detail #2 - WHERE is REUVEN during this meal?

Is he eating with his brothers, or did he go off to somewhere else on his own? [And if so, for what reason?]

Even though there are no explicit answers in the Torah to these two questions, we will attempt to answer them by employing some 'deductive reasoning'.

(1) Where are the brothers eating?

Recall that the brothers are grazing their sheep in the Dotan area [see 37:17/ today the area of Jenin, between Shechem and Afula], which is on the northern slopes of central mountain range of Israel. The "midbar" [wilderness], that Reuven is talking about, is probably located a few kilometers to the east of Dotan, as this "midbar" stretches along the eastern slope of the entire central mountain range. [See map www.tanach.org/map3d.pdf .]

Considering that the brothers throw Yosef into a pit 'out in the MIDBAR', it would definitely make sense for them to return afterward to their campsite in the Dotan area to eat (see 37:16-17). Besides, it would not be very appetizing to eat lunch while listening to your little brother screaming for his life from a pit nearby - see 42:21 for proof that he was indeed screaming when they threw him in.

And even should one conclude that it would have been just as logical for them to have sat down to eat near the pit; by considering the whereabouts of Reuven (detail #2) - we will be able to provide additional support to our supposition that the brothers must have sat down to eat farther away.

2) Where is Reuven?

Considering that Reuven's real plan is to later save Yosef from the pit, it would only be logical from him to either stay near the pit, or at least remain with his brothers (wherever they may be). Certainly it would not make sense, according to his real plan, for him to go far away, and to leave his brothers by the pit!

However, from the continuation of the story we know for sure that Reuven did not stay near the pit, because he RETURNS to the pit only AFTER Yosef is sold! Therefore, if Reuven left the pit area, then certainly the brothers also must have left that area. Hence, it

would only be logical to conclude that the brothers are indeed eating away from the pit, and Reuven must be eating with them!

After all, not joining them for lunch could raise their suspicion. Furthermore, the Torah never tells us that he left his brothers.

In summary, by considering the logic of Reuven's plan, we conclude that Reuven most likely stayed with his brothers, as they all sit down to eat AWAY from the pit.

[Obviously, this interpretation does not follow popular explanation that Reuven had left his brothers, as it was his turn to take care of his father (see first opinion in Rashi). In the Further Iyun section we discuss how and why our shiur disagrees with that approach, and prefers the approach of Rashbam and Chizkuni.]

PLAN C - YEHUDA'S PLAN / A 'QUICK BUCK'

Now that we have supposed that Reuven and the brothers are sitting down to eat at a distance far away from the pit, we can continue our study of the narrative, to see if this conclusion fits with its continuation:

"And the brothers sat down to eat, and they **lifted up their eyes** and saw a caravan of Yishmaelim coming **from the Gilad** carrying [spices]... to Egypt.

Then Yehuda said to his brothers, "What do we gain by killing our brother ... let us SELL him [instead] to the Yishmaelim; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh, and his brothers agreed" (37:25-27).

[From Yehuda's suggestion, it becomes clear that the brothers truly planned to allow Yosef to die in the pit. and were unaware of Reuven's intention to save him.]

If indeed Reuven is still sitting with his brothers, then this new plan (to **sell** Yosef) puts him in quite a predicament; for if the brothers would sell Yosef, his own plan to rescue him would be ruined. Hence, the most logical step for Reuven to take would be to either sneak away to the 'pit' - to get there before his brothers sell him, or possibly to 'volunteer' to fetch Yosef from the pit, in order to free him - and then explain to his brothers that Yosef had 'ran away'.

Reuven does return to the pit in 37:29, but before the Torah informs us of what happens when Reuven returns, we are told first of something else that took place in the meantime:

"And a group of Midyanite **TRADERS** passed by, and THEY pulled, and they lifted Yosef out of the pit, and THEY sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty pieces of silver, and brought Yosef to Egypt." (see 37:28)

[Carefully read this pasuk again, noting the difference between the Midyanim and Yishmaelim.]

