
THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org
In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Questions for self study - by Menachem Leibtag

PARSHAT VAYESHEV

PART I - QUESTIONS FOR THE 'SHABBOS TABLE'

THE WANING OF PROPHECY

- Does God ever speak directly to any of Yaakov's children (i.e. as He had spoken to Avraham Yitzchak and Yaakov)?
 If so, where, when, and why?
 If not, in your opinion, why doesn't He?
 [As above,] does God ever speak directly to Yosef?
 Does God ever speak to him [indirectly] through dreams?
 If so, explain how and when.
 Does God ever speak to any of Yaakov's children through events? If so, explain how and when.
 Can you explain why this may be significant?

THE RISE OF NEW 'PSHAT' / RASHI & HIS GRANDSON

- There is a famous Rashbam at the beginning of this week's Parsha (see 37:2/ 'Eileh toldot...') in which he discusses his conversation with Rashi (his grandfather) concerning the need to focus more on the study of 'pshat' when studying Chumash.
 I recommend that you take a few minutes to study this Rashbam, where he mentions an important conversation he had with his grandfather (Rashi) concerning how to study Chumash.
 [From a certain perspective, Rashbam's observations on this pausk provide the basis for the approach that we employ in our shiurim.]

YOSEF'S DREAMS & YITZCHAK'S BLESSINGS

- Compare Yosef's two dreams (see 37:5-10) to Yitzchak's blessing of Yaakov (s/b Esav) in 27:28-29. In what manner are they similar? [In what manner are they different?]
 How does this similarity help explain the nature of the brothers' hatred of Yosef? Could this be a source for a more 'idealistic' (or 'spiritual') reason that would 'justify' their hatred?
 [Compare with the story of Yitzchak & Esav.]
 How does this similarity explain Yaakov's reaction to Yosef's dreams? [Keep this question in mind as you study the story of Yosef and his brothers, for it can help explain the reason for its complexity.]
- Do the brothers have reason to believe that Yaakov is making a mistake by favoring Yosef? Pretend that you are 'hired' as their lawyer. Attempt to defend their decision to 'remove' Yosef from God's 'chosen family'. Base your 'defense' both on Yosef's behavior and on precedents from earlier generations. [Relate to what Rivka did to ensure that Yaakov received the blessing.]
 [When you finish, pretend that you are the 'judge' and explain why that 'defense' is wrong.]

THE BLOOD OF GOAT

- In the story of 'mechirat Yosef', why do the brothers need to lie concerning the 'blood stained coat' to trick their father to believe that Yosef had been devoured by an animal? Why don't they just keep quiet and pretend as though they never saw him, and therefore have no idea what happened to him?
 In your opinion, does Yaakov ever suspect that the brothers may have killed Yosef (or sold him)? In your opinion, does Yaakov ever find out what 'really' happened? If so, who do you think told him, or how did he find out? Relate to Yaakov's blessings to his children in Parshat Vaychi.]
- Whenever Bnei Yisrael as a nation offer a korban musaf, the 'chatat' offering is always a 'se'ir izim' [a goat] (e.g. see Bamidbar chapters 28-29). In your opinion, do you think that this specific

'chatat' offering of a 'se'ir izim' relates to the actions of the brothers when they sold Yosef? In your answer, relate to 37:31!
 [See also Ramban on Vayikra 9:2-3 (towards the end) where he explains why Bnei Yisrael must offer a 'se'ir izim le-chatat' on the eighth day dedication ceremony. Note how he relates this to mechirat Yosef and 'chet ha-egel'.]

"HISHTADLUT" OR LACK OF FAITH

- Review 40:12-15. In your opinion, was Yosef correct in asking the "sar ha-mashkim" [Pharaoh's butler] 'to intervene on his behalf to free him from jail, or was Yosef expected to rely only on God? If Yosef was correct in this regard, what can we learn from this story?
 If Yosef was 'wrong', what do you base your opinion on?

