

**VAYEISHEV: DOES GOD SPEAK TO US TODAY? PART I**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayeishev!

Aleph Beta is pleased to present this guide, the first in a four-part series. It deals with *Parshat Vayeishev*

through *Parshat Vayechi*: the whole of the epic Joseph story.

# After The Age Of Prophecy

Let’s just dive right in with a question that, on the face of it, has little to do with *Parshat Vayeishev:* **Does God speak to us, today? And if so, how?**

After all, Jews traditionally pray to God three times a day, which means that we spend all of this time *talking* to God — but does God ever talk back? We don’t live in an age of prophecy anymore, so does that mean that God is silent? Or might God have non-prophetic ways of talking to us?

Now, let’s be clear: we don’t mean, “Sometimes I just feel so inspired that it really *seems* that God is talking to me.” Yes, you *could* say that — and certainly many religious people can relate to that experience — but it’s undoubtedly a very subjective thing. We’re looking for something a bit more concrete than that, something about which even a very rational person would have to concede: “You’re right. God is clearly communicating with you.” Is there any such thing that we could put our finger on?

And here’s why we’re bringing this up in a guide to *Parshat Vayeishev*, of all places. We have a hunch that the epic story of Joseph actually gives us a kind of answer to this question. Because think about this: Can we think of an example in the Torah of God speaking, non- prophetically, to a person? We wouldn’t find such a thing with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob — because they were all prophets. But there is one generation in the Book of Genesis that doesn’t have any prophets: Joseph’s generation. You never find the phrase “and God spoke to Joseph, saying” or “and God appeared to Judah and said.” God seems to be silent in that generation. So you have to ask: Was God in fact silent? Or did God find a

way to talk to Joseph *without really talking to him?* Intriguingly, the answer seems to be: yes. And by our count, it happens at least *twice*.

# Addressing Joseph’s Dreams

Now, before we reveal those two instances, let us just dismiss one possibility out of hand. You might be thinking that the first time that God communicates with Joseph is in *Parshat Vayeishev*: in his *dreams.* You’ll recall that Joseph has this one dream in which he and his brothers are gathering wheat, and his brothers’ stalks of wheat start bowing down to his stalk of wheat:

## INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life’s biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That’s why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we’ll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you’re planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the “Source Sheet” for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, “Parshat Vayeishev: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part I” (available for viewing at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org/)). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

**Genesis 37:6-7**

ה ָּ ׂש ֶדה, ְו ִה ֵּנה ָק ָמה ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי, ְו ַגם-נ ָ ּצ ָבה; ְו ִה ֵּנה

ֹו ְך ּבת

ִה ֵּנה ֲא ַנ ְחנ ּו ְמ ַא ְּל ִמים ֲא ֻל ִּמים, ח ָל ְמ ִּתי. ְו

ה ֶ ּזה ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֲחל ֹום ה

ִש ְמע ּו-נא,

ְת ֻס ֶּבי ָנה ֲא ֻל ּמֹ ֵתי ֶכם, ַו ִּת ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֶויןָ ַל ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי.

‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.’

He has a second dream in which the sun, the moon, and eleven stars are all bowing down to him:

**Genesis 37:9**

לי.

כ ֹו ָכ ִבים, ִמ ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ִוים

ה ׁ ֶּש ֶמ ׁש ְו ַה ָ ּי ֵר ַח ְו ַא ַחד ָע ָ ׂשר

ֹום ע ֹוד, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל

ַל ְמ ִּתי ח

ה ֵּנה

Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.

Could this be God’s way of communicating with Joseph?

The problem with that line of thinking is that Joseph’s dreams don’t really do much for him, do they? As a matter of fact, the only thing that they really do is get him thrown into a pit and sold off as a slave. It’s enough to make you say, “If that’s how God talks to us, then ‘no thanks, I’m not interested.’”

# Does God Use Dreams to Speak to Us?

So let’s leave Joseph’s dreams aside for the moment and ask ourselves: Are there any *other* times when Joseph seems to be privy to some kind of divine communication?

For us, there are two cases that come to mind. The first is Joseph’s interpretation of *Pharaoh’s* dream. Pharaoh dreams about these seven beautiful cows that are swallowed alive by seven ugly cows — and Pharaoh knows that it means something

but can’t figure out what. None of his astrologers can offer a satisfactory explanation either. One of his servants remembers having met this Hebrew fellow, back in prison, and suggests that he may be able to help:

**Genesis 41:12-13**

ה ָיה

ּכן

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר ָּפ ַתר- ָלנ ּו,

ֹו, ָּפ ָתר. ַו ְי ִהי ּכ ֲחלֹמ

ׁש אי

ה ַּט ָּב ִחים, ַו ְּנ ַס ֶּפר-ל ֹו, ַו ִ ּי ְפ ָּתר- ָלנ ּו ֶאת-חלֹמֹ ֵתינ ּו:

ל ַ ׂשר

ו ׁ ָשם ִא ָּתנ ּו ַנ ַער ִע ְב ִרי, ֶע ֶבד

And there was with us there a young man, a Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he did interpret. And it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was

So Pharaoh’s attendants haul Joseph out of prison and Pharaoh says, “I hear that you know how to interpret dreams.” And how does Joseph reply?

**Genesis 41:16**

ַי ֲע ֶנה ֶאת- ׁשל ֹום ַּפ ְרעֹה. אלֹקים,

ּב ְל ָע ָדי:

It is not in me; God will interpret the dream for Pharaoh [lit: give Pharaoh an answer of peace].

Joseph seems fairly confident that God is going to take an active role in helping him to interpret this dream.

But here’s the curious thing. Pharaoh tells Joseph his dream, and Joseph offers an interpretation. There is no interruption in the text to say, “and God spoke to Joseph and told him what the dream meant.” The interpretation seems to be coming from Joseph himself. So you have to ask: What exactly did Joseph mean when he said, “*God* will interpret the dream”? Was he just being humble? Just being pious? Or did he have some way of communicating with God, of hearing *God’s* interpretation of the dream? And if it wasn’t through prophecy — since there was no “And God spoke to Joseph” — then what was the vehicle for this conversation?

# It’s All In Your Head

While you’re pondering that, consider the second instance when this seems to occur. It happens years later: after Joseph rises through the ranks of Egyptian royalty, after famine strikes the land, after Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to secure grain and he recognizes them — but they don’t recognize him. In a dramatic speech, Joseph reveals himself to them as his long-lost brother — and listen to what he says:

**Genesis 45:4-5, 8**

ל ִמ ְח ָיה, ׁ ְש ָל ַח ִני

ּכי

ה ָּנה:

ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, ּכי-מ

ֵעי ֵני ֶכם, ּב

א ִני י ֹו ֵסף ֲא ִחי ֶכם, ֲא ׁ ֶשר-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, ִמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. ְו ַע ָּתה ַאל- ּת ָע ְצב ּו, ְו ַאל- ִי ַחר

ּב ָכל-א ֶרץ

ל ָכל- ֵבית ֹו, ּומֹ ׁ ֵשל,

ּו ְל ָאד ֹון ל ַפ ְרעֹה,

ל ָאב

ה ֱאלֹקים; ַו ְי ִ ׂשי ֵמ ִני

ִמ ְצרָ ִים.

ּכי,

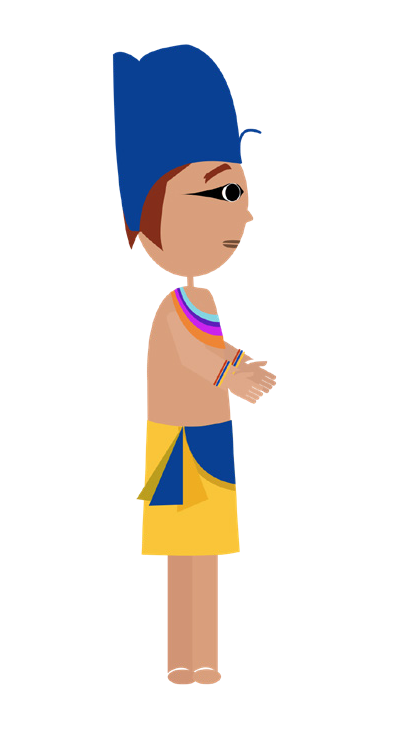
ה ָּנה,

ל ְפ ֵני ֶכם… ְו ַע ָּתה, לֹא-א ֶּתם ׁ ְש ַל ְח ֶּתם אֹ ִתי

אלֹקים

I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; for God did send me before you to preserve life… So now it was not you that sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Joseph appears to tell his brothers: *I know that, from your perspective, you did this terrible thing in selling me into slavery. But it wasn’t really you; God was pulling the strings. God wanted me to end up in Egypt, so that I could provide for you during this time of famine. God made it all work out.1*



The way that Joseph is talking, it really sounds like he has received some great insight into the divine plan. *I*

*understand why all this happened; it was providential.* But one more time — just like with Pharaoh’s dream— we don’t have any *record* of God coming down from Heaven and saying

to Joseph: “Hey Joseph, I want to tell you My plan!” So… how does Joseph know? Is it possible that this too is an

example of God speaking to Joseph… without actually speaking to him?

That is the question of non-prophetic communication. If it could exist in the generation of Joseph, then maybe there is a way that God could speak to us, even today — and maybe the story of Joseph provides a model.

# The Key Piece of Information

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves; this is all in the realm of “interesting possibility,” but we haven’t proven anything yet. So let’s go back to that first instance, to the story in which Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s mysterious dreams, after having said: “God will interpret the dreams.” Now, we’ve already made the point that there is no mention in the Torah of God whispering in Joseph’s ear, at least no *explicit* mention. So if there is some sort of *implicit* communication between God and Joseph lurking in the text, what might it look like? What exactly are we searching for here?

Well, if you were God and you wanted to impart the meaning of this dream to Joseph, you wouldn’t actually have to explain every little detail to him. There is really just one key piece of information that you’d have to give him; with that one piece of information in hand, Joseph could extrapolate the rest. What is that key piece of information?

It is that cows *equal* years. The commentaries talk about how Pharaoh’s astrologers were mistaken about exactly this point: they suggested that the cows represented types of crops, or maybe daughters of Pharaoh, or maybe cities. Joseph’s key insight was that they represented *time* — and the units of time were *years.*

against evil meant you you, for as “And , ְו ַא ֶּתם, ֲח ׁ ַש ְב ֶּתם ָע ַלי ָר ָעה; ֱאלֹקים, ֲח ׁ ָש ָב ּה ְלטֹ ָבה, ְל ַמ ַען ֲע ׂשֹה ַּכ ּי ֹום ַה ֶ ּזה, ְל ַה ֲחיֹת ַעם-רב Jacob: father his of death the after later, years sentiment similar very a expresses Joseph 1 50:20) (Genesis alive.” people much save to day, this is it as pass, to bring to good, for it meant God but me;

Once you know that **cows equal years**, then the rest is obvious: *seven beautiful cows* means *seven beautiful years*, and *seven ugly cows* are *seven bad years*. When seven bad cows swallow seven good cows, it means that the famine is going to be so bad that people will *forget* that there were ever seven years of plenty. So could God have found a way, somehow, to convey that one little piece of information to Joseph?

We think that the answer is yes — and that if you replay the story in slow motion, you’ll find that the text actually tells us

*when* that happened.

You see, if you look back at the verses, you’ll see that the storyline proceeds at a pretty rapid pace. Pharaoh is looking for an interpreter, someone recommends Joseph, and before you know it, Joseph has been pulled out of the pit, he’s hearing all about Pharaoh’s dream, and somehow, he knows exactly how to interpret it. The only one who said anything to Joseph was Pharaoh. So there must have been something in *Pharaoh’s words* that tipped him off.

“But wait!” - we hear you saying. “All of the astrologers heard the same spiel from Pharaoh, and none of them were able to interpret the dream! If there was a hint, why didn’t they hear it?” Yes, it’s true that they were all told about the same dream — but maybe Joseph *heard* it differently. *Maybe* there was some kind of clue in Pharaoh’s telling of the dream, embedded in such a way that *only Joseph* could have understood its meaning.

But how could you put something in the dream that only Joseph would understand?

# How Do We Understand the Messages God Speaks to Us?

Oh, there’s a way — and here’s an analogy to explain it. Imagine that you have a whole bunch of friends gathered around your table and you’re playing a game. You call for a volunteer to play the role of God. Bob raises his hand. Now, Bob gets to look around the table and nominate his good friend to play the role of Joseph. Everyone else around the table is one of Pharaoh’s astrologers.

Now, here is how the game works. You come up with a secret message and you whisper it to Bob. Let’s say the secret message is “We’re having peach pie for dessert.” Bob’s task is to somehow communicate that message to “Joseph” — who is at the other end of the table — without any of the astrologers figuring out what he’s trying to say.

It’s not an easy task — but it can be done. Bob and Joseph have one thing going for them: they *know each other*. They’re friends — and that means they’ve likely had experiences together that none of the other people have shared. Maybe Bob can somehow *leverage* those experiences to communicate something, secretly, to Joseph.

For example: imagine that three years ago, Bob and Joseph went on a skip trip together and they packed peaches for a snack. Bob might say: “Remember when we were on that ski trip and we had that snack?” Now imagine that when Bob and Joseph were kids, they were in geometry class together.

So Bob might say: “Remember when we were back in Mr. Albertson’s class and we couldn’t figure out that strange Greek letter thing?” In this way, Bob could couple together a coded message for Bob,

a message that no one else at the table would understand, simply by piecing together their prior shared experiences.

Might the real God have been doing something similar with the real Joseph? Could it be that embedded in Pharaoh’s dream were certain things that were sort of “shared experiences” between God and Joseph? And that God made use of that shared experience to communicate directly to Joseph? To communicate that key piece of information that Joseph needed to “crack” the dream: that *cows equals years*?

Think of friends and family who will love it as much as you did - and share it with them!

And when you do, please remember to support Aleph Beta. Nothing makes us happier than bringing eye-opening, soul-heartening, life-changing Torah directly to you — but it all costs money. Like the cost of the writing, editing, design and circulation of the guide that you’re reading. So until we win the lottery, we need your support. Encourage your friends to subscribe to Aleph Beta, so they can get the guides sent directly to them! Or if you shared it with a friend and it was an awesome experience for both of you, consider making a small donation to show your love.

Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

Love the guide?

Then SHARE and SUPPORT!

We will pick up this question in next week’s guide to *Parshat Miketz.*



Vayeishev: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part I

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 37:5-10**

**בראשית לז:ה–י**

**5** And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it to his

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹוד, ׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו. **ו** ַו ּיֹאמֶר,

**ה** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם י ֹו ֵסף חל ֹום, ַו ַ ּי ֵּגד

brethren; and they hated him yet the more. **6** And he said

ִש ְמע ּו-נא, ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ִּתי. **ז** ְו ִה ֵּנה א ַנ ְחנ ּו

א ֵלי ֶהם:

unto them: ‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have

א ֻל ִּמים, ּבת ֹו ְך ה ָּ ׂש ֶדה, ְו ִה ֵּנה ָק ָמה א ֻל ָּמ ִתי, ְו ַגם-נ ָ ּצ ָבה;

מ ַא ְּל ִמים

dreamed: **7** for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.’ **8** And his brethren said to him: ‘Shalt

ו ִה ֵּנה ת ֻס ֶּבי ָנה א ֻל ּמֹ ֵתי ֶכם, ַו ִּת ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֶויןָ ַל ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי. **ח** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו ל ֹו, א ָחיו,

ֹו ה ָמלֹ ְך ִת ְמלֹ ְך ע ֵלינ ּו, אם-מ ׁש ֹול ִת ְמ ׁשֹל ּבנ ּו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹוד ׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו, על-חלֹמֹ ָתיו ְו ַעל- ְ ּד ָב ָריו. **ט** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם ע ֹוד חל ֹום א ֵחר, ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר אֹת

thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have

ה ׁ ֶּש ֶמ ׁש ְו ַה ָ ּי ֵר ַח ְו ַא ַחד

ֹום ע ֹוד, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל

ַל ְמ ִּתי ח

ֵּנה ה

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר,

dominion over us?’ And they hated him yet the more for his

ו ְי ַס ֵּפר אל-א ִביו, ְו ֶאל-א ָחיו, ַו ִ ּי ְג ַער-

מ ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ִוים לי. **י**

ע ָ ׂשר כ ֹו ָכ ִבים,

dreams, and for his words. **9** And he dreamed yet another

א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ָּת: הב ֹוא ָנב ֹוא, א ִני

ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה

ב ֹו א ִביו, ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו מה

dream, and told it to his brethren, and said: ‘Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.’ **10** And he told it

to his father, and to his brethren; and his father rebuked him, and said unto him: ‘What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down to thee to the earth?’

ְר ָצה. א

ָך, ל

ו ִא ְּמ ָך ְו ַא ֶחי ָך, ל ִה ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֹות

**Genesis 41:1-32**

### בראשית מא:א–לב

**1** And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that

ו ַפ ְר ֹעה חֹ ֵלם, ְו ִה ֵּנה עֹ ֵמד על-ה ְיאֹר. **ב**

**א** ַו ְי ִהי, מ ֵּקץ ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ָי ִמים;

Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river. **2**

ָפר ֹות, ְיפות מ ְר ֶאה, ו ְב ִריאֹת ּב ָ ׂשר;

ו ִה ֵּנה מן-ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע

And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine,

ֹות, עֹל ֹות א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן מן- א ֵחר

ו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו. **ג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות

well-favoured and fat-fleshed; and they fed in the reed-

grass. **3** And, behold, seven other kine came up after

ְש ַפת על-

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ּב ָ ׂשר; ַו ַּת ֲעמֹ ְד ָנה א ֶצל

ה ְיאֹר, ָרע ֹות מ ְר ֶאה, ְו ַד ּק ֹות

them out of the river, ill favoured and lean-fleshed; and

ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַד ּקֹת ה ָּב ָ ׂשר, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

הַ ְיאֹר. **ד** ַו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה ה ָּפר ֹות, ָרע ֹות

stood by the other kine upon the brink of the river. **4**

ַפ ְרעֹה. **ה** וַ ִ ּיי ׁ ָשן, וַ ַ ּי ֲחלֹם

ה ָּפר ֹות, ְיפת ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַה ְּב ִריאֹת; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ,

And the ill-favoured and lean-fleshed kine did eat up the

ָחד-- ְב ִריאות ְוטֹב ֹות. **ו** א

ָק ֶנה ּב

ֵש ִנית; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹל ֹות

seven well-favoured and fat kine. So Pharaoh awoke. **5**

פת ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן. **ז**

ו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, ַ ּד ּק ֹות ו ׁ ְשד ּו

And he slept and dreamed a second time: and, behold,

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים, ה ְּב ִריאות

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּק ֹות, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ו ִּת ְב ַל ְע ָנה,

seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank and

ַפ ְרעֹה, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל ֹום. **ח** ַו ְי ִהי ב ּ ֹב ֶקר, ַו ִּת ָּפ ֶעם ר ּוחו,

ו ַה ְּמ ֵלאות; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ

good. **6** And, behold, seven ears, thin and blasted with

the east wind, sprung up after them. **7** And the thin ears

ו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את- ָכל-ח ְר ֻט ֵּמי מ ְצ ַר ִים, ְו ֶאת- ָכל-ח ָכ ֶמי ָה; ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר

swallowed up the seven rank and full ears. And Pharaoh

ל ֶהם את-חלֹמ ֹו, ְו ֵאין-פ ֹו ֵתר או ָתם ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **ט** ַו ְי ַד ֵּבר ׂשר

ַפ ְרעֹה

awoke, and, behold, it was a dream. **8** And it came to

את- ּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר: את-ח ָט ַאי, א ִני מ ְז ִּכיר ה ּי ֹום. **י** ַפ ְרעֹה,

ה ַּמ ׁ ְש ִקים,

pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled; and he

ָּב ִחים--אֹ ִתי, ְו ֵאת ה ַּט

ׂשר

ּבית

ּב ִמ ׁ ְש ַמר,

על-ע ָב ָדיו; ַו ִ ּי ֵּתן אֹ ִתי

ק ַצף

sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all the

ָוהוא: אי ׁש ּכ ִפ ְתר ֹון א ִני

ְי ָלה א ָחד, ּב ַל

ֹום חל

ׂשר הָאֹ ִפים. **יא** ַו ַּנ ַח ְל ָמה

wise men thereof; and Pharaoh told them his dream; but

ע ְב ִרי, ע ֶבד ל ַ ׂשר ה ַּט ָּב ִחים, ַו ְּנ ַס ֶּפר-

חֲלֹמ ֹו, חָ ָל ְמנ ּו. **יב** ְו ׁ ָשם א ָּתנ ּו ַנ ַער

there was none that could interpret them unto Pharaoh.

**9** Then spoke the chief butler unto Pharaoh, saying: ‘I

ָפ ָתר. **יג** ַו ְי ִהי ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֲחלֹמ ֹו, ּכ

ֵתינ ּו: אי ׁש את-חלֹמֹ

ל ֹו, ַו ִ ּי ְפ ָּתר- ָלנ ּו



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Source Sheet Page 2

make mention of my faults this day: **10** Pharaoh was

ְרעֹה ַפ

ת ָלה. **יד** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח

ַכ ִּני, ְואֹת ֹו על-

ה ׁ ִשיב

ָיה: אֹ ִתי ה

ּכן

ָפ ַתר- ָלנ ּו,

wroth with his servants, and put me in the ward of the

בא אל-

ׂש ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ ּי

ּב ֹור; ַו ְי ַג ַּלח ַו ְי ַח ֵּלף מן-ה

ֹו ֵסף, ַו ְי ִרי ֻצהו את-י

ו ִ ּי ְק ָרא

house of the captain of the guard, me and the chief baker. **11** And we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he; we dreamed each man according to the interpretation of his

ַל ְמ ִּתי, ופ ֵתר אין אֹת ֹו; ח

ל ְפ ּתֹר אֹת ֹו. **טז** ַו ַ ּי ַען י ֹו ֵסף את- ׁ ְשל ֹום ַפ ְרעֹה. **יז** ַו ְידַ ֵּבר

ֹו ֵסף, חל ֹום אל-י

ִת ׁ ְש ַמע חל ֹום, ַי ֲע ֶנה אלֹקים,

ְרעֹה, ַפ

לאמֹר,

ָע ָדי: ּב ְל

ָך ַפרְעֹה. **טו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ו ֲא ִני, ׁ ָש ַמ ְע ִּתי ע ֶלי

את- ַּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר,

dream. **12** And there was with us there a young man, a

Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told

ְש ַפת ה ְיאֹר. **יח** ְו ִה ֵּנה מִן- על-

ִמי, ה ְנ ִני עֹ ֵמד ּב ֲחלֹ

ַפ ְר ֹעה, אל-י ֹו ֵסף:

him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man

פת תֹ ַאר; ַו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו.

ּב ִריאות ּב ָ ׂשר, ִוי

ֹות, ָפר

ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע

according to his dream he did interpret. **13** And it came

ַאר תֹ

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ַ ּד ּל ֹות ְו ָרע ֹות

ֵחר ֹות, עֹל ֹות א

**יט** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע- ּפר ֹות

to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was: I was restored

ַע. **כ** לרֹ

ְצ ַר ִים, מ

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ֵה ָּנה כ

ּב ָ ׂשר: לֹא-ר ִאי ִתי

מאֹד, ְו ַר ּק ֹות

unto mine office, and he was hanged.’ **14** Then Pharaoh

ָּפר ֹות ה ִרא ׁשֹנ ֹות, ה

ה ָּפר ֹות, ה ַר ּק ֹות, ְו ָה ָרע ֹות--את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה,

sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out

באנה אל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה, ְולֹא נ ֹו ַדע ּכי-באו אל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה,

ה ְּברִיאֹת. **כא** ַו ָּת

of the dungeon. And he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: ‘I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it; and I have heard say of thee, that

ו ַמ ְר ֵאי ֶהן ַרע, ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר ּב ְּת ִח ָּלה; ָו ִאי ָקץ. **כב** ָו ֵא ֶרא, ּב ֲחלֹ ִמי; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע

ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹלֹת ּב ָק ֶנה א ָחד--מ ֵלאֹת ְוטֹב ֹות. **כג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים,

צ ֻנמ ֹות ַ ּד ּק ֹות ׁ ְש ֻדפות ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהם. **כד** ַו ִּת ְב ַלעְןָ

when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it.’ **16** And

ַח ְר ֻט ִּמים, אל-ה

ה ּ ֹטב ֹות; ָואֹ ַמר,

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ה ַ ּד ּקֹת,

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: ‘It is not in me; God will

א ָחד הוא:

ְרעֹה ַפ

ֹום חל

ּפ ְרעֹה, אל-

**כה** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסףלי.

ִּגיד, מ

ו ֵאין

give Pharaoh an answer of peace.’ **17** And Pharaoh spoke

ה ּ ֹטבת, ׁ ֶש ַבע

ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **כו** ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפרֹת

ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה, ה ִּגיד

את א ׁ ֶשר

unto Joseph: ‘In my dream, behold, I stood upon the brink

ָּנה: חל ֹום, א ָחד ה

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ּ ֹטבת, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים

ָש ִנים ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

of the river. **18** And, behold, there came up out of the river

ַר ּק ֹות ְו ָה ָרעֹת ֹהעלֹת א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים ה

הוא. **כז** ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ָּפר ֹות

seven kine, fat-fleshed and well-favoured; and they fed in

the reed-grass. **19** And, behold, seven other kine came up

ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ֵרקות, ׁ ְש ֻדפות ה ָּק ִדים-- ִי ְהי ּו, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב.

after them, poor and very ill-favoured and lean-fleshed,

אל- ּפ ְר ֹעה: א ׁ ֶשר ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה, ה ְר ָאה

א ׁ ֶשר ִ ּד ַּב ְר ִּתי

ה ָ ּד ָבר,

**כח** הוא

such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness.

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ָש ָבע ָּגד ֹול, ּבאות--

ה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים,

את- ּפ ְרעֹה. **כט**

**20** And the lean and ill-favoured kine did eat up the first

ֶא ֶרץ ּב

ּכל-ה ָּ ׂש ָבע,

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ְו ִנ ׁ ְש ַּכח

מ ְצרָ ִים. **ל** ְו ָקמ ּו ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב,

seven fat kine. **21** And when they had eaten them up, it

ֶרץ, מ ְּפ ֵני ּב ָא

את-ה ָא ֶרץ. **לא** ְולֹא- ִי ָ ּו ַדע ה ָּ ׂש ָבע

ָר ָעב, ה

מ ְצ ָר ִים; ְו ִכ ָּלה

could not be known that they had eaten them; but they

ֲחל ֹום ה

ּכי-כ ֵבד הוא, מאֹד. **לב** ְו ַעל ה ׁ ָּשנ ֹות

ה ָר ָעב ההוא א ֲח ֵרי-כן:

were still ill-favoured as at the beginning. So I awoke. **22** And I saw in my dream, and, behold, seven ears came up upon one stalk, full and good. **23** And, behold, seven ears, withered, thin, and blasted with the east wind, sprung up after them. **24** And the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it unto the magicians; but there was none that could declare it to me.’ **25** And Joseph said unto Pharaoh: ‘The dream of Pharaoh is one; what God is about to do He has declared unto Pharaoh. **26** The seven good kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one**. 27** And the seven lean and ill-favoured kine that came up after them are seven years, and also the seven empty ears blasted with the east wind; they shall be seven years of famine. **28** That is the thing which I spoke unto Pharaoh: what God is about to do He

ֱאלֹקים ה

ה ֱאלֹקים, ו ְמ ַמ ֵהר מ ִעם

ה ָ ּד ָבר

ָמ ִים-- ִכי-נכ ֹון ַפ ֲע

אל- ּפ ְרעֹה,

לעֲשֹת ֹו.



Vayeishev: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part I

Source Sheet Page 3

has shown unto Pharaoh. **29** Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. **30** And there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land; **31** and the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine which followeth; for it shall be very grievous. **32** And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice, it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

**Genesis 45:4-8**

### בראשית מה:ד–ח

**4** And Joseph said unto his brethren: ‘Come near to me, I

א ַלי, ַו ִ ּי ָּג ׁש ּו; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, א ִני י ֹו ֵסף

**ד** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסף אל-א ָחיו ְּג ׁש ּו-נא

pray you.’ And they came near. And he said: ‘I am Joseph

א ׁ ֶשר-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, מ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **ה** ְו ַע ָּתה אל- ּת ָע ְצב ּו, ְו ַאל-

א ִחי ֶכם,

your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. **5** And now be not

ל ִמ ְח ָיה, ׁ ְש ָל ַח ִני אלֹקים

ָּנה: ּכי ה

י ַחר ּב ֵעי ֵני ֶכם, ּכי-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי,

grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither;

for God did send me before you to preserve life. **6** For

ּב ֶק ֶרב ה ָא ֶרץ; ְוע ֹוד ח ֵמ ׁש ׁ ָש ִנים,

לפְ ֵני ֶכם. **ו** ּכי-זה ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ה ָר ָעב,

these two years has the famine been in the land; and there

ל ְפ ֵני ֶכם, לש ּום ל ֶכם אלֹקים

אין-ח ִרי ׁש ְו ָק ִציר. **ז** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ָל ֵח ִני

א ׁ ֶשר

are yet five years, in which there shall be neither plowing

ָטה ְּגדֹ ָלה. **ח** ְו ַע ָּתה, לֹא-א ֶּתם ל ְפ ֵלי

ֶכם, ל

ַה ֲחי ֹות ו ְל

ָא ֶרץ, ּב

ְש ֵא ִרית

nor harvest. **7** And God sent me before you to give you

ל ָכל-

ְל ָאד ֹון ו

ַפ ְרעֹה, ל

ָאב ל

ה ֱאלֹקים; ַו ְי ִ ׂשי ֵמ ִני

ּכי,

ָּנה, ה

ְש ַל ְח ֶּתם אֹ ִתי

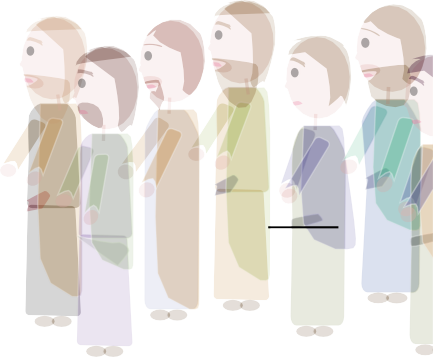
a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance. **8** So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

ְצ ָר ִים. מ

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ומֹ ׁ ֵשל,

ּבית ֹו,



**VAYEISHEV: WHO REALLY SOLD JOSEPH?**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayeishev!

# The Greatest Crime That Never Happened

Parshat Vayeishev includes one of the most astounding events in the entire Bible, the sale of Joseph at the hands of his brothers. We want to invite you to explore this sale through the eyes of Rashbam,1 one of the medieval Biblical commentators.2

Rashbam actually argues -- get ready for this -- that the brothers never sold Joseph at all. We know, it flies in the face of what you *think* you know about the story. It makes you wonder, where is Rashbam coming up with this? Is he just trying to get the brothers off the hook? Isn’t it plain in the Bible that they sold Joseph?

# An Open And Shut Case

The only way to resolve this is to take a look at the verses themselves. But first, let’s remind ourselves of the context. Joseph was sent by his father to check up on his brothers. When the brothers see him approaching from afar, they hatch a plan to cast him into a pit. The action picks up below in verse 23:

**Genesis 37:23-29**

**בראשית לז: כג–כט**

**23** When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר- ָבא י ֹו ֵסף ֶאל-א ָחיו; ַו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו

**כג** ַו ְי ִהי,

of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, **24** and

ה ַּפ ִּסים ֲא ׁ ֶשר ָע ָליו.

את-י ֹו ֵסף ֶאת- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו, ֶאת- ְכתֹ ֶנת

took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there

ב ֹו

ה ּ ֹב ָרה; ְו ַה ּב ֹור ֵרק, ֵאין

**כד** ַו ִ ּי ָּק ֻחהו--ו ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו אֹת ֹו,

was no water in it. **25** Then they sat down to a meal. Looking

מָ ִים. **כה** ַו ֵ ּי ׁ ְשב ּו, ֶל ֱא ָכל- ֶל ֶחם, ַו ִ ּי ְ ׂשאו ֵעי ֵני ֶהם ַו ִ ּי ְראו,

up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their

ִּג ְל ָעד; ּו ְג ַמ ֵּלי ֶהם ּב ָאה ִמ

ו ִה ֵּנה אֹ ְר ַחת ִי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt.

להו ִריד

נ ְ ׂש ִאים, ְנ ֹכאת ּו ְצ ִרי ָולֹט--הו ְל ִכים,

**26** Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing

ּכי

ֶב ַצע, מה-

מִ ְצ ָר ְימָה. **כו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ְיהו ָדה, ֶאל-א ָחיו:

our brother and covering up his blood? **27** Come, let us sell him

ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו לכ ּו ְו

נ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו. **כז**

to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves.

ב ָ ׂש ֵרנ ּו,

ִחינ ּו ּכי-א

ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים, ְו ָי ֵדנ ּו ַאל- ּת ִהי-ב ֹו,

After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed.

**28** When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up

הוא; ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמע ּו, ֶא ָחיו. **כח** ַו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו ֲא ָנ ׁ ִשים ִמ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ׁ ְשכ ּו ַו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ִמן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו

out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to

ּכ ֶסף; ַו ָ ּי ִביאו

ּב ֶע ְ ׂש ִרים

את-י ֹו ֵסף ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. **29** And Reuben

את-י ֹו ֵסף, ִמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כט** ַו ָ ּי ׁ ָשב ְראו ֵבן ֶאל-ה ּב ֹור,

returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he rent his garments.

ּב ּב ֹור; ַו ִ ּי ְק ַרע, ֶאת- ְב ָג ָדיו.

ו ִה ֵּנה ֵאין-י ֹו ֵסף

1 Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, Rashi’s grandson, whose commentary focuses on the *pshat*, simple meaning, of the verses.

2 Admittedly, Rashbam’s interpretation of this sale is unusual; many commentators adopt a different stance. Here is a sampling of those other opinions: Rashi (based on the Midrash) writes that the brothers pulled Joseph from the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites, who in turn sold him to the Midianites, who sold him to Egypt. (However, Genesis 39:1 challenges this.) Ibn Ezra understands, based on a verse in Judges 8:24, that the Midianites and the Ishmaelites are the same tribe. Ramban offers a brilliant harmonization. The brothers raised Joseph from the pit and sold him to Midianite merchants, who hired camels from the Ishmaelite caravans, who brought him to Egypt for the Midianites.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life’s biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That’s why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we’ll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you’re planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the “Source Sheet” for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, “Parshat Vayeishev: Who Really Sold Joseph?” (available for viewing at [www.](http://www/) alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

When you first read these verses, it’s not obvious where Rashbam is coming from. Indeed, verses 26 and 27 seem to fly

in the face of his argument. Notice Judah’s suggestion to his brothers:

**Genesis 37:26-27**

לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים...

ּכי ַנ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו?

מה- ֶב ַצע,

What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites...

And how do the brothers respond to Judah’s proposal? They don’t miss a beat:

**Genesis 37:27**

ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְשמְע ּו ֶא ָחיו

And his brothers agreed

If you had any doubt that the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, there’s your evidence! It seems like an open and shut case, right?

# Searching For Ambiguity

## PONDER THIS



Take a second look back at the verses. This time, see if you can find any evidence to defend

Rashbam’s position that the brothers *didn’t* sell Joseph.

Now that you’ve read it a second time, do things seem just a little bit less cut and dry? Take a look at verse 28:

**Genesis 37:28**

ו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו ֲא ָנ ׁ ִשים ִמ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּימְ ׁ ְשכ ּו ַו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ִמן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

When Midianite traders passed by, *they* pulled Joseph up out of the pit, and they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites

Who is the “they”? The truth is, the text doesn’t say. It’s ambiguous.

How might we figure it out? Well, in Hebrew, whenever we find a verb whose subject isn’t defined, we look back to the

last subject that was mentioned. What is the last subject that was mentioned?