The startling fact about this pasuk is that the brothers are never mentioned! If our assumption above was correct, it turns out that when the brothers (sitting far away from the pit) were discussing the possibility of selling Yosef to the Yishmaelim - it just so happened that the Midyanim got there first!

To appreciate the logic of this interpretation, we must provide a little geographic background, which is essential towards understanding what transpires in these psukim.

THE ANCIENT TRADE ROUTE

Recall that Yosef met his brothers while they were grazing their sheep in the hilly area of Dotan (see 37:17), north of Shechem. Recall as well that during their meal, the brothers 'lifted up their eyes' and noticed a caravan of YISHMAELIM traveling down from the GILAD (today, the northern mountain range in Jordan), on its way down to Egypt (see 37:25).

Now, when we read this story in Chumash, most everyone assumes that this convoy will soon pass nearby the spot where the brothers are eating. However, when we consider the geography involved, it is more probable to arrive at a very different conclusion!

This CARAVAN of Yishmaelim (camels et al.) most likely should be traveling along the ancient trade route (better known as the Via Maris), which crosses through Emek Yizrael (the Jezreel Valley) on its way toward the Mediterranean coast. Therefore, this convoy,

now sighted by the brothers as it descends from the Gilad Mountains in Transjordan, must first pass through the Bet She'an valley, continuing on towards Afula and Megiddo in Emek Yizrael, on its way towards the coast. Certainly, it would NOT pass the hilly area of Dotan, for it would make no sense for the caravan to climb the Gilboa mountain range to cross through the Dotan area to reach the coast. Let's explain why.

Dotan, today the area of Jenin (about 20 kilometers north of Shechem) lies about 10 kilometers SOUTH of this main highway (the Via Maris) as it crosses Emek Yizrael. In altitude, Dotan sits about 300-400 meters above Emek Yizrael. Hence, from the hills of the Dotan/Gilboa area (where the brothers are eating lunch), one can enjoy of both the Gilad and parts of the Jezreel Valley, and could certainly identify a large caravan traveling in the Jezreel Valley below.

This explains why the brothers are able to see a Yishmaelite caravan (convoy) as it was descending from the Gilad towards Bet She'an on its way to Emek Yizrael. However, even though they could see it, it was still far enough away to allow the brothers ample time to meet it, when it would pass by some ten kilometers to the north.

Therefore, in order to sell Yosef to that caravan, the brothers would have to first fetch Yosef from the pit, and then carry him on a short trip till they meet the caravan in Emek Yizrael. They have ample time to 'finish their meal', go fetch Yosef from the pit in the 'midbar' (a kilometer or so away), and then meet the convoy to sell Yosef.

SOMEBODY GOT THERE FIRST

With this background, we now return to the story in Chumash, while carefully noting the grammar of the next pasuk:

"And a group of Midyanite **TRADERS** passed by, and THEY pulled, and they lifted Yosef out of the pit, and THEY sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty pieces of silver, and brought Yosef to Egypt." (37:28)

Based on the wording of this pasuk, it's quite clear that the Midyanim and the Yishmaelim are two DIFFERENT groups of people! To support this, note how the Torah describes the Midyanim as local '**traders**' ("socharim"), while the Yishmaelim are described as international '**movers**' ("orchat Yishmaelim - a transport caravan). Hence, a simple reading of this pasuk implies that a group of Midyanite traders happened to pass by the pit (they most probably heard Yosef screaming), and pulled him out. As these Midyanim are 'traders', they were probably on their way to sell their wares (now including Yosef) to the Yishmaelite caravan.

If this explanation is correct, then the MIDYANIM themselves pulled Yosef out of the pit and sold him. [After all, the brothers are never mentioned in this pasuk.]