**PART II - QUESTIONS FOR PREPARATION
 (for shiur on 'Who Sold Yosef?')**

- Before we begin our study, a few questions to think about (as there are no definite answers to them in the text).
 Considering Yosef's dreams, as well as his relationship with his brothers, attempt to explain the 'spiritual reason' for the brothers' hatred of Yosef. Relate your answer to the uncertain nature of the 'bechira' process in Sefer Breishit. [Relate as well to questions 3, 4, & 5 in Part One above.]
 In your opinion, did Yosef's brothers and father agree that there was something prophetic about Yosef's dreams; or did his family dismiss them as 'just a dream'. Relate to 37:10-11.
 In your opinion, did Yosef tell his family about his dreams in order to make his brothers jealous, or did he think that it was his responsibility to make his dreams known?
 With this background, we can begin our textual study.
- Forgetting any previous knowledge you may have of the story of 'Yosef and his brothers', undertake a careful reading of 37:12-36, paying attention to the flow of events. . As you study these psukim, be sure that you follow the logic of everyone's plan, including:
 1) The brothers' original plan to kill Yosef
 Be sure you understand how they planned to kill him, and why they plan to throw his body (afterward) in 'one of pits'.
 2) Reuven's plan to save Yosef (and what he tells the brothers)
 Suggest a reason for why specifically Reuven wants to save Yosef (and bring him back to his father)? Relate to his position within the family, as well as to earlier events.
 Do the brothers know that Reuven plans to save him? If not, do they assume that Yosef will die a 'natural death' in the pit? If so, why is this any better than their original plan?
 3) Yehuda's plan to sell Yosef.
 Be sure you understand how this new plan will achieve the same goals as the brothers' original plan (#1 above), but carries less guilt.
- After studying these psukim, read them once again, and try to answer the following questions (which do not have an explicit answer in the psukim, but can be deduced by logic):
 a. When the brothers sit down to eat (in 37:25), do they sit down **nearby**, i.e. in sight of the pit that Yosef is in, or do they sit much farther away, out of sight (and sound) of Yosef? Considering that this pit is in the "midbar" (see 37:22 & 37:24), would it make sense for them to eat near the pit in the "midbar" where Yosef is screaming, or back in the Dotan area where they are grazing their sheep (see 37:17).
 b. As they sit down to eat (in 37:25), is Reuven sitting down to eat with his brothers, or did he go away?
 If he did go away, where did he go to and why? [Base your answer on his original plan to save Yosef?]
 Note how your answer to this question must relate to your answer to question (a) above!

As you attempt to reach your conclusion, be sure to consider the word "va-yashov" in both 37:29 & 37:20, noting how it can help explain where Reuven had been in relation to his brothers, and in relation to the pit!

4. If you have a detailed map of Israel, attempt to locate Hebron, Shechem, Dotan [i.e. Jennin], and the Gilad mountains (as well as the highway that connects the Gilad to Egypt via Emek Yizrael). [If your map includes topographic detail, it would be helpful to note the elevation of these areas. You can find one online at www.tanach.org/map3d.pdf .]

Based on what you see on the map, approximately how far is the journey from Shechem to Hebron?

Considering that the brothers are grazing their sheep, does it appear as though they came home from Dotan to Hebron every evening, or only once every month or so?

5. Based on Reuven's (secret) plan to later save Yosef from the pit, would it have made sense for him to leave the area near Yosef's pit for any length of time?

Would it make sense for him to have left his brothers alone with Yosef by the pit?

5. Return once again to your map, or even better, take a look at the following two maps on line, that show this area:

www.tanach.org/yosefmap1.pdf

www.tanach.org/yosefmap2.pdf

Attempt to relate this 'topographic information' to your understanding of the details of this story.

For example, when the brothers sit down to eat and 'raise their eyes' and see a caravan of Yishmaelim (see 37:25), would it make sense that they are passing nearby, or do they see them from a distance quite far away?

Similarly, if a caravan carrying goods by camel was traveling from the Gilad to Egypt, where would it most likely have crossed Israel - through Emek Yizrael or over the mountains in the Dotan area?

Based on your answer, would it seem that the Yishmaelim are headed toward the brothers, or that the brothers would need to travel a short distance to meet the Yishmaelim?

6. Carefully study 37:28, noting the different groups of people that are mentioned. Be sure that you understand the difference between the Midyanim who are 'merchants' and the Yishmaelim who are 'transporting' the goods to Egypt.

By considering your answers to the above question, review 37:28 (in its context) and try to determine **who** precisely sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim, the brothers or the Midyanim?

How many possible ways are there to explain this pasuk?

[In your answer, relate to statements later made by Yosef in **both** 40:15 and 45:4.]

If you have time, answer at this time the first five questions in the Parshanut section below.

7. In your opinion, was Yosef aware of the brothers' original plan to kill him? Does he understand why they originally threw him into the pit?

Likewise, are the brothers aware of what really happened to Yosef? In other words, was Reuven (in 37:29) the first brother to notice that Yosef was missing, or the last brother to find out that he was sold?

8. How would your answer to this question affect how we understand both Yosef's behavior in Egypt in regard to why he never contacted home, and why the brothers never went to Egypt to look for him.

PART III - PARSHANUT

1. Review your answers to the preparation questions above, then, before reading the various commentators on 37:28, ask yourself the following questions:

(A) Are the Midyanim and Yishmaelim the same people?

[Relate to 25:1-4]

(B) Who pulled Yosef out of the pit?

(C) Why is Reuven not there when all of this transpires?

2. See Rashi 37:28. How does he solve (A)?

See Rashi 37:29 (where he quotes the Midrash that it was Reuven's turn to go home to learn with his father). How far is it from Hebron to Dotan? [i.e. how many days of travel?]