It’s the Midianite traders. Read the verse one more time: “When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit...” It sure sounds like “they” refers to the Midianite traders. Grammatically, that’s the most straightforward way to read the text.

# Getting The Players Straight

Still not convinced? If you stick to the old story and insist that it’s the brothers who did the selling, you’re left with another complication: not who *sold* Joseph, but...who *bought* him. We’ll show you what we mean. Close your eyes and imagine the scene. There’s a wide expanse of desert and a hot beating sun. Joseph is in the pit, too deep down to lift himself out, wondering what will happen next. He’s hurt and afraid. Will his brothers have mercy on him and rescue him? Meanwhile, his brothers are off on the side, setting up a picnic lunch.

## PONDER THIS



Is anyone else on the scene? Who are the other players, besides Joseph and his brothers?

If you look back at the verses, you’ll see that there are not one but two other players: the **Ishmaelites** (mentioned in verses 27 and 28) and the **Midianites** (mentioned in verse 28). Two bands of merchants who just happen to be passing by the pit! What’s going on here? Which one bought Joseph?

## PONDER THIS



Let’s say you reject Rashbam’s theory. You maintain that the brothers sold Joseph. Well, then, how do you imagine this scene? What did the Ishmaelites do? What did the Midianites do? Why does the Bible tell me about both of them?

If we look back at verse 28, we see that “they” (whoever *they* is) “sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the **Ishmaelites**, who brought Joseph to Egypt.” So if the brothers did the selling, and the Ishmaelites did the buying, what are the Midianites doing there? They don’t seem to have a role at all. Why do I need to know that the Midianites traders just happened to be passing by? I mean, it’s not like the Bible tells me every time a group of Hittites filled up their water jugs at the local well, or a group of Jebusites settled in for an afternoon nap. The Bible isn’t a history book, it’s not interested in detailing the movements of every band of merchants in the ancient Near East. It’s a g*uidebook*, in which God conveys crucial messages about how we’re meant to live our lives. The Torah wouldn’t mention the Midianites unless they were actually crucial for us, reading this book thousands of years later. Therefore, isn’t it plausible that the Midianites did the selling and the Ishmaelites did the buying?

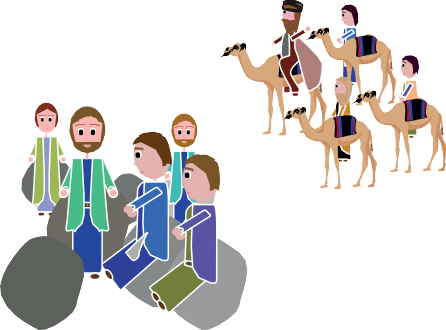


# Arriving At A Conclusion

So where do we stand? When we began our study, Rashbam’s reading seemed doomed. But now that we’re looking at the evidence, the scales are shifting. When you take the grammatical ambiguity of the “they” and combine it with the confusion about the Ishmaelites and the Midianites, you can start to see how Rashbam reached his conclusion: that the Midianites sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who brought him to Egypt.3

*Which means that the brothers had no hand in it.* They saw the Ishmaelite traders in the distance, but they didn’t notice that the Midianite traders were closer. The brothers never saw the Midianites coming. Maybe the Midianites were approaching from the opposite direction, or maybe there was a sand dune in the way. Whatever the case, the Midianites arrived at the pit first. They saw Joseph and had the same idea that the brothers did. It was the Midianites who grabbed Joseph, sold him to the Ishmaelites, and pocketed the profit.4

The brothers didn’t do it, and they didn’t know that it happened until it was too late. They were eating their lunch, minds occupied, waiting for the Ishmaelites to arrive so they could make their money. The brothers *planned* to sell Joseph, yes - but their plan never came to fruition, *because the Midianites beat them to it.*



Ishmaelites

Midianites

3 It’s worth noting that Genesis 37:36 seems to present some problems for Rashbam’s theory: ַפר ִטי ְלפו ִים ָר ְצ מ-ֶאל ֹו אֹת ּו ְכר ָמ ִנים ָד ְּמ ַה ְו (“And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar…”) - but we think there’s a way to reconcile. How would you respond, if you were Rashbam? If you’re interested in more, we recommend seeking out Rashbam’s own comment on verse 36.

4 Indeed, this explains another peculiarity in the verses: that Reuben returns to the pit and seems shocked to find that Joseph is gone: ָדיו ָג ְב -ֶאת ,ַרע ְק ּי ִ ַו ;ֹור ּב ַּב ֵסף ֹו י-ֵאין ֵּנה ִה ְו ,ֹור ּב ה-ֶאל ֵבן ְראו ָשב ּיׁ ָ ַו , “And Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he rent his garments.” If the brothers just lifted Joseph out of the pit, what do you mean, “Reuben returned to the pit”? Wasn’t he already standing there with everyone else? And if he just participated with the brothers in drawing Joseph out of the pit, why was he so surprised that Joseph was gone? If you reject Rashbam’s reading, you have to say that Reuben wandered off from the brothers -- that they sold Joseph while Reuben was out of the picture -- and that’s a bit of a stretch, because there just isn’t any other evidence in the text to suggest it.

# One Thing Leads To Another

We’re able to see now that Rashbam wasn’t coming out of nowhere. However much it butts up against what we *thought*

we knew about this story, Rashbam’s interpretation is rooted in the Biblical text itself.

## PONDER THIS



But we’re left to ponder: What are the *implications* of Rashbam’s reading? In other words, why does the Bible tell the story in this way, and what are we supposed to learn from it?

The Bible is painting a portrait for us of a group of people who intended to commit a crime… but they never actually did it, because their plan was interrupted. We can’t say for sure, but it seems that the Bible is inviting us to *imagine* what would have happened if their crime *hadn’t* been interrupted. What if these Midianite traders had come an

hour later, or had taken a different route that day? After all, this moment at the pit is not an isolated crime. It has enormous ramifications. This crime determined the very course of Israelite history.

Think about it: after Joseph heads down to Egypt, he gets cozy with Pharaoh; before you know it, he’s second in command of all of Egypt and his entire extended family is settled comfortably in Goshen. A generation later, the descendants of Jacob are enslaved to the new Pharaoh, an oppression which will persist for hundreds of years. You see, it’s not hard to draw a line from the sale of Joseph to the enslavement of the entire nation in Egypt. The stakes here run high.

## PONDER THIS



So what do you think would have happened if the Midianites *never came*? How might the history of

the children of Israel looked different?

You might be thinking: “It wouldn’t have made *any difference* at all. If the Midianites didn’t sell him, the brothers would

have. Joseph still would have ended up in Egypt as a slave.”

You may be right - but is it possible to somehow test that theory? **We think it is.**

Let’s take a closer look at the verses which describe the brothers’ plan, to try to get inside of their minds, to really understand what they were thinking. Then we’ll be in a position to hazard a guess about what their *next step* would have been.

# Testing The Theory

## LOOK INSIDE



Take a second look at the encounter between Joseph and his brothers at the pit. We’ve provided you with a lengthier excerpt below, so you can get a fuller sense of the picture here. As you read, ask yourself: What are the brothers planning to do to Joseph? Their plan changes over time. How many different plans can you find?

**Genesis 37:18-29**

**18** They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. **19** They said to one

**בראשית לז: יח–כט**

**יח** ַו ִ ּי ְראו אֹת ֹו, ֵמ ָרחֹק; ּו ְב ֶט ֶרם ִי ְק ַרב ֲא ֵלי ֶהם,

ַו ִ ּי ְת ַנ ְּכל ּו אֹתו ַל ֲה ִמיתו. **יט** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו, ִאי ׁש ֶאל-א ִחיו:

another, “Here comes that dreamer! **20** Come now,

לכ ּו

ָבא. **כ** ְו ַע ָּתה ה ָּל ֶזה--

ֲחלֹמ ֹות ה

ַעל ּב

ה ֵּנה,

let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and

ח ָ ּיה

ה ּ ֹבר ֹות, ְו ָא ַמ ְרנ ּו,

ַא ַחד ּב

ו ַנ ַה ְר ֵגהו, ְו ַנ ׁ ְש ִל ֵכהו

we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall

ָתיו. **כא** חלֹמֹ

ר ָעה ֲא ָכ ָל ְתהו; ְו ִנ ְר ֶאה, ַמה- ִ ּי ְהי ּו

see what comes of his dreams!” **21** But when Reuben

heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let

ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַמע ְראו ֵבן, ַו ַ ּי ִ ּצ ֵלהו ִמ ָ ּי ָדם; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, לֹא ַנ ֶּכ ּנ ּו ָנ ֶפ ׁש. **כב** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ֲא ֵל ֶהם ְראו ֵבן, ַאל- ּת ׁ ְש ְּפכ ּו- ָדם--ה ׁ ְש ִליכ ּו

us not take his life.” **22** And Reuben went on, “Shed

ְד ָּבר, ְו ָיד ּב ִּמ

ה ֶ ּזה ֲא ׁ ֶשר

אֹת ֹו ֶאל-ה ּב ֹור

no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness,

ה ִ ּציל אֹת ֹו ִמ ָ ּי ָדם, ַל ֲה ׁ ִשיב ֹו,

ַמ ַען, ל

אל- ּת ׁ ְש ְלחו-ב ֹו:

but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר- ָבא י ֹו ֵסף ֶאל-א ָחיו;

אֶל-אָ ִביו. **כג** ַו ְי ִהי,

him from them and restore him to his father. **23**

ה ַּפ ִּסים

ו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ֶאת- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו, ֶאת- ְכתֹ ֶנת

When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped

ה ּ ֹב ָרה;

אֲ ׁ ֶשר ָע ָליו. **כד** ַו ִ ּי ָּק ֻחהו--ו ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו אֹת ֹו,

Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he

ב ֹו ָמ ִים. **כה** ַו ֵ ּי ׁ ְשב ּו, ֶל ֱא ָכל- ֶל ֶחם,

ו ַה ּב ֹור ֵרק, ֵאין

was wearing, **24** and took him and cast him into the

ו ִ ּי ְ ׂשאו ֵעי ֵני ֶהם ַו ִ ּי ְראו, ְו ִה ֵּנה אֹ ְר ַחת ִי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. **25**

נ ְ ׂש ִאים, ְנ ֹכאת ּו ְצ ִרי

ּב ָאה ִמ ִּג ְל ָעד; ּו ְג ַמ ֵּלי ֶהם

Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw

ִריד ִמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כו** ַו ּיֹאמֶר להו

ולֹט--הו ְל ִכים,

a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their

ַנ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ּכי

ֶב ַצע, מה-

יהו ָדה, ֶאל-א ָחיו:

camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken

לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

ו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו. **כז**

to Egypt. **26** Then Judah said to his brothers, “What

ב ָ ׂש ֵרנ ּו, הוא; ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמע ּו,

ִחינ ּו ּכי-א

ו ָי ֵדנ ּו ַאל- ּת ִהי-ב ֹו,

do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? **27** Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but

אֶ ָחיו. **כח** ַו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו ֲא ָנ ׁ ִשים ִמ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ׁ ְשכ ּו ו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ִמן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף

let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is

ּכ ֶסף; ַו ָ ּי ִביאו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף,

ּב ֶע ְ ׂש ִרים

ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. **28**

מִ ְצ ָר ְימָה. **כט** ַו ָ ּי ׁ ָשב ְראו ֵבן ֶאל-ה ּב ֹור, ְו ִה ֵּנה

When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. **29** When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes.

ּב ּב ֹור; ַו ִ ּי ְק ַרע, ֶאת- ְב ָג ָדיו.

אין-י ֹו ֵסף

Alright, let’s compare notes. It seems like the brothers actually consider **three** options:

1. “Let’s kill Joseph! We’ll toss his corpse into a pit and say that he was eaten by a wild animal. We’ll see what

becomes of his dreams!” (verses 18-20)

1. “Let’s not get our hands dirty by murdering him. Better to just toss him into a pit where he’ll eventually rot and

die.” (verses 21-25)

1. “Let’s not kill our own flesh and blood. What if we sell him instead? That way we’ll be rid of him, and gain something from it.” (verses 26-28)

## PONDER THIS



Why do you think the plans keep changing?

**Hint:** What’s happening as the brothers’ plan goes from A to B to C? What trend do you see here?

We see a couple of patterns at play:

First, these three plans seem to go from **most violent to least violent,** from:

**1**

a) killing Joseph with their own bare hands to

b) indirectly killing him by leaving him in a pit to die to

c) selling him into slavery

Second, as they progress from A to B to C, the brothers are becoming **less passionate and more calculating.**

**2**

Indeed, that’s what seems to lead Judah to ask:

**Genesis 37:26-27**

לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים…

ּכי ַנ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו?

מה- ֶב ַצע,

What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites...

Judah’s proposal - *Let’s see if we can make some money here!* - smacks more of logic than anger.

All told, as the account advances from Plan A to Plan B to Plan C, it looks like the brothers are beginning to cool off, ever so slightly, that they’re gaining some control over their tempers. They are thinking, and rethinking, and rethinking again their original murderous proposal.

# An Educated Guess

## PONDER THIS



How can we explain this progression? *What* is causing the brothers to rethink their plans over and

over again? Is there some factor which is influencing their thinking?

**The biggest influence on the brothers’ decision-making process seems to be nothing more than the simple passage of time.** Take a look back at the verses, this time with an eye towards the clock. In verse 18, when the brothers first articulate Plan A, they’ve only just noticed Joseph approaching from afar. By the time he actually catches up to them in verse 23, they’ve already moved onto Plan B. And by the time Judah proposes Plan C, they’ve had the chance to sit down to a meal, to fill their stomachs and ponder their actions. As the seconds and minutes steadily tick by, the brothers give the scenario more thought; their voice of conscience rings a bit louder, and their impulse to kill Joseph grows less and less severe. As much as the brothers are creating these plans, time is a partner in writing the script.

## PONDER THIS



We’re now in a position to return to our outstanding question: what *would have* happened had the Midianite traders not gotten there when they did? If the brothers had had more time to think about it, what might Plan D have looked like?



There’s no way to know for certain, but if we follow the clues in the text, then we have good reason to suggest that the pattern would have continued. Just as Plan A was tempered by Plan B, and Plan B was softened even more by Plan C, Plan C would have been replaced by a more compassionate Plan D. Plan D might have looked something like this:

“Hey guys, let’s haul Joseph out of the pit. We’ve shown him who’s boss; he won’t mess with us again.”

It’s enough to make you wonder: Could this whole ordeal have been averted? Could we have skipped over that whole slavery in Egypt part of our history and gone straight to Sinai? Sadly, we’ll never know -- because the brothers *were* interrupted; the Midianites *did* show up.

# The Timeless Lesson

As fascinating as it is to play this game - to imagine what might have happened if things were different - we haven’t fully addressed the question at the heart of the whole matter. *What meaning are we meant to take away from this?* Finding the textual anomalies is the easy part. Figuring out what timeless lesson the Bible is trying to teach us - that’s the hard

part. At such moments, the Bible seems to be almost silent, inviting us to do the work, to piece together speculation and introspection to arrive at an answer.

## PONDER THIS



Why do you think the Torah goes into detail about these three different plans? “Let’s do this!” “Nah, let’s do this!” “Ooh, how about this?” What’s the life lesson here?

**We want to suggest the following:** If we had asked you, before you read this guide, “What’s the lesson of the sale of Joseph?”, what would you have said? *Don’t sell your brother into slavery.* Right? But did you *really* need the Bible to tell you that? You sort of already knew that, didn’t you? As lessons go, it’s pretty one-dimensional. It’s not like we’ve ever contemplated selling a loved one, but then remembered, “Oh wait, the Bible says that I shouldn’t do that… never mind.”

The Bible is in the business of changing the way that we live our lives… and the lesson here is something much more nuanced. It has to do with what happens when angry people get together and start to play off one another. It’s about how situations can escalate too quickly. It’s about how we can rapidly lose control of the consequences of our actions. By recording Plans A, B and C, the evolution between them and the final, fateful interception by the Midianites, the Bible shows us the complexity of *how sin happens* - and warns us of the frightful consequences if and when our actions spiral out of our hands. We’d like to think that we have free will - that the actions that we take reflect our careful and deliberate choices. But it’s possible to set a chain of events into motion that we are then powerless to reverse.

If the brothers had had just a little more time, Joseph might never have been sold down to Egypt. The brothers might have changed their minds and not gone through with the sale. But they ran out of time, and it did happen. Those are the inescapable consequences of their actions. Yes, the Midianites are the ones who actually sold Joseph, *but the brothers created the conditions* that allowed him to be sold. The brothers might not have been convicted in a human court, but on some deep level, they bear culpability for what happened.

Time can be your friend, especially when you are about to do something impetuous. But you don’t always get the luxury of time. When that happens, you’re left with the bitter consequences of your actions. That, to us, is the really chilling lesson of Rashbam. When passions run high, we need to find a way to build in *time*, to give ourselves a chance to cool down before taking action. Because we won’t always get to take it back.



Vayeishev: Who Really Sold Joseph?

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 37:18-29**

**בראשית לז: יח–כט**

**18** They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. **19** They said to one

א ֵלי ֶהם,

אי ׁש אל-א ִחיו:

**יח** ַו ִ ּי ְראו אֹת ֹו, מ ָרחֹק; ו ְב ֶט ֶרם ִי ְק ַרב

ו ִ ּי ְת ַנ ְּכל ּו אֹתו ל ֲה ִמיתו. **יט** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו,

another, “Here comes that dreamer! **20** Come now, let us

ֹות ה ָּל ֶזה-- ָבא. **כ** עַ ָּתה לכ ּו ה ֲחלֹמ

ה ֵּנה, ּב ַעל

kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say,

‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of

ּב ַא ַחד ה ּ ֹבר ֹות, ְו ָא ַמ ְרנ ּו, ח ָ ּיה

ו ַנ ַה ְר ֵגהו, ְו ַנ ׁ ְש ִל ֵכהו

his dreams!” **21** But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save

him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” **22** And

מה- ִ ּי ְהי ּו חלֹמֹ ָתיו. **כא**

מ ָ ּי ָדם; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, לֹא ַנ ֶּכ ּנ ּו ָנ ֶפ ׁש.

א ָכ ָל ְתהו; ְו ִנ ְר ֶאה, ְראו ֵבן, ַו ַ ּי ִ ּצ ֵלהו ר ָעה ו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַמע

Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit

אל- ּת ׁ ְש ְּפכ ּו- ָדם--ה ׁ ְש ִליכ ּו

ֵל ֶהם ְראו ֵבן, א

**כב** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר

out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—

א ׁ ֶשר ּב ִּמ ְד ָּבר, ְו ָיד

ה ֶ ּזה

אֹת ֹו אל-ה ּב ֹור

intending to save him from them and restore him to his

ה ִ ּציל אֹת ֹו מ ָ ּי ָדם, ל ֲה ׁ ִשיב ֹו,

אל- ּת ׁ ְש ְלחו-ב ֹו: ל ַמ ַען,

father. **23** When Joseph came up to his brothers, they

אֶל-אָ ִביו. **כג** ַו ְי ִהי, ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר- ָבא י ֹו ֵסף אל-א ָחיו;

stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he

was wearing, **24** and took him and cast him into the pit.

ו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו את-י ֹו ֵסף את- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו, את- ְכתֹ ֶנת ה ַּפ ִּסים

The pit was empty; there was no water in it. **25** Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of

ע ָליו. **כד** ַו ִ ּי ָּק ֻחהו--ו ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו אֹת ֹו, ה ּ ֹב ָרה; ְו ַה ּב ֹור

אין ב ֹו מ ִים. **כה** ַו ֵ ּי ׁ ְשב ּו, ל ֱא ָכל- ֶל ֶחם, ַו ִ ּי ְ ׂשאו

אֲ ׁ ֶשר

רק,

Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum,

ָאה ּב

עי ֵני ֶהם ַו ִ ּי ְראו, ְו ִה ֵּנה אֹ ְר ַחת ִי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. **26** Then Judah

נ ְ ׂש ִאים, ְנכאת ו ְצ ִרי

מ ִּג ְל ָעד; ו ְג ַמ ֵּלי ֶהם

said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother

ולֹט--הו ְל ִכים, להו ִריד מ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ְיהו ָדה,

and covering up his blood? **27** Come, let us sell him to the

מה- ֶב ַצע, ּכי ַנ ֲה ֹרג את-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו,

אל-א ָחיו:

Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves.

After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers

agreed. **28** When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled

אֶת- ָ ּדמ ֹו. **כז** לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים, ְו ָי ֵדנ ּו

אל- ּת ִהי-ב ֹו, ּכי-א ִחינ ּו ב ָ ׂש ֵרנ ּו, הוא; ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמע ּו, א ָחיו.

Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty

א ָנ ׁ ִשים מ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ׁ ְשכ ּו ַו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו

**כח** ַו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו

pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to

ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

ֹו ֵסף את-י

מן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו

את-י ֹו ֵסף

Egypt. **29** When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that

מ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כט** וַ ָ ּי ׁ ָשב

ֹו ֵסף, את-י

ּב ֶע ְ ׂש ִרים ּכ ֶסף; ַו ָ ּי ִביאו

Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes.

ּב ּב ֹור; ַו ִ ּי ְק ַרע,

ֹו ֵסף אין-י

ּב ֹור, ְו ִה ֵּנה אל-ה

ראו ֵבן

ֶאת- ְב ָג ָדיו.

Think of friends and family who will love it as much as you did - and share it with them!

And when you do, please remember to support Aleph Beta. Nothing makes us happier than bringing eye-opening, soul-heartening, life-changing Torah directly to you — but it all costs money. Like the cost of the writing, editing, design and circulation of the guide that you’re reading. So until we win the lottery, we need your support. Encourage your friends to subscribe to Aleph Beta, so they can get the guides sent directly to them! Or if you shared it with a friend and it was an awesome experience for both of you, consider making a small donation to show your love.

Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

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Vayeishev: Who Really Sold Joseph?

Source Sheet Page 2

**Rashbam on Genesis 37:28**

**When the Midianite traders passed by -** While the brothers had been sitting down to consume their meal, having distanced themselves somewhat from the pit into which they had thrown Joseph in order not to be guilty of “eating while spilling blood,” they were waiting for the Ishmaelites whom they had seen in the distance, to arrive. During this period the Midianites, coming from a different direction had passed there, saw Joseph in the pit, pulled him up, and proceeded to sell him to the Ishmaelites. One may assume that the brothers had no knowledge of this. Even though the Torah appears to attribute the sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites to the brothers, (based on Joseph accusing them of having sold him to Egypt, 45,4) we would have

to say that because of their having been instrumental in bringing about that sale they are considered as if having assisted in that sale. This appears to me the deeper meaning of the plain meaning of the text both here and in chapter 45. The line describing the Midianites passing that way is described as something totally coincidental, having nothing to do with what the brothers had planned to do with Joseph. Even if the Torah says: “And they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites,” this sounds as if the brothers did the selling. It is also possible that the brothers noting the Midianites suddenly materialising out of nowhere, instructed them to pull Joseph out of the pit after which they themselves sold him to the Ishmaelites.

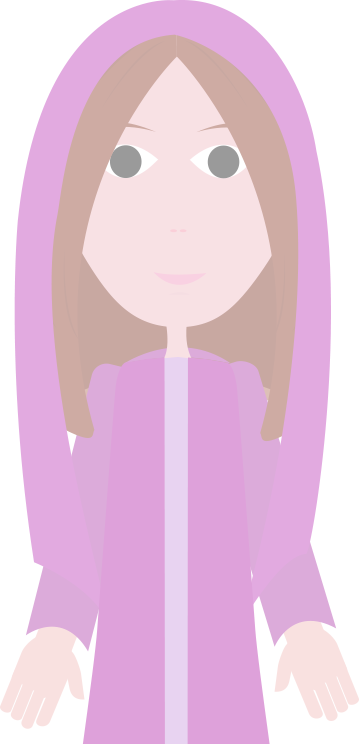
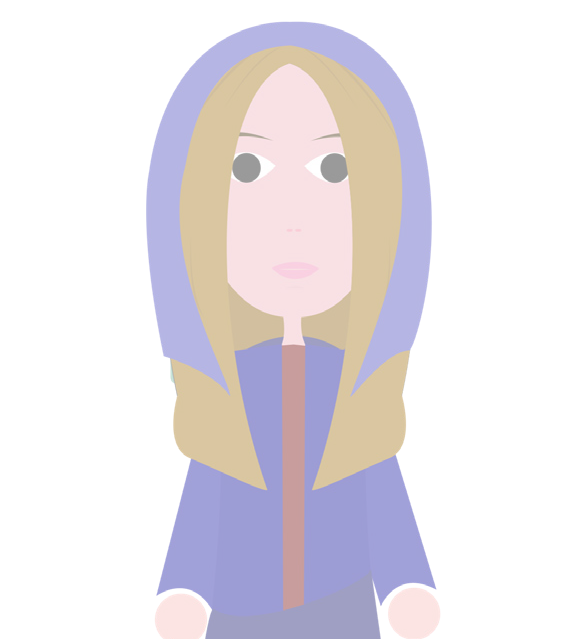
### רשב”ם על בראשית לז:כח

**ויעברו אנשים מדינים -** ובתוך שהיו יושבים לאכול לחםורחוקים היו קצת מן הבור לבלתי אכול על הדם וממתינים היו לישמעאלים שראו וקודם שבאו הישמעאלים עברו אנשים מדינים אחרים דרך שם וראוהו בבור ומשכוהו ומכרוהו המדיינים לישמעאלים. ויש לומר: שהאחים לא ידעו ואף על פי שכתוב אשר מכרתם אותי מצרימה. יש לומר: שהגרמת מעשיהם סייעה במכירתו. זה נראה לי לפי עומק דרך פשוטו של מקרא. כי ויעברו אנשים מדינים משמע ע”י מקרה והם מכרוהו לישמעאלים. ואף

אם באתה לומר וימכרו את יוסף לישמעאלים כי אחיו מכרוהו,

אם כן צריך לומר שהם ציוו למדינים סוחרים למושכו מן הבור,

ואח”כ מכרוהו לישמעאלים.



**VAYIGASH: DOES GOD SPEAK TO US TODAY? PART III**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayigash!

This guide is the third in a 4-part series, which deals with *Parshat Vayeishev* through *Parshat Vayechi:* the whole of the epic Joseph story.

# An Observation and a Question

In Parts I and II of this series of guides, we’ve been wondering about this question: Could there be such a thing as non- prophetic communication between God and man? And if so, what would it look like? We’ve been looking at Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream in *Parshat Miketz* as a possible model, and we’d like to continue to explore that line of thinking with you in this guide.

In Part II, we left off with an observation and a question.

**THE OBSERVATION:** The *run-up* to Pharaoh’s re-telling of his dream to Joseph is a **mirror image** of an earlier event in Joseph’s life: when his brothers threw him into a pit and he was sold into slavery. Everything that happened to Joseph all of those years ago in the land of Canaan is now being inverted and replayed here, thirteen years later, in the land of Egypt.

**THE QUESTION:** As Pharaoh begins to share his dream, does that pattern continue? Are there links between Pharaoh’s dream and what happened early in Joseph’s life, before he was cast into the pit?

Let’s take a look at the language of Pharaoh’s dream, and we’ll see for ourselves.

# Who Else Is Described As “Beautiful”?

**Genesis 41:17-18**

**פת ּתֹאַר**…

ּב ָ ׂשר, **ִוי**

ִריאות ּב

ה ְיאֹר. ְו ִה ֵּנה ִמן-ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע ָּפר ֹות,

ִני עֹ ֵמד ַעל- ְש ַפת ה ְנ

ֲחלֹ ִמי, ּב

ו ְי ַד ֵּבר ַּפ ְרעֹה, ֶאל-י ֹו ֵסף:

And Pharaoh spoke unto Joseph: ‘In my dream, behold, I stood upon the brink of the river. And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, fat-fleshed and **beautiful of form**…

**INSTRUCTIONS**

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life’s biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That’s why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we’ll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you’re planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the “Source Sheet” for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, “Parshat Vayigash: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part III” (available for viewing at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org/)). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

Stop right there. If you were Joseph, and you were hearing Pharaoh say this to you — that the cows were *yefat to’ar*, “beautiful of form” — would that remind you of anything?

There are only two people in the entire Five Books of Moses who are ever described with this kind of language. One person is Joseph himself. The other is his mother, Rachel.

**Genesis 29:17**

**ְי ַפת-תֹ ַאר,** ִוי ַפת ַמ ְר ֶאהה ְי ָתה,

ו ָר ֵחל,

Rachel was of **beautiful form** and fair to look upon

**Genesis 39:6**

ַו ְי ִהי י ֹוסֵף, **ְי ֵפה-תֹ ַאר** ִוי ֵפה ַמ ְר ֶאה

And Joseph was of **beautiful form**, and fair to look upon

So if you are Joseph, listening to Pharaoh speak… you are thinking: “Oh my goodness! These cows, they remind me of my mother. They remind me of… myself.”

And as Pharaoh continues to speak, you’ll hear yet more clues that seem, inescapably, to point in this direction:

**Genesis 41:18**

**ָ**ב**אחו**

ויפת ּתֹ ַאר; ַו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה,

They were beautiful of form; and they were grazing in the **swamp**



At first glance, this verse about cows grazing in the swamp has little to do with Joseph’s life. But the trick is in the

translation. We’ve chosen to follow Rashi and translate the word ּו ּבאָח (*ba’achu*) as “in the swamp.” But it’s not such

an easy word to translate. The word appears nowhere else in the entire Five Books of Moses, which is perhaps why Onkelos, an even earlier commentator than Rashi, suggests an alternative interpretation: *be’echav*, “with his brothers.” In other words, those fat, healthy cows were grazing *with their cow brothers*. And what about the word ָנה ֶעי ִּתרְ ַו (*vatir’ena*), “and they were grazing”? This verb actually has two meanings. When applied to animals, it means “to graze,” which is how we translated it above. But when applied to people, it has a different meaning: “to shepherd.” *The seven beautiful cows were shepherding with their brothers.* If you were Joseph, hearing Pharaoh speak, what would that remind you of?

There was a time when Joseph was shepherding with *his* brothers. It’s the very first verse of the Joseph story:

**Genesis 37:2**

ב ְל ָהה ְו ֶאת- ְב ֵני ִז ְל ָּפה, ְנ ׁ ֵשי ָא ִביו; ַו ָ ּי ֵבא י ֹו ֵסף ֶאת- ִ ּד ָּב ָתם ָר ָעה,

ְוהוא ַנ ַער ֶאת- ְב ֵני ּב ּצֹאן,

אֶל-אֲ ִבי ֶהם.

ָיה **רֹ ֶעה אֶת-אֶ ָחיו** ה

ּבן- ׁש ַבע-ע ְ ׂש ֵרה ׁ ָש ָנה

א ֶּלה ּתֹ ְלד ֹות ַי ֲעקֹב, י ֹו ֵסף

These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was **shepherding with his brothers**, being still a lad even with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought evil report of them unto their father.

# Rachel Cows and Leah Cows

It’s kind of crazy, right? In Pharaoh’s dream, there are these two sets of cows: the beautiful cows and their “brothers,” the ugly cows. It almost seems as if the beautiful cows are supposed to correspond to the children of Rachel (who are described as being *yefat to’ar*), while the ugly cows correspond to the children of Leah!

But that sounds pretty far-fetched. Does the text give us any further indication of this, any evidence that it is so? As a matter of fact, it does. Listen to how Pharaoh describes those seven ugly cows:

**Genesis 41:19**

**רַ ּק ֹות** ָבּ ָ ׂשר

ו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע- ּפר ֹות ֲא ֵחר ֹות, עֹל ֹות ַא ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ַ ּד ּל ֹות ְו ָרע ֹות ּתֹ ַאר ְמאֹד,

And, behold, seven other kine came up after them, poor and very ill-favoured and **lean**-fleshed

*Rakot*, lean - where have you heard a word like that before? There is only other time in the entire Five Books of Moses that we encounter such a word. In that other place, it is spelled differently, but pronounced the same: *rako*t. It is used to describe a woman:

**Genesis 29:17**

ְו ֵעי ֵני ֵלאָה**רַ ּכ ֹות**

And the eyes of Leah were **thin**

Indeed, this is the only physical description that we ever get of Leah, and it’s from the very same verse that we quoted earlier, the verse which describes Rachel as *yefat to’ar*, beautiful. These seven ugly cows — they really do seem to be Leah cows, and the beautiful cows are Rachel cows… and they’re grazing together.

Joseph, hearing Pharaoh describe all of this, must have been thinking: *It’s like he’s narrating my life.* But the next thing that Pharaoh says must have made Joseph’s blood run cold:

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר

**Genesis 41:19-20**

ֶאל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה, ּו ַמ ְר ֵאי ֶהן ַרע, ּכי-באו

באנה ֶאל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה, ְולֹא נ ֹו ַדע

ְּב ִריאֹת. ַו ָּת ה

ַּב ְּתחִ ָּלה.

ִרא ׁשֹנ ֹות, ה

ָּפר ֹות ה

ה ַר ּק ֹות, ְו ָה ָרע ֹות--את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה,

And the lean and ill-favoured kine did eat up the first seven fat kine. And when they had eaten them up, it could not be known that they had eaten them; but they were still ill-favoured as at the beginning.

The ugly cows devoured the beautiful cows. If you were Joseph, what would this remind you of? Was there a time when the children of Leah “devoured” the children of Rachel? It’s when his brothers threw him into a pit. It was as if they *swallowed him alive*. And Pharaoh says that the ugly cows didn’t even *look any different* after they swallowed the beautiful cows. They looked exactly the same. It was the *perfect crime.* The beautiful cows were gone, without a trace. Just like Joseph: he vanished from that pit, was wiped clean off of the map of the family, and his brothers returned home to their father, looking just as they had when they left. It wasn’t apparent that they had just swallowed someone alive. This dream: it is *retelling Joseph’s life.*

But now, before we get too excited here, we have to confront a problem with this line of thinking, a problem that must have bothered Joseph too, if Joseph had seen these patterns. It is the *number of cows.*

If the beautiful cows were really meant to represent the children of Rachel, then there shouldn’t have been *seven* of them. There should have been just one or two of them (one for Joseph, two if you count Benjamin). And the ugly cows — if they’re supposed to represent the children of Leah, then there shouldn’t have been seven of them, either. There were only six brothers from the children of Leah. Why were there two sets of *seven cows?*

# Turning Towards An Answer

We think that we found an answer — and we want to show you how we got there. Go back to that key verse from Genesis chapter 29, the one that gives the physical descriptions of Rachel and Leah:

**Genesis 29:17**

ְי ַפת-תֹ ַאר, ִוי ַפת ַמ ְר ֶאה. ה ְי ָתה,

ו ֵעי ֵני ֵל ָאה, ַר ּכ ֹות; ְו ָר ֵחל,

And Leah’s eyes were thin; but Rachel was of beautiful form and fair to look upon.