[This interpretation also explains why the Torah needs to tell us about both MIDYANIM and YISHMAELIM, for understanding that these are two DIFFERENT groups is a critical factor in the story, and not just an incidental detail.]

DID REUVEN GET THERE 'FIRST' OR 'LAST'?

So where were the brothers during all of this? Most probably, still eating! Recall our explanation above: the brothers had thrown Yosef into a pit out in the 'midbar' and returned to their grazing area to eat. They are far enough away that they do not see or hear what transpired between Yosef and the Midyanim!

And WHERE was Reuven? Again, as we explained above, he must have been eating WITH his brothers. However, as soon as he heard Yehuda's new plan (and the brothers' agreement) to sell Yosef, he would have to get back to the pit (before his brothers) to save Yosef - and that's exactly what he does! [But it's too late.]

Note how this explanation fits perfectly into the next pasuk:

"And Reuven RETURNED ("**va-yashov Reuven el ha'bor**") to the pit, and behold, Yosef was no longer in the pit!;

Then, he tore his clothes." (see 37:29)

Reuven is not the LAST brother to find out that Yosef was **sold** (as commonly assumed). Rather, he is the FIRST brother to recognize that Yosef is **missing**!

What can Reuven do? Shocked, he immediately returns to his brothers [probably by now eating dessert] with the terrible news: "And he RETURNED [**'va-yashov'**] to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone! And for myself, what am I going to do?' (37:30).

Note the word 'va-yashov' [and Reuven RETURNED] in both 37:29 and 37:30. This verb proves that the brothers could not have been eating near the pit, for if so, Reuven would not need to 'RETURN' to them. However, based on our explanation above, 'va-yashov' in both psukim makes perfect sense. Since Reuven and his brothers are eating away from the pit, Reuven must first RETURN to the pit, then he must RETURN back to his brothers to tell them the news - hence TWICE the verb 'va-yashov'!

[This also explains why the brothers don't answer Reuven by informing him that they sold him. Instead, the brothers seem to be no less in shock than Reuven himself.]

WHAT DO THE BROTHERS THINK?

At this point in the story the brothers must be totally baffled, for they have no idea what happened to Yosef. If he escaped from the pit, then he probably would have ran back home and in a short time, the brothers would hear about it. But he doesn't return home, and hence they most probably assume that he was eaten by an animal. Note that in all of their conversations with Yosef in Egypt, the consistently claim "ha'echad eineno" [one (brother) is **missing**]; yet they never say that he was sold.

[See 42:13 and 42:32. See also 43:7, noting how the brothers we definitely asked these questions during interrogation - hence it would have been difficult for them to lie about what happened to their other brother, nor would they have any reason to lie about his fate, or time to corroborate the same story beforehand.]

Once the brothers realize that Yosef is gone, they also don't want their father to think that he may lost, nor would they want their father to accuse them of killing him - so they plot once again. They cleverly decide to trick their father into thinking that Yosef had been killed by a wild animal on his way to visit them, by dipping Yosef's coat in blood and sending it ahead to their father (see 37:31-32). Their plan works, as when Yaakov sees the coat he laments:

"My son's coat -"CHAYA RA'A ACHALATU; tarof, taraf Yosef" - he was surely devoured by a wild beast (37:33).

By doing so, they cause their father to take personal blame for Yosef's death; after all, it was Yaakov's idea to send Yosef on the 'dangerous journey' from Hebron to Shchem.

Ironically, the end result of this final plan echoes the brothers' original plan (see 37:20 "ve-amarnu - chaya ra'a achalatu" & compare with 37:33). Yaakov reaches the conclusion that the brothers wanted, but they themselves have no idea what happened!

Even more ironic is how the brothers final plan 'to sell Yosef' came true, even though they never sold him; and how (they thought that) their original plan - for Yosef to die - came true, even though they never killed him.