Does it make any sense that Reuven would leave for such a long time while Yosef was in the pit? In your opinion, does this Midrash explain pshat concerning what 'happened' or does it provide us with insight concerning the brothers' 'respect' for their father? [If the latter is true, what the message of this Midrash concerning the nature of 'sin'at achim?]

Next, explain the second possibility raised by Rashi.

3. See Ibn Ezra & Radak on 37:28 and Ramban 37:25.

How do they answer (A)?

How (and why) do their respective commentaries differ?

4. See Rashbam on 37:28; how does he answer (A), (B), & (C)?

In what manner is his approach totally different from all of the others? [Why do you think Rashbam concludes with a 'second opinion'?]

5. Finally, see Chizkuni on 37:28. How does he answer A, B, & C? In what manner is his peirush different from Rashbam?

[Why do you think that Chizkuni also includes a 'second opinion'? Is this 'second opinion' the same as Rashbam's 'second opinion'?]

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BEN ZKUNIM

1. In 37:3, we find how Yosef is described as his father's 'ben zkunim' [lit. son of his old age]. How did you understand this phrase? How much younger is Yosef than his other brothers? How old is Yaakov at this time? How old is Binyamin?

Based on these questions, does it make sense that Yosef should be considered the ben zkunim?

First see Rashi, noting his interpretation and that he quotes Unkelos. Can you explain the need of Unkelos' interpretation? See also Rashbam and Ibn Ezra.

Then, see Ramban on 37:3, noting his questions on the above interpretations, and how he explains this phrase in a very different manner!

Finally, see Radak and Chizkuni, noting what is unique about each of their explanations.

WHEN DID YEHUDA GET MARRIED?

2. In Chapter 38 - the story of Yehuda and his children - interrupts the narrative that describes the story of Yosef in Egypt that began in chapter 37 and continues in chapter 39.

Review the story in chapter 38, and consider the minimum amount of years that have transpired. Consider as well how many years pass from the time that Yosef is sold (see 37:2) and when he solves Pharaoh's dream (see 41:46), and the fact that the entire family goes down to Egypt less than a decade later.

Based on the above, at what age do you think Yehuda first married Shua's daughter (see 38:1-2)? [i.e. before or after Yosef was sold?]

Then, see Rashi on 38:1. What is his opinion? Does he relate to any of the above questions? If so, how?

See also Radak (until the end of his peirush to 38:1!). In what manner is his peirush similar to Rashi, and how is it different?

Next, see Chizkuni on 38:1. Note how he relates to the above questions. How does he solve them? See also Seforno!

Finally, see Ibn Ezra on 38:1. How does he solve the above questions? How and why is his peirush different than Chizkuni?

In your opinion, which peirush appears to be most logical?

3. Re: **who** Yehuda married, i.e. did he marry a Canaanite? See how Unkelos translates this word. [Note that there are two versions.]

What is the problem with translating 'kna'ani' as a Canaanite?

Then see Rashi on 38:2. See also Rashbam. What does his explanation add to Rashi's 'translation'? [See also Radak.]

[See also Rasa"g. What does he mean by 'ki-pshuto'?]

See Ibn Ezra.

Finally, see Ramban. It's quite long, but be sure to see at least the final few lines of that Ramban (in relation to David Hamelech). What is the Ramban's primary point, and why does he go to such great lengths to support his interpretation?

How does this topic relate to a primary theme in Sefer Breishit, in regard to Bnei Yisrael's future inheritance of Eretz Canaan based on 9:18-27, 10:15-20, and 17:7-8.

SAR HA'TABACHIM

1. Review 37:36, noting how Yosef was sold to Potiphar, the "sar ha'tabachim". In modern Hebrew - the word "tabach" refers to a 'chef' or a cook, and "sar" means a government minister.

In your opinion, what type of ministry was he in charge of?

Note the tirgum Unkelos ["rav kotolaya"]. Why leads the tirgum to this conclusion?

See Rashi - noting how he disagrees with the Tirgum. In your opinion, what leads Rashi to this conclusion.

See Ibn Ezra, noting how he offers two interpretations, yet prefers the Tirgum. Can you explain why? Then, note how Ramban supports Ibn Ezra's opinion!

2. Later on, in chapter 39, Yosef is sent to jail. Review 39:20-23. How does this jail relate to Yosef's previous job as servant to Potifar? Who else is later sent to the same jail?

Can you relate this to your answer to the above question?

3. Review 41:45, noting how Yosef is given Osnat bat Potiphara for a wife. In your opinion, is Potiphar (of chapter 37) the same person as Potiphara, father of Osnat?

What did you base your conclusion on?

Then, see Rashi! What does he base his conclusion on?

Afterward, see Rashbam. Why does he disagree?

Finally, see Ramban and Chizkuni, noting how they provide some possible reasons for both Potiphar's change of 'profession', as well as why his daughter is given to Yosef for a wife!

Enjoy!

be-hatzlacha,
menachem