This one verse was the key to interpreting Pharaoh’s dream. Right there, in one verse, was the key for Joseph to understand how everything in Pharaoh’s dream mirrored his own life. Now take a look at the *next* verse, and we’re going to hear about that magic number *seven:*

**Genesis 29:18**

ְּק ַט ָּנה. ה

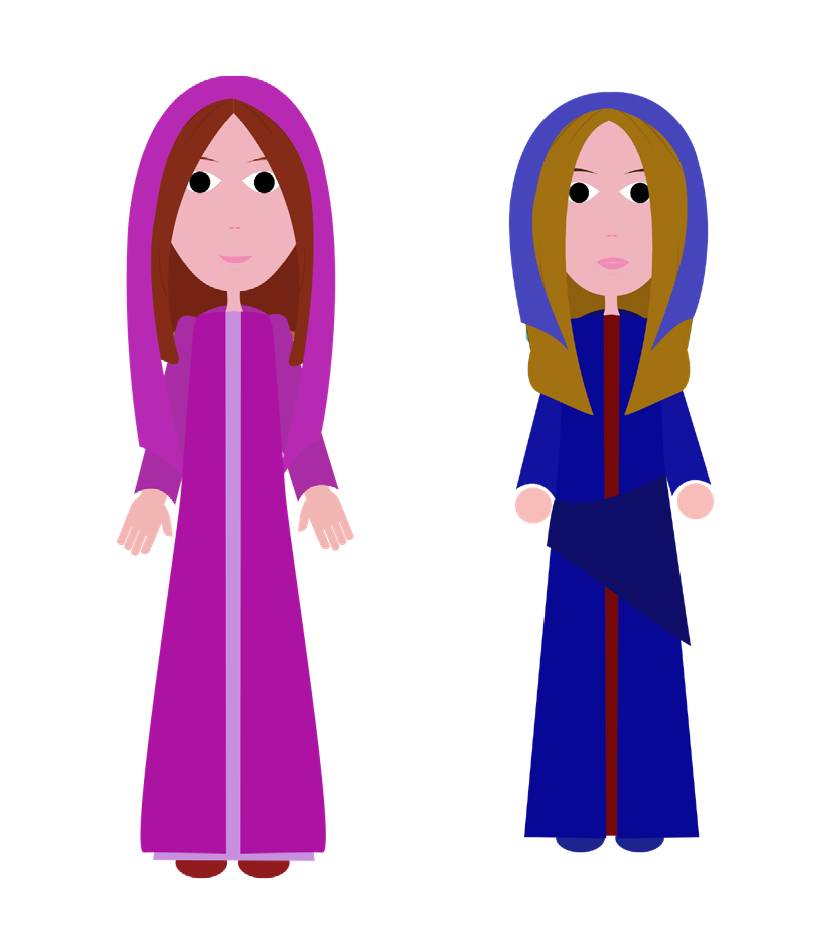
ְּת ָך, ּב

ָר ֵחל ּב

ו ֶ ּי ֱא ַהב ַי ֲעקֹב, ֶאת-ר ֵחל; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, ֶא ֱע ָב ְד ָך **ׁ ֶשבַע ׁ ָש ִנים**,

And Jacob loved Rachel; and he said [to Laban]: ‘I will serve you **seven years** for Rachel your younger daughter.’

Not just seven, but *seven years.* Jacob worked for seven years for Rachel, but she was switched for Leah under the chuppah. He needed to work another seven years to earn her hand in marriage. *Two sets of seven years.*

And suddenly it dawns on Joseph: *the cows are years.* The beautiful cows **don’t** represent me or my mother, not directly. The ugly cows **don’t** represent my brothers, the children of Leah. The two sets of cows represent years:

the years that my father worked for Rachel and Leah. When I was out in the field, shepherding with my brothers, we were the *fruits* of those years. It was as if the seven long years that my father worked for Rachel… they were out in the fields, those years, shepherding with the seven long years that my father worked for Leah. And when they swallowed me, it is like one set of years swallowed the other: it was like my father had worked for *naught* for those seven years for Rachel, because the fruits of those years vanished, I vanished.

Joseph is hearing the dream through the prism of his own life experience, and that gives him the key that he needs to interpret it. That’s how he’s able to interpret Pharaoh’s dream. God uses Joseph’s life as the key that unlocks the meaning of Pharaoh’s dream.

When Pharaoh is talking to Joseph, God is speaking too — but only Joseph can hear Him.1

1 In looking back at everything that we’ve said about Pharaoh and Joseph’s dream, you need to distinguish between what it is that we (as readers of the Torah) hear and what it is that Joseph heard when Pharaoh spoke. The Torah is written in Hebrew, but Pharaoh and Joseph almost certainly weren’t speaking Hebrew to one another. They were probably speaking Egyptian. That means that the exact language that we see in our text is a paraphrase, at best. If so, you might well say, then if Pharaoh didn’t really use the phrase *yefat to’ar* to describe the beautiful cows (Hebrew for “beautiful of form”), then it doesn’t match up with Rachel right? Then the whole reading of “cows shepherding with their brothers” goes out the window, as does the *rakot* (“thin”) nature of Leah’s eyes… right?

So no, we don’t necessarily think that you have to follow that line of thinking. Here’s why: the Torah is using these connections to speak to you, the reader. It is a literary device that God is employing in order to communicate with you what it was like for Joseph to listen to Pharaoh’s dreams. For example, the Torah uses the word *bor,* “pit,” to describe the prison. It’s a literary device intended to convey the following to you: that as Joseph was being pulled out of prison, he had some *déjà vu* sense that he was being pulled out of the pit, all over again. And as Pharaoh bedecked him in new clothes, it felt for Joseph like that moment when, thirteen years prior, his clothes were stripped from him. There was something about the way that Pharaoh described the cows that recalled, for Joseph, his mother. This is all the Torah’s way of clueing us in, placing these words in strategic places to help us to make the connections. These are connections that were very much going on in Joseph’s mind — *yefat to’ar* or no *yefat to’ar* — because the events just seemed so uncannily similar.

# Past, Present… And Future?

It turns out that, as remarkable as this is, there is yet a third layer of meaning in Pharaoh’s dream. We’ve already suggested that the dream conveys meaning that relates to Joseph’s *past*, as well as meaning that relates to Pharaoh’s *present.* But we also believe that there’s meaning, encoded in this dream, that will relate to Joseph’s *future.* Joseph can’t understand it

just yet, as he stands before Pharaoh, but he’ll be able to understand it nine years hence.

To see it, you have to look back at the dream interpretation that Joseph gives to Pharaoh. In essence, what he was saying to Pharaoh was:

*Your dream isn’t a reason for despair. Yes, the ugly cows swallow the beautiful cows — but that doesn’t mean that we’re doomed. It doesn’t mean that famine is destined*

*to wipe us out. We can survive! Those beautiful cows… just because they’re going to be swallowed up doesn’t mean that they can’t have an impact. They have a job to do. The job of the beautiful cows — the beautiful years — is to sustain everyone.*

*And that’s despite the fact that, once those years are over and famine strikes, no one will remember them! During the years of famine, you’ll ask the average Egyptian on the street: ‘Hey, do you remember the good years?’ He’ll respond: ‘What good years? All I can remember is starvation.’ But he’ll be mistaken. For the crust of bread that he’ll still be holding in his hand is a testament to those good years that once were, keeping him alive even now, even though they have been forgotten. The good years can still have an impact even after they have vanished. The beautiful years have to give their bounty to the bad years. Then they will have done their job.*

What is the implication of this message, for Joseph’s future? Nine years later his brothers will show up at his door in Egypt. They won’t recognize him, but he will recognize them and hide his true identity from them… until something happens:

**Genesis 42:9**

ַלם ָל ֶהם ח

ה ֲחלֹמ ֹות, ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ו ִ ּי ְז ּ ֹכר י ֹו ֵסף--את

And Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed of them

The most straightforward read of this verse is that Joseph remembered *his* dreams from all of those years before: about the sheaves of wheat bowing down, about the sun and the moon and stars. But maybe, just maybe, one of the dreams that Joseph remembered was *this* dream, Pharaoh’s dream. And if he did, then he would have remembered how that dream *characterized* the people standing in front of him now: they were the fruit of the *rakot* cows, the gaunt, thin years. And in the language of the dream, who is he, Joseph? He is the fruit of the *yefat to’ar* cows, the beautiful years. And what did he tell Pharaoh is the *job* of the beautiful years? To sustain the terrible years. The job of the beautiful cows is to *take care* of the ugly ones — even though they would swallow them alive. So perhaps, in that moment, as Joseph looks at his brothers, although he is filled with righteous anger — this is just the nudge that he needs to temper that anger, ever so slightly: not to send them home rashly and refuse them the life-saving grain that they seek.

And when Joseph finally does reveal himself to them, what does he say?

ְפ ֵני ֶכם… ל

**Genesis 45:4**

**למִ ְח ָיה**, ׁ ְש ָל ַח ִני ֱאלֹקים

ּכי

ה ָּנה:

ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, ּכי-מ

ֵעי ֵני ֶכם, ּב

א ִני י ֹו ֵסף ֲא ִחי ֶכם, ֲא ׁ ֶשר-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, ִמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. ְו ַע ָּתה ַאל- ּת ָע ְצב ּו, ְו ַאל- ִי ַחר

ֶרץ ִמ ְצ ָר ִים. ּב ָכל-א

ל ָכל- ֵבית ֹו, ּומֹ ׁ ֵשל,

ּו ְל ָאד ֹון ל ַפ ְרעֹה,

ל ָאב

ה ֱאלֹקים; ַו ְי ִ ׂשי ֵמ ִני

ּכי,

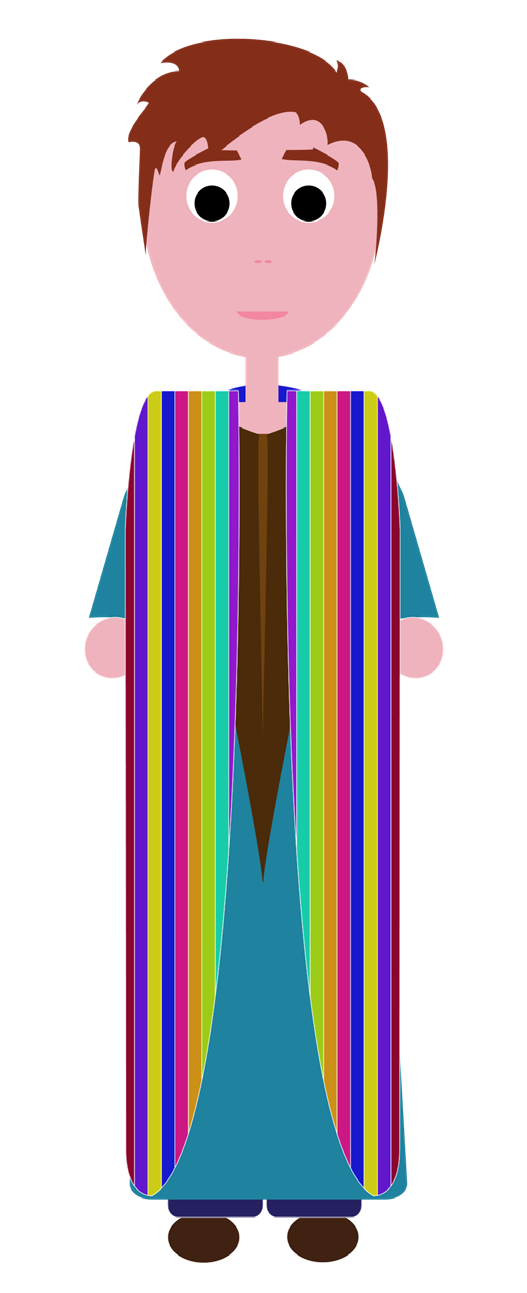
ה ָּנה,

ו ַע ָּתה, לֹא-א ֶּתם ׁ ְש ַל ְח ֶּתם אֹ ִתי

I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; for God did send me before you **to preserve life**

The first thing that he says is: *Don’t be upset about what happened. I know why God put me here: it was so I could* ***sustain***

*you.* How did he know that? *He knew it from Pharaoh’s dream.*

Joseph saw his own *past* in that dream. He saw Pharaoh’s *present* in the dream. And finally he comes to see, reflected in that self-same dream, the meaning of his *future*. Joseph’s brothers will swallow him, but God wants Joseph to care for them, nonetheless.

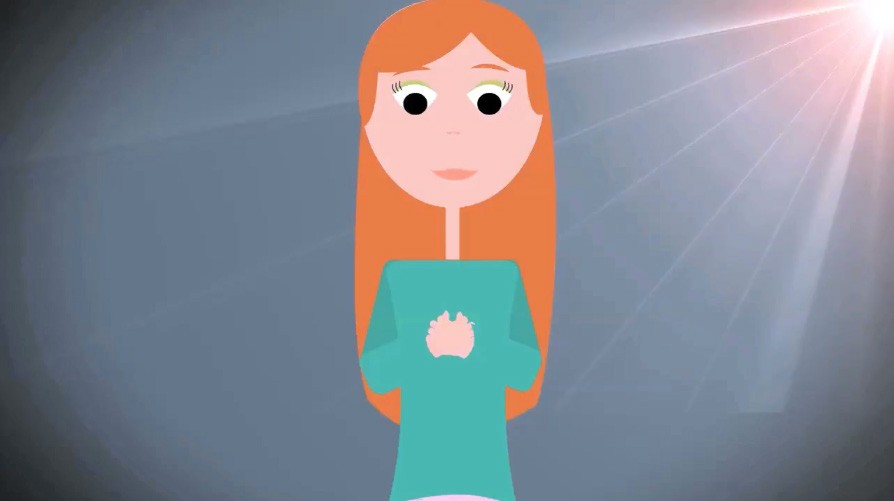
Look at the kindness of Joseph. Kindness usually makes us feel all fuzzy inside, right? But there’s a certain kind of kindness, that *doesn’t* make you feel warm. A kind of kindness that is not so easy to do. What happens when someone from your own family doesn’t care about you? They forget about you, you don’t matter to them; but one day, years later, they are in need. Can you find it within yourself to take care of them? What about if they don’t even know that the help is coming from you? This is what Joseph does. It’s one thing to engage in warm and fuzzy kindness, but Joseph is modeling for us what it looks like to engage in the more painful kind.

# Our Day

And finally, that brings us to the grand and intensely personal question with which we opened this series of guides: How, if at all, does God speak to humankind in the absence of prophecy? We have seen, it seems, that there is such a way. That God *does* speak to people without speaking: that God spoke to Joseph. And if that is so: then what about our own day and age? Might it be that God speaks that way *to us?*

We want to humbly submit that the answer is yes. For we will all come to a time, after 120 years, when we will go to heaven, and we may say to God: *God, I prayed to you! I talked to you. Sometimes I wasn’t really concentrating... but there were times that I really reached out to you, in moments of pain, and I want to know, God: Where were you? Where was your response? Did you ever say anything back to me?*

Is it possible that God’s response would be: *Did you ever look at your life? Did you ever watch for the patterns? As you were going through events, did you ever have that feeling of déjà vu — that things had happened before? Did that ever happen to you? This is how I talked to you. It’s like we have this private message board — Me and you — this slate that no one else can understand, the set of our shared experiences: your life — it’s the way I talk to you. And you may not always understand the messages that I’m “writing” out to you on this little blank slate that we have together. You have to work hard to listen. Even Joseph didn’t understand immediately. It took him nine years after he heard it all to finally really understand. And you too: you may not understand it all. But you understand enough, sometimes, to know that it’s not a coincidence. You understand enough to know that I’m tapping you on the shoulder. And even if you don’t know what I mean, if you just know that I am speaking to you: sometimes that’s enough.*

What we’re describing is a beautiful, radical idea: that we all have a kind of private communication channel with the divine. The slate is our own lives. It’s a personal kind

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of language that means something *only* to us — the same way that Pharaoh’s dream meant something *only* to Joseph. And the

communication comes from the most unlikely of sources. For who would have thought

that God would speak to Joseph not so much through his own dreams as through Pharaoh’s? But Joseph was wise enough to

hear the echoes resonate in his life, to discern God’s voice. Maybe we can pick up a little bit

of that wisdom, too — and be ready to hear His voice in the most unlikely of places.

We’re almost through with this series, but we would like to take the final installment to explore some personal implications of this theory. Join us for Part IV in the guide to *Parshat Vayechi*.



Vayigash: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part III

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 41:1-32**

**בראשית מא:א–לב**

על-ה ְיאֹר. **ב**

חֹ ֵלם, ְו ִה ֵּנה עֹ ֵמד ו ַפ ְרעֹה

מ ֵּקץ ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ָי ִמים;

**א** ַו ְי ִהי,

**1** And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that

ו ְב ִריאֹת ּב ָ ׂשר;

ֹות, ְיפות מ ְר ֶאה, ָפר

ו ִה ֵּנה מן-ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע

Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river. **2**

ֲח ֵרי ֶהן מן- א

ו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו. **ג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות א ֵחר ֹות, עֹל ֹות

And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, well-

ְש ַפת על-

מ ְר ֶאה, ְו ַד ּק ֹות ּב ָ ׂשר; ַו ַּת ֲעמֹ ְד ָנה א ֶצל ה ָּפר ֹות,

ה ְיאֹר, ָרע ֹות

favoured and fat-fleshed; and they fed in the reed-grass.

**3** And, behold, seven other kine came up after them out

ה ָּפר ֹות, ָרע ֹות ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַד ּקֹת ה ָּב ָ ׂשר, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

הַ ְיאֹר. **ד** ַו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה

of the river, ill favoured and lean-fleshed; and stood by the

ַפ ְרעֹה. **ה** וַ ִ ּיי ׁ ָשן, וַ ַ ּי ֲחלֹם

ה ָּפר ֹות, ְיפת ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַה ְּב ִריאֹת; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ,

other kine upon the brink of the river. **4** And the ill-favoured

ָחד-- ְב ִריאות ְוטֹב ֹות. א

ָק ֶנה ּב

ֵש ִנית; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹל ֹות

and lean-fleshed kine did eat up the seven well-favoured

ֲח ֵרי ֶהן. א

פת ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות,

ו ׁ ְשד ּו

**ו** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, ַ ּד ּק ֹות

and fat kine. So Pharaoh awoke. **5** And he slept and

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים, ה ְּב ִריאות

את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּק ֹות,

**ז** ַו ִּת ְב ַל ְע ָנה,

dreamed a second time: and, behold, seven ears of corn

חל ֹום. **ח** ַו ְי ִהי ב ּ ֹב ֶקר, ַו ִּת ָּפ ֶעם ר ּוחו,

ו ַה ְּמ ֵלאות; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ ַפ ְרעֹה, ְו ִה ֵּנה

came up upon one stalk, rank and good. **6** And, behold,

ו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את- ָכל-ח ְר ֻט ֵּמי מ ְצ ַר ִים, ְו ֶאת- ָכל-ח ָכ ֶמי ָה; ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר

seven ears, thin and blasted with the east wind, sprung up

after them. **7** And the thin ears swallowed up the seven

ל ֶהם את-חלֹמ ֹו, ְו ֵאין-פ ֹו ֵתר או ָתם ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **ט** ַו ְי ַד ֵּבר ׂשר

ַפ ְרעֹה

rank and full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and, behold, it

ה ַּמ ׁ ְש ִקים, את- ּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר: את-ח ָט ַאי, א ִני מ ְז ִּכיר ה ּי ֹום. **י** ַפרְעֹה,

was a dream. **8** And it came to pass in the morning that

על-ע ָב ָדיו; ַו ִ ּי ֵּתן אֹ ִתי ּב ִמ ׁ ְש ַמר, ּבית ׂשר ה ַּט ָּב ִחים--אֹ ִתי, ְו ֵאת

ק ַצף

his spirit was troubled; and he sent and called for all the

ְתר ֹון ּכ ִפ

ׁש אי

ִני ָוהוא: א

ָחד, א

ְי ָלה ּב ַל

ֹום חל

ׂשר הָאֹ ִפים. **יא** ַו ַּנ ַח ְל ָמה

magicians of Egypt, and all the wise men thereof; and

ע ֶבד ל ַ ׂשר ה ַּט ָּב ִחים, ַו ְּנ ַס ֶּפר-

ְב ִרי, ע

חֲלֹמ ֹו, חָ ָל ְמנ ּו. **יב** ְו ׁ ָשם א ָּתנ ּו ַנ ַער

Pharaoh told them his dream; but there was none that

ָפ ָתר. **יג** ַו ְי ִהי ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֵתינ ּו: אי ׁש ּכ ֲחלֹמ ֹו, את-חלֹמֹ

ל ֹו, ַו ִ ּי ְפ ָּתר- ָלנ ּו

could interpret them unto Pharaoh. **9** Then spoke the

ה ׁ ִשיב על- ַכ ִּני, ְואֹת ֹו ת ָלה. **יד** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַפ ְרעֹה

ָפ ַתר- ָלנ ּו, ּכן ה ָיה: אֹ ִתי

chief butler unto Pharaoh, saying: ‘I make mention of my faults this day: **10** Pharaoh was wroth with his servants, and put me in the ward of the house of the captain of the guard, me and the chief baker. **11** And we dreamed

מן-ה ּב ֹור; ַו ְי ַג ַּלח ַו ְי ַח ֵּלף ׂש ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ ּיבא אל-

ֹו ֵסף, חל ֹום ח ַל ְמ ִּתי, ופ ֵתר אין אֹת ֹו; חל ֹום, ל ְפ ּתֹר אֹת ֹו. **טז** ַו ַ ּי ַען י ֹו ֵסף אל-י ִת ׁ ְש ַמע

ו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את-י ֹו ֵסף, ַו ְי ִרי ֻצהו

ַפרְ ֹעה. **טו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ַפ ְרעֹה,

ו ֲא ִני, ׁ ָש ַמ ְע ִּתי ע ֶלי ָך לאמֹר,

a dream in one night, I and he; we dreamed each man

ְרעֹה. **יז** ַו ְידַ ֵּבר ַפ

את- ׁ ְשל ֹום

ַי ֲע ֶנה אלֹקים,

ָע ָדי: ּב ְל

לאמֹר,

את- ַּפ ְרעֹה

according to the interpretation of his dream. **12** And there

ְיאֹר. **יח** ְו ִה ֵּנה מן- ה

ִני עֹ ֵמד על- ְש ַפת ה ְנ

ֲחלֹ ִמי, ּב

ַפ ְר ֹעה, אל-י ֹו ֵסף:

was with us there a young man, a Hebrew, servant to the

ּב ָ ׂשר, ִויפת תֹ ַאר; ַו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו.

ה ְיאֹר, ֹעלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות, ּב ִריאות

captain of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ַ ּד ּל ֹות ְו ָרע ֹות תֹ ַאר

**יט** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע- ּפר ֹות א ֵחר ֹות, עֹל ֹות

to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he

did interpret. **13** And it came to pass, as he interpreted

ַע. **כ** לרֹ

ְצ ַר ִים, מ

מאֹד, ְו ַר ּק ֹות ּב ָ ׂשר: לֹא-ר ִאי ִתי כ ֵה ָּנה ּב ָכל-א ֶרץ

to us, so it was: I was restored unto mine office, and he

ִרא ׁשֹנ ֹות, ה

ָּפר ֹות ה

ה ַר ּק ֹות, ְו ָה ָרע ֹות--את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה,

was hanged.**’ 14** Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph,

ְר ֶּב ָנה, אל-ק

ּכי-באו

ְר ֶּב ָנה, ְולֹא נ ֹו ַדע אל-ק

באנה

ה ְּברִיאֹת. **כא** ַו ָּת

and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon. And he

ּב ֲחלֹ ִמי; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע

ָּלה; ָו ִאי ָקץ. **כב** ָו ֵא ֶרא, ּב ְּת ִח

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ו ַמ ְר ֵאי ֶהן ַרע,

shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: ‘I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it; and I have heard say of thee, that when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it.’ **16** And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: ‘It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an

ִש ֳּב ִלים, ֹעלֹת ּב ָק ֶנה א ָחד--מ ֵלאֹת ְוטֹב ֹות. **כג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים,

צ ֻנמ ֹות ַ ּד ּק ֹות ׁ ְש ֻדפות ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהם. **כד** ַו ִּת ְב ַלעְןָ

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּקֹת, את ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ּטֹב ֹות; ָואֹ ַמר, אל-ה ַח ְר ֻט ִּמים,

ו ֵאין מ ִּגיד, לי. **כה** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסף אל- ּפ ְר ֹעה, חל ֹום ַפ ְר ֹעה א ָחד הוא: את א ׁ ֶשר ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה, ה ִּגיד ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **כו** ׁ ֶש ַבע ָ ֹפרת ה ּ ֹטבת, ׁ ֶש ַבע

answer of peace.’ **17** And Pharaoh spoke unto Joseph: ‘In

ָחד א

ֹום, חל

ה ָּנה:

בת, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים

ה ּ ֹט

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

ָש ִנים

my dream, behold, I stood upon the brink of the river. **18**

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים

העֹלֹת

ּק ֹות ְו ָה ָרעֹת ה ַר

ָּפר ֹות ה

הוא. **כז** ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע



Vayigash: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part III

Source Sheet Page 2

And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, fat-

ה ָּק ִדים-- ִי ְהי ּו, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב.

ה ֵרקות, ׁ ְש ֻדפות

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

fleshed and well-favoured; and they fed in the reed-grass.

ְר ָאה ה

ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה,

א ׁ ֶשר

ּפ ְרעֹה: אל-

א ׁ ֶשר ִ ּד ַּב ְר ִּתי

ה ָ ּד ָבר,

**כח** הוא

**19** And, behold, seven other kine came up after them, poor

ָש ָבע ָּגד ֹול, ּב ָכל-א ֶרץ ּבאות--

את- ּפ ְר ֹעה. **כט** ה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים,

and very ill-favoured and lean-fleshed, such as I never saw

ּכל-ה ָּ ׂש ָבע, ּב ֶא ֶרץ

מ ְצרָ ִים. **ל** ְו ָקמ ּו ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ְו ִנ ׁ ְש ַּכח

in all the land of Egypt for badness. **20** And the lean and

את-ה ָא ֶרץ. **לא** ְולֹא- ִי ָ ּו ַדע ה ָּ ׂש ָבע ּב ָא ֶרץ, מ ְּפ ֵני

ָר ָעב, ה

מ ְצ ָר ִים; ְו ִכ ָּלה

ill-favoured kine did eat up the first seven fat kine. **21** And

when they had eaten them up, it could not be known that

ּכי-כ ֵבד הוא, מאֹד. **לב** ְו ַעל ה ׁ ָּשנ ֹות ה ֲחל ֹום

ה ָר ָעב ההוא א ֲח ֵרי-כן:

they had eaten them; but they were still ill-favoured as at

ה ֱאלֹקים, ו ְמ ַמ ֵהר ה ֱאלֹקים מ ִעם

ה ָ ּד ָבר

ָמ ִים-- ִכי-נכ ֹון ַפ ֲע

אל- ּפ ְרעֹה,

the beginning. So I awoke. **22** And I saw in my dream, and, behold, seven ears came up upon one stalk, full and good. **23** And, behold, seven ears, withered, thin, and blasted with the east wind, sprung up after them. **24** And the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it unto the magicians; but there was none that could declare it to me.’ **25** And Joseph said unto Pharaoh: ‘The dream of Pharaoh is one; what God is about to do He has declared unto Pharaoh. **26** The seven good kine are seven years; and

the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one.

**27** And the seven lean and ill-favoured kine that came up after them are seven years, and also the seven empty ears blasted with the east wind; they shall be seven years of famine. **28** That is the thing which I spoke unto Pharaoh: what God is about to do He has shown unto Pharaoh. **29** Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. **30** And there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land; **31** and the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine which followeth; for it shall be very grievous. **32** And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice, it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

שֹת ֹו.

לעֲ

**Genesis 29:17-18**

### בראשית כט:יז-יח

**17** And Leah’s eyes were thin; but Rachel was of beautiful

ְר ֶאה. **יח** מ

ַר ּכ ֹות; ְו ָר ֵחל, ה ְי ָתה, ְי ַפת-תֹ ַאר, ִוי ַפת ל ָאה,

**יז** ו ֵעי ֵני

form and fair to look upon. **18** And Jacob loved Rachel; and he said [to Laban]: ‘I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter.’

ּב ְּת ָך, ּב ָר ֵחל

את-ר ֵחל; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, א ֱע ָב ְד ָך ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים,

ו ֶ ּי ֱא ַהב ַי ֲעקֹב,

ַה ְּקטַ ָּנה.



Vayigash: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part III

Source Sheet Page 3

**Genesis 37:2**

### בראשית לז:ב

**2** These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being

ָיה רֹ ֶעה את-א ָחיו ה

תֹ ְלד ֹות ַי ֲעקֹב, י ֹו ֵסף ּבן- ׁש ַבע-ע ְ ׂש ֵרה ׁ ָש ָנה

**ב** א ֶּלה

seventeen years old, was shepherding with his brothers, being still a lad even with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought evil report of them unto their father.

**Genesis 39:6**

א ִביו; ַו ָ ּי ֵבא י ֹו ֵסף

את- ְב ֵני ב ְל ָהה ְו ֶאת- ְב ֵני ִז ְל ָּפה, ְנ ׁ ֵשי

אל-א ִבי ֶהם.

ּב ּצֹאן, ְוהוא ַנ ַער

את- ִ ּד ָּב ָתם ָר ָעה,

### בראשית לט:ו

**6** And he left all that he had in Joseph’s hand; and, having

אם-

ָמה, ּכי מאו

**ו** ו ַ ּי ֲע ֹזב ּכל-א ׁ ֶשר-ל ֹו, ּב ַיד-י ֹו ֵסף, ְולֹא- ָי ַדע א ּת ֹו

him, he knew not aught save the bread which he did eat. And Joseph was of beautiful form, and fair to look upon.

ְר ֶאה. מ

א ׁ ֶשר-הוא או ֵכל; ַו ְי ִהי י ֹו ֵסף, ְי ֵפה-תֹ ַאר ִוי ֵפה

ה ֶּל ֶחם

**Genesis 42:9**

### בראשית מב:ט

**9** And Joseph remembered the dreams which he dreamed

ֵל ֶהם א

ַלם ל ֶהם; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ח

ה ֲחלֹמ ֹות, א ׁ ֶשר

**ט** ו ִ ּי ְז ּ ֹכר י ֹו ֵסף--את

of them, and said unto them: ‘Ye are spies; to see the nakedness of the land ye are come.’

ּבאתם.

ְר ַות ה ָא ֶרץ את-ע

מ ַר ְּג ִלים א ֶּתם, ל ְראות

**Genesis 45:4-8**

### בראשית מה:ד–ח

**4** And Joseph said unto his brethren: ‘Come near to me, I

א ַלי, ַו ִ ּי ָּג ׁש ּו; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, א ִני י ֹו ֵסף

**ד** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסף אל-א ָחיו ְּג ׁש ּו-נא

pray you.’ And they came near. And he said: ‘I am Joseph

א ׁ ֶשר-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, מ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **ה** ְו ַע ָּתה אל- ּת ָע ְצב ּו, ְו ַאל-

א ִחי ֶכם,

your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. **5** And now be not

ל ִמ ְח ָיה, ׁ ְש ָל ַח ִני אלֹקים

ָּנה: ּכי ה

י ַחר ּב ֵעי ֵני ֶכם, ּכי-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי,

grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither;

for God did send me before you to preserve life. **6** For

ּב ֶק ֶרב ה ָא ֶרץ; ְוע ֹוד ח ֵמ ׁש ׁ ָש ִנים,

לפְ ֵני ֶכם. **ו** ּכי-זה ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ה ָר ָעב,

these two years has the famine been in the land; and there

ל ְפ ֵני ֶכם, לש ּום ל ֶכם אלֹקים

אין-ח ִרי ׁש ְו ָק ִציר. **ז** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ָל ֵח ִני

א ׁ ֶשר

are yet five years, in which there shall be neither plowing

ָטה ְּגדֹ ָלה. **ח** ְו ַע ָּתה, לֹא-א ֶּתם ל ְפ ֵלי

ֶכם, ל

ַה ֲחי ֹות ו ְל

ָא ֶרץ, ּב

ְש ֵא ִרית

nor harvest. **7** And God sent me before you to give you

ל ָכל-

ְל ָאד ֹון ו

ַפ ְרעֹה, ל

ָאב ל

ה ֱאלֹקים; ַו ְי ִ ׂשי ֵמ ִני

ּכי,

ָּנה, ה

ְש ַל ְח ֶּתם אֹ ִתי

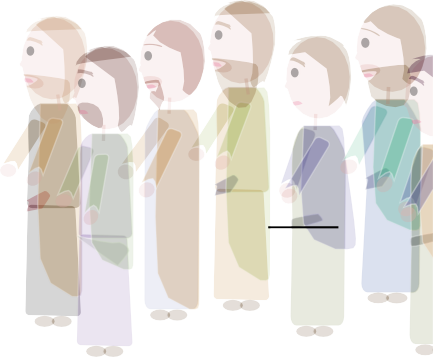
a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance. **8** So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

ְצ ָר ִים. מ

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ומֹ ׁ ֵשל,

ּבית ֹו,



**VAYEISHEV: WHO REALLY SOLD JOSEPH?**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayeishev!

# The Greatest Crime That Never Happened

Parshat Vayeishev includes one of the most astounding events in the entire Bible, the sale of Joseph at the hands of his brothers. We want to invite you to explore this sale through the eyes of Rashbam,1 one of the medieval Biblical commentators.2

Rashbam actually argues -- get ready for this -- that the brothers never sold Joseph at all. We know, it flies in the face of what you *think* you know about the story. It makes you wonder, where is Rashbam coming up with this? Is he just trying to get the brothers off the hook? Isn’t it plain in the Bible that they sold Joseph?

# An Open And Shut Case

The only way to resolve this is to take a look at the verses themselves. But first, let’s remind ourselves of the context. Joseph was sent by his father to check up on his brothers. When the brothers see him approaching from afar, they hatch a plan to cast him into a pit. The action picks up below in verse 23:

**Genesis 37:23-29**

**בראשית לז: כג–כט**

**23** When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר- ָבא י ֹו ֵסף ֶאל-א ָחיו; ַו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו

**כג** ַו ְי ִהי,

of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, **24** and

ה ַּפ ִּסים ֲא ׁ ֶשר ָע ָליו.

את-י ֹו ֵסף ֶאת- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו, ֶאת- ְכתֹ ֶנת

took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there

ב ֹו

ה ּ ֹב ָרה; ְו ַה ּב ֹור ֵרק, ֵאין

**כד** ַו ִ ּי ָּק ֻחהו--ו ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו אֹת ֹו,

was no water in it. **25** Then they sat down to a meal. Looking

מָ ִים. **כה** ַו ֵ ּי ׁ ְשב ּו, ֶל ֱא ָכל- ֶל ֶחם, ַו ִ ּי ְ ׂשאו ֵעי ֵני ֶהם ַו ִ ּי ְראו,

up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their

ִּג ְל ָעד; ּו ְג ַמ ֵּלי ֶהם ּב ָאה ִמ

ו ִה ֵּנה אֹ ְר ַחת ִי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt.

להו ִריד

נ ְ ׂש ִאים, ְנ ֹכאת ּו ְצ ִרי ָולֹט--הו ְל ִכים,

**26** Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing

ּכי

ֶב ַצע, מה-

מִ ְצ ָר ְימָה. **כו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ְיהו ָדה, ֶאל-א ָחיו:

our brother and covering up his blood? **27** Come, let us sell him

ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו לכ ּו ְו

נ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו. **כז**

to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves.

ב ָ ׂש ֵרנ ּו,

ִחינ ּו ּכי-א

ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים, ְו ָי ֵדנ ּו ַאל- ּת ִהי-ב ֹו,

After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed.

**28** When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up

הוא; ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמע ּו, ֶא ָחיו. **כח** ַו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו ֲא ָנ ׁ ִשים ִמ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ׁ ְשכ ּו ַו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ִמן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו

out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to

ּכ ֶסף; ַו ָ ּי ִביאו

ּב ֶע ְ ׂש ִרים

את-י ֹו ֵסף ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. **29** And Reuben

את-י ֹו ֵסף, ִמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כט** ַו ָ ּי ׁ ָשב ְראו ֵבן ֶאל-ה ּב ֹור,

returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he rent his garments.

ּב ּב ֹור; ַו ִ ּי ְק ַרע, ֶאת- ְב ָג ָדיו.

ו ִה ֵּנה ֵאין-י ֹו ֵסף

1 Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, Rashi’s grandson, whose commentary focuses on the *pshat*, simple meaning, of the verses.