In retrospect, one could even suggest that the brothers may have never been able to 'gather the courage' to either kill or sell Yosef. Despite their various plans and intense hatred of Yosef, just as they had quickly retracted from their first two plans to kill Yosef (see 37:22 & 26), they most probably would have retracted from their plan to sell him as well.

Nevertheless: they talked; they planned; they plotted - and in God's eyes - are considered guilty, even though they never actually killed or sold Yosef.

WHAT DOES YOSEF THINK?

So far, our explanation has followed interpretation suggested by Rashbam and Chizkuni. [I recommend that you read their commentaries and note how they reach the same conclusion

regarding who sold Yosef, even though they don't explain the events in the manner that we did.]

Even though this interpretation seems to explain the psukim in Parshat Va'yeshev quite well, there is a pasuk in Parshat Vayigash that seems to 'ruin' this entire approach. When Yosef finally reveals himself to his brothers, he states explicitly:

"I am Yosef your brother, whom you SOLD to Egypt"(45:4)

Based on this statement, it's quite clear that Yosef himself thinks that his brothers SOLD him! But if our above interpretation is correct, Yosef should have thought that the Midyanim had sold him, and not his brothers! In fact, this pasuk is most probably the primary basis for the more popular interpretation (advanced by Rashi and Radak - see Further Iyun section) that the brothers indeed did sell Yosef.

The Chizkuni, bothered by this pasuk, explains that Yosef knows that the Midyanites sold him, but since the brothers threw him in the pit, it was the brothers "who CAUSED me to be sold to Egypt".

Alternately, one could explain, based on the above shiur that Yosef truly did think that his brothers had sold him, even though the brothers themselves had no idea concerning what really happened.

To explain why, let's consider these events from Yosef's perspective.

Yosef was not aware of any of the brothers' conversations. All that he knew was that, as soon as he arrived, his brothers took off his coat and threw him into the pit. A short time later, some Midyanim passed by, took him out of the pit, and sold him to the Yishmaelim who, later, sold him to the Egyptians. Yosef, trying to piece together what had happened, probably assumed that his brothers had set it all up beforehand. In other words, he thought that the brothers told the Midyanim that they had thrown Yosef in a certain pit, and that they should take him from there to sell to the Yishmaelim.

If so, then Yosef was totally unaware that it was only 'by chance' that the Midyanim were passing by, nor did he think that the brothers originally wanted him to die in the pit. Rather, he thought all along that his brothers had sold him, even though they had no idea what had happened.

In next week's shiur, we will see how this understanding can help us understand Yosef's behavior during his many years in Egypt. It will also explain why the brothers assume that Yosef is either missing (see 42:13) or dead (see 42:22 -"hineh gam damo nidrash"), even though Yosef thinks that his brothers sold him (see 45:4).

[Furthermore, this interpretation also explains why Yosef tells his cellmates (in prison) that he was '**stolen**' from the Land of Ivrim (see 40:15).]

WHAT DOES GOD THINK

Even though the brothers had three different plans for 'getting rid' of Yosef, God had a different plan.

The Hand of Providence led the brothers to believe that THEIR 'dream' [to rid themselves of Yosef] had come true. In reality, it was their plotting that eventually led to the fulfillment of Yosef's dreams to come true.

Finally, as will be seen in the story that follows, this was all part of God's long-term plan for the people of Israel to become a nation in the Land of Egypt, as the forecasts of "brit bein ha'btarim" slowly begin to unfold, in a manner that Avraham Avinu would have never dreamt.

shabbat shalom,
menachem

FOR FURTHER IYUN

=====

A. THE HAFTARA - [WHAT AMOS THOUGHT]

According to the Haftara for Parshat Vayeshev, from Amos chapters 1 & 2, it would seem that the navi thinks that the brothers sold Yosef, as it states:

"Thus saith the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, yea, for four, I will not reverse it: - 'al michram b'kesef tzadik...' - because they sell the righteous [one?] for money, and the needy for a pair of shoes..." (see Amos 2:5-6)

