

**VAYECHI: WHO IS JOSEPH’S REAL FATHER?**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayechi!

## Jacob Takes A Bow

Parshat Vayechi opens with a moving scene. Jacob has reached the ripe old age of 147, and he senses that his death is near. He calls for his son Joseph to approach. He once thought that his beloved Joseph was lost forever, mauled to death by a wild animal; but for these past seventeen years, father and son have been reunited in the land of Egypt.

Joseph rushes to Jacob’s bedside. As Joseph stands there looking on, his father bows down dramatically towards the head of the bed.

Why was Jacob bowing? It may seem like a small question. But it turns out to be quite a big question indeed. The midrash offers an answer which unearths a hidden truth at the heart of the children of Israel’s story. Let’s uncover it for ourselves.

### LOOK INSIDE: A Midrash



Read the midrash below. What do you think it means? Is there anything strange about it?

**Rashi on Genesis 47:311**

##### רש״י על בראשית מז:לא

**[He bowed] on the head of the bed:** Because his

ָ� ְי ָת� ִמ ָ�הּת ֹו שׁ ְ� ֵל ָמ,� ְולֹא � ָי� ב �הּ ָר שׁ ָ�ע, **ה ִטּמ ָ�טּה –** ַעל שׁ ֶ�

##### על רֹא שׁש

offspring were perfect, insofar as not one of them was wicked, as is evidenced by the fact that Joseph was

a king, and furthermore, that [even though] he was captured among the gentiles, he remained steadfast in his righteousness.

ִים, ַו ֲ� ֵרי �וא ע ֹו ֵמד � �הּ ֹו

ל ֵבין

ֶ� ֲ� ֵרי י ֹו ֵסף ֶמ ֶל ְך �וא, ְוע ֹוד שׁ ֶ� ִ�הּ שׁ ְ� ָהּב�

ְהּב ִצדְק ֹו.

According to the Midrash, Jacob was bowing because he saw that his legacy was finally complete. None of his children were evil-doers; they were all good, fine Israelites. This became clear to him when he saw that even Joseph - who was separated from his family for many years, who lived among another nation and held a position of great power in Egypt - was as righteous as he had been when he had lived in Jacob’s house.

1 This midrash can be found in Sifrei Va’etchanan 31 and Sifrei Ha’azinu 334. We’ve quoted it here as Rashi brings it in his commentary on the verse.

### 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: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?” (available for viewing at [www.](http://www/) alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Ami Silver, edited by Rivky Stern and Beth Lesch, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

Now, this Midrash offers an inspiring message about Joseph’s steadfastness and his commitment to his faith, but it seems to come at the wrong time. According to the Midrash, Jacob realizes that Joseph is a *tzaddik*...when? It’s at the very end of his life, as Jacob is lying on his deathbed. Isn’t that a bit odd?

### PONDER THIS