2 Admittedly, Rashbam’s interpretation of this sale is unusual; many commentators adopt a different stance. Here is a sampling of those other opinions: Rashi (based on the Midrash) writes that the brothers pulled Joseph from the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites, who in turn sold him to the Midianites, who sold him to Egypt. (However, Genesis 39:1 challenges this.) Ibn Ezra understands, based on a verse in Judges 8:24, that the Midianites and the Ishmaelites are the same tribe. Ramban offers a brilliant harmonization. The brothers raised Joseph from the pit and sold him to Midianite merchants, who hired camels from the Ishmaelite caravans, who brought him to Egypt for the Midianites.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life’s biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That’s why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we’ll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you’re planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the “Source Sheet” for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, “Parshat Vayeishev: Who Really Sold Joseph?” (available for viewing at [www.](http://www/) alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

When you first read these verses, it’s not obvious where Rashbam is coming from. Indeed, verses 26 and 27 seem to fly

in the face of his argument. Notice Judah’s suggestion to his brothers:

**Genesis 37:26-27**

לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים...

ּכי ַנ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו?

מה- ֶב ַצע,

What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites...

And how do the brothers respond to Judah’s proposal? They don’t miss a beat:

**Genesis 37:27**

ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְשמְע ּו ֶא ָחיו

And his brothers agreed

If you had any doubt that the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, there’s your evidence! It seems like an open and shut case, right?

# Searching For Ambiguity

## PONDER THIS



Take a second look back at the verses. This time, see if you can find any evidence to defend

Rashbam’s position that the brothers *didn’t* sell Joseph.

Now that you’ve read it a second time, do things seem just a little bit less cut and dry? Take a look at verse 28:

**Genesis 37:28**

ו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו ֲא ָנ ׁ ִשים ִמ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּימְ ׁ ְשכ ּו ַו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ִמן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

When Midianite traders passed by, *they* pulled Joseph up out of the pit, and they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites

Who is the “they”? The truth is, the text doesn’t say. It’s ambiguous.

How might we figure it out? Well, in Hebrew, whenever we find a verb whose subject isn’t defined, we look back to the

last subject that was mentioned. What is the last subject that was mentioned?

It’s the Midianite traders. Read the verse one more time: “When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit...” It sure sounds like “they” refers to the Midianite traders. Grammatically, that’s the most straightforward way to read the text.

# Getting The Players Straight

Still not convinced? If you stick to the old story and insist that it’s the brothers who did the selling, you’re left with another complication: not who *sold* Joseph, but...who *bought* him. We’ll show you what we mean. Close your eyes and imagine the scene. There’s a wide expanse of desert and a hot beating sun. Joseph is in the pit, too deep down to lift himself out, wondering what will happen next. He’s hurt and afraid. Will his brothers have mercy on him and rescue him? Meanwhile, his brothers are off on the side, setting up a picnic lunch.

## PONDER THIS



Is anyone else on the scene? Who are the other players, besides Joseph and his brothers?

If you look back at the verses, you’ll see that there are not one but two other players: the **Ishmaelites** (mentioned in verses 27 and 28) and the **Midianites** (mentioned in verse 28). Two bands of merchants who just happen to be passing by the pit! What’s going on here? Which one bought Joseph?

## PONDER THIS



Let’s say you reject Rashbam’s theory. You maintain that the brothers sold Joseph. Well, then, how do you imagine this scene? What did the Ishmaelites do? What did the Midianites do? Why does the Bible tell me about both of them?

If we look back at verse 28, we see that “they” (whoever *they* is) “sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the **Ishmaelites**, who brought Joseph to Egypt.” So if the brothers did the selling, and the Ishmaelites did the buying, what are the Midianites doing there? They don’t seem to have a role at all. Why do I need to know that the Midianites traders just happened to be passing by? I mean, it’s not like the Bible tells me every time a group of Hittites filled up their water jugs at the local well, or a group of Jebusites settled in for an afternoon nap. The Bible isn’t a history book, it’s not interested in detailing the movements of every band of merchants in the ancient Near East. It’s a g*uidebook*, in which God conveys crucial messages about how we’re meant to live our lives. The Torah wouldn’t mention the Midianites unless they were actually crucial for us, reading this book thousands of years later. Therefore, isn’t it plausible that the Midianites did the selling and the Ishmaelites did the buying?

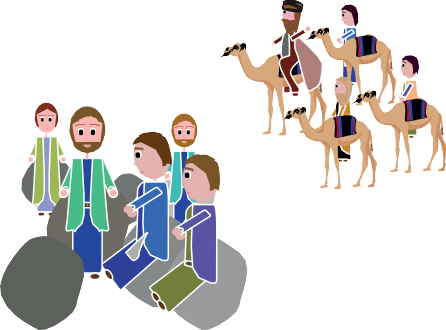


# Arriving At A Conclusion

So where do we stand? When we began our study, Rashbam’s reading seemed doomed. But now that we’re looking at the evidence, the scales are shifting. When you take the grammatical ambiguity of the “they” and combine it with the confusion about the Ishmaelites and the Midianites, you can start to see how Rashbam reached his conclusion: that the Midianites sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who brought him to Egypt.3

*Which means that the brothers had no hand in it.* They saw the Ishmaelite traders in the distance, but they didn’t notice that the Midianite traders were closer. The brothers never saw the Midianites coming. Maybe the Midianites were approaching from the opposite direction, or maybe there was a sand dune in the way. Whatever the case, the Midianites arrived at the pit first. They saw Joseph and had the same idea that the brothers did. It was the Midianites who grabbed Joseph, sold him to the Ishmaelites, and pocketed the profit.4

The brothers didn’t do it, and they didn’t know that it happened until it was too late. They were eating their lunch, minds occupied, waiting for the Ishmaelites to arrive so they could make their money. The brothers *planned* to sell Joseph, yes - but their plan never came to fruition, *because the Midianites beat them to it.*



Ishmaelites

Midianites

3 It’s worth noting that Genesis 37:36 seems to present some problems for Rashbam’s theory: ַפר ִטי ְלפו ִים ָר ְצ מ-ֶאל ֹו אֹת ּו ְכר ָמ ִנים ָד ְּמ ַה ְו (“And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar…”) - but we think there’s a way to reconcile. How would you respond, if you were Rashbam? If you’re interested in more, we recommend seeking out Rashbam’s own comment on verse 36.

4 Indeed, this explains another peculiarity in the verses: that Reuben returns to the pit and seems shocked to find that Joseph is gone: ָדיו ָג ְב -ֶאת ,ַרע ְק ּי ִ ַו ;ֹור ּב ַּב ֵסף ֹו י-ֵאין ֵּנה ִה ְו ,ֹור ּב ה-ֶאל ֵבן ְראו ָשב ּיׁ ָ ַו , “And Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he rent his garments.” If the brothers just lifted Joseph out of the pit, what do you mean, “Reuben returned to the pit”? Wasn’t he already standing there with everyone else? And if he just participated with the brothers in drawing Joseph out of the pit, why was he so surprised that Joseph was gone? If you reject Rashbam’s reading, you have to say that Reuben wandered off from the brothers -- that they sold Joseph while Reuben was out of the picture -- and that’s a bit of a stretch, because there just isn’t any other evidence in the text to suggest it.

# One Thing Leads To Another

We’re able to see now that Rashbam wasn’t coming out of nowhere. However much it butts up against what we *thought*

we knew about this story, Rashbam’s interpretation is rooted in the Biblical text itself.

## PONDER THIS



But we’re left to ponder: What are the *implications* of Rashbam’s reading? In other words, why does the Bible tell the story in this way, and what are we supposed to learn from it?

The Bible is painting a portrait for us of a group of people who intended to commit a crime… but they never actually did it, because their plan was interrupted. We can’t say for sure, but it seems that the Bible is inviting us to *imagine* what would have happened if their crime *hadn’t* been interrupted. What if these Midianite traders had come an

hour later, or had taken a different route that day? After all, this moment at the pit is not an isolated crime. It has enormous ramifications. This crime determined the very course of Israelite history.

Think about it: after Joseph heads down to Egypt, he gets cozy with Pharaoh; before you know it, he’s second in command of all of Egypt and his entire extended family is settled comfortably in Goshen. A generation later, the descendants of Jacob are enslaved to the new Pharaoh, an oppression which will persist for hundreds of years. You see, it’s not hard to draw a line from the sale of Joseph to the enslavement of the entire nation in Egypt. The stakes here run high.

## PONDER THIS



So what do you think would have happened if the Midianites *never came*? How might the history of

the children of Israel looked different?

You might be thinking: “It wouldn’t have made *any difference* at all. If the Midianites didn’t sell him, the brothers would

have. Joseph still would have ended up in Egypt as a slave.”

You may be right - but is it possible to somehow test that theory? **We think it is.**

Let’s take a closer look at the verses which describe the brothers’ plan, to try to get inside of their minds, to really understand what they were thinking. Then we’ll be in a position to hazard a guess about what their *next step* would have been.

# Testing The Theory

## LOOK INSIDE



Take a second look at the encounter between Joseph and his brothers at the pit. We’ve provided you with a lengthier excerpt below, so you can get a fuller sense of the picture here. As you read, ask yourself: What are the brothers planning to do to Joseph? Their plan changes over time. How many different plans can you find?

**Genesis 37:18-29**

**18** They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. **19** They said to one

**בראשית לז: יח–כט**

**יח** ַו ִ ּי ְראו אֹת ֹו, ֵמ ָרחֹק; ּו ְב ֶט ֶרם ִי ְק ַרב ֲא ֵלי ֶהם,

ַו ִ ּי ְת ַנ ְּכל ּו אֹתו ַל ֲה ִמיתו. **יט** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו, ִאי ׁש ֶאל-א ִחיו:

another, “Here comes that dreamer! **20** Come now,

לכ ּו

ָבא. **כ** ְו ַע ָּתה ה ָּל ֶזה--

ֲחלֹמ ֹות ה

ַעל ּב

ה ֵּנה,

let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and

ח ָ ּיה

ה ּ ֹבר ֹות, ְו ָא ַמ ְרנ ּו,

ַא ַחד ּב

ו ַנ ַה ְר ֵגהו, ְו ַנ ׁ ְש ִל ֵכהו

we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall

ָתיו. **כא** חלֹמֹ

ר ָעה ֲא ָכ ָל ְתהו; ְו ִנ ְר ֶאה, ַמה- ִ ּי ְהי ּו

see what comes of his dreams!” **21** But when Reuben

heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let

ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַמע ְראו ֵבן, ַו ַ ּי ִ ּצ ֵלהו ִמ ָ ּי ָדם; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, לֹא ַנ ֶּכ ּנ ּו ָנ ֶפ ׁש. **כב** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ֲא ֵל ֶהם ְראו ֵבן, ַאל- ּת ׁ ְש ְּפכ ּו- ָדם--ה ׁ ְש ִליכ ּו

us not take his life.” **22** And Reuben went on, “Shed

ְד ָּבר, ְו ָיד ּב ִּמ

ה ֶ ּזה ֲא ׁ ֶשר

אֹת ֹו ֶאל-ה ּב ֹור

no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness,

ה ִ ּציל אֹת ֹו ִמ ָ ּי ָדם, ַל ֲה ׁ ִשיב ֹו,

ַמ ַען, ל

אל- ּת ׁ ְש ְלחו-ב ֹו:

but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר- ָבא י ֹו ֵסף ֶאל-א ָחיו;

אֶל-אָ ִביו. **כג** ַו ְי ִהי,

him from them and restore him to his father. **23**

ה ַּפ ִּסים

ו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ֶאת- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו, ֶאת- ְכתֹ ֶנת

When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped

ה ּ ֹב ָרה;

אֲ ׁ ֶשר ָע ָליו. **כד** ַו ִ ּי ָּק ֻחהו--ו ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו אֹת ֹו,

Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he

ב ֹו ָמ ִים. **כה** ַו ֵ ּי ׁ ְשב ּו, ֶל ֱא ָכל- ֶל ֶחם,

ו ַה ּב ֹור ֵרק, ֵאין

was wearing, **24** and took him and cast him into the

ו ִ ּי ְ ׂשאו ֵעי ֵני ֶהם ַו ִ ּי ְראו, ְו ִה ֵּנה אֹ ְר ַחת ִי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. **25**

נ ְ ׂש ִאים, ְנ ֹכאת ּו ְצ ִרי

ּב ָאה ִמ ִּג ְל ָעד; ּו ְג ַמ ֵּלי ֶהם

Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw

ִריד ִמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כו** ַו ּיֹאמֶר להו

ולֹט--הו ְל ִכים,

a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their

ַנ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ּכי

ֶב ַצע, מה-

יהו ָדה, ֶאל-א ָחיו:

camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken

לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

ו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו. **כז**

to Egypt. **26** Then Judah said to his brothers, “What

ב ָ ׂש ֵרנ ּו, הוא; ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמע ּו,

ִחינ ּו ּכי-א

ו ָי ֵדנ ּו ַאל- ּת ִהי-ב ֹו,

do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? **27** Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but

אֶ ָחיו. **כח** ַו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו ֲא ָנ ׁ ִשים ִמ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ׁ ְשכ ּו ו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ִמן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף

let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is

ּכ ֶסף; ַו ָ ּי ִביאו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף,

ּב ֶע ְ ׂש ִרים

ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. **28**

מִ ְצ ָר ְימָה. **כט** ַו ָ ּי ׁ ָשב ְראו ֵבן ֶאל-ה ּב ֹור, ְו ִה ֵּנה

When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. **29** When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes.

ּב ּב ֹור; ַו ִ ּי ְק ַרע, ֶאת- ְב ָג ָדיו.

אין-י ֹו ֵסף

Alright, let’s compare notes. It seems like the brothers actually consider **three** options:

1. “Let’s kill Joseph! We’ll toss his corpse into a pit and say that he was eaten by a wild animal. We’ll see what

becomes of his dreams!” (verses 18-20)

1. “Let’s not get our hands dirty by murdering him. Better to just toss him into a pit where he’ll eventually rot and

die.” (verses 21-25)

1. “Let’s not kill our own flesh and blood. What if we sell him instead? That way we’ll be rid of him, and gain something from it.” (verses 26-28)

## PONDER THIS



Why do you think the plans keep changing?

**Hint:** What’s happening as the brothers’ plan goes from A to B to C? What trend do you see here?

We see a couple of patterns at play:

First, these three plans seem to go from **most violent to least violent,** from:

**1**

a) killing Joseph with their own bare hands to

b) indirectly killing him by leaving him in a pit to die to

c) selling him into slavery

Second, as they progress from A to B to C, the brothers are becoming **less passionate and more calculating.**

**2**

Indeed, that’s what seems to lead Judah to ask:

**Genesis 37:26-27**

לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ַל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים…

ּכי ַנ ֲהרֹג ֶאת-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו, ֶאת- ָ ּדמ ֹו?

מה- ֶב ַצע,

What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites...

Judah’s proposal - *Let’s see if we can make some money here!* - smacks more of logic than anger.

All told, as the account advances from Plan A to Plan B to Plan C, it looks like the brothers are beginning to cool off, ever so slightly, that they’re gaining some control over their tempers. They are thinking, and rethinking, and rethinking again their original murderous proposal.

# An Educated Guess

## PONDER THIS



How can we explain this progression? *What* is causing the brothers to rethink their plans over and

over again? Is there some factor which is influencing their thinking?

**The biggest influence on the brothers’ decision-making process seems to be nothing more than the simple passage of time.** Take a look back at the verses, this time with an eye towards the clock. In verse 18, when the brothers first articulate Plan A, they’ve only just noticed Joseph approaching from afar. By the time he actually catches up to them in verse 23, they’ve already moved onto Plan B. And by the time Judah proposes Plan C, they’ve had the chance to sit down to a meal, to fill their stomachs and ponder their actions. As the seconds and minutes steadily tick by, the brothers give the scenario more thought; their voice of conscience rings a bit louder, and their impulse to kill Joseph grows less and less severe. As much as the brothers are creating these plans, time is a partner in writing the script.

## PONDER THIS



We’re now in a position to return to our outstanding question: what *would have* happened had the Midianite traders not gotten there when they did? If the brothers had had more time to think about it, what might Plan D have looked like?



There’s no way to know for certain, but if we follow the clues in the text, then we have good reason to suggest that the pattern would have continued. Just as Plan A was tempered by Plan B, and Plan B was softened even more by Plan C, Plan C would have been replaced by a more compassionate Plan D. Plan D might have looked something like this:

“Hey guys, let’s haul Joseph out of the pit. We’ve shown him who’s boss; he won’t mess with us again.”

It’s enough to make you wonder: Could this whole ordeal have been averted? Could we have skipped over that whole slavery in Egypt part of our history and gone straight to Sinai? Sadly, we’ll never know -- because the brothers *were* interrupted; the Midianites *did* show up.

# The Timeless Lesson

As fascinating as it is to play this game - to imagine what might have happened if things were different - we haven’t fully addressed the question at the heart of the whole matter. *What meaning are we meant to take away from this?* Finding the textual anomalies is the easy part. Figuring out what timeless lesson the Bible is trying to teach us - that’s the hard

part. At such moments, the Bible seems to be almost silent, inviting us to do the work, to piece together speculation and introspection to arrive at an answer.

## PONDER THIS



Why do you think the Torah goes into detail about these three different plans? “Let’s do this!” “Nah, let’s do this!” “Ooh, how about this?” What’s the life lesson here?

**We want to suggest the following:** If we had asked you, before you read this guide, “What’s the lesson of the sale of Joseph?”, what would you have said? *Don’t sell your brother into slavery.* Right? But did you *really* need the Bible to tell you that? You sort of already knew that, didn’t you? As lessons go, it’s pretty one-dimensional. It’s not like we’ve ever contemplated selling a loved one, but then remembered, “Oh wait, the Bible says that I shouldn’t do that… never mind.”

The Bible is in the business of changing the way that we live our lives… and the lesson here is something much more nuanced. It has to do with what happens when angry people get together and start to play off one another. It’s about how situations can escalate too quickly. It’s about how we can rapidly lose control of the consequences of our actions. By recording Plans A, B and C, the evolution between them and the final, fateful interception by the Midianites, the Bible shows us the complexity of *how sin happens* - and warns us of the frightful consequences if and when our actions spiral out of our hands. We’d like to think that we have free will - that the actions that we take reflect our careful and deliberate choices. But it’s possible to set a chain of events into motion that we are then powerless to reverse.

If the brothers had had just a little more time, Joseph might never have been sold down to Egypt. The brothers might have changed their minds and not gone through with the sale. But they ran out of time, and it did happen. Those are the inescapable consequences of their actions. Yes, the Midianites are the ones who actually sold Joseph, *but the brothers created the conditions* that allowed him to be sold. The brothers might not have been convicted in a human court, but on some deep level, they bear culpability for what happened.

Time can be your friend, especially when you are about to do something impetuous. But you don’t always get the luxury of time. When that happens, you’re left with the bitter consequences of your actions. That, to us, is the really chilling lesson of Rashbam. When passions run high, we need to find a way to build in *time*, to give ourselves a chance to cool down before taking action. Because we won’t always get to take it back.



Vayeishev: Who Really Sold Joseph?

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 37:18-29**

**בראשית לז: יח–כט**

**18** They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. **19** They said to one

א ֵלי ֶהם,

אי ׁש אל-א ִחיו:

**יח** ַו ִ ּי ְראו אֹת ֹו, מ ָרחֹק; ו ְב ֶט ֶרם ִי ְק ַרב

ו ִ ּי ְת ַנ ְּכל ּו אֹתו ל ֲה ִמיתו. **יט** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו,

another, “Here comes that dreamer! **20** Come now, let us

ֹות ה ָּל ֶזה-- ָבא. **כ** עַ ָּתה לכ ּו ה ֲחלֹמ

ה ֵּנה, ּב ַעל

kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say,

‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of

ּב ַא ַחד ה ּ ֹבר ֹות, ְו ָא ַמ ְרנ ּו, ח ָ ּיה

ו ַנ ַה ְר ֵגהו, ְו ַנ ׁ ְש ִל ֵכהו

his dreams!” **21** But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save

him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” **22** And

מה- ִ ּי ְהי ּו חלֹמֹ ָתיו. **כא**

מ ָ ּי ָדם; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, לֹא ַנ ֶּכ ּנ ּו ָנ ֶפ ׁש.

א ָכ ָל ְתהו; ְו ִנ ְר ֶאה, ְראו ֵבן, ַו ַ ּי ִ ּצ ֵלהו ר ָעה ו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַמע

Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit

אל- ּת ׁ ְש ְּפכ ּו- ָדם--ה ׁ ְש ִליכ ּו

ֵל ֶהם ְראו ֵבן, א

**כב** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר

out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—

א ׁ ֶשר ּב ִּמ ְד ָּבר, ְו ָיד

ה ֶ ּזה

אֹת ֹו אל-ה ּב ֹור

intending to save him from them and restore him to his

ה ִ ּציל אֹת ֹו מ ָ ּי ָדם, ל ֲה ׁ ִשיב ֹו,

אל- ּת ׁ ְש ְלחו-ב ֹו: ל ַמ ַען,

father. **23** When Joseph came up to his brothers, they

אֶל-אָ ִביו. **כג** ַו ְי ִהי, ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר- ָבא י ֹו ֵסף אל-א ָחיו;

stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he

was wearing, **24** and took him and cast him into the pit.

ו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו את-י ֹו ֵסף את- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו, את- ְכתֹ ֶנת ה ַּפ ִּסים

The pit was empty; there was no water in it. **25** Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of

ע ָליו. **כד** ַו ִ ּי ָּק ֻחהו--ו ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו אֹת ֹו, ה ּ ֹב ָרה; ְו ַה ּב ֹור

אין ב ֹו מ ִים. **כה** ַו ֵ ּי ׁ ְשב ּו, ל ֱא ָכל- ֶל ֶחם, ַו ִ ּי ְ ׂשאו

אֲ ׁ ֶשר

רק,

Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum,

ָאה ּב

עי ֵני ֶהם ַו ִ ּי ְראו, ְו ִה ֵּנה אֹ ְר ַחת ִי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים

balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. **26** Then Judah

נ ְ ׂש ִאים, ְנכאת ו ְצ ִרי

מ ִּג ְל ָעד; ו ְג ַמ ֵּלי ֶהם

said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother

ולֹט--הו ְל ִכים, להו ִריד מ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ְיהו ָדה,

and covering up his blood? **27** Come, let us sell him to the

מה- ֶב ַצע, ּכי ַנ ֲה ֹרג את-א ִחינ ּו, ְו ִכ ִּסינ ּו,

אל-א ָחיו:

Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves.

After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers

agreed. **28** When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled

אֶת- ָ ּדמ ֹו. **כז** לכ ּו ְו ִנ ְמ ְּכ ֶר ּנ ּו ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים, ְו ָי ֵדנ ּו

אל- ּת ִהי-ב ֹו, ּכי-א ִחינ ּו ב ָ ׂש ֵרנ ּו, הוא; ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמע ּו, א ָחיו.

Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty

א ָנ ׁ ִשים מ ְד ָי ִנים סֹ ֲח ִרים, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ׁ ְשכ ּו ַו ַ ּי ֲעל ּו

**כח** ַו ַ ּי ַע ְבר ּו

pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to

ל ִ ּי ׁ ְש ְמ ֵעא ִלים,

ֹו ֵסף את-י

מן-ה ּב ֹור, ַו ִ ּי ְמ ְּכר ּו

את-י ֹו ֵסף

Egypt. **29** When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that

מ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **כט** וַ ָ ּי ׁ ָשב

ֹו ֵסף, את-י

ּב ֶע ְ ׂש ִרים ּכ ֶסף; ַו ָ ּי ִביאו

Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes.

ּב ּב ֹור; ַו ִ ּי ְק ַרע,

ֹו ֵסף אין-י

ּב ֹור, ְו ִה ֵּנה אל-ה

ראו ֵבן

ֶאת- ְב ָג ָדיו.

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Vayeishev: Who Really Sold Joseph?

Source Sheet Page 2

**Rashbam on Genesis 37:28**

**When the Midianite traders passed by -** While the brothers had been sitting down to consume their meal, having distanced themselves somewhat from the pit into which they had thrown Joseph in order not to be guilty of “eating while spilling blood,” they were waiting for the Ishmaelites whom they had seen in the distance, to arrive. During this period the Midianites, coming from a different direction had passed there, saw Joseph in the pit, pulled him up, and proceeded to sell him to the Ishmaelites. One may assume that the brothers had no knowledge of this. Even though the Torah appears to attribute the sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites to the brothers, (based on Joseph accusing them of having sold him to Egypt, 45,4) we would have

to say that because of their having been instrumental in bringing about that sale they are considered as if having assisted in that sale. This appears to me the deeper meaning of the plain meaning of the text both here and in chapter 45. The line describing the Midianites passing that way is described as something totally coincidental, having nothing to do with what the brothers had planned to do with Joseph. Even if the Torah says: “And they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites,” this sounds as if the brothers did the selling. It is also possible that the brothers noting the Midianites suddenly materialising out of nowhere, instructed them to pull Joseph out of the pit after which they themselves sold him to the Ishmaelites.

### רשב”ם על בראשית לז:כח

**ויעברו אנשים מדינים -** ובתוך שהיו יושבים לאכול לחםורחוקים היו קצת מן הבור לבלתי אכול על הדם וממתינים היו לישמעאלים שראו וקודם שבאו הישמעאלים עברו אנשים מדינים אחרים דרך שם וראוהו בבור ומשכוהו ומכרוהו המדיינים לישמעאלים. ויש לומר: שהאחים לא ידעו ואף על פי שכתוב אשר מכרתם אותי מצרימה. יש לומר: שהגרמת מעשיהם סייעה במכירתו. זה נראה לי לפי עומק דרך פשוטו של מקרא. כי ויעברו אנשים מדינים משמע ע”י מקרה והם מכרוהו לישמעאלים. ואף

אם באתה לומר וימכרו את יוסף לישמעאלים כי אחיו מכרוהו,

אם כן צריך לומר שהם ציוו למדינים סוחרים למושכו מן הבור,

ואח”כ מכרוהו לישמעאלים.



**VAYEISHEV: WHO REALLY SOLD JOSEPH?**

***Teacher’s Guide***

This guide corresponds to the video: [Who Really Sold Joseph?](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/who-sold-joseph-into-slavery)

### POINTS TO PAUSE DISCUSSION TOPICS



* 2:49 What are the implications of this explanation of the Rashbam? What impact does it have on the larger story? If we accept the

Rashbam, what are we meant to learn from the narrative?

* 4:51 What’s the problem with saying that the idea that one is “unaccountable in the earthly courts, but liable in the heavenly



court” means that while one is *not* technically responsible, one *does* have a moral responsibility? What are the potential theological and/or logical difficulties with such a perspective?

When thinking about this question, consider the following: if there is any responsibility (as Rabbi Fohrman will explain), why is there a discrepancy between the earthly and heavenly courts? Meaning, if one is at all responsible, why is he/she not legally accountable?

* 9:49 Can you think of any other examples in Jewish law or literature in which the concept of time is regarded as a factor that can lead

to a shift in perspective or a reformed decision?

*Ex: The Jews tried to leave Egypt in great haste (b’chipazon) so as*

*not allow Pharaoh to change his mind.*

**FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE**

Rabbi Fohrman suggested that one “take-away” implication of the Rashbam's theory on the sale of Joseph is the accountability of non-action. Why should someone who does not directly commit a crime be ever considered responsible for the eventual result(s)? Furthermore, where should the line be drawn between actions that create responsibility and those too indirect for blame? What are some practical cases in which this principle might be applied? Can you think of any examples in which someone might be responsible although not legally accountable (in secular or Jewish courts) for a given indirect action or decision? Finally, how might this idea affect your own actions and decisions going forward?

The second implication of the Rashbam's theory was the realization of the benefits of dangers of lapsing time between initial event and reaction. Have you ever experienced a situation in which you thought to react in one way “in the moment” but changed your attitude with the passing of time? Psychologically, why is this true? What are some practical time-related tips that can help us react more appropriately in a difficult situation? On the other hand, what might be the practical and/or moral dangers of leaving too much between event and action?



*Source Sheet/Graphic Organizer*

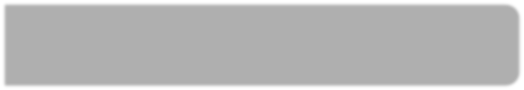
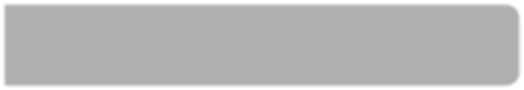
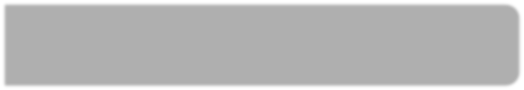
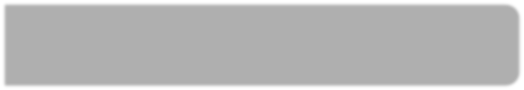
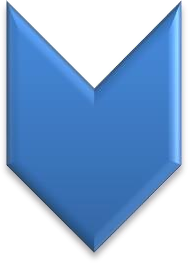
**VAYEISHEV: WHO REALLY SOLD JOSEPH?**

GENESIS 37:26-28

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **כו** ַו ֹּיא ֶמר ְיהּודה, ֶאל- ֶא ָחיו: ַמה- ֶב ַצע, ִּכי ַנ ֲה ֹּרג ֶאת-  ָאחינּו, ְו ִּכ ִּסינּו, ֶאת- ָדמו. | **26** And Judah said unto his brethren: 'What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? |
| ְו ִּנ ְמ ְכ ֶרּנּו ַל ִּי ְש ְמ ֵעאלים, ְו ָי ֵדנּו ַאל- ְת ִּהי-בו, ִּכי-ָאחינּו **כז** ְלכּו  ְב ָש ֵרנּו, הּוא; ַו ִּי ְש ְמעּו, ֶא ָחיו. | **27** Come, and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother, our flesh.' And his brethren hearkened unto him. |
| **כח** ַו ַי ַע ְברּו ֲא ָנ ִּשים ִּמ ְד ָי ִּנים ֹּס ֲח ִּרים, **ַו ִּי ְמ ְשכּו**  ֹּו ֵסף ִּמן- ַהב ֹּור, **ַו ִּי ְמ ְכרּו** ֶאת-י ֹּו ֵסף **ַו ַי ֲעלּו** ֶאת-י  ְב ֶע ְש ִּרים ָכ ֶסף; ַו ָי ִּביאּו ֶאת- ַל ִּי ְש ְמ ֵעאלים,  ִּמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. י ֹּו ֵסף, | **28** And there passed by Midianites, merchantmen; and **they** drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty  shekels of silver. And they brought Joseph into Egypt. |

*Instructions: As the video progresses, fill in the blanks below regarding the various developmental stages in the brothers’ plan concerning Joseph. When complete, this can flow chart can serve as a useful graphic organizer*





**Plan A**

* Joseph and throw him into the pit

**Plan B**



**Plan C**

* Don't let him die; let's

**Plan D**

* **?**

This is Rabbi David Fohrman and welcome to the Parshat Vayeishev. This week's parsha Parsha includes one of the most astounding events in the entire Torah: the sale of Yosef at the hands of his brothers. But today I want to explore with you the Rashbam's theory of this sale.

Who

Really

Sold

Joseph

into

Slavery?

He argues that the sale of Yosef was the greatest crime that never happened. The brothers never actually sold Yosef at all. It flies in the face of everything we have learned, but if you look carefully at the verses, the verses actually seem to support this.

In another course on Yosef which you can find at Aleph Beta, I treated the Rashbam's theory in detail, but the general outline of his theory is this: the brothers, after placing Yosef in the pit, sit down to break bread and at that meal Yehuda comes up with a plan. He sees "orchot Yishmaelim ba'a mi'Gil'ad," he sees an Ishmaelite caravan coming from afar and he says, "ma betza ki naharog et-achinu v'chisinu et-damo," what do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Let's just sell him to the Yishmaelim.

This plan that Yehuda proposes is, in fact, sort of the third plan that the brothers have. Their initial plan when they first see Yosef coming is, let's kill him and we will throw his body in the pit. Reuven, though, disposes off that plan, he tells the brothers, "al-tishpachu dam," let’s not kill him. Instead let’s cast him into the pit alive and we'll let him expire there, that way we won't touch him, our hands won't be guilty of actually directly killing him. The Torah attests that Reuven was actually surreptitiously planning on saving Yosef. But now Yehuda has plan number three, Yehuda of course is not aware of that Reuven wants to save Yosef. And therefore he says why should we allow him to die, here there's Ishmaelite traders in the distance, let's just sell him. And the brothers agreed to do that. If you look carefully at the text the next thing that happens, Midianite traders come first: "va'ya'avru anashim Midyanim socharim." Midianite traders came - and now listen - "vayimsh'chu v'ya'alu et-Yosef min-ha-bor," and they pulled Yosef up out of the pit, "vayimkru et-Yosef l'Yishmaelim," they sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim.

Who's they? ”They,” the Rashbam argues, it's not the brothers. “They” are the Midianites.

Was

Joseph

Sold

into

Egypt by His

Brothers –

or Not?

The Brothers saw the Yishmaelim, the Ishmaelite traders in the distance, they didn't see the Midianites were closer, the Rashbam argues. The Midianites arrived at the pit first and had the same idea the brothers did. They pulled him up out of the pit and they sold him to the Yishmaelim. And now the question that's left for us to ponder is: what are the implications of this Rashbam? If you accept Rashbam's theory, what does that do for our understanding of the story? What do we take away from this? But I want to pull back the zoom lens now and sort of ask why does that actually sort of make a difference to us, here and now, and how does that affect our lives?

And when we think of Biblical text that way, it's here where we don't really have the evidence; its speculation. So why, as to what it means, is more of a personal question, a subjective question and so,

implication number one: Do you have to actually do something to be responsible for it?

In the Yom Kippur service that Ashkenazim say, for example, there are sections there that ascribe some of the terrible suffering that occurred later on in Jewish history—specifically with ten martyrs that were killed by the Romans much, much later in Jewish history than Biblical times, they ascribe that, actually, to—in some way—a heavenly "din" a judgment, as it were, for the sale of Joseph. According to the Rashbam, does that even make sense? The brothers didn't do it, they were guiltless. But the question is, were they really guiltless?

Who

Was to

Blame

for

Joseph

Being

Sold?

There's a fascinating statement that the sages make in the Gemara to the effect that "grama b'nizakin patur me'dinei adam v'chayev b'dinei shamayim," which is that there are different levels of responsibility. When I cause something directly, let's say, someone causes some kind of damage, so if they do it directly, they're "chayev b'dinei adam" which means that a human court can actually require the perpetrator to pay for the damage that he committed. But, the Gemara says, if the damage that you caused was a 'grama,' if it was indirect, if I didn't do it, but I created the conditions that allowed someone else to do it, then "patur dinei adam," then a human court actually doesn't have the ability to make the perpetrator pay anything for the crime.

And then it says "v'chayev b'dinei shamayim": but although you are not liable in the earthly courts, you are liable in the heavenly court. What does it mean that you are liable in the heavenly court? So people often think well, it means I have some sort of moral responsibility to you. But that's actually not what the words mean, that's not what :chayev b'dinei shamayim" means, that you are liable in the heavenly court. It means, from God's perspective, you actually have to repay the money, even though a court cannot impose those upon you. In the Rashbam's picture the brothers did exactly that - they created the conditions, in the end, that allowed for Joseph to be sold. They didn't actually sell him, the Midianites did that, the Ishmaelites did that.

But the question is, does that really lessens their responsibility? Maybe in earthly courts but not in the heavenly court. From God's perspective you are still responsible and, to me, that's a chilling thing. Here the brothers are, when they come back to their father, what they said was really kind of like a white lie: “we don't know what happened to him.” It's really true, they don't know what happened to him. Yes it's true they make this alibi, they put the blood on the coat. They don't know what happened to him and yet at some deep level they are responsible for whatever happened to him. They created the conditions for this, they indirectly set in motion the chain of events. Earthly courts may not hold them liable, but God would.

Why Was

Joseph

Sold

into

Slavery?

Here is one other personal reflection that I want to leave you with, about the Rashbam's way of looking at things. In the end the brothers never sold Yosef and therefore one of the questions I think that the text leaves you with is not about what happened, but about what might have happened had Yosef not, in fact,

been found by the Midianite traders who sold him off to the Ishmaelites?

Look how many different plans there were. What was plan A that the brothers had? Plan A was, let's kill Yosef and throw his corpse into one of these pits. That's what they were saying as they saw Yosef come to them. So that was Plan A. Plan A actually never came to be an actuality. Reuven stopped Plan A. He said, “we are not going to kill anybody. Instead let's take him and let's throw him in the pit alive.” And the implication is, let him just die in the pit. Reuven, of course, as the text tells us, was trying to save him. But even as far as what the brothers thought Reuven was saying, it was a less extreme plan than Plan A. Plan A was, let's kill him outright.

Plan B is, well no, let's not really do that, let's just throw him in the pit and let him expire there. Already the plan is evolving, it's becoming less severe. And then they take Yosef and they throw him into the pit and he is alive, and then they are kind of thinking about it over lunch. At that point Yehuda comes up with a plan C, and the plan C is, “you know we really shouldn't let him die at all, why don't we just sell him? Get rid of the problem that way. Why don't we sell him to that band of traders over there?”

But if you think about it, what is happening to create Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C? Aside from the people who are creating those plans, time is creating those plans. Time is elapsing, and as time elapses you get to think about it more, you get to ruminate about it more, your initial impulse to just get rid of him gets less and less severe. And the great question is, what would have happened had the Midianite traders not gotten there before the brothers? If the brothers really did have the time, thought about it more over lunch,The Ishmaelite trades are off in the distance, they'll eventually get here, ould there have been a plan D? What would have a plan D been like? Would a plan D have been that when they finally got to the pit, you know, and the Ishmaelite traders are there and the brothers are there, would they in fact have gone through with selling him?Or just as Plan A got replaced by Plan B and just as Plan B got replaced by plan C, would Plan C have gotten replaced by Plan D? Would it have been, you know, we'll haul Yosef out of the pit and give him a tongue-lashing and tell him, you know, this is ridiculous what happened here and we'd have to make sure nothing like this ever happens again.

Commentary on

the Sale of

Joseph

Would that had been the case and maybe there never would have been a sale of Joseph at all. But there was… because the brothers ran out of time. Time can sometimes be your friend, especially when you are about to do something impetuous. And so what do we take out of that? You know, what I take out of that is that you got to be really, really careful when you are angry, not to do something irrevocable, because plans change when you are angry. The Gemara famously talks about a certain kind of "get," a bill of divorce, which would be written for a Cohen. It had to be tied up in all sorts of arcane and difficult ways. It took a long time to prepare and the whole point of it was it needed to be very cumbersome because a Cohen in particular, according to Torah law, can't remarry his wife once he divorces her. Other men could. A Cohen can't do anything impetuous. And the Sages, in creating a special 'get' for the Cohen, tried to engineer time into the document. Give him time, because there will be a plan B, there will be a plan C, there will be a plan D.

The idea behind the time is that the document is going to become superfluous. He will change his mind, he won't go through with it. The brothers also might have changed their mind, might have not gone through with it. But you don't always get the luxury of time. Sometimes life gives it to you and sometimes life doesn't give it to you. The Midianite traders come and they are out of your control and at that point you are left with the bitter consequences of your decision, you just have to live with what happened. Yosef is gone. You put him in the pit. That's something that the brothers can never get away from. That, to me, is the really chilling lesson of the Rashbam. Time can heal a lot of wounds but you don't always get time. So you’ve got to be really careful about what actions you are going to take in the heat of the moment, what wounds you will create. You don't always get to take them back.



**THE PARSHA EXPERIMENT**

**PARSHAT VAYEISHEV: HARLOTS & GOATS & COATS, OH MY!**

This guide corresponds to the video: [Harlots & Coats & Goats, Oh My!](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/judah-tamar-story-significance)

**SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE**



1. This week’s parsha begins the epic saga of Joseph
   1. The Sale of Joseph and its aftermath really takes us through end of the book of Genesis
   2. There are 14 chapters left to the book, and almost all of them are about Joseph
   3. There’s one chapter that seems to totally interrupt the Joseph story, see if you spot digression in recap
      1. Jacob gives Joseph a coat, & Joseph shares

Guide by Dr. Sarah Levy

dreams which imply that he’ll rule over brothers

* + 1. The brothers get really jealous, and they eventually sell Joseph
    2. Tamar dresses like a prostitute and conceives a child with Judah
    3. Joseph ends up in Egypt and

becomes master in Potiphar’s home

* + 1. Potiphar’s wife frames Joseph and he’s sent to Jail
    2. In jail, Joseph interprets the dreams of a butler and baker
  1. Right after the Sale of Joseph, before we

hear about Joseph’s life in Egypt, we hear the strange digression of Judah and Tamar

1. Judah has a few kids, and he marries off his oldest son, Er, to a woman named Tamar
   1. Er dies, Tamar is faced with yibum - levirate marriage
      1. When a man dies without children, his widow marries the deceased’s brother
      2. The children from that marriage would carry on the legacy of the dead brother
   2. After Er dies, Tamar marries the next son, Onan, but Onan dies too Judah has one more son, Shela, but he doesn't want Tamar marry him - After all, his first two sons just died, so he tells her to wait until Shela gets older
   3. Years go by, and he doesn’t give Shela to Tamar
      1. Tamar has been in limbo
      2. She’s still mourning the loss of her husband, hoping that someone will keep Er’s name alive through



* 1. She takes matters into her own hands
     1. She dresses up like a prostitute, and waits for Judah to solicit her
     2. We hear about the details of the bargain between Tamar and Judah over payment for her services
     3. He doesn't have payment with him, so she takes a collateral
     4. He tries to find her later to actually pay her
  2. Why do we need to know about these details of Judah’s life? Why don’t we hear personal stories about any of his other brothers?
     1. Why does the Torah think it’s important for us to hear this? Secondly, even if it’s a valuable story, why are we hearing about it now?
     2. What are we to do with the strange digression story of Judah and Tamar?
  3. Rabbi Fohrman's theory: Maybe the story is not a digression from the Joseph story at all

- maybe it’s a perfect continuation

1. Take a look, and play where have we heard these words or ideas before?
   1. When Tamar realizes that Judah had no intention of allowing her to marry his son Shela, she devises another way to keep the legacy of her first husband alive
   2. She dresses up like a prostitute, and tries to fool Judah - And it works (Genesis 38:15)
   3. Tamar asks, what he will pay for her services, and Judah answers that he will send her a goat and give her his signet ring, coat, and staff as collateral (Genesis 38:17-18)
   4. Then something ironic happens
      1. Judah, who seems to have been the judge at the time, is told that Tamar is pregnant
      2. That’s a problem because Tamar has been awaiting yibum from Shela
      3. For her infidelity, Judah condemns her to death
      4. The irony is that Judah himself is the father of the child, but he doesn’t realize that
      5. Tamar sends to her father-in-law as she is being led to her death, saying that the person whose belongings she has impregnated her (Genesis 38:25)
   5. Where have we heard this before?
      1. Don't need to go back too far - It’s exactly what happened in previous chapter with the Sale of Joseph
      2. Joseph lost his coat when his brothers stripped him of it
      3. Then, they dipped the coat into goat’s blood in order to cover up their actions --

- again, deception involving a goat

* + 1. And then, the bloody coat is presented to father for recognition Just as Tamar presented a coat to Judah - the father of her unborn children - for recognition



* + - * Looking at the words the brothers say when they present the bloody

ֶּכר- ָנא coat, ה

37:32)

is the same (Genesis

ה ֶּכר- ָנא -

only appears in these two

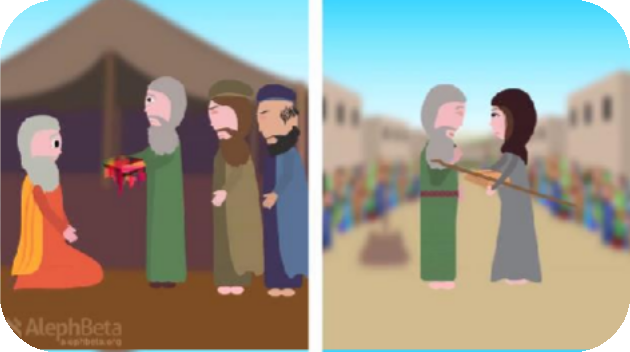
stories in the entire Torah

* 1. What does this connection mean?
     1. Why is the Judah and Tamar story carrying echoes back to the sale of Joseph?
     2. Who engineered the Sale of Joseph?
        + That was Judah, and the brothers followed his lead
        + He choreographed the events the led to deceiving Jacob with the bloody coat

1. The stories of Judah and Tamar and the Sale of Joseph are not the only Goats and Coats stories - there’s another earlier one
   1. Goats and coats goes back to the story of the blessings
   2. Jacob prepares a goat for his father before he gets the blessing
      1. Jacob wears Esau’s coat and presents it to his father to deceive him 2.Isaac was confused, not recognizing him (Genesis 27:23)
         * That's the same word
         * The Sale of Joseph is an echo of the very first Goats and Coats story - the story of the blessings
   3. Jacob’s children are replaying Jacob’s deception
      1. They seem to be facing same challenges that Jacob faced
      2. We saw it with the deception with Shechem/Dina, and we see it with the Sale of Joseph
2. The story we hear immediately after that is Judah and Tamar
   1. Judah just arranged a deception in which he covered up the truth and shirked responsibility, and now Judah would be faced with another similar opportunity
   2. And he has a choice - will he continue to cover up truth, to shirk responsibility?
   3. Or will he learn from his mistakes and grow from them?
      1. Tamar is being brought out to be killed and she makes a small plea
      2. She gives Judah a choice
   4. What were Judah’s options at that point?
      1. He could have said nothing



* + - * He could have continued hiding the truth
      * That was probably an attractive option for Judah.
    1. But Judah doesn’t remain silent (Genesis 37:26)
       - Judah saves her life, and publicly embarrasses himself
       - He’s able to do something that beforehand, in the Sale of Joseph, he was unable to do
       - He recognized the truth - He took responsibility for his actions.

1. By connecting these three stories, the Torah is highlighting that Judah was beginning to restore his personal integrity on a path that would eventually lead him to look Joseph, the brother he deceived and sold into slavery, in the eye - that’s a story for another time
   1. In the story of Judah and Tamar, Judah was beginning to correct a chain of deception that has plagued his whole family - his father, his brothers, and himself
   2. This is the turning point in the story of Jacob’s children
      1. The brothers failed - they deceived, hid the truth
      2. But Judah, when he’s faced with

ָנא -ֶּכר ַה , doesn’t cover up the truth

* + 1. He confronts it directly
    2. Like his father, he begins to correct the mistakes that have haunted his family
  1. And you know what happens when he does?
     1. When Judah recognizes his ring, coat, and staff, he gets them back Who carries around these things? Who carries around a coat, a staff, and a signet ring?
     2. A king does - Davidic dynasty, the Messiah, would ultimately come from Judah
     3. It would come from Peretz, the child born from the union of Judah and Tamar - The child that would never have lived if Judah hadn’t recognized the truth
     4. Judah gets back his ring, his cloak, and staff
        + Symbolic - at this moment, Judah’s kingship is confirmed

1. What a fascinating paradigm
   1. Kingship doesn’t descend from a flawless, perfect human being
   2. Descends from one who made mistakes, but learned and grew from them
   3. That’s who God chooses as our leaders - someone who has experienced a fall, and learned how to perfect themselves

ו ַי ֵּכר ְיהּודה - Judah That’s 1.

* 1. But that story doesn’t end there

- Judah recognized

* + 1. Judah may have begun a transformation, and he may have begun to correct the flaws of his father and brothers, but his family's in shambles
       - He ruined relationships - Jacob’s mourning, and Joseph’s a slave in Egypt
       - How can Judah and his brothers begin to put the pieces back together?

David: Welcome to Parshat Vayeishev. This week's parsha begins the epic saga of Joseph. In fact, the Sale of Joseph and its aftermath really takes us through the end of [the book of Genesis](https://www.alephbeta.org/torah/genesis). There are 14 chapters left to the book, and almost all of them are about Joseph.

Immanuel: Almost all of them. There's one chapter that seems to totally interrupt the Joseph story. Listen carefully to the 20-second recap and see if you can spot a digression:

Jacob gives Joseph a coat

Joseph shares dreams which imply that he'll rule over his brothers The brothers get really jealous, and they eventually sell Joseph Tamar dresses like a prostitute and conceives a child with Judah Joseph ends up in Egypt and becomes master in Potiphar's home Potiphar's wife frames Joseph and he's sent to Jail

In Jail, Joseph successfully interprets the dreams of a butler and baker.

David: Did you catch that? Right after the Sale of Joseph, before we hear about Joseph's life in Egypt… we hear the strange digression of the story of Judah and Tamar.

Explaining the Strange

Story of

Judah and Tamar

Immanuel: Judah has a few kids, and he marries off his oldest son, Er, to a woman named Tamar. But Er dies, and now Tamar is faced with yibum – levirate marriage. Traditionally, when a man dies without children, his widow would marry the deceased's brother, and the children from that marriage would carry on the legacy of the dead brother.

So, after Er dies, Tamar marries the next son, Onan… but Onan dies too. Judah has one more son, Shela, but he doesn't want Tamar marry him… after all, his first two sons just died. So he tells her to wait until Shela gets older. Years go by, and he doesn't give Shela to Tamar.

David: Meanwhile, Tamar has been in limbo… she's still mourning the loss of her husband, hoping that someone will keep Er's name alive through Yibum. She takes matters into her own hands. She dresses up like a prostitute, and waits for Judah to solicit her.

We hear about the details of the bargain between Tamar and Judah over payment for her services... He doesn't have payment with him, so she takes a collateral, and then he tries to find her later to actually pay her…. it's just a really strange story.

Immanuel: Why do we need to know about these details of Judah's life? Why don't we hear personal stories about any of his other brothers... Why does the Torah think it's important for us to hear this? Secondly, even if it's a valuable story, why are we hearing about it now??

David: Let's explore this and more this week on the Parsha Experiment.

Immanuel: Hi, I'm Imu Shalev. David: And I'm David Block.

Immanuel: And welcome to the Parsha Experiment. What are we to do with the strange digression story of Judah and Tamar? Here's a theory that Rabbi Fohrman suggests in a few places, links below. Maybe the story is not a digression from the Joseph story at all... maybe somehow, it's a perfect continuation.

Why Did Tamar Disguise Herself and Sleep with Judah?

David: Let's take a look, and play our favorite game: where have we heard these words or ideas before? When Tamar realizes that Judah had no intention of allowing her to marry his son Shela, she devises another way to keep the legacy of her first husband alive. She dresses up like a prostitute, and tries to fool

Judah. And it works:

פנ ֶיה :וַי ַ ּחְשׁבֶהָ לְזונ ָה her, sees Judah –וַי ִ ּ ְראֶהָ י ְהו ּ ָדה,

she's thinks he and –כִּי כִסְּתָה,

a prostitute, because her face is covered… he doesn't recognize her.

Immanuel: Tamar asks, What can you pay me for my services? Judah answers:

now. me with it have don't just I flock… my from goat a you send can I –אָנֹכִי אֲשַׁלַּח ג ְּ ִדי עִז ִ ּים מִן הַצֹ ּאן your –חֹתָמְךָ ו ּפְתִילֶךָ, ו ּמַטּךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּי ָ ֶדךָ things:, few a me give meantime, the in problem; no says, She staff. your and coat, your ring, signet

David: Then something ironic happens. Judah, who seems to have been the judge at the time, is told that Tamar is pregnant… and that's a problem because Tamar has been awaiting Yibum from Shela.

For her infidelity, Judah condemns her to death. Of course, the irony is that Judah himself is the father of the child, but he doesn't realize that... yet.

Immanuel: And look what Tamar does. As Tamar is being led out to be killed, she sends to her father-in- law saying: הָרה אָנֹכִי ,ֹו לּ אֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר לְאִישׁ– the person to whom these things belong impregnated me.

staff… this coat, this ring, signet this –מִי הַחֹתֶמֶת וְהַפתִילִים וְהַמַּטֶּה, הָאֵלֶּה please… recognize, –הַכֶּר נ ָא they??? are whose

David: Ok, let's take a step back… I think we have heard this before:

1. A man who is deceived in a plot involving a goat.
2. Someone loses a coat.
3. The coat is then presented to a father for recognition.

Studying Parallels to Judah and Tamar in the Bible

Immanuel: You don't need to go back too far. It's exactly what happened in previous chapter with the Sale of Joseph. Joseph lost his coat when his brothers stripped him of it. Then, they dipped the coat into goat's blood in order to cover up their actions – again, deception involving a goat.

And then, right on queue, the bloody coat is presented to father for recognition. Just as Tamar presented a coat to Judah – the father of her unborn children – for recognition!

David: And look at the words the brothers say when they present the bloody coat to Jacob: ָא נ הַכֶּר–

Tamar what exactly that's –הַכֶּר נ ָא coat? son's your this is –אִם לֹא –הַכְּתֹנ ֶת בִּנ ְךָ הִוא please, recognize

said to Judah. Recognize these things! And just in case you're thinking that ָא נ הַכֶּרis a common Biblical phrase, it actually appears only twice in the entire Torah. In these two stories.

A Hidden

Commentary

in Tamar and Judah's

Story

Immanuel: So, what does this connection mean? Why is the Judah and Tamar story carrying echoes back to the sale of Joseph?

Well, think about it: who engineered the Sale of Joseph? That was Judah. It was his idea, and the brothers followed his lead. He choreographed the events the led to deceiving Jacob with the bloody coat, to covering up the truth… to saying, ָא נ הַכֶּר– Father, please, recognize this.

David: But the stories of Judah and Tamar and the Sale of Joseph are not the only Goats and Coats stories… there's another one. An earlier one… Goats and coats goes back to the earliest deception in the Jacob story – the story of the blessings.

Jacob prepares a goat for his father before he gets the blessing. Jacob wears Esau's coat and presents it to his father to deceive him – Isaac feels the coat to figure out which son it is. But he's was confused…

הִכִּירו וְלֹא– and he does not recognize him! That's the same word – .נא הכרRecognize. This was the very first Goats and Coats story.

The Sale of Joseph is an echo of the very first Goats and Coats story – the story of the blessings. Jacob's children are replaying their father's deception. They seem to be facing the same challenges that Jacob faced. We saw it with the deception with Shechem and Dinah, and we see it now with the Sale of Joseph.

The Significant

Lesson

Behind Judah and Tamar's

Story

Immanuel: And the story we hear immediately after that is Judah and Tamar. Judah just arranged a deception in which he covered up the truth and shirked responsibility, and now Judah would be faced with another similar opportunity. And he has a choice… will he continue to cover up truth, to shirk responsibility? Or will he learn from his mistakes and grow from them?

Tamar is being brought out to be killed and she makes a small plea. She doesn't say, "Judah, this coat and ring and staff, they are YOURS! This is your child!" Instead, she gives Judah a choice… "Please, recognize these things – to whom do they belong?"

David: What were Judah's options at that point? The ball was in his court. He could have said nothing.

He could have continued hiding the truth, and no one would have known the difference. And that was probably an attractive option for Judah.

Earlier in the story, Judah sent someone to pay Tamar the goat that he didn't have with him at the time.

But the person couldn't find her, and Judah said, he says, "Let's stop looking for her – ּז לָבו ֶה ִהְי נ פן– lest

it come to scandal." He clearly didn't want the word to get out about what he did. So now, he has the perfect opportunity to let the story die out… it would be so easy to cover it up.

Immanuel: But Judah doesn't remain silent: ָדה ּ ְהו י ּכּר ַ וַי– Judah does recognize them, ּי ִ מִמֶּנ צָדקָה ּאמֶר וַיֹ– and he says, Tamar is more righteous than I. Judah saves her life and publicly embarrasses himself… He's able to do something that beforehand – in the Sale of Joseph – he was unable to do… He recognized the truth. He took responsibility for his actions.

David: By connecting these three stories, the Torah is highlighting that Judah was beginning to restore his personal integrity on a path that would eventually lead him to look Joseph, the brother he deceived and sold into slavery, in the eye. But that's a story for another time.

Why Is the

Story of

Judah and Tamar

Important?

Immanuel: In the story of Judah and Tamar, Judah was beginning to correct a chain of deception that has plagued his whole family – his father, his brothers, and himself. This is the turning point in the story of Jacob's children. The brothers failed… they deceived, hid the truth. But Judah, when he's faced with

,ָא נ הַכֶּרhe doesn't cover up the truth – he confronts it directly… and, like his father, he begins to correct the mistakes that have haunted his family.

David: And you know what happens when he does? When Judah recognizes his ring, coat, and staff, he gets them back. Who carries around these things? Who carries around a coat, a staff, and a signet ring? A king does. The Davidic dynasty, the Messiah, would ultimately come from Judah.

In fact, it would come from Peretz, the child born from the union of Judah and Tamar. The child that would never have lived if Judah hadn't recognize the truth. Judah gets back his ring, his cloak, and staff… It's symbolic – it's at this very moment when Judah's kingship is confirmed.

Immanuel: What a fascinating paradigm. Kingship doesn't descend from a flawless, perfect human being. It descends from someone who made mistakes, but was able to learn and grow from them. That's who God chooses as our leaders… someone who has experienced a fall, and learned how to perfect themselves. That's Judah… ָדה ּ ְהו י ּכּר ַ וַי– Judah recognized.

David: But that story doesn't end there. Judah may have begun a transformation, he may have begun to correct the flaws of his father and brothers. But his family's in shambles. He ruined relationships, Jacob's mourning, and his brother Joseph's a slave in Egypt. How can Judah and his brothers begin to put the pieces back together?

Immanuel: Join us next week on the Parsha Experiment.



**PARSHAT VAYEISHEV:**

**A Pattern**

**Joseph's... Groundhog Day?**

This guide corresponds to the video: [Joseph's... Groundhog Day?](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/life-of-joseph)

**SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE**

* 1. Parshat Vayeishev launches us into the Joseph story – it’s a saga that will occupy us for the rest of the Book of Genesis.
     1. It’s got all these really interesting parts to it: Joseph’s early life; his sale as a slave – a little cameo involving Judah and his involvement with Tamar – then, back to Joseph and his rise to prominence in the house of Potiphar; the story of how Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him and ultimately frames him and sends him to prison; then, Joseph’s encounter with Pharaoh, his becoming viceroy over all of Egypt, and so on. So, these are the vignettes comprise the surface story of the text.

Guide by Dr. Sarah Levy

* + 1. But I want to share with you something that may be going on *underneath* the surface of the text. A pattern that seems to permeate a vast expanse of this story. I want to share the pattern with you – and ponder what it might mean.
  1. So this pattern, if its right to call it that, starts in chapter 38, right after the story of the Sale of Joseph begins.
     1. In many ways, this chapter is actually the most perplexing chapter in the entire book of Genesis, just because… it seems so entirely out of place.
     2. I mean, there’s this horrific, terrible story going on…Brothers jump their brother, kidnap him and engineer his sale as a slave. They cover it all up by putting blood on his coat and suggesting to their father that his beloved son has been ripped to pieces. And then BANG all of a sudden, the Torah just hits the pause button on that story, leaving us completely hanging as to what happens to these people. To Joseph, the victim. To the band of brothers who did this, to father who’s grieving – and instead, the Torah launches us into just an extended digression that seems to have nothing to do with anything: The story of Judah and Tamar.
  2. So what happens in that story of Judah and Tamar?
     1. Well, it’s lengthy but here’s the basic gist of it: Yehudah has three sons. The oldest of his sons, Er, marries a woman by the name of Tamar. Er- he dies young and he’s childless, so it falls to Onan, the next oldest child of Judah, to marry Tamar, and hopefully, have children, in order to carry on the name of the deceased Er. But Onan isn’t interested, and before you know it, God does away with him – leaving only the last child of Judah, Shelah, who could possibly marry Tamar and give birth to a child that would extend Er’s legacy.
     2. So you see what I mean about this seeming like a digression. But now, keep on reading, because at this point, all sorts of strange things start happening. For our purposes, let’s just say there’s a disguise, there’s an act of seduction – and along the way, Yehudah finds himself promising a goat to Tamar. But, he doesn’t happen to have a goat handy, so he gives her his coat, as collateral.



* + 1. So it’s certainly an intriguing story, this episode involving Yehudah and Tamar. But of course, what, in blazes, does it have to do with the story of Joseph? Why is this story even here?
  1. Well, here might be the beginnings of an answer. This whole story of Judah and Tamar, this supposed digression, it *does* have something to do with the Sale of Joseph.
     1. The key to the puzzle is: “No goat. Coat?” You see, Judah, in the Tamar story, he finds himself dealing with goats and coats.
     2. Later, at the very end of the story, Tamar – who’s got Judah’s coat – challenges him to recognize whether the coat is his, asking him: *haker na,* do you recognize this coat?
  2. Well, we’ve heard all that before.
     1. Because Judah had once *before*, had dealt with goats and coats. He had done so back in the sale of Joseph.
     2. In that story, Judah and the brothers had stripped Joseph of his coat; then, they slaughtered a goat and put its blood on that coat, sending it to their father. And as they did that, what did they ask father? *Haker na,* ‘Do you recognize this coat?’
  3. It’s a remarkable series of connections. And the truth is, it’s just the beginning.
     1. This is really just scratching the surface of the connections between the story of Yehudah and Tamar and the Joseph story, time doesn’t allow me to go into all of them now.
     2. But trust me, manifold connections are there.
     3. But suffice it say, for the time being, that we might be seeing the beginning of a pattern. The pattern kinda goes like this. There’s this terrible story, the sale of Joseph. But it seems to be repeating itself, somehow, in the very next episode. So now I want you to go to the third episode in the Joseph saga, and let’s examine whether this pattern of repetition sort of continues. The third episode involves Joseph’s interactions in Egypt, in the House of Potiphar.

**It Happens a Second Time, Too**

1. So just to summarize this third episode: Yosef has been sold off as a slave to Egypt, and has entered the house of Potiphar, an Egyptian nobleman. And Yosef earns the complete trust of his master, he puts him in charge of the whole house.
   1. But then that trust is put to the test when Yosef is faced with advances from Potiphar’s wife.
   2. Yosef resists, and when she won’t take no for an answer, she grabs hold of his coat. In a split second he makes this choice. He slips out of his coat, and runs outside. And Mrs. Potiphar, enraged, turns the situation around.
   3. Using the coat in her hands as evidence, false evidence. She lodges an accusation of attempted rape against Yosef. Yosef is condemned to the royal dungeons, where he languishes for many long years.
   4. All right, so that’s the story... does any of this remind you of anything we’ve heard before?
2. Well, of course it certainly does. Just ask: When *else* does Yosef occupy a similar position of responsibility in a household – second in charge to the man of the house?
   1. When *else* does Yosef face a crisis, brought about by other members of that household? When else does he lose a coat? When else do adversaries of his use the coat as false evidence, and lie about him to the master of the house? When else is Yosef condemned to go in a veritable hole in the ground afterwards?



* 1. Well, the answer of course, to all that is clear. All this happened in the story of Yosef’s sale, of course.

1. So, it really *does* seem like there’s this pattern going on here, right?
   1. You know, first we found that the supposed digression involving Yehudah and Tamar wasn’t really a digression; instead, it seemed like this repetition of these things that happened back when Joseph was sold.
   2. But now, its larger than just that: All this stuff that’s happening between Potiphar, Mrs. Potiphar and Joseph in the very next story – that, *too*, feels like a big replay of the story with the pit!
   3. And so it sort of seems like there’s this kind of pattern happening.
2. If it’s really a pattern… you’d expect it to happen again, right?
   1. As the old saying goes, once is an accident, twice is a coincidence, and three times… is a pattern. So… does all this happen a third time?
   2. Well, I’m glad you asked. Because, as it happens, it does.

### Pharaoh

1. Let’s look at what happens after Joseph gets thrown in the dungeon by Potiphar. The next major story in the Joseph saga is about how Joseph gets *out* of that dungeon. Here’s basically what happens.
   1. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, he’s experiencing these disturbing dreams. And searching for an interpretation that feels right to him, he hears of this young guy who’d been imprisoned, who happens to have a knack at understanding dreams.
   2. So Pharaoh wastes no time in calling for Joseph.
   3. But here’s the thing: Joseph wasn’t, really, strictly speaking, *in* a pit. The Hebrew term back when Potiphar put him in those dungeons was *beit hasohar:* a jail. But now the Hebrew has changed. The *beit hasohar* was gone and all of a sudden, Joseph was in… a pit, a *bor*.
2. Well… was Joseph ever in a pit?
   1. He sure was. Thirteen years ago, his brothers threw him in a pit. It seems as if the Torah is somehow intentionally blurring the narratives here.
   2. But let’s continue with the Pharaoh story. What happens right after Pharaoh extricates Joseph from that prison? After he takes a haircut, Joseph gets this change of clothes. He gets to wear these nice, beautiful new clothes.
   3. Well, does *that* remind you of anything that happened back in the Sale of Joseph? And of course, it sure does. Right before the brothers threw him in that pit, what did they do? They forcibly stripped Joseph of his beautiful coat of many colors...
3. Oh. So events are taking place now that seem to remind us of events that took place thirteen years ago back at the pit.
   1. Except things are different now. Things are somehow… reversed. You see, the first time around, Joseph got thrown in a pit. Now he leaves one.
   2. The first time around, he lost his clothes. Now he gets some. Back at the pit, Joseph *first*

lost his clothes and then was thrown in a pit.

* 1. Now, first he gets taken out of a pit and *then* he gets these new clothes. So it’s all kind of a reverse. And then this change in fortune continues…because look the next thing that happens between Joseph and Pharaoh.

1. Here is Pharaoh, this ultimate authority figure, and he is beckoning for Joseph to come to him… and Joseph in fact comes.



* 1. And think about the reverse of that event. It would be... An authority figure sends *away*

Joseph. Which, of course, is *exactly* what happened thirteen years ago.

* 1. Because right before Joseph was thrown into that pit, right before he lost his clothes… father had actually sent him away from him, on that ill-fated mission to go check on his brothers.

1. Next what happens? Pharaoh calls to Joseph and says: “I had this dream,” and I need you to interpret it for me.
   1. Of course, thirteen years ago, that remind you of something. It reminds you of something that happened right before father sent Joseph away. Right before that, Joseph had told Jacob about his dreams.
   2. And here too, of course, it is kind of a ‘reverse’: You see, the reverse of a father figure telling a dream to Joseph... would be Joseph telling a dream to father figure like he does with Jacob. Moreover, Pharaoh thinks his dream is inscrutable
   3. Well, the reverse of a dream that is impossible to interpret is… one whose interpretation is glaringly self-evident; so obvious that it doesn’t even need interpretation. Which was *exactly* the kind of dream everyone thought Joseph had had thirteen years ago… a dream of the sun and moon. *Very subtle Joseph.* It seemed so *obvious* what that meant: A father, mother, and eleven siblings, all bowing to Joseph. *Did Joseph want to be ruler over the family, father had caustically asked him?*

### What Does it All Mean?

1. So again, just sort of stand back and look at the whole picture here. It seems almost indisputable that the events of the sale of Joseph are just occurring again and again, in various iterations, throughout Parshat Vayeshev, extending into at least the beginning of Parshat Miketz.
   1. It happens with Judah and Tamar, it happens with the story of Potiphar, and it happens with the story of Pharaoh. The question is: why.
   2. I want to offer you a theory to you about that now – and I want to try and elaborate that theory for you, next week.

### Groundhog Day

1. I’d like to suggest, by way of analogy, that a “Groundhog Day” scenario might be playing itself out here.
   1. In Groundhog Day, a film released a good while back, a charming, but flawed weatherman, finds himself trapped in time, condemned to relive the events of a particular day, over and over again – until somehow, at some point, he can get things right, and return to normal life.
   2. Something *like* that seems to be happening in the Joseph saga. And ground zero in these Groundhog Day replays… is the episode of the Sale of Yosef.
2. In other words: Things went wrong in the Sale of Yosef. Badly, catastrophically, wrong.
   1. And the catastrophe- it wasn’t really owned by one particular person or even group of people.
   2. You see, it’s not just the brothers who are responsible for what happens. Sure, they bear direct responsibility. The brothers are the ones who kidnap Joseph and plot to sell him as a slave. But… at some level, *everyone* shares *some* degree of responsibility, greater or smaller. No one escapes.
   3. The Torah goes out of its way to tell us, for example, that Yaakov favored Joseph, leading the brothers to hate him. So Yaakov contributed in some way, here. And Yoseph, he too, contributed to the cataclysm.



* 1. Because back when he’s shepherding with his brothers, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us something about him: he brings back these bad reports about them to father.
  2. And that, of course, gives the brothers additional reasons to hate him.

1. Somehow, all this combines to create a perfect storm of sorts – a scenario so ghastly, that before it happened, hardly anyone in the family could have possibly imagined it actually transpiring: The Sale of Joseph.
   1. So… what happens after the sale of Joseph? Evidently, *Groundhog Day is what happens next.* Groundhog Day is a kind of *curse* for our erstwhile weatherman – he’s locked in this day; it is his prison in time, as it were – but it is also an *opportunity for him*: An opportunity to replay, as it were, a badly imperfect series of events… with the possibility of actually redeeming those events.
   2. It is a real second chance. And here, in Parshat Vayeishev, maybe that is exactly what is happening: Some of the key players in this original cataclysm get a chance to revisit their roles, and see if somehow they can ‘replay the day’ in a way that works better.
   3. Can they somehow redeem the past through their present actions?
2. Now, how, *exactly*, do these Groundhog Day scenarios work to redeem events of the past?
   1. That is a very intriguing question, and I’ll try and give you my answer to that next week.
   2. But in the meantime, if this theory is correct – I think we can say with confidence that one very important thing is true: in the Joseph story, even as each human being pursues his or her narrowly defined goal, there seems to be another hand working: the hand of fate, or the Hand of heaven.
   3. Events are mysteriously conspiring to give human beings a second chance to somehow fix some of the greatest mistakes they’ve ever made in their lives. It is an astounding, but awe-inspiring, phenomenon in our history. It is a phenomenon that bequeaths hope.
3. Do *we* get second chances, in our own lives?
   1. Does God give *us* these sorts of opportunities, too?
   2. Do we sometimes find ourselves locked in what seems our own ‘prisons of time,’ only to discover, years later, that the prison was less a prison than an opportunity; that we’ve been given the chance to fix something?
   3. I’ll let each of you answer that very personal question for yourselves. But next week, I aim to continue our journey through the Joseph story, to try to sift through these events, to find a deeper meaning and give you a sense of how the Torah’s version of Groundhog Day may be playing itself out and what it might mean.



Hi everybody, this is Rabbi David Fohrman, and welcome to Parshat Vayeishev. You are watching [Aleph Beta](https://www.alephbeta.org/).

Parshat Vayeishev launches us into the Joseph story – it’s a saga that will occupy us for the rest of the [Book of Genesis](https://www.alephbeta.org/torah/genesis).

The Timeline of

Joseph's

Life

Story

It’s got all these really interesting parts to it:

Joseph’s early life; his sale as a slave;

a little cameo involving Judah and his involvement with Tamar;

then, back to Joseph and his rise to prominence in the house of Potiphar;

the story of how Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him and ultimately frames him and sends him to prison;

then, Joseph’s encounter with Pharaoh, his becoming viceroy over all of Egypt, and so on.

So, these are the vignettes comprise the surface story of the text.

But I want to share with you something that may be going on underneath the surface of the text. A pattern that seems to permeate a vast expanse of this story. I want to share the pattern with you – and ponder what it might mean.

Connections to

Joseph's

Life in the Bible

So this pattern, if its right to call it that, starts in chapter 38, right after the story of the Sale of Joseph begins. In many ways, this chapter is actually the most perplexing chapter in the [entire Book of Genesis](https://www.alephbeta.org/torah/genesis), just because… it seems so entirely out of place.

I mean, there’s this horrific, terrible story going on… Brothers jump their brother, kidnap him and engineer his sale as a slave. They cover it all up by putting blood on his coat, and suggesting to their father that his beloved son has been ripped to pieces. And then BANG all of a sudden, the Torah just hits the pause button on that story, leaving us completely hanging as to what happens to these people – to Joseph, the victim; to the band of brothers who did this; to father who’s grieving – and instead, the Torah launches us into just an extended digression that seems to have nothing to do with anything: The story of Judah and Tamar.

So what happens in that story of Judah and Tamar? Well, it's lengthy but here’s the basic gist of it: Yehudah has three sons. The oldest of his sons, Er, marries a woman by the name of Tamar. Er, he dies young and he’s childless, so it falls to Onan, the next oldest child of Judah, to marry Tamar and hopefully have children, in order to carry on the name of the deceased Er.

But Onan isn’t interested, and before you know it, God does away with him – leaving only the last child of Judah, Shelah, who could possibly marry Tamar and give birth to a child that would extend Er’s legacy.

So you see what I mean about this seeming like a digression. But now, keep on reading, because at this point, all sorts of strange things start happening. For our purposes, let’s just say there’s a disguise, there’s an act of seduction, and along the way, Yehudah finds himself promising a goat to Tamar. But, he doesn’t happen to have a goat handy, so he gives her his coat, as collateral.

So it’s certainly an intriguing story, this episode involving Yehudah and Tamar. But of course, what, in blazes, does it have to do with the story of Joseph? Why is this story even here?

Well, here might be the beginnings of an answer. This whole story of Judah and Tamar, this supposed digression, it does have something to do with the Sale of Joseph. The key to the puzzle is: “No goat.

Coat?”

You see, Judah, in the Tamar story, he finds himself dealing with goats and coats. Later, at the very end of the story, Tamar – who’s got Judah’s coat – challenges him to recognize whether the coat is his, asking him: haker na, do you recognize this coat?

Going

Back

Through

Joseph's

Life Timeline

Well, we’ve heard all that before. Because Judah had once, before, had dealt with goats and coats. He had done so back in the Sale of Joseph.

In that story, Judah and the brothers had stripped Joseph of his coat; then, they slaughtered a goat and put its blood on that coat, sending it to their father. And as they did that, what did they ask father? Haker na, ‘Do you recognize this coat?’

It’s a remarkable series of connections. And the truth is, it’s just the beginning. This is really just scratching the surface of the connections between the story of Yehudah and Tamar and the Joseph story.

Time doesn’t allow me to go into all of them now. But trust me, manifold connections are there. If you’d like to see them, check on the whole course on this at Aleph Beta – there are links below to it.

But suffice to say, for the time being, that we might be seeing the beginning of a pattern. The pattern kinda goes like this. There’s this terrible story, the sale of Joseph. But it seems to be repeating itself, somehow, in the very next episode.

So now I want you to go to the third episode in the Joseph saga, and let’s examine whether this pattern of repetition sort of continues. The third episode involves Joseph’s interactions in Egypt, in the House of Potiphar.

It Happens Again in

Joseph's

Life

So just to summarize this third episode: Yosef has been sold of f as a slave to Egypt, and has entered the house of Potiphar, an Egyptian nobleman. And Yosef earns the complete trust of his master, he puts him in charge of the whole house. But then that trust is put to the test when Yosef is faced with advances from Potiphar’s wife.

Yosef resists, and when she won’t take no for an answer, she grabs hold of his coat. In a split second, he makes this choice: he slips out of his coat and runs outside. And Mrs. Potiphar, enraged, turns the situation around.

Using the coat in her hands as evidence, false evidence, she lodges an accusation of attempted rape against Yosef. Yosef is condemned to the royal dungeons, where he languishes for many long years.

All right, so that’s the story... does any of this remind you of anything we’ve heard before?

Well, of course it certainly does. Just ask: When else does Yosef occupy a similar position of responsibility in a household, second in charge to the man of the house? When else does Yosef face a crisis, brought about by other members of that household? When else does he lose a coat? When else do adversaries of his use the coat as false evidence, and lie about him to the master of the house? When else is Yosef condemned to go in a veritable hole in the ground afterwards?

Well, the answer of course to all that is clear. All this happened in the story of Yosef’s sale, of course.

So, it really does seem like there’s this pattern going on here, right? You know, first we found that the supposed digression involving Yehudah and Tamar wasn’t really a digression; instead, it seemed like this repetition of these things that happened back when Joseph was sold.

But now, it's larger than just that: All this stuff that’s happening between Potiphar, Mrs. Potiphar and Joseph in the very next story that, too, feels like a big replay of the story with the pit! And so it sort of seems like there’s this kind of pattern happening.

If it’s really a pattern… you’d expect it to happen again, right? As the old saying goes, once is an accident, twice is a coincidence and three times… is a pattern. So… does all this happen a third time?

Well, I’m glad you asked. Because, as it happens, it does.

The Pharaoh Chapter in

Joseph's

Life Timeline

Let’s look at what happens after Joseph gets thrown in the dungeon by Potiphar. The next major story in the Joseph saga is about how Joseph gets out of that dungeon. Here’s basically what happens.

Pharaoh, king of Egypt, he’s experiencing these disturbing dreams. And searching for an interpretation

that feels right to him, he hears of this young guy who’d been imprisoned, who happens to have a knack at understanding dreams. So Pharaoh wastes no time in calling for Joseph and:

וַי ִ ּשְׁלַח ַפרעֹה וַי ִ ּקרא אֶת יוסֵף, וַי ְ ִריצֻהו ּמִן הַבּור

Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and pulled him out of the pit.

But here’s the thing: Joseph wasn’t, really, strictly speaking, in a pit. The Hebrew term back when Potiphar put him in those dungeons was beit hasohar: a jail. But now the Hebrew has changed. The beit hasohar was gone and all of a sudden, Joseph was in… a pit, a bor.

Well… was Joseph ever in a pit? He sure was. Thirteen years ago, his brothers threw him in a pit. It seems as if the Torah is somehow intentionally blurring the narratives here.

But let’s kinda continue with the Pharaoh story. What happens right after Pharaoh extricates Joseph from that prison? The text tells us:

וַי ְג ַלַּח֙ וַי ְחלּ֣ף שִׂמְלֹתָ֔יו

After he takes a haircut, Joseph gets this change of clothes.

He gets to wear these nice, beautiful new clothes. Well, does that remind you of anything that happened back in the Sale of Joseph?

And of course, it sure does. Right before the brothers threw him in that pit, what did they do? They forcibly stripped Joseph of his beautiful coat of many colors...

Oh. So events are taking place now that seem to remind us of events that took place 13 years ago back at the pit. Except things are also kind of different now. Things are somehow… reversed.

Back at the pit, Joseph first lost his clothes and then was thrown in a pit. Now, first he gets taken out of a pit and then he gets these new clothes. So it’s all kind of a reverse. And then this change in fortune continues… because look the next thing that happens between Joseph and Pharaoh.

וַי ָ ּבֹ֖א פַרעֹֽהאֶל־

And Joseph came before Pharaoh.

Here is Pharaoh, this ultimate authority figure, and he is beckoning for Joseph to come to him… and Joseph in fact comes. And think about the reverse of that event. It would be... an authority figure sends away Joseph.

Which, of course, is exactly what happened 13 years ago. Because right before Joseph was thrown into

that pit, right before he lost his clothes… father had actually sent him away from him, on that ill-fated mission to go check on his brothers.

Next what happens? Pharaoh calls to Joseph and says: “I had this dream,” and I need you to interpret it for me. Of course, 13 years ago, that reminds you of something. It reminds you of something that happened right before father sent Joseph away.

Right before that, Joseph had told Jacob about his dreams. And here too, of course, it is kind of a ‘reverse:’ You see, the reverse of a father figure telling a dream to Joseph... would be Joseph telling a dream to father figure, like he does with Jacob. Moreover, Pharaoh thinks his dream is inscrutable:

dream. my interpret can one no –חֲל֣ום חָלַ֔מְתִּי ו ּפת ֖ר א ֣ין אֹת֑ו

Well, of course, the reverse of a dream that is impossible to interpret would be one whose interpretation is glaringly self-evident; so obvious that it doesn’t even need interpretation. Which was exactly the kind of dream everyone thought Joseph had had 13 years ago… his dream of the sun and moon and 11 stars, all bowing before Joseph. Very subtle Joseph.

It seems so obvious what that means: A father, mother, and 11 siblings, all bowing to you. Did Joseph want to be ruler over the family, father had caustically asked him?

What Is the

Lesson

Behind

Joseph's

Repetitive Life Events?

So again, just sort of stand back and look at the whole picture here. It seems almost indisputable that the events of the Sale of Joseph are just occurring again and again, in various iterations, throughout Parshat Vayeishev, extending into at least the beginning of Parshat Miketz. It happens with Judah and Tamar, it happens with the story of Potiphar, and it happens with the story of Pharaoh.

The question is: why. I want to offer you a theory to you about that now – and I want to try and elaborate that theory for you, next week.

I’d like to suggest, by way of analogy, that a “Groundhog Day” scenario might be playing itself out here. In "Groundhog Day," a film released a good while back, a charming, but flawed weatherman, finds himself trapped in time, condemned to relive the events of a particular day, over and over again – until somehow, at some point, he can get things right, and return to normal life.

Something like that seems to be happening in the Joseph saga. And ground zero in these "Groundhog Day" replays… is the episode of the Sale of Yosef.

In other words: Things went wrong in the Sale of Yosef – badly, catastrophically, wrong. And the catastrophe, it wasn’t really owned by one particular person or even a group of people.

You see, it’s not just the brothers who are responsible for what happens. Sure, they bear direct responsibility. The brothers are the ones who kidnap Joseph and plot to sell him as a slave. But… at some

level, everyone shares some degree of responsibility, greater or smaller. No one escapes.

The Torah goes out of its way to tell us, for example, that Yaakov favored Joseph, leading the brothers to hate him: .ּאֹת֑ו ְא֖ו ּשׂנ ִ ֽי וַ אֶחָ֔יומִכָּל־ אֲבִיהֶם֙ ֤ב אָה אֹת֞וכִּֽי־ ּאֶחָ֗יו ְרא֣ו ּ ִ וַיThe brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more – so they hated him. So Yaakov contributed in some way, here.

And Yoseph, he too, contributed to the cataclysm. Because back when he’s shepherding with his

brothers, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us something about him: אֶל־,ֽם אֲבִיה ֖ה רע אֶת־

דּבָּת ֥ם

ס ֛ף

יו ֥א ֵב ּ ָ וַיhe brings back these bad reports about them to father. And that, of course, gives the

brothers additional reasons to hate him.

Somehow, all this combines to create a perfect storm of sorts – a scenario so ghastly, that before it happened, hardly anyone in the family could have possibly imagined it actually transpiring: The Sale of Joseph.

So… what happens after the sale of Joseph? Evidently, Groundhog Day is what happens next. The Principles Behind Joseph's Groundhog Day

Groundhog Day is a kind of curse for our erstwhile weatherman – he’s locked in this day; it is his prison in time, as it were. But it is also an opportunity for him: An opportunity to replay, as it were, a badly imperfect series of events… with the possibility of actually redeeming those events. It is a real second chance.

And here, in Parshat Vayeishev, maybe that is exactly what is happening: Some of the key players in this original cataclysm get a chance to revisit their roles and see if somehow they can ‘replay the day’ in a way that works better. Can they somehow redeem the past through their present actions?

Now, how, exactly, do these Groundhog Day scenarios work to redeem events of the past? That is a very intriguing question, and I’ll try and give you my answer to that next week. But in the meantime, if this theory is correct, I think we can say with confidence that one very important thing is true: in the Joseph story, even as each human being pursues his or her narrowly defined goal, there seems to be another hand working: the hand of fate, or the Hand of heaven.

Events are mysteriously conspiring to give human beings a second chance to somehow fix some of the greatest mistakes they’ve ever made in their lives. It is an astounding, but awe-inspiring, phenomenon in our history. It is a phenomenon that bequeaths hope.

Do we get second chances, in our own lives? Does God give us these sorts of opportunities, too? Do we sometimes find ourselves locked in what seems our own ‘prisons of time’, only to discover, years later, that the prison was less a prison than an opportunity, that we’ve been given the chance to fix something?

I’ll let each of you answer that very personal question for yourselves. But next week, I aim to continue

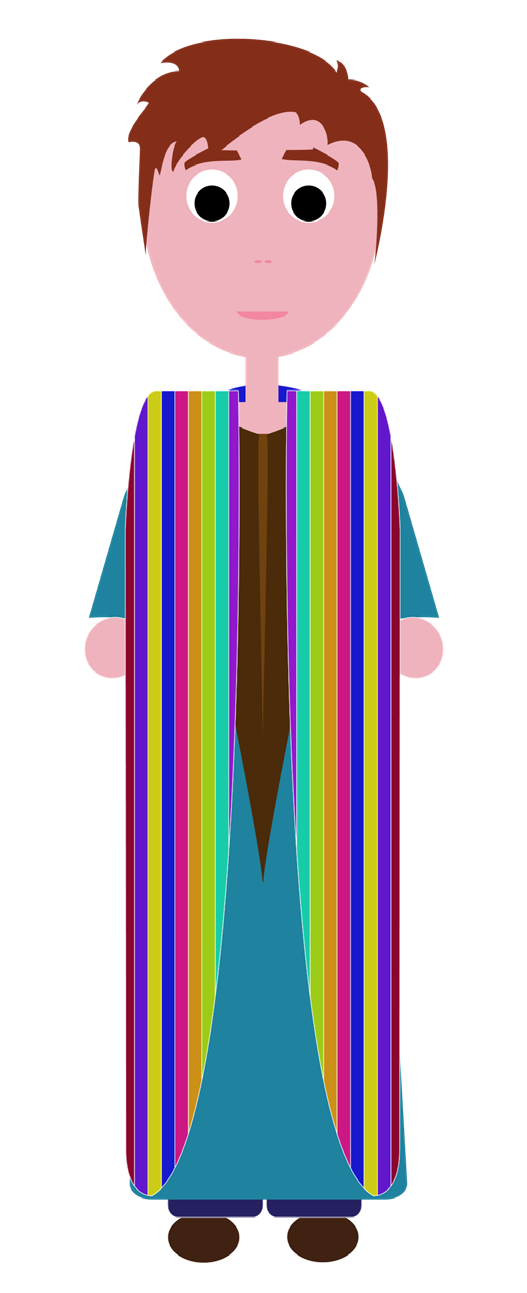
our journey through the Joseph story, to try to sift through these event, to find a deeper meaning and give you a sense of how the Torah’s version of Groundhog Day may be playing itself out and what it might mean. I’ll see you then.

Watch the next video – From Pit To Palace: The Meaning Of Joseph's Groundhog Day



**MIKETZ: DOES GOD SPEAK TO US TODAY? PART II**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Miketz!

This guide is the second in a four-part series, which deals with *Parshat Vayeishev* through *Parshat Vayechi*: the whole of the epic Joseph story.

**Picking Up Where We Left Off**

In last week’s guide to Parshat *Vayeishev*, we left you with a bit of a puzzle. We were wondering if God ever communicates to us without actually speaking, and we were looking at the Joseph story, hoping that it might serve as a model of this sort of “non-prophetic communication,” as it were. Were there instances in Joseph’s life in which God was speaking to him without *speaking*? We thought that Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams might be one such instance, and we made the point that there was really only *one* piece of information that Joseph needed in order to interpret the dream: that the cows that Pharaoh was dreaming about represented *years*. Once Joseph had that information, he could piece together the meaning of the whole rest of the dream. But how did Joseph know that key piece of information? How did he know that *cows equaled years*? We raised the possibility that maybe — just maybe — God was able to embed a clue in the dream itself, a clue that only Joseph would understand. But what was the clue?

In order to see it, we’re going to have to back up and return to the beginning of the story of Joseph and Pharaoh. We want to put some intriguing observations on the table, to unearth a pattern in the text and explore what it may mean — for we think *that* is the only way to arrive at an answer.

# Back To The Verses

**Genesis 41:14-15**

**14** And Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they

**בראשית מא:יד–טו**

**יד** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַּפ ְרעֹה ַו ִ ּי ְק ָרא ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף, ַו ְי ִרי ֻצהו ִמן-ה ּב ֹור; ַו ְי ַג ַּלח

brought him hastily out of the dungeon. And he shaved

ׂש ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ ּיבא ֶאל- ּפ ְרעֹה. **טו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ַּפ ְרעֹה, ֶאל-י ֹו ֵסף,

ו ְי ַח ֵּלף

himself, and changed his raiment, and he came in unto

פ ֵתר ֵאין אֹת ֹו; ַו ֲא ִני, ׁ ָש ַמ ְע ִּתי ָע ֶליָך ֵלאמֹר,

ַל ְמ ִּתי, ּו ח

חל ֹום

Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: ‘I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it; and I have heard say of thee, that when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it.’

ְפ ּתֹר אֹת ֹו. ל

ֹום, חל

ִת ׁ ְש ַמע

**INSTRUCTIONS**

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life’s biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That’s why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we’ll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you’re planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the “Source Sheet” for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

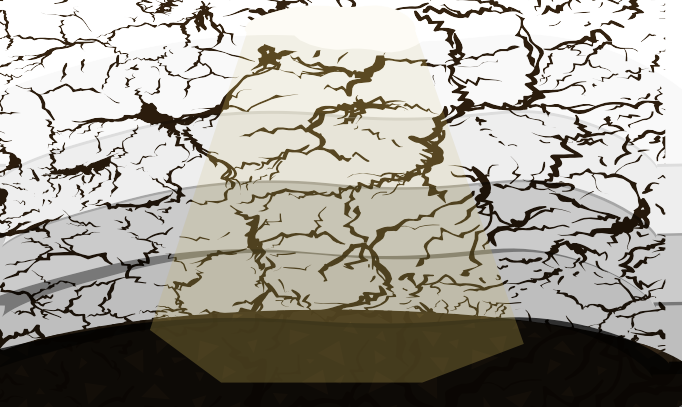
Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, “Parshat Miketz: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part II” (available for viewing at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org/)). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

If you are a Hebrew reader, look closely at verse 14 and ask yourself: Are there any unusual words used here?

How about the word which describes where Joseph was taken from? It is described as ֹור ּב הַ. What does ֹור ּב הַ mean? It’s translated above as “the dungeon,” but literally, it means “the pit.” That’s a strange word to use to describe a jail. (The



Lorem ipsum



more straightforward term for “jail” is ּסֹהַר הַ ּבית — and that,

indeed, is the word that is used throughout the narrative, until this point.) So why does the Torah use this odd turn of phrase, ֹור ּב הַ? Why does it say that Joseph was taken out of a “pit,” when he was really being lifted from a jail? Well, it seems that the text is urging us to remember that there was *another* time when Joseph was in a pit. When was that time?

It was thirteen years earlier, when his brothers threw him into one:

**Genesis 37:23-24**

**בראשית כג**–**כד**

**23** And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto

ּכאֲ ׁ ֶשר- ָבּא י ֹוסֵף אֶל-אֶ ָחיו; ַו ַ ּיפְ ׁ ִשיט ּו אֶת-י ֹוסֵף אֶת-

**כג** ו ְיהִי,

his brethren, that they stripped Joseph of his coat, the

ֻכּ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו, אֶת- ְכּתֹ ֶנת הַ ַּפ ִּסים אֲ ׁ ֶשר עָ ָליו. **כד** ו ִ ּי ָּקחֻה ּו--וַ ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו

coat of many colours that was on him; **24** and they took him, and cast him into **the pit**--and **the pit** was empty, there was no water in it.

**ה ּ ֹברָה; ְוהַ ּב ֹור**רֵק, אֵין בּ ֹו מָ ִים

.אֹת ֹו,

How very strange! With these two uses of the unusual word ֹור ּב הַ, it almost seems that the Torah is purposefully *blurring the lines* between these two stories.

But maybe we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Is there anything else about this story with Joseph and Pharaoh that harkens back, mysteriously, to Joseph’s encounter with his brothers at the pit? Well, if you look at Genesis 41:15 above, you’ll see that the next thing to happen in this story with Pharaoh, is that Joseph gets a haircut and a change of clothes. Does that remind you of anything that happened at the pit?

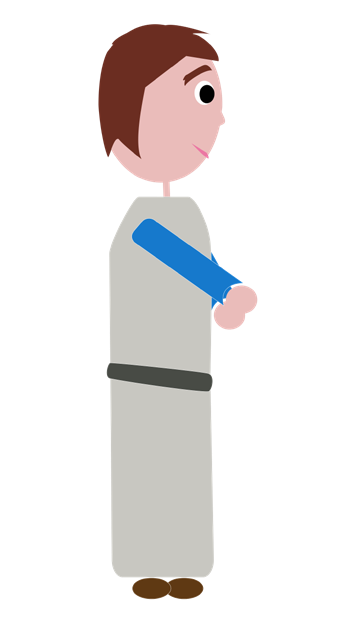
It certainly does:

**Genesis 37:23**

ַו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו ֶאת-י ֹו ֵסף ֶאת- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו

They stripped Joseph of his coat

Thirteen years ago, Joseph had his clothes removed and then was thrown into a pit. Now, before Pharaoh, Joseph is pulled out of the “pit” and given a set of nice new clothes.



Not only are we finding these intriguing parallels between the two stories — pit/pit, clothes/clothes — but there’s a real richness to the pattern, for everything is happening in the *reverse* chronological order. At the pit, it was first clothes and then pit. Now, in Egypt, it’s pit and then clothes.

And it’s not just the reverse *chronological* order. The meanings of these events are inversions of one another, too; they are kind of mirror images. What do we mean? Well, the first time around, Joseph’s prized coat was *taken* from him. Now, it’s the opposite: he’s given a beautiful new coat to wear. The first time around, he was *cast into a pit.* Now, the opposite: he is *lifted out.*

It’s intriguing, but... this pattern of reverse chronology and reverse meanings: does it continue? If it does, then we should be able to find more parallels. Let’s see if we can do just that.

# Pit, Clothes, and… ?

In the Egypt story, after Joseph is lifted from the pit and given new clothes, what happens?

**Genesis 41:14**

בא ֶאל- ּפ ְרעֹה.

ו ָ ּי

and he came in unto Pharaoh

Joseph is described as *coming* to this man, this authority figure. What’s the opposite of that? The opposite of “coming to” is “being sent away from.” Does anything like that happen thirteen years prior? Does it ever happen that a man, an authority figure, *sends Joseph away*? Before Joseph was thrown into the pit, before he lost his clothes?

**Genesis 37:13–14**

**בראשית לז:יג–יד**

**13** And Israel said unto Joseph: ‘Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto them.’ And he said to him: ‘Here am I.’ **14** And he

הל ֹוא ַא ֶחיָך רֹ ִעים ּב ׁ ְש ֶכם-- ְל ָכה, **יד** ו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו, ֶל ְך-נא ְר ֵאהה ֵּנ ִני.

ה ּצֹאן, ַו ֲה ׁ ִש ֵב ִני, ָ ּד ָבר; **ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ָלחֵה ּו**

**יג** ו ּיֹא ֶמר ִי ְׂש ָר ֵאל ֶאל-י ֹו ֵסף,

ו ֶא ׁ ְש ָל ֲחָך ֲא ֵלי ֶהם; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו, ׁשל ֹום ַא ֶחיָך ְו ֶאת- ׁשל ֹום את-

said to him: ‘Go now, see whether it is well with thy brethren, and well with the flock; and bring me back word.’ So **he sent him** out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

בא ׁ ְש ֶכ ָמה.

ח ְבר ֹון, ַו ָ ּי

מ ֵע ֶמק

An authority figure — Pharaoh — calls him in; an authority figure — Jacob — sends him away. The parallels do indeed continue.

And that’s not even the end of it. What is the very next thing to happen *after* Joseph comes before Pharaoh? Pharaoh essentially says to Joseph: “I had this dream, and I need an interpreter - for it is inscrutable, impossible to understand.” In the earlier story of Joseph in the pit — before Joseph’s brothers cast him in, before they strip off his clothes, before his father sends him away — where do we hear about a *dream*? Specifically: a dream whose meaning is so obvious that no one needs to interpret it, because it speaks for itself?

Of course: that’s precisely what we find at the start of the first story:

**Genesis 37:6-7**

ה ָּׂש ֶדה, ְו ִה ֵּנה ָק ָמה ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי, ְו ַגם-נ ָ ּצ ָבה; ְו ִה ֵּנה

ֹו ְך ּבת

ִה ֵּנה ֲא ַנ ְחנ ּו ְמ ַא ְּל ִמים ֲא ֻל ִּמים, ח ָל ְמ ִּתי. ְו

ה ֶ ּזה ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֲחל ֹום ה

ִש ְמע ּו-נא,

ְת ֻס ֶּבי ָנה ֲא ֻל ּמֹ ֵתי ֶכם, ַו ִּת ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֶויןָ ַל ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי.

‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.’

**Genesis 37:9**

לי.

כ ֹו ָכ ִבים, ִמ ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ִוים

ה ׁ ֶּש ֶמ ׁש ְו ַה ָ ּי ֵר ַח ְו ַא ַחד ָע ָׂשר

ֹום ע ֹוד, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל

ַל ְמ ִּתי ח

ה ֵּנה

Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.

Joseph had these two dreams — about the sheaves of wheat bowing down; about the sun, moon, and stars bowing down — and their meaning seemed so *obvious*. It’s another reversal: one set of inscrutable dreams, and one set of obvious ones.

In fact, there are other “mirror images” here: in the Joseph and Pharaoh story, how does Pharaoh relate to Joseph? He wants to talk to him about dreams. Thirteen years ago, Jacob didn’t want to hear anything about dreams:

**Genesis 37:10**

ָל ְמ ָּת ח

ה ֶ ּזה ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֲחל ֹום ה

ו ְי ַס ֵּפר ֶאל-א ִביו, ְו ֶאל-א ָחיו, ַו ִ ּי ְג ַער-ב ֹו ָא ִביו, ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו ָמה

And he [Joseph] told it to his father, and to his brethren; and his father rebuked him, and said unto him: ‘What is this dream that thou hast dreamed?

And here is one last intriguing detail. When Pharaoh tells Joseph about his dream, his language is:

**Genesis 41:15**

**ח ַלמְ ִּתי**

**חֲ ל ֹום**

**A dream I have dreamt**

Do you know what Joseph’s language was, thirteen years before?

**Genesis 37:9**

**ָח ַלמְ ִּתחיֲ ל ֹום**

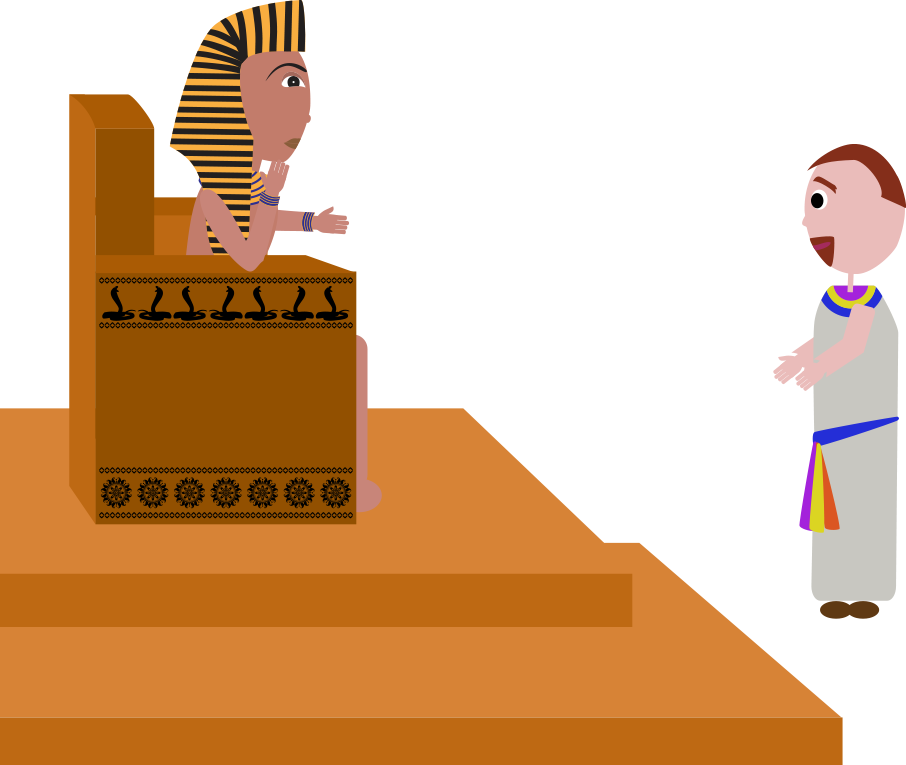
**I dreamt a dream**

It’s the same thing backwards.

# Not A Figment Of Our Imagination

When you add it all up, it doesn’t really seem like a coincidence or a figment of our imagination. The Torah really does seem to be connecting these two stories for us, posing these reverse parallels between them. It seems to suggest that *whatever happened thirteen years ago is being undone now.* Thirteen years ago, everything was falling apart and now, it’s all coming together, it’s all being somehow redeemed.

But what is the point of all of this? It’s all very interesting, this series of parallels between the two stories, but how could it possibly answer our larger question about how Joseph came to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams? About how God might have spoken to Joseph *without really speaking to him*? About how God might speak to us, today?

The answer is: because seeing these parallels is actually going to help us understand what Joseph was thinking and feeling in those moments just before he was asked to interpret the dream: when he was pulled from the pit, given new clothes, and brought close to an authority figure (we might even go so far as to say a “father figure”). To understand what Joseph was thinking and feeling

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in those moments — that, arguably, is a most crucial context for understanding *how* Joseph arrived at

his interpretation. For isn’t it at least *plausible* that Joseph, in that very moment, was aware of the *déjà vu* which we see playing out, that he was suddenly and acutely carried back to his own, troubling, memories from thirteen years earlier? Those memories of the *original* pit, the *original* clothes, the *original* father figure? Isn’t it possible that there was something in Joseph’s earlier experience which prepared him for

decoding Pharaoh’s inscrutable dreams? That God is actually *leading* Joseph to an understanding of what Pharaoh’s dream means by *pointing* him back in time to Joseph’s own experience? And for that to be true — and, we’ll admit, it seems like a pretty wild theory — here’s what we would expect to find: that the parallels will continue. That some aspect of Pharaoh’s dreams themselves will find an echo in Joseph’s original dreams — and that Joseph will parlay that echo into a full-throated dream interpretation.

If so, then we may well find that, as Pharaoh begins to tell Joseph his dream, God is playing that little dinner table game that we described in last week’s guide, communicating aloud with Joseph but in a way that no one else can hear. We’re almost ready to see it, but we have just a few important elements of this parallel left to unveil. That unveiling is precisely what we will do in the guide to *Parshat Vayigash*; stay tuned.



Miketz: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part II

Source Sheet Page1

**Genesis 41:1-32**

**בראשית מא:א–לב**

**1** And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that

ו ַפ ְר ֹעה חֹ ֵלם, ְו ִה ֵּנה עֹ ֵמד על-ה ְיאֹר. **ב**

**א** ַו ְי ִהי, מ ֵּקץ ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ָי ִמים;

Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river. **2**

ָפר ֹות, ְיפות מ ְר ֶאה, ו ְב ִריאֹת ּב ָׂשר;

ו ִה ֵּנה מן-ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע

And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine,

ֹות, עֹל ֹות א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן מן- א ֵחר

ו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו. **ג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות

well-favoured and fat-fleshed; and they fed in the reed-

grass. **3** And, behold, seven other kine came up after

על- ְׂש ַפת

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ּב ָׂשר; ַו ַּת ֲעמֹ ְד ָנה א ֶצל

ה ְיאֹר, ָרע ֹות מ ְר ֶאה, ְו ַד ּק ֹות

them out of the river, ill favoured and lean-fleshed; and

ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַד ּקֹת ה ָּב ָׂשר, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

הַ ְיאֹר. **ד** ַו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה ה ָּפר ֹות, ָרע ֹות

stood by the other kine upon the brink of the river. **4**

ַפ ְרעֹה. **ה** וַ ִ ּיי ׁ ָשן, וַ ַ ּי ֲחלֹם

ה ָּפר ֹות, ְיפת ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַה ְּב ִריאֹת; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ,

And the ill-favoured and lean-fleshed kine did eat up the

ָחד-- ְב ִריאות ְוטֹב ֹות. **ו** א

ָק ֶנה ּב

ֵש ִנית; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹל ֹות

seven well-favoured and fat kine. So Pharaoh awoke. **5**

פת ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן. **ז**

ו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, ַ ּד ּק ֹות ו ׁ ְשד ּו

And he slept and dreamed a second time: and, behold,

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים, ה ְּב ִריאות

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּק ֹות, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ו ִּת ְב ַל ְע ָנה,

seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank and

ַפ ְרעֹה, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל ֹום. **ח** ַו ְי ִהי ב ּ ֹב ֶקר, ַו ִּת ָּפ ֶעם ר ּוחו,

ו ַה ְּמ ֵלאות; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ

good. **6** And, behold, seven ears, thin and blasted with

the east wind, sprung up after them. **7** And the thin ears

ו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את- ָכל-ח ְר ֻט ֵּמי מ ְצ ַר ִים, ְו ֶאת- ָכל-ח ָכ ֶמי ָה; ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר

swallowed up the seven rank and full ears. And Pharaoh

ל ֶהם את-חלֹמ ֹו, ְו ֵאין-פ ֹו ֵתר או ָתם ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **ט** ַו ְי ַד ֵּברׂשר

ַפ ְרעֹה

awoke, and, behold, it was a dream. **8** And it came to

את- ּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר: את-ח ָט ַאי, א ִני מ ְז ִּכיר ה ּי ֹום. **י** ַפ ְרעֹה,

ה ַּמ ׁ ְש ִקים,

pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled; and he

ָּב ִחים--אֹ ִתי, ְו ֵאת ה ַּט

ׂשר

ּבית

ּב ִמ ׁ ְש ַמר,

על-ע ָב ָדיו; ַו ִ ּי ֵּתן אֹ ִתי

ק ַצף

sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all the

ָוהוא: אי ׁש ּכ ִפ ְתר ֹון א ִני

ְי ָלה א ָחד, ּב ַל

ֹום חל

ׂשר הָאֹ ִפים. **יא** ַו ַּנ ַח ְל ָמה

wise men thereof; and Pharaoh told them his dream; but

ע ְב ִרי, ע ֶבד ל ַׂשר ה ַּט ָּב ִחים, ַו ְּנ ַס ֶּפר-

חֲלֹמ ֹו, חָ ָל ְמנ ּו. **יב** ְו ׁ ָשם א ָּתנ ּו ַנ ַער

there was none that could interpret them unto Pharaoh.

ָפ ָתר. **יג** ַו ְי ִהי ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֵתינ ּו: אי ׁש ּכ ֲחלֹמ ֹו, את-חלֹמֹ

ל ֹו, ַו ִ ּי ְפ ָּתר- ָלנ ּו

**9** Then spoke the chief butler unto Pharaoh, saying: ‘I

make mention of my faults this day: **10** Pharaoh was

ה ׁ ִשיב על- ַכ ִּני, ְואֹת ֹו ת ָלה. **יד** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַפ ְרעֹה

ָפ ַתר- ָלנ ּו, ּכן ה ָיה: אֹ ִתי

wroth with his servants, and put me in the ward of the house of the captain of the guard, me and the chief baker. **11** And we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he; we

מן-ה ּב ֹור; ַו ְי ַג ַּלח ַו ְי ַח ֵּלףׂש ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ ּיבא אל-

ֹו ֵסף, חל ֹום ח ַל ְמ ִּתי, ופ ֵתר אין אֹת ֹו; חל ֹום, ל ְפ ּתֹר אֹת ֹו. **טז** ַו ַ ּי ַען י ֹו ֵסף אל-י ִת ׁ ְש ַמע

ו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את-י ֹו ֵסף, ַו ְי ִרי ֻצהו

ַפרְ ֹעה. **טו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ַפ ְרעֹה,

ו ֲא ִני, ׁ ָש ַמ ְע ִּתי ע ֶליָך לאמֹר,

dreamed each man according to the interpretation of his

את- ׁ ְשל ֹום ַפ ְרעֹה. **יז** ַו ְידַ ֵּבר

ַי ֲע ֶנה אלֹקים,

ָע ָדי: ּב ְל

את- ַּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר,

dream. **12** And there was with us there a young man, a

ה ְנ ִני עֹ ֵמד על- ְׂש ַפת ה ְיאֹר. **יח** ְו ִה ֵּנה מִן-

ֲחלֹ ִמי, ּב

ַפ ְר ֹעה, אל-י ֹו ֵסף:

Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told

ּב ָׂשר, ִויפת תֹ ַאר; ַו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו.

ה ְיאֹר, ֹעלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות, ּב ִריאות

him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he did interpret. **13** And it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was: I was restored

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ַ ּד ּל ֹות ְו ָרע ֹות תֹ ַאר

ָכל-א ֶרץ מ ְצ ַר ִים, לרֹ ַע. **כ** ּב

**יט** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע- ּפר ֹות א ֵחר ֹות, עֹל ֹות

מאֹד, ְו ַר ּק ֹות ּב ָׂשר: לֹא-ר ִאי ִתי כ ֵה ָּנה

unto mine office, and he was hanged.’ **14** Then Pharaoh

ִרא ׁשֹנ ֹות, ה

ָּפר ֹות ה

ה ַר ּק ֹות, ְו ָה ָרע ֹות--את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה,

sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out

ְר ֶּב ָנה, אל-ק

ּכי-באו

ְר ֶּב ָנה, ְולֹא נ ֹו ַדע אל-ק

באנה

ה ְּברִיאֹת. **כא** ַו ָּת

of the dungeon. And he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: ‘I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it; and I have heard say of thee, that when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it.’ **16** And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: ‘It is not in me; God will

ו ַמ ְר ֵאי ֶהן ַרע, ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר ּב ְּת ִח ָּלה; ָו ִאי ָקץ. **כב** ָו ֵא ֶרא, ּב ֲחלֹ ִמי; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע

ִש ֳּב ִלים, ֹעלֹת ּב ָק ֶנה א ָחד--מ ֵלאֹת ְוטֹב ֹות. **כג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים,

צ ֻנמ ֹות ַ ּד ּק ֹות ׁ ְש ֻדפות ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהם. **כד** ַו ִּת ְב ַלעְןָ

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּקֹת, את ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ּטֹב ֹות; ָואֹ ַמר, אל-ה ַח ְר ֻט ִּמים,

ו ֵאין מ ִּגיד, לי. **כה** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסף אל- ּפ ְר ֹעה, חל ֹום ַפ ְר ֹעה א ָחד הוא:

give Pharaoh an answer of peace.’ **17** And Pharaoh spoke

בת, ׁ ֶש ַבע

ה ּ ֹט

ָפרֹת

ל ַפ ְרעֹה. **כו** ׁ ֶש ַבע

ִּגיד ה

ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶׂשה,

את א ׁ ֶשר



Miketz: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part II

Source Sheet Page 2

unto Joseph: ‘In my dream, behold, I stood upon the brink

ָחד א

ֹום, חל

ה ָּנה:

בת, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים

ה ּ ֹט

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

ָש ִנים

of the river. **18** And, behold, there came up out of the river

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ׁ ֶש ַבע

העֹלֹת

ּק ֹות ְו ָה ָרעֹת ה ַר

ָּפר ֹות ה

הוא. **כז** ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

seven kine, fat-fleshed and well-favoured; and they fed in

ה ֵרקות, ׁ ְש ֻדפות ה ָּק ִדים-- ִי ְהי ּו, ׁ ֶש ַבע

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

ָש ִנים ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

the reed-grass. **19** And, behold, seven other kine came up

א ׁ ֶשר ִ ּד ַּב ְר ִּתי אל- ּפ ְר ֹעה: א ׁ ֶשר ה ֱאלֹקים

ְש ֵנירָ ָעב. **כח** הוא ה ָ ּד ָבר,

after them, poor and very ill-favoured and lean-fleshed,

ה ְר ָאה את- ּפ ְר ֹעה. **כט** ה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים, ּבאות-- ָׂש ָבע ָּגד ֹול,

עֹ ֶׂשה,

such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness.

**20** And the lean and ill-favoured kine did eat up the first

ּב ָכל-א ֶרץ מ ְצ ָר ִים. **ל** ְו ָקמ ּו ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ְו ִנ ׁ ְש ַּכח ּכל-

seven fat kine. **21** And when they had eaten them up, it

ּב ֶא ֶרץ מ ְצ ָר ִים; ְו ִכ ָּלה ה ָר ָעב, את-ה ָא ֶרץ. **לא** ְולֹא-י ָ ּו ַדע

ה ָּׂש ָבע,

could not be known that they had eaten them; but they

מאֹד.

ֵבד הוא, ּכי-כ

ֲח ֵרי-כן: א

ההוא

ָר ָעב ה

ְּפ ֵני מ

ָא ֶרץ, ּב

ה ָּׂש ָבע

were still ill-favoured as at the beginning. So I awoke. **22**

מ ִעם

ה ָ ּד ָבר

ָמ ִים-- ִכי-נכ ֹון ַפ ֲע

ּפ ְרעֹה, אל-

ֲחל ֹום ה

ה ׁ ָּשנ ֹות

**לב** ְו ַעל

And I saw in my dream, and, behold, seven ears came up upon one stalk, full and good. **23** And, behold, seven ears, withered, thin, and blasted with the east wind, sprung up after them. **24** And the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it unto the magicians; but there was none that could declare it to me.’ **25** And Joseph said unto Pharaoh: ‘The dream of Pharaoh is one; what God is about to do He has declared unto Pharaoh. **26** The seven good kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one**. 27** And the seven lean and ill-favoured kine that came up after them are seven years, and also the seven empty ears blasted with the east wind; they shall be seven years of famine. **28** That is the thing which I spoke unto Pharaoh: what God is about to do He has shown unto Pharaoh. **29** Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. **30**

And there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and

all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land; **31** and the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine which followeth; for it shall be very grievous. **32** And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice, it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

ל ֲעׂשֹת ֹו.

ְמ ַמהֵר הָ ֱאלֹקים ו

הָ ֱאלֹקים,

**Genesis 37:23-24**

### בראשית כג–כד

**23** And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his

אל-א ָחיו; ַו ַ ּי ְפ ׁ ִשיט ּו את-י ֹו ֵסף את- ֻכ ָּת ְנ ּת ֹו,

**כג** ו ְי ִהי, ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר- ָבא י ֹו ֵסף

brethren, that they stripped Joseph of his coat, the coat of many colours that was on him; **24** and they took him, and cast him into the pit--and the pit was empty, there was no water in it.

ו ִ ּי ָּק ֻחהו--ו ַ ּי ׁ ְש ִלכ ּו אֹת ֹו, ה ּ ֹב ָרה;

ע ָליו. **כד**

את- ְכתֹ ֶנת ה ַּפ ִּסים א ׁ ֶשר

ו ַה ּב ֹור ֵרק, אין ב ֹו מ ִים.



Miketz: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part II

Source Sheet Page 3

**Genesis 37:13–14**

### בראשית לז:יג–יד

**13** And Israel said unto Joseph: ‘Do not thy brethren feed

א ֶחיָך רֹ ִעים ּב ׁ ְש ֶכם-- ְל ָכה,

ֹוא הל

**יג** ו ּיֹא ֶמר ִי ְׂש ָר ֵאל אל-י ֹו ֵסף,

the flock in Shechem? come, and I will send thee unto

ֶמר ל ֹו, ל ְך-נא ְר ֵאה את- ו ּיֹא

ֶהם; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו, ה ֵּנ ִני. **יד** א ֵלי

ו ֶא ׁ ְש ָל ֲחָך

them.’ And he said to him: ‘Here am I.’ **14** And he said to him: ‘Go now, see whether it is well with thy brethren, and well with the flock; and bring me back word.’ So he sent him out of the vale of Hebron, and he came to Shechem.

ֵע ֶמק מ

ה ּצֹאן, ַו ֲה ׁ ִש ֵב ִני, ָ ּד ָבר; ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ָל ֵחהו

ְשל ֹום א ֶחיָך ְו ֶאת- ׁשל ֹום

ח ְבר ֹון, ַו ָ ּיבא ׁ ְש ֶכ ָמה.

**Genesis 37:5-10**

### בראשית לז:ה–י

**5** And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it to his

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹוד,ׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו. **ו** ַו ּיֹאמֶר,

**ה** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם י ֹו ֵסף חל ֹום, ַו ַ ּי ֵּגד

brethren; and they hated him yet the more. **6** And he said

ִש ְמע ּו-נא, ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ִּתי. **ז** ְו ִה ֵּנה א ַנ ְחנ ּו

א ֵלי ֶהם:

unto them: ‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have

א ֻל ִּמים, ּבת ֹו ְך ה ָּׂש ֶדה, ְו ִה ֵּנה ָק ָמה א ֻל ָּמ ִתי, ְו ַגם-נ ָ ּצ ָבה;

מ ַא ְּל ִמים

dreamed: **7** for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.’ **8** And his brethren said to him: ‘Shalt

ו ִה ֵּנה ת ֻס ֶּבי ָנה א ֻל ּמֹ ֵתי ֶכם, ַו ִּת ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֶויןָ ַל ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי. **ח** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו ל ֹו, א ָחיו,

ֹו ה ָמלֹ ְך ִת ְמלֹ ְך ע ֵלינ ּו, אם-מ ׁש ֹול ִת ְמ ׁשֹל ּבנ ּו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹודׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו, על-חלֹמֹ ָתיו ְו ַעל- ְ ּד ָב ָריו. **ט** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם ע ֹוד חל ֹום א ֵחר, ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר אֹת

thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have

ה ׁ ֶּש ֶמ ׁש ְו ַה ָ ּי ֵר ַח ְו ַא ַחד

ֹום ע ֹוד, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל

ַל ְמ ִּתי ח

ֵּנה ה

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר,

dominion over us?’ And they hated him yet the more for his

ו ְי ַס ֵּפר אל-א ִביו, ְו ֶאל-א ָחיו, ַו ִ ּי ְג ַער-

מ ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ִוים לי. **י**

ע ָׂשר כ ֹו ָכ ִבים,

dreams, and for his words. **9** And he dreamed yet another

א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ָּת: הב ֹוא ָנב ֹוא, א ִני

ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה

ב ֹו א ִביו, ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו מה

dream, and told it to his brethren, and said: ‘Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.’ **10** And he told it

to his father, and to his brethren; and his father rebuked him, and said unto him: ‘What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down to thee to the earth?’

ְר ָצה. א

לָך,

ו ִא ְּמָך ְו ַא ֶחיָך, ל ִה ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֹות



**VAYECHI: DOES GOD SPEAK TO US TODAY? PART IV**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayechi!

This guide is the fourth in a 4-part series, which deals with *Parshat Vayeishev* through *Parshat Vayechi*: the whole of the epic Joseph story.

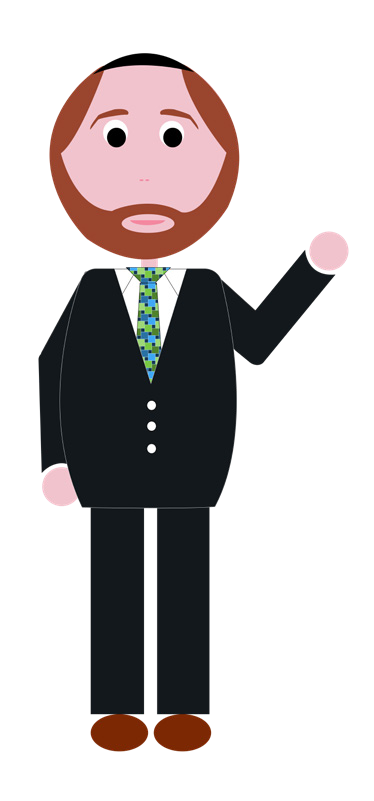
# What About Our Lives?

In Parts I through III, we posed a big question: *Does God speak to us today?* We embarked upon an exploration of the Joseph story, looking to Pharaoh’s dreams as a model for how God may actually communicate, non-prophetically, with humankind. In this fourth and final installment, we want to move from theory to implication: to speak personally about what it might look like, in our own lives, if this theory is true — and finally, to offer a suggestion about the meaning not of Pharaoh’s dreams but of Joseph’s dreams: a reading which can serve as a crucial cautionary tale.

Because the elephant-in-the-room question that you’ve got to be wondering, after hearing this whole theory about Joseph is: *Does this ever actually happen today? Maybe it happened to Joseph, but what about to us? Does God give us taps on the shoulder? Does He speak to us, through dreams or through other patterns in our lives?* And if the answer is ‘yes,’ then what are we supposed to do about it? Should we go around scrutinizing our lives, searching for these kinds of patterns? And if we find them, how do we interpret their meaning — and how can we be confident that we’ve gotten it right? What if we’re wrong?

In this guide, we want to share with you a personal story that Rabbi Fohrman tells in his original video on this topic, because we think that it addresses these questions in a very helpful way. Here’s that story, direct from Rabbi Fohrman:

# A Personal Take



Awhile ago, I spent a day in Cleveland. Actually, I was giving this very talk — about Pharaoh and Joseph’s dreams. About 16 people were present. And at the end of the talk, someone raised his hand and said, “Rabbi Fohrman, have you — in your own personal life – ever received one of these taps on the shoulder? The kind of thing that you’re talking about?”

I have to admit, I was kind of taken aback by the question. I wasn’t really prepared for it. But here is the answer that I gave:

## INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life’s biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That’s why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we’ll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

“

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you’re planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the “Source Sheet” for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, “Parshat Vayechi: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part IV” (available for viewing at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org/)). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

Let me tell you something about my own interest in this topic. It goes back to when I was about ten or eleven years old. My father was struggling with cancer, and over the course of that struggle, *he* became pretty convinced that God was giving him these kinds of taps on the shoulder. And not just once or twice either. I will give you an example: he was in remission from cancer for about two years, and then one night, he had this dream. He saw two monsters who were fighting each other, and in the background of the dream were scenes from places where he’d lived: San Francisco, Orinda, and other places — and the last scene was the house

in Berkeley, California where we were living right then. And in that dream, one monster killed the other monster. The last thing that he saw was the time, ‘5:31.’ He woke up, looked at his watch

— and it was 5:31 in the morning. He thought: *Maybe this dream is telling me something: that this is the last act. That either I am going to win it, or it is going to win me, right here. And maybe it’s time to go to my doctor to see what’s going on.* He went to his doctor. It turned out that the cancer was back.

These kinds of things happened a lot of my father. He felt that he got a lot of these little ‘taps on the shoulder’ from God. At the time, as a ten- or eleven-year old, I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Was my father just grasping at straws? Was this just a product of his desperation? Was there any reality to this? I really felt that I needed to talk with somebody about it.

A

So I approached my rebbe about it. I said to him: ‘Is it really possible that there could be meaning in our dreams?’ And do you know what he said to me? ‘Dreams don’t mean anything. We don’t believe in any of this stuff.’ And he quoted me some suitable Jewish sources to back up his claim.

I went back to my father and said, ‘I was speaking to my rebbe and he said this is all nonsense, that God can’t speak to people in these kinds of ways.’ My father just smiled and said: ‘You know, he’s not going through what I’m going through right now. I wouldn’t expect him to say anything different. But this is my experience, and I can’t deny my experience.’ And a few years later, my father died.

So ever since then, this is something that has always preoccupied me. Did God really tap my father on the shoulder? Or was my father just so desperate that he was making something out of nothing? It was always an unresolved issue for me. That’s why it is personally meaningful to me, to have found this Joseph story in which the Torah does seem to be saying that God actually speaks non-prophetically to us. That these kinds of taps on the shoulder can be real.

nd then I left to drive to the last talk of the day — and as I got into the car, it struck me that I had actually aded this fellow’s question. He had asked me if I ever felt these taps in my *own* life… and I hadn’t talked at

about my own life, only about my *father’s* life. I wondered *why* it was that I did that. Why did I evade his

”

ev all

question? Was it because I was too embarrassed to admit that I *didn’t* really feel any of these kind of taps on the shoulder in my own life?

Whatever the case was, I was off to my next talk — and this one wasn’t in front of sixteen people, it was in front of three hundred… and I was late. I was supposed to talk about some other topic, but I was exhausted, so I thought, “I’ll just talk about Joseph and Pharaoh’s dream again.” I hurried into the hall, late, and started trying to get my computer hooked up to the projector, with everyone waiting expectantly. So there I was, struggling to get PowerPoint to work… and in these kinds of situations, there’s always somebody there piping up from the front row saying, “Hey Rabbi Fohrman! Do you remember me?” Sure enough, there’s a guy there, saying just that… but I’m late and stressed and am not giving him my full attention… until he says it again: “Hey Rabbi Fohrman, do you remember me?” I look up, stare at him, and I say: “Wait one second. I *do* remember you. You are my fifth grade rebbe from Berkeley, California.” The very one that I had spoken to about my father and his dreams.

It was twenty five years later, I hadn’t seen him in ages — but there he was. After I gave the talk, I sat down to process what had happened. I said to myself: *Here you were, evading questions about taps on the shoulder… and it is almost as if God is saying to you: “Why? Because you think you haven’t had enough taps lately? OK, so I’ll give you a tap on the shoulder. The guy who says that there’s no such thing as taps from God… he’s going to be the one to tap you on the shoulder.”*

Now, what is the grand significance of that moment in my life? Honestly, I don’t know how to interpret it, other than to say that I simply couldn’t deny that *I felt God in my life* — right there, in that moment. And that meant something to me. And I think it’s a very big deal. If you ask most people: *Do you have a sense in your everyday life that God is right there with you?* I think most of us couldn’t honestly say that we do. We go about

our everyday life, we’ve got carpools, grocery shopping… but we don’t *feel* that God is with us in the carpool, in the grocery store. I think that part of the reason is because we think that God has so many better things to do than to worry about “little old me.” After all, who am I? I am one person in the city of a few million people and a galaxy with a hundred billion stars, and who knows how many planets — and God is taking care of this *whole thing*… so why should the Master of Universe take His time to walk with me in my life? The idea just seems so remote.

But what would happen if for at least *one* little moment in your life you knew that it was true? That God really was walking with you? It seems to me that that would be a life-changing moment. Because if it was true that God walked with you in that *one* moment, then it can’t be that you’re just too small to count. It must be that, somehow, you *do* count with God. And that maybe God is *always* walking with you — but that’s just the moment that you happened to glimpse it to be true. And that’s a profound thing, a beautiful thing. A life in which you feel *accompanied* is very different than a life in which you feel all alone.

# Joseph Teaches A Cautionary Tale

Now, before we conclude this series, we do want to consider the other side of the coin here. Rabbi Fohrman was suggesting that these taps on the shoulder may be profoundly significant for us insofar as they suggest to us that *God is present in our lives* — but not necessarily insofar as they lead to any more specific conclusions than that, that they demand any *interpretation*. To try to *interpret* these taps as containing a complex message, direct from God to man: that, arguably, can be very, very dangerous and can lead you into great trouble.

To illustrate this, we want to come back, one last time, to the Joseph and Pharaoh story. Recall that Pharaoh had two dreams, not just one. All of the resonances that we have seen that take Joseph back to his own life — those are all from the first dream, the one about the cows. But Pharaoh had another dream that we haven’t discussed at all, a dream about seven beautiful sheaves of wheat and seven ugly sheaves:

**Genesis 41:5**

ֶא ָחד-- ְב ִריאות ְוטֹב ֹות. ּב ָק ֶנה

ו ִ ּיי ׁ ָשן, ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם ׁ ֵש ִנית; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹל ֹות

And he slept and dreamed a second time: and, behold, seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank and good.

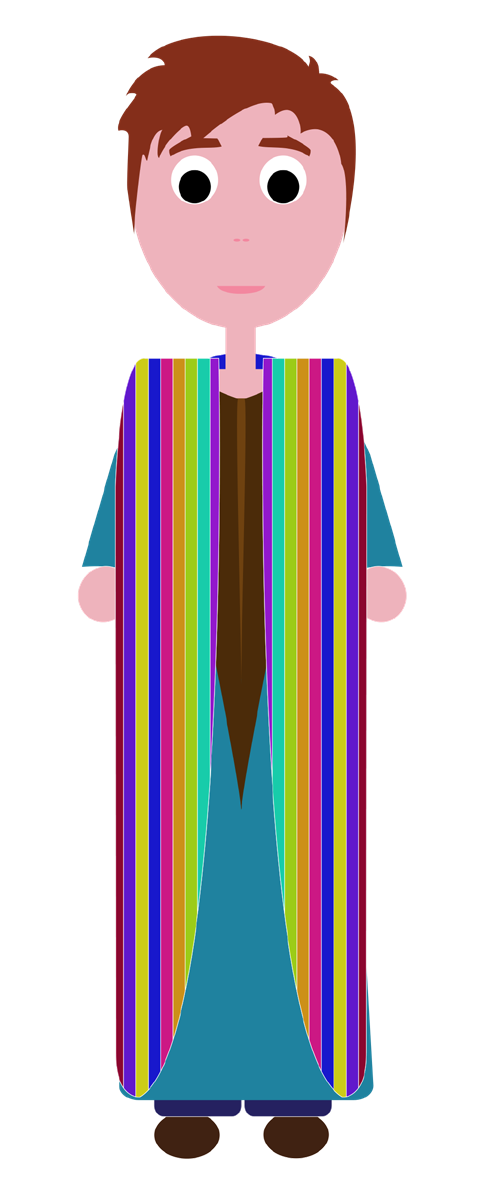
That dream didn’t seem to have any links to Joseph’s life. So why would Pharaoh have two dreams, with only one of them resonating with Joseph?

Well, take a step back and ask yourself the following question:1 *If you are Pharaoh and you’re going to have a dream that talks about the gross domestic product of Egypt, would it make more sense to express that in terms of cows or sheaves of wheat?*

1 We’d like to give attribution to Jonathan Grossman for having developed and shared the fascinating theory that follows.

Egypt was an agrarian society: the rest of the Middle East was arid, but in Egypt, the Nile would overflow each year, so it was a place where you could reliably plant crops. The Egyptians ate wheat, they didn’t eat cows. In fact, they worshipped cows. So the dream about cows would have been a strange one for Pharaoh to have had.

Now remember: it was *that first* dream that was filled with hints to Joseph’s life. Perhaps that would have confirmed to Joseph, looking at the dream: *When Pharaoh dreamed about sheaves of wheat, he was dreaming about himself. But when he dreamed about cows… I’m the cattle rancher around here. My family was involved with herds, with cattle. The cow dream — that was a dream about* ***me.*** *It provided a key so that I could help to interpret a dream about him!*

But if that’s true, then maybe, just maybe, it prompted Joseph to look back at his own life and say:

*One second…. When I was seventeen years old, I* ***also*** *had two dreams. One dream was about the sun, the moon, the stars… but one dream was about sheaves of wheat. What was I doing dreaming about wheat? I’m not a farmer. I’m cattle rancher. Pharaoh is the wheat farmer. When Pharaoh was dreaming about cows, he was dreaming about* ***my past.*** *Well, maybe when I dreamed about wheat, I was dreaming about* ***Pharaoh’s future.***

*My dream never meant that I was supposed to rule over my brothers! It was talking about the future, about a day when my brothers would be desperate and they would all come to me, seeking food. But I also had another dream, one whose meaning seemed so self- evident: about the sun, the moon, the stars. We all thought we knew exactly what that dream meant. The sun was my father, the moon was my mother, the stars were my brothers, and they would all bow down to me. But maybe we were mistaken. Maybe it wasn’t so self- evident after all.*

*Because what did Pharaoh’s dream teach me? That things aren’t always what they seem. Cows can represent time, years. So what if I take that lesson and apply it to my own dream? How many heavenly bodies were there in my dream? Thirteen: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars. How old was I when I had that dream? I was seventeen years old. How much time would pass between that dream, and the moment when I would one day be in charge of all of the wheat of Egypt, of the world? Thirteen years.2*

Joseph and his family had made an error. They thought the dream meant that Joseph would rule over them, that he had dreams of grandeur — and because of that, they hated him, they threw him into a pit. It wasn’t until *thirteen years later,* until Pharaoh’s dream, that Joseph had the key to be able to understand what his own dream had meant.

What’s the implication of all of this for us? It’s tempting, when you have a dream, to see it as a tap on the shoulder from God… and then, to take it a step further, to declare: *It’s plain to see what God is showing me!* But that’s a dangerous game to play, especially when we don’t have all of the facts. These messages from God, even if they are meant to be discerned, can sometimes only be understood in retrospect, after the passage of time. And sometimes we never figure them out.

Sometimes all we can do is conclude, with humility: *I got a tap on the shoulder from God.. I don’t understand what it means. All I know is that I am not alone.* And that, in and of itself, can mean everything.

the from out went Joseph Egypt.--And of king Pharaoh before stood he when old years thirty was Joseph “And , ְוי ֹו ֵסף, ֶּבן- ׁשלֹ ׁ ִשים ׁ ָש ָנה, ְּב ָע ְמד ֹו, ִל ְפ ֵני ַּפ ְרעֹה ֶמ ֶל ְך-מ ְצ ָר ִים; ַו ֵ ּי ֵצא י ֹו ֵסף ִמ ִּל ְפ ֵני ַפ ְרעֹה, ַו ַ ּי ֲע ֹבר ְּב ָכל-א ֶרץ ִמ ְצ ָר ִים 2 41:46) (Genesis Egypt.” of land the all throughout went and Pharaoh, of presence



Vayechi: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part IV

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 41:1-32**

**בראשית מא:א–לב**

**1** And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that

ו ַפ ְר ֹעה חֹ ֵלם, ְו ִה ֵּנה עֹ ֵמד על-ה ְיאֹר. **ב**

**א** ַו ְי ִהי, מ ֵּקץ ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ָי ִמים;

Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river. **2**

ָפר ֹות, ְיפות מ ְר ֶאה, ו ְב ִריאֹת ּב ָ ׂשר;

ו ִה ֵּנה מן-ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע

And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, well-

ֹות, עֹל ֹות א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן מן- א ֵחר

ו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו. **ג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות

favoured and fat-fleshed; and they fed in the reed-grass.

**3** And, behold, seven other kine came up after them out

ְש ַפת על-

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ּב ָ ׂשר; ַו ַּת ֲעמֹ ְד ָנה א ֶצל

ה ְיאֹר, ָרע ֹות מ ְר ֶאה, ְו ַד ּק ֹות

of the river, ill favoured and lean-fleshed; and stood by the

ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַד ּקֹת ה ָּב ָ ׂשר, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

הַ ְיאֹר. **ד** ַו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה ה ָּפר ֹות, ָרע ֹות

other kine upon the brink of the river. **4** And the ill-favoured

ַפ ְרעֹה. **ה** וַ ִ ּיי ׁ ָשן, וַ ַ ּי ֲחלֹם

ה ָּפר ֹות, ְיפת ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַה ְּב ִריאֹת; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ,

and lean-fleshed kine did eat up the seven well-favoured

ָחד-- ְב ִריאות ְוטֹב ֹות. א

ָק ֶנה ּב

ֵש ִנית; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹל ֹות

and fat kine. So Pharaoh awoke. **5** And he slept and

פת ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן.

**ו** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, ַ ּד ּק ֹות ו ׁ ְשד ּו

dreamed a second time: and, behold, seven ears of corn

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים, ה ְּב ִריאות

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּק ֹות, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

**ז** ַו ִּת ְב ַל ְע ָנה,

came up upon one stalk, rank and good. **6** And, behold,

ַפ ְרעֹה, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל ֹום. **ח** ַו ְי ִהי ב ּ ֹב ֶקר, ַו ִּת ָּפ ֶעם ר ּוחו,

ו ַה ְּמ ֵלאות; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ

seven ears, thin and blasted with the east wind, sprung up

after them. **7** And the thin ears swallowed up the seven

ו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את- ָכל-ח ְר ֻט ֵּמי מ ְצ ַר ִים, ְו ֶאת- ָכל-ח ָכ ֶמי ָה; ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר

rank and full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and, behold, it

ל ֶהם את-חלֹמ ֹו, ְו ֵאין-פ ֹו ֵתר או ָתם ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **ט** ַו ְי ַד ֵּבר ׂשר

ַפ ְרעֹה

was a dream. **8** And it came to pass in the morning that

את- ּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר: את-ח ָט ַאי, א ִני מ ְז ִּכיר ה ּי ֹום. **י** ַפרְעֹה,

ה ַּמ ׁ ְש ִקים,

his spirit was troubled; and he sent and called for all the

ָּב ִחים--אֹ ִתי, ְו ֵאת ה ַּט

ׂשר

ּבית

ּב ִמ ׁ ְש ַמר,

על-ע ָב ָדיו; ַו ִ ּי ֵּתן אֹ ִתי

ק ַצף

magicians of Egypt, and all the wise men thereof; and

ָוהוא: אי ׁש ּכ ִפ ְתר ֹון א ִני

ְי ָלה א ָחד, ּב ַל

ֹום חל

ׂשר הָאֹ ִפים. **יא** ַו ַּנ ַח ְל ָמה

Pharaoh told them his dream; but there was none that

ע ְב ִרי, ע ֶבד ל ַ ׂשר ה ַּט ָּב ִחים, ַו ְּנ ַס ֶּפר-

חֲלֹמ ֹו, חָ ָל ְמנ ּו. **יב** ְו ׁ ָשם א ָּתנ ּו ַנ ַער

could interpret them unto Pharaoh. **9** Then spoke the

ָפ ָתר. **יג** ַו ְי ִהי ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֵתינ ּו: אי ׁש ּכ ֲחלֹמ ֹו, את-חלֹמֹ

ל ֹו, ַו ִ ּי ְפ ָּתר- ָלנ ּו

chief butler unto Pharaoh, saying: ‘I make mention of my

faults this day: **10** Pharaoh was wroth with his servants,

ה ׁ ִשיב על- ַכ ִּני, ְואֹת ֹו ת ָלה. **יד** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַפ ְרעֹה

ָפ ַתר- ָלנ ּו, ּכן ה ָיה: אֹ ִתי

and put me in the ward of the house of the captain of the guard, me and the chief baker. **11** And we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he; we dreamed each man

מן-ה ּב ֹור; ַו ְי ַג ַּלח ַו ְי ַח ֵּלף ׂש ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ ּיבא אל-

ֹו ֵסף, חל ֹום ח ַל ְמ ִּתי, ופ ֵתר אין אֹת ֹו; חל ֹום, ל ְפ ּתֹר אֹת ֹו. **טז** ַו ַ ּי ַען י ֹו ֵסף אל-י ִת ׁ ְש ַמע

ו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את-י ֹו ֵסף, ַו ְי ִרי ֻצהו

ַפרְ ֹעה. **טו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ַפ ְרעֹה,

ו ֲא ִני, ׁ ָש ַמ ְע ִּתי ע ֶלי ָך לאמֹר,

according to the interpretation of his dream. **12** And there

את- ׁ ְשל ֹום ַפ ְרעֹה. **יז** ַו ְידַ ֵּבר

ַי ֲע ֶנה אלֹקים,

ָע ָדי: ּב ְל

את- ַּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר,

was with us there a young man, a Hebrew, servant to the

עֹ ֵמד על- ְש ַפת ה ְיאֹר. **יח** ְו ִה ֵּנה מן- ה ְנ ִני

ֲחלֹ ִמי, ּב

ַפ ְר ֹעה, אל-י ֹו ֵסף:

captain of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted

ּב ָ ׂשר, ִויפת תֹ ַאר; ַו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו.

ה ְיאֹר, ֹעלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות, ּב ִריאות

to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he did interpret. **13** And it came to pass, as he interpreted

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א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ַ ּד ּל ֹות ְו ָרע ֹות תֹ ַאר

**יט** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע- ּפר ֹות א ֵחר ֹות, עֹל ֹות

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Vayechi: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part IV

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to us, so it was: I was restored unto mine office, and he

ַע. **כ** לרֹ

ְצ ַר ִים, מ

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ֵה ָּנה כ

ּב ָ ׂשר: לֹא-ר ִאי ִתי

מאֹד, ְו ַר ּק ֹות

was hanged.**’ 14** Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph,

ִרא ׁשֹנ ֹות, ה

ָּפר ֹות ה

ה ַר ּק ֹות, ְו ָה ָרע ֹות--את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה,

and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon. And he

אל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה, ּכי-באו

באנה אל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה, ְולֹא נ ֹו ַדע

ה ְּברִיאֹת. **כא** ַו ָּת

shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: ‘I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it; and I have heard say of thee, that when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it.’ **16** And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: ‘It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an

ו ַמ ְר ֵאי ֶהן ַרע, ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר ּב ְּת ִח ָּלה; ָו ִאי ָקץ. **כב** ָו ֵא ֶרא, ּב ֲחלֹ ִמי; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע

ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹלֹת ּב ָק ֶנה א ָחד--מ ֵלאֹת ְוטֹב ֹות. **כג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים,

צ ֻנמ ֹות ַ ּד ּק ֹות ׁ ְש ֻדפות ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהם. **כד** ַו ִּת ְב ַלעְןָ

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּקֹת, את ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ּטֹב ֹות; ָואֹ ַמר, אל-ה ַח ְר ֻט ִּמים,

ו ֵאין מ ִּגיד, לי. **כה** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסף אל- ּפ ְר ֹעה, חל ֹום ַפ ְר ֹעה א ָחד הוא:

answer of peace.’ **17** And Pharaoh spoke unto Joseph: ‘In

בת, ׁ ֶש ַבע

ה ּ ֹט

ָפרֹת

ל ַפ ְרעֹה. **כו** ׁ ֶש ַבע

ִּגיד ה

ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה,

את א ׁ ֶשר

my dream, behold, I stood upon the brink of the river. **18**

ָּנה: חל ֹום, א ָחד ה

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ּ ֹטבת, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים

ָש ִנים ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine, fat-

ַר ּק ֹות ְו ָה ָרעֹת ֹהעלֹת א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים ה

הוא. **כז** ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ָּפר ֹות

fleshed and well-favoured; and they fed in the reed-grass.

ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ֵרקות, ׁ ְש ֻדפות ה ָּק ִדים-- ִי ְהי ּו, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב.

**19** And, behold, seven other kine came up after them, poor and very ill-favoured and lean-fleshed, such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness. **20** And the lean and

א ׁ ֶשר ִ ּד ַּב ְר ִּתי אל- ּפ ְר ֹעה: א ׁ ֶשר ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה, ה ְר ָאה ה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים, ּבאות-- ָש ָבע ָּגד ֹול, ּב ָכל-א ֶרץ

**כח** הוא ה ָ ּד ָבר,את- ּפ ְרעֹה. **כט**

ill-favoured kine did eat up the first seven fat kine. **21** And

ֶא ֶרץ ּב

ּכל-ה ָּ ׂש ָבע,

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ְו ִנ ׁ ְש ַּכח

מ ְצרָ ִים. **ל** ְו ָקמ ּו ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב,

when they had eaten them up, it could not be known that

ְּפ ֵני מ

ָא ֶרץ, ּב

ה ָּ ׂש ָבע

את-ה ָא ֶרץ. **לא** ְולֹא- ִי ָ ּו ַדע

ָר ָעב, ה

מ ְצ ָר ִים; ְו ִכ ָּלה

they had eaten them; but they were still ill-favoured as at

ֲחל ֹום ה

מאֹד. **לב** ְו ַעל ה ׁ ָּשנ ֹות

א ֲח ֵרי-כן: ּכי-כ ֵבד הוא, ההוא

ה ָר ָעב

the beginning. So I awoke. **22** And I saw in my dream, and, behold, seven ears came up upon one stalk, full and good. **23** And, behold, seven ears, withered, thin, and blasted with the east wind, sprung up after them. **24** And the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it unto the magicians; but there was none that could declare it to me.’ **25** And Joseph said unto Pharaoh: ‘The dream of Pharaoh is one; what God is about to do He has declared unto Pharaoh. **26** The seven good kine are seven years; and

the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one.

**27** And the seven lean and ill-favoured kine that came up after them are seven years, and also the seven empty ears blasted with the east wind; they shall be seven years of famine. **28** That is the thing which I spoke unto Pharaoh: what God is about to do He has shown unto Pharaoh. **29** Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. **30** And there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land; **31** and the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine which followeth; for it shall be very grievous. **32** And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice, it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

ֱאלֹקים ה

ַמ ֵהר ו ְמ

ֱאלֹקים, ה

ַפ ֲע ָמ ִים-- ִכי-נכ ֹון ה ָ ּד ָבר מ ִעם

אל- ּפ ְרעֹה,

לעֲשֹת ֹו.



Vayechi: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part IV

Source Sheet Page 3

**Genesis 37:5-10**

### בראשית לז:ה–י

**5** And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it to his

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹוד, ׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו. **ו** ַו ּיֹאמֶר,

**ה** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם י ֹו ֵסף חל ֹום, ַו ַ ּי ֵּגד

brethren; and they hated him yet the more. **6** And he said

ִש ְמע ּו-נא, ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ִּתי. **ז** ְו ִה ֵּנה א ַנ ְחנ ּו

א ֵלי ֶהם:

unto them: ‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have

א ֻל ִּמים, ּבת ֹו ְך ה ָּ ׂש ֶדה, ְו ִה ֵּנה ָק ָמה א ֻל ָּמ ִתי, ְו ַגם-נ ָ ּצ ָבה;

מ ַא ְּל ִמים

dreamed: **7** for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.’ **8** And his brethren said to him: ‘Shalt

ו ִה ֵּנה ת ֻס ֶּבי ָנה א ֻל ּמֹ ֵתי ֶכם, ַו ִּת ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֶויןָ ַל ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי. **ח** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו ל ֹו, א ָחיו,

ֹו ה ָמלֹ ְך ִת ְמלֹ ְך ע ֵלינ ּו, אם-מ ׁש ֹול ִת ְמ ׁשֹל ּבנ ּו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹוד ׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו, על-חלֹמֹ ָתיו ְו ַעל- ְ ּד ָב ָריו. **ט** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם ע ֹוד חל ֹום א ֵחר, ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר אֹת

thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have

ה ׁ ֶּש ֶמ ׁש ְו ַה ָ ּי ֵר ַח ְו ַא ַחד

ֹום ע ֹוד, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל

ַל ְמ ִּתי ח

ֵּנה ה

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר,

dominion over us?’ And they hated him yet the more for his

ו ְי ַס ֵּפר אל-א ִביו, ְו ֶאל-א ָחיו, ַו ִ ּי ְג ַער-

מ ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ִוים לי. **י**

ע ָ ׂשר כ ֹו ָכ ִבים,

dreams, and for his words. **9** And he dreamed yet another

א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ָּת: הב ֹוא ָנב ֹוא, א ִני

ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה

ב ֹו א ִביו, ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו מה

dream, and told it to his brethren, and said: ‘Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.’ **10** And he told it

to his father, and to his brethren; and his father rebuked him, and said unto him: ‘What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down to thee to the earth?’

ְר ָצה. א

ָך, ל

ו ִא ְּמ ָך ְו ַא ֶחי ָך, ל ִה ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֹות

**Genesis 41:46**

### בראשית מא:מו

**46** And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before

מ ֶל ְך-מ ְצ ָר ִים; ַו ֵ ּי ֵצא

ְפ ֵני ַפ ְרעֹה ל

ּבן- ׁשלֹ ׁ ִשים ׁ ָש ָנה, ּב ָע ְמד ֹו,

**מו** וי ֹו ֵסף,

Pharaoh king of Egypt.--And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt.

ְצ ָר ִים. מ

בר ּב ָכל-א ֶרץ

פ ְרעֹה, ַו ַ ּי ֲע

י ֹו ֵסף מ ִּל ְפ ֵני



**VAYEISHEV: DOES GOD SPEAK TO US TODAY? PART I**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayeishev!

Aleph Beta is pleased to present this guide, the first in a four-part series. It deals with *Parshat Vayeishev*

through *Parshat Vayechi*: the whole of the epic Joseph story.

# After The Age Of Prophecy

Let’s just dive right in with a question that, on the face of it, has little to do with *Parshat Vayeishev:* **Does God speak to us, today? And if so, how?**

After all, Jews traditionally pray to God three times a day, which means that we spend all of this time *talking* to God — but does God ever talk back? We don’t live in an age of prophecy anymore, so does that mean that God is silent? Or might God have non-prophetic ways of talking to us?

Now, let’s be clear: we don’t mean, “Sometimes I just feel so inspired that it really *seems* that God is talking to me.” Yes, you *could* say that — and certainly many religious people can relate to that experience — but it’s undoubtedly a very subjective thing. We’re looking for something a bit more concrete than that, something about which even a very rational person would have to concede: “You’re right. God is clearly communicating with you.” Is there any such thing that we could put our finger on?

And here’s why we’re bringing this up in a guide to *Parshat Vayeishev*, of all places. We have a hunch that the epic story of Joseph actually gives us a kind of answer to this question. Because think about this: Can we think of an example in the Torah of God speaking, non- prophetically, to a person? We wouldn’t find such a thing with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob — because they were all prophets. But there is one generation in the Book of Genesis that doesn’t have any prophets: Joseph’s generation. You never find the phrase “and God spoke to Joseph, saying” or “and God appeared to Judah and said.” God seems to be silent in that generation. So you have to ask: Was God in fact silent? Or did God find a

way to talk to Joseph *without really talking to him?* Intriguingly, the answer seems to be: yes. And by our count, it happens at least *twice*.

# Addressing Joseph’s Dreams

Now, before we reveal those two instances, let us just dismiss one possibility out of hand. You might be thinking that the first time that God communicates with Joseph is in *Parshat Vayeishev*: in his *dreams.* You’ll recall that Joseph has this one dream in which he and his brothers are gathering wheat, and his brothers’ stalks of wheat start bowing down to his stalk of wheat:

## INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life’s biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That’s why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we’ll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you’re planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the “Source Sheet” for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, “Parshat Vayeishev: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part I” (available for viewing at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org/)). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

**Genesis 37:6-7**

ה ָּ ׂש ֶדה, ְו ִה ֵּנה ָק ָמה ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי, ְו ַגם-נ ָ ּצ ָבה; ְו ִה ֵּנה

ֹו ְך ּבת

ִה ֵּנה ֲא ַנ ְחנ ּו ְמ ַא ְּל ִמים ֲא ֻל ִּמים, ח ָל ְמ ִּתי. ְו

ה ֶ ּזה ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֲחל ֹום ה

ִש ְמע ּו-נא,

ְת ֻס ֶּבי ָנה ֲא ֻל ּמֹ ֵתי ֶכם, ַו ִּת ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֶויןָ ַל ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי.

‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.’

He has a second dream in which the sun, the moon, and eleven stars are all bowing down to him:

**Genesis 37:9**

לי.

כ ֹו ָכ ִבים, ִמ ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ִוים

ה ׁ ֶּש ֶמ ׁש ְו ַה ָ ּי ֵר ַח ְו ַא ַחד ָע ָ ׂשר

ֹום ע ֹוד, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל

ַל ְמ ִּתי ח

ה ֵּנה

Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.

Could this be God’s way of communicating with Joseph?

The problem with that line of thinking is that Joseph’s dreams don’t really do much for him, do they? As a matter of fact, the only thing that they really do is get him thrown into a pit and sold off as a slave. It’s enough to make you say, “If that’s how God talks to us, then ‘no thanks, I’m not interested.’”

# Does God Use Dreams to Speak to Us?

So let’s leave Joseph’s dreams aside for the moment and ask ourselves: Are there any *other* times when Joseph seems to be privy to some kind of divine communication?

For us, there are two cases that come to mind. The first is Joseph’s interpretation of *Pharaoh’s* dream. Pharaoh dreams about these seven beautiful cows that are swallowed alive by seven ugly cows — and Pharaoh knows that it means something

but can’t figure out what. None of his astrologers can offer a satisfactory explanation either. One of his servants remembers having met this Hebrew fellow, back in prison, and suggests that he may be able to help:

**Genesis 41:12-13**

ה ָיה

ּכן

ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר ָּפ ַתר- ָלנ ּו,

ֹו, ָּפ ָתר. ַו ְי ִהי ּכ ֲחלֹמ

ׁש אי

ה ַּט ָּב ִחים, ַו ְּנ ַס ֶּפר-ל ֹו, ַו ִ ּי ְפ ָּתר- ָלנ ּו ֶאת-חלֹמֹ ֵתינ ּו:

ל ַ ׂשר

ו ׁ ָשם ִא ָּתנ ּו ַנ ַער ִע ְב ִרי, ֶע ֶבד

And there was with us there a young man, a Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man according to his dream he did interpret. And it came to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was

So Pharaoh’s attendants haul Joseph out of prison and Pharaoh says, “I hear that you know how to interpret dreams.” And how does Joseph reply?

**Genesis 41:16**

ַי ֲע ֶנה ֶאת- ׁשל ֹום ַּפ ְרעֹה. אלֹקים,

ּב ְל ָע ָדי:

It is not in me; God will interpret the dream for Pharaoh [lit: give Pharaoh an answer of peace].

Joseph seems fairly confident that God is going to take an active role in helping him to interpret this dream.

But here’s the curious thing. Pharaoh tells Joseph his dream, and Joseph offers an interpretation. There is no interruption in the text to say, “and God spoke to Joseph and told him what the dream meant.” The interpretation seems to be coming from Joseph himself. So you have to ask: What exactly did Joseph mean when he said, “*God* will interpret the dream”? Was he just being humble? Just being pious? Or did he have some way of communicating with God, of hearing *God’s* interpretation of the dream? And if it wasn’t through prophecy — since there was no “And God spoke to Joseph” — then what was the vehicle for this conversation?

# It’s All In Your Head

While you’re pondering that, consider the second instance when this seems to occur. It happens years later: after Joseph rises through the ranks of Egyptian royalty, after famine strikes the land, after Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to secure grain and he recognizes them — but they don’t recognize him. In a dramatic speech, Joseph reveals himself to them as his long-lost brother — and listen to what he says:

**Genesis 45:4-5, 8**

ל ִמ ְח ָיה, ׁ ְש ָל ַח ִני

ּכי

ה ָּנה:

ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, ּכי-מ

ֵעי ֵני ֶכם, ּב

א ִני י ֹו ֵסף ֲא ִחי ֶכם, ֲא ׁ ֶשר-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, ִמ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. ְו ַע ָּתה ַאל- ּת ָע ְצב ּו, ְו ַאל- ִי ַחר

ּב ָכל-א ֶרץ

ל ָכל- ֵבית ֹו, ּומֹ ׁ ֵשל,

ּו ְל ָאד ֹון ל ַפ ְרעֹה,

ל ָאב

ה ֱאלֹקים; ַו ְי ִ ׂשי ֵמ ִני

ִמ ְצרָ ִים.

ּכי,

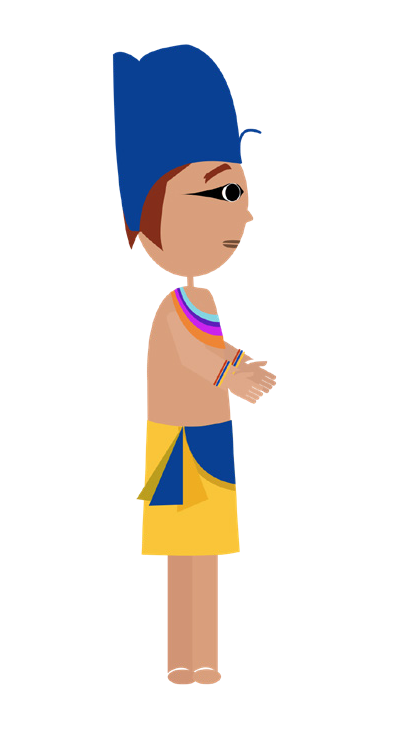
ה ָּנה,

ל ְפ ֵני ֶכם… ְו ַע ָּתה, לֹא-א ֶּתם ׁ ְש ַל ְח ֶּתם אֹ ִתי

אלֹקים

I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here; for God did send me before you to preserve life… So now it was not you that sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Joseph appears to tell his brothers: *I know that, from your perspective, you did this terrible thing in selling me into slavery. But it wasn’t really you; God was pulling the strings. God wanted me to end up in Egypt, so that I could provide for you during this time of famine. God made it all work out.1*



The way that Joseph is talking, it really sounds like he has received some great insight into the divine plan. *I*

*understand why all this happened; it was providential.* But one more time — just like with Pharaoh’s dream— we don’t have any *record* of God coming down from Heaven and saying

to Joseph: “Hey Joseph, I want to tell you My plan!” So… how does Joseph know? Is it possible that this too is an

example of God speaking to Joseph… without actually speaking to him?

That is the question of non-prophetic communication. If it could exist in the generation of Joseph, then maybe there is a way that God could speak to us, even today — and maybe the story of Joseph provides a model.

# The Key Piece of Information

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves; this is all in the realm of “interesting possibility,” but we haven’t proven anything yet. So let’s go back to that first instance, to the story in which Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s mysterious dreams, after having said: “God will interpret the dreams.” Now, we’ve already made the point that there is no mention in the Torah of God whispering in Joseph’s ear, at least no *explicit* mention. So if there is some sort of *implicit* communication between God and Joseph lurking in the text, what might it look like? What exactly are we searching for here?

Well, if you were God and you wanted to impart the meaning of this dream to Joseph, you wouldn’t actually have to explain every little detail to him. There is really just one key piece of information that you’d have to give him; with that one piece of information in hand, Joseph could extrapolate the rest. What is that key piece of information?

It is that cows *equal* years. The commentaries talk about how Pharaoh’s astrologers were mistaken about exactly this point: they suggested that the cows represented types of crops, or maybe daughters of Pharaoh, or maybe cities. Joseph’s key insight was that they represented *time* — and the units of time were *years.*

against evil meant you you, for as “And , ְו ַא ֶּתם, ֲח ׁ ַש ְב ֶּתם ָע ַלי ָר ָעה; ֱאלֹקים, ֲח ׁ ָש ָב ּה ְלטֹ ָבה, ְל ַמ ַען ֲע ׂשֹה ַּכ ּי ֹום ַה ֶ ּזה, ְל ַה ֲחיֹת ַעם-רב Jacob: father his of death the after later, years sentiment similar very a expresses Joseph 1 50:20) (Genesis alive.” people much save to day, this is it as pass, to bring to good, for it meant God but me;

Once you know that **cows equal years**, then the rest is obvious: *seven beautiful cows* means *seven beautiful years*, and *seven ugly cows* are *seven bad years*. When seven bad cows swallow seven good cows, it means that the famine is going to be so bad that people will *forget* that there were ever seven years of plenty. So could God have found a way, somehow, to convey that one little piece of information to Joseph?

We think that the answer is yes — and that if you replay the story in slow motion, you’ll find that the text actually tells us

*when* that happened.

You see, if you look back at the verses, you’ll see that the storyline proceeds at a pretty rapid pace. Pharaoh is looking for an interpreter, someone recommends Joseph, and before you know it, Joseph has been pulled out of the pit, he’s hearing all about Pharaoh’s dream, and somehow, he knows exactly how to interpret it. The only one who said anything to Joseph was Pharaoh. So there must have been something in *Pharaoh’s words* that tipped him off.

“But wait!” - we hear you saying. “All of the astrologers heard the same spiel from Pharaoh, and none of them were able to interpret the dream! If there was a hint, why didn’t they hear it?” Yes, it’s true that they were all told about the same dream — but maybe Joseph *heard* it differently. *Maybe* there was some kind of clue in Pharaoh’s telling of the dream, embedded in such a way that *only Joseph* could have understood its meaning.

But how could you put something in the dream that only Joseph would understand?

# How Do We Understand the Messages God Speaks to Us?

Oh, there’s a way — and here’s an analogy to explain it. Imagine that you have a whole bunch of friends gathered around your table and you’re playing a game. You call for a volunteer to play the role of God. Bob raises his hand. Now, Bob gets to look around the table and nominate his good friend to play the role of Joseph. Everyone else around the table is one of Pharaoh’s astrologers.

Now, here is how the game works. You come up with a secret message and you whisper it to Bob. Let’s say the secret message is “We’re having peach pie for dessert.” Bob’s task is to somehow communicate that message to “Joseph” — who is at the other end of the table — without any of the astrologers figuring out what he’s trying to say.

It’s not an easy task — but it can be done. Bob and Joseph have one thing going for them: they *know each other*. They’re friends — and that means they’ve likely had experiences together that none of the other people have shared. Maybe Bob can somehow *leverage* those experiences to communicate something, secretly, to Joseph.

For example: imagine that three years ago, Bob and Joseph went on a skip trip together and they packed peaches for a snack. Bob might say: “Remember when we were on that ski trip and we had that snack?” Now imagine that when Bob and Joseph were kids, they were in geometry class together.

So Bob might say: “Remember when we were back in Mr. Albertson’s class and we couldn’t figure out that strange Greek letter thing?” In this way, Bob could couple together a coded message for Bob,

a message that no one else at the table would understand, simply by piecing together their prior shared experiences.

Might the real God have been doing something similar with the real Joseph? Could it be that embedded in Pharaoh’s dream were certain things that were sort of “shared experiences” between God and Joseph? And that God made use of that shared experience to communicate directly to Joseph? To communicate that key piece of information that Joseph needed to “crack” the dream: that *cows equals years*?

Think of friends and family who will love it as much as you did - and share it with them!

And when you do, please remember to support Aleph Beta. Nothing makes us happier than bringing eye-opening, soul-heartening, life-changing Torah directly to you — but it all costs money. Like the cost of the writing, editing, design and circulation of the guide that you’re reading. So until we win the lottery, we need your support. Encourage your friends to subscribe to Aleph Beta, so they can get the guides sent directly to them! Or if you shared it with a friend and it was an awesome experience for both of you, consider making a small donation to show your love.

Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

Love the guide?

Then SHARE and SUPPORT!

We will pick up this question in next week’s guide to *Parshat Miketz.*



Vayeishev: Does God Speak To Us Today? Part I

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 37:5-10**

**בראשית לז:ה–י**

**5** And Joseph dreamed a dream, and he told it to his

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹוד, ׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו. **ו** ַו ּיֹאמֶר,

**ה** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם י ֹו ֵסף חל ֹום, ַו ַ ּי ֵּגד

brethren; and they hated him yet the more. **6** And he said

ִש ְמע ּו-נא, ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ִּתי. **ז** ְו ִה ֵּנה א ַנ ְחנ ּו

א ֵלי ֶהם:

unto them: ‘Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have

א ֻל ִּמים, ּבת ֹו ְך ה ָּ ׂש ֶדה, ְו ִה ֵּנה ָק ָמה א ֻל ָּמ ִתי, ְו ַגם-נ ָ ּצ ָבה;

מ ַא ְּל ִמים

dreamed: **7** for, behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves came round about, and bowed down to my sheaf.’ **8** And his brethren said to him: ‘Shalt

ו ִה ֵּנה ת ֻס ֶּבי ָנה א ֻל ּמֹ ֵתי ֶכם, ַו ִּת ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֶויןָ ַל ֲא ֻל ָּמ ִתי. **ח** ַו ּיֹא ְמר ּו ל ֹו, א ָחיו,

ֹו ה ָמלֹ ְך ִת ְמלֹ ְך ע ֵלינ ּו, אם-מ ׁש ֹול ִת ְמ ׁשֹל ּבנ ּו; ַו ּי ֹו ִספו ע ֹוד ׂש ֹנא אֹת ֹו, על-חלֹמֹ ָתיו ְו ַעל- ְ ּד ָב ָריו. **ט** ַו ַ ּי ֲחלֹם ע ֹוד חל ֹום א ֵחר, ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר אֹת

thou indeed reign over us? or shalt thou indeed have

ה ׁ ֶּש ֶמ ׁש ְו ַה ָ ּי ֵר ַח ְו ַא ַחד

ֹום ע ֹוד, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל

ַל ְמ ִּתי ח

ֵּנה ה

ל ֶא ָחיו; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר,

dominion over us?’ And they hated him yet the more for his

ו ְי ַס ֵּפר אל-א ִביו, ְו ֶאל-א ָחיו, ַו ִ ּי ְג ַער-

מ ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ִוים לי. **י**

ע ָ ׂשר כ ֹו ָכ ִבים,

dreams, and for his words. **9** And he dreamed yet another

א ׁ ֶשר ח ָל ְמ ָּת: הב ֹוא ָנב ֹוא, א ִני

ה ֲחל ֹום ה ֶ ּזה

ב ֹו א ִביו, ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו מה

dream, and told it to his brethren, and said: ‘Behold, I have dreamed yet a dream: and, behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.’ **10** And he told it

to his father, and to his brethren; and his father rebuked him, and said unto him: ‘What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brethren indeed come to bow down to thee to the earth?’

ְר ָצה. א

ָך, ל

ו ִא ְּמ ָך ְו ַא ֶחי ָך, ל ִה ׁ ְש ַּת ֲח ֹות

**Genesis 41:1-32**

### בראשית מא:א–לב

**1** And it came to pass at the end of two full years, that

ו ַפ ְר ֹעה חֹ ֵלם, ְו ִה ֵּנה עֹ ֵמד על-ה ְיאֹר. **ב**

**א** ַו ְי ִהי, מ ֵּקץ ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ָי ִמים;

Pharaoh dreamed: and, behold, he stood by the river. **2**

ָפר ֹות, ְיפות מ ְר ֶאה, ו ְב ִריאֹת ּב ָ ׂשר;

ו ִה ֵּנה מן-ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע

And, behold, there came up out of the river seven kine,

ֹות, עֹל ֹות א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן מן- א ֵחר

ו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו. **ג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפר ֹות

well-favoured and fat-fleshed; and they fed in the reed-

grass. **3** And, behold, seven other kine came up after

ְש ַפת על-

ָּפר ֹות, ה

ּב ָ ׂשר; ַו ַּת ֲעמֹ ְד ָנה א ֶצל

ה ְיאֹר, ָרע ֹות מ ְר ֶאה, ְו ַד ּק ֹות

them out of the river, ill favoured and lean-fleshed; and

ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַד ּקֹת ה ָּב ָ ׂשר, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

הַ ְיאֹר. **ד** ַו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה ה ָּפר ֹות, ָרע ֹות

stood by the other kine upon the brink of the river. **4**

ַפ ְרעֹה. **ה** וַ ִ ּיי ׁ ָשן, וַ ַ ּי ֲחלֹם

ה ָּפר ֹות, ְיפת ה ַּמ ְר ֶאה ְו ַה ְּב ִריאֹת; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ,

And the ill-favoured and lean-fleshed kine did eat up the

ָחד-- ְב ִריאות ְוטֹב ֹות. **ו** א

ָק ֶנה ּב

ֵש ִנית; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹל ֹות

seven well-favoured and fat kine. So Pharaoh awoke. **5**

פת ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן. **ז**

ו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים, ַ ּד ּק ֹות ו ׁ ְשד ּו

And he slept and dreamed a second time: and, behold,

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים, ה ְּב ִריאות

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ַ ּד ּק ֹות, את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ו ִּת ְב ַל ְע ָנה,

seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank and

ַפ ְרעֹה, ְו ִה ֵּנה חל ֹום. **ח** ַו ְי ִהי ב ּ ֹב ֶקר, ַו ִּת ָּפ ֶעם ר ּוחו,

ו ַה ְּמ ֵלאות; ַו ִ ּיי ַקץ

good. **6** And, behold, seven ears, thin and blasted with

the east wind, sprung up after them. **7** And the thin ears

ו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח ַו ִ ּי ְק ָרא את- ָכל-ח ְר ֻט ֵּמי מ ְצ ַר ִים, ְו ֶאת- ָכל-ח ָכ ֶמי ָה; ַו ְי ַס ֵּפר

swallowed up the seven rank and full ears. And Pharaoh

ל ֶהם את-חלֹמ ֹו, ְו ֵאין-פ ֹו ֵתר או ָתם ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **ט** ַו ְי ַד ֵּבר ׂשר

ַפ ְרעֹה

awoke, and, behold, it was a dream. **8** And it came to

את- ּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר: את-ח ָט ַאי, א ִני מ ְז ִּכיר ה ּי ֹום. **י** ַפ ְרעֹה,

ה ַּמ ׁ ְש ִקים,

pass in the morning that his spirit was troubled; and he

ָּב ִחים--אֹ ִתי, ְו ֵאת ה ַּט

ׂשר

ּבית

ּב ִמ ׁ ְש ַמר,

על-ע ָב ָדיו; ַו ִ ּי ֵּתן אֹ ִתי

ק ַצף

sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all the

ָוהוא: אי ׁש ּכ ִפ ְתר ֹון א ִני

ְי ָלה א ָחד, ּב ַל

ֹום חל

ׂשר הָאֹ ִפים. **יא** ַו ַּנ ַח ְל ָמה

wise men thereof; and Pharaoh told them his dream; but

ע ְב ִרי, ע ֶבד ל ַ ׂשר ה ַּט ָּב ִחים, ַו ְּנ ַס ֶּפר-

חֲלֹמ ֹו, חָ ָל ְמנ ּו. **יב** ְו ׁ ָשם א ָּתנ ּו ַנ ַער

there was none that could interpret them unto Pharaoh.

**9** Then spoke the chief butler unto Pharaoh, saying: ‘I

ָפ ָתר. **יג** ַו ְי ִהי ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר

ֲחלֹמ ֹו, ּכ

ֵתינ ּו: אי ׁש את-חלֹמֹ

ל ֹו, ַו ִ ּי ְפ ָּתר- ָלנ ּו



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make mention of my faults this day: **10** Pharaoh was

ְרעֹה ַפ

ת ָלה. **יד** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ַלח

ַכ ִּני, ְואֹת ֹו על-

ה ׁ ִשיב

ָיה: אֹ ִתי ה

ּכן

ָפ ַתר- ָלנ ּו,

wroth with his servants, and put me in the ward of the

בא אל-

ׂש ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ ּי

ּב ֹור; ַו ְי ַג ַּלח ַו ְי ַח ֵּלף מן-ה

ֹו ֵסף, ַו ְי ִרי ֻצהו את-י

ו ִ ּי ְק ָרא

house of the captain of the guard, me and the chief baker. **11** And we dreamed a dream in one night, I and he; we dreamed each man according to the interpretation of his

ַל ְמ ִּתי, ופ ֵתר אין אֹת ֹו; ח

ל ְפ ּתֹר אֹת ֹו. **טז** ַו ַ ּי ַען י ֹו ֵסף את- ׁ ְשל ֹום ַפ ְרעֹה. **יז** ַו ְידַ ֵּבר

ֹו ֵסף, חל ֹום אל-י

ִת ׁ ְש ַמע חל ֹום, ַי ֲע ֶנה אלֹקים,

ְרעֹה, ַפ

לאמֹר,

ָע ָדי: ּב ְל

ָך ַפרְעֹה. **טו** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר ו ֲא ִני, ׁ ָש ַמ ְע ִּתי ע ֶלי

את- ַּפ ְר ֹעה לאמֹר,

dream. **12** And there was with us there a young man, a

Hebrew, servant to the captain of the guard; and we told

ְש ַפת ה ְיאֹר. **יח** ְו ִה ֵּנה מִן- על-

ִמי, ה ְנ ִני עֹ ֵמד ּב ֲחלֹ

ַפ ְר ֹעה, אל-י ֹו ֵסף:

him, and he interpreted to us our dreams; to each man

פת תֹ ַאר; ַו ִּת ְר ֶעי ָנה, ּב ָאחו.

ּב ִריאות ּב ָ ׂשר, ִוי

ֹות, ָפר

ה ְיאֹר, עֹלֹת ׁ ֶש ַבע

according to his dream he did interpret. **13** And it came

ַאר תֹ

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ַ ּד ּל ֹות ְו ָרע ֹות

ֵחר ֹות, עֹל ֹות א

**יט** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע- ּפר ֹות

to pass, as he interpreted to us, so it was: I was restored

ַע. **כ** לרֹ

ְצ ַר ִים, מ

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ֵה ָּנה כ

ּב ָ ׂשר: לֹא-ר ִאי ִתי

מאֹד, ְו ַר ּק ֹות

unto mine office, and he was hanged.’ **14** Then Pharaoh

ָּפר ֹות ה ִרא ׁשֹנ ֹות, ה

ה ָּפר ֹות, ה ַר ּק ֹות, ְו ָה ָרע ֹות--את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ו ּתֹא ַכ ְל ָנה,

sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out

באנה אל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה, ְולֹא נ ֹו ַדע ּכי-באו אל-ק ְר ֶּב ָנה,

ה ְּברִיאֹת. **כא** ַו ָּת

of the dungeon. And he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: ‘I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it; and I have heard say of thee, that

ו ַמ ְר ֵאי ֶהן ַרע, ּכ ֲא ׁ ֶשר ּב ְּת ִח ָּלה; ָו ִאי ָקץ. **כב** ָו ֵא ֶרא, ּב ֲחלֹ ִמי; ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע

ִש ֳּב ִלים, עֹלֹת ּב ָק ֶנה א ָחד--מ ֵלאֹת ְוטֹב ֹות. **כג** ְו ִה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ִש ֳּב ִלים,

צ ֻנמ ֹות ַ ּד ּק ֹות ׁ ְש ֻדפות ָק ִדים--צֹ ְמחות, א ֲח ֵרי ֶהם. **כד** ַו ִּת ְב ַלעְןָ

when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it.’ **16** And

ַח ְר ֻט ִּמים, אל-ה

ה ּ ֹטב ֹות; ָואֹ ַמר,

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

את ׁ ֶש ַבע

ה ַ ּד ּקֹת,

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים

Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: ‘It is not in me; God will

א ָחד הוא:

ְרעֹה ַפ

ֹום חל

ּפ ְרעֹה, אל-

**כה** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסףלי.

ִּגיד, מ

ו ֵאין

give Pharaoh an answer of peace.’ **17** And Pharaoh spoke

ה ּ ֹטבת, ׁ ֶש ַבע

ל ַפ ְר ֹעה. **כו** ׁ ֶש ַבע ָפרֹת

ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה, ה ִּגיד

את א ׁ ֶשר

unto Joseph: ‘In my dream, behold, I stood upon the brink

ָּנה: חל ֹום, א ָחד ה

ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ּ ֹטבת, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים

ָש ִנים ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע

of the river. **18** And, behold, there came up out of the river

ַר ּק ֹות ְו ָה ָרעֹת ֹהעלֹת א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים ה

הוא. **כז** ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ָּפר ֹות

seven kine, fat-fleshed and well-favoured; and they fed in

the reed-grass. **19** And, behold, seven other kine came up

ה ָּנה, ְו ׁ ֶש ַבע ה ׁ ִּש ֳּב ִלים ה ֵרקות, ׁ ְש ֻדפות ה ָּק ִדים-- ִי ְהי ּו, ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב.

after them, poor and very ill-favoured and lean-fleshed,

אל- ּפ ְר ֹעה: א ׁ ֶשר ה ֱאלֹקים עֹ ֶ ׂשה, ה ְר ָאה

א ׁ ֶשר ִ ּד ַּב ְר ִּתי

ה ָ ּד ָבר,

**כח** הוא

such as I never saw in all the land of Egypt for badness.

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ָש ָבע ָּגד ֹול, ּבאות--

ה ֵּנה ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ָש ִנים,

את- ּפ ְרעֹה. **כט**

**20** And the lean and ill-favoured kine did eat up the first

ֶא ֶרץ ּב

ּכל-ה ָּ ׂש ָבע,

א ֲח ֵרי ֶהן, ְו ִנ ׁ ְש ַּכח

מ ְצרָ ִים. **ל** ְו ָקמ ּו ׁ ֶש ַבע ׁ ְש ֵני ָר ָעב,

seven fat kine. **21** And when they had eaten them up, it

ֶרץ, מ ְּפ ֵני ּב ָא

את-ה ָא ֶרץ. **לא** ְולֹא- ִי ָ ּו ַדע ה ָּ ׂש ָבע

ָר ָעב, ה

מ ְצ ָר ִים; ְו ִכ ָּלה

could not be known that they had eaten them; but they

ֲחל ֹום ה

ּכי-כ ֵבד הוא, מאֹד. **לב** ְו ַעל ה ׁ ָּשנ ֹות

ה ָר ָעב ההוא א ֲח ֵרי-כן:

were still ill-favoured as at the beginning. So I awoke. **22** And I saw in my dream, and, behold, seven ears came up upon one stalk, full and good. **23** And, behold, seven ears, withered, thin, and blasted with the east wind, sprung up after them. **24** And the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it unto the magicians; but there was none that could declare it to me.’ **25** And Joseph said unto Pharaoh: ‘The dream of Pharaoh is one; what God is about to do He has declared unto Pharaoh. **26** The seven good kine are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years: the dream is one**. 27** And the seven lean and ill-favoured kine that came up after them are seven years, and also the seven empty ears blasted with the east wind; they shall be seven years of famine. **28** That is the thing which I spoke unto Pharaoh: what God is about to do He

ֱאלֹקים ה

ה ֱאלֹקים, ו ְמ ַמ ֵהר מ ִעם

ה ָ ּד ָבר

ָמ ִים-- ִכי-נכ ֹון ַפ ֲע

אל- ּפ ְרעֹה,

לעֲשֹת ֹו.



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has shown unto Pharaoh. **29** Behold, there come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. **30** And there shall arise after them seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land; **31** and the plenty shall not be known in the land by reason of that famine which followeth; for it shall be very grievous. **32** And for that the dream was doubled unto Pharaoh twice, it is because the thing is established by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass.

**Genesis 45:4-8**

### בראשית מה:ד–ח

**4** And Joseph said unto his brethren: ‘Come near to me, I

א ַלי, ַו ִ ּי ָּג ׁש ּו; ַו ּיֹא ֶמר, א ִני י ֹו ֵסף

**ד** ַו ּיֹא ֶמר י ֹו ֵסף אל-א ָחיו ְּג ׁש ּו-נא

pray you.’ And they came near. And he said: ‘I am Joseph

א ׁ ֶשר-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי, מ ְצ ָר ְי ָמה. **ה** ְו ַע ָּתה אל- ּת ָע ְצב ּו, ְו ַאל-

א ִחי ֶכם,

your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. **5** And now be not

ל ִמ ְח ָיה, ׁ ְש ָל ַח ִני אלֹקים

ָּנה: ּכי ה

י ַחר ּב ֵעי ֵני ֶכם, ּכי-מ ַכ ְר ֶּתם אֹ ִתי,

grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither;

for God did send me before you to preserve life. **6** For

ּב ֶק ֶרב ה ָא ֶרץ; ְוע ֹוד ח ֵמ ׁש ׁ ָש ִנים,

לפְ ֵני ֶכם. **ו** ּכי-זה ׁ ְש ָנ ַת ִים ה ָר ָעב,

these two years has the famine been in the land; and there

ל ְפ ֵני ֶכם, לש ּום ל ֶכם אלֹקים

אין-ח ִרי ׁש ְו ָק ִציר. **ז** ַו ִ ּי ׁ ְש ָל ֵח ִני

א ׁ ֶשר

are yet five years, in which there shall be neither plowing

ָטה ְּגדֹ ָלה. **ח** ְו ַע ָּתה, לֹא-א ֶּתם ל ְפ ֵלי

ֶכם, ל

ַה ֲחי ֹות ו ְל

ָא ֶרץ, ּב

ְש ֵא ִרית

nor harvest. **7** And God sent me before you to give you

ל ָכל-

ְל ָאד ֹון ו

ַפ ְרעֹה, ל

ָאב ל

ה ֱאלֹקים; ַו ְי ִ ׂשי ֵמ ִני

ּכי,

ָּנה, ה

ְש ַל ְח ֶּתם אֹ ִתי

a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance. **8** So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

ְצ ָר ִים. מ

ָכל-א ֶרץ ּב

ומֹ ׁ ֵשל,

ּבית ֹו,