However, a closer study of Sefer Amos shows that the navi is not talking about Yosef and his brothers, rather - he is complaining about the people of Israel at that time. In other words, Israel is not being punished for the sins of their forefathers, rather they are being punished for their own sins. To prove this, simply note this very same theme in Amos chapter 8: "Hear this, you that would swallow the needy, and destroy the poor of the land, Saying: 'When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell grain? and the sabbath, that we may set forth corn? making the ephah [a dry measure] small, and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances of deceit; - 'Iknot b'kesef dalim, v'evyon b'aavur naalaim" (compare with 2:6) - so that we may buy the poor for money, and the needy for a pair of shoes... " (see Amos 8:4-6)

The navi may intentionally employ a phrase that may 'echo' how the brothers treated Yosef, maybe to emphasize how Am Yisrael was supposed to learn from the stories of Chumash how 'not' to act - but surely, his primary complaint is about the behavior of his own generation.

B. RASHI'S SHITTA

To explain Rashi's 'shitta' (opinion) that the brothers sold Yosef, we must return to the two questions raised earlier in the shiur: i.e. where are the brothers eating, and where Reuven is - and change our conclusions.

According to this opinion, the brothers sat down to eat nearby the pit, and for some reason (see below) Reuven left them.

Then, there are two ways to explain what happened next. Either when the Midyanim came by, the brothers employed their services as 'middlemen' to sell Yosef to the Yishmaelim (see Rashbam's second explanation), OR possibly, the term Yishmaelim is synonymous with the term Midyanim (see Radak).

To explain why Reuven had left his brothers, Rashi offers two reasons- either he went 'home' to take care of his father, or he had taken a short walk to do some 'soul-searching' (see Rashi & Radak).

Re: Rashi's quote of the Midrash that it was Reuven's turn to go home to take care of his father, it would be difficult to consider this pshat, for it's over 100 kilometers from Hebron to Dotan, and hence it would be totally against Reuven's own plan to save Yosef, from him to leave his brothers at a time like this!

One could suggest that this Midrash is not coming to explain pshat about what 'happened', but rather gives us insight regarding how 'frum' the brothers were, and the fact that they cared about the mitzvah of 'kibud av', but their hatred of Yosef was much greater than their love for their father.

If so, what point is this Midrash making regarding the nature of 'sin'at achim'.

Rashi's second opinion, that Reuven was 'fasting', may relate to Reuven's own plan - as discussed below:

C. WHAT'S IN IT FOR REUVEN!

For some reason, Reuven is interested in saving Yosef. Why does Reuven suddenly become so dedicated to his father?

One could suggest that Yaakov was quite angry with Reuven since the incident with Bilha (see 35:22), after which he was most likely cursed by his father (see 49:4), and hence lost his 'bechora'. Reuven may have hoped that by saving Yosef from the brothers, he would 'prove himself' once again worthy to his father. This would explain his reaction when he tells his brothers that Yosef is missing - "va-ani ana ani ba". This was his big chance to redeem himself. Now, it only looks worse for him. After all, should Yaakov find out what happened, bottom line, it was Reuven's idea to throw him in the pit! For Reuven, this could have been 'strike three!' [Just a thought.]

D. WHY THE BROTHERS HATED YOSEF

One could suggest that the brothers' hatred of Yosef may have been more than just 'petty sibling jealousy'. Considering that they all

realized that they were a chosen family, with great goals for their future, and also realizing that in previous generations, certain children were chosen, and others 'rejected' - they may have felt that it was their spiritual 'responsibility' to 'expel' Yosef from this 'chosen family', considering his behavior.

Examine Yosef's dreams. Compare them to Yitzchak's original bracha to Eisav /Yaakov, and the standard blessing of bechira.

How would this confirm the brothers' fear? Do the brothers have reason to believe that Yaakov is making a mistake by favoring Yosef? Do they have a precedent for 'intervening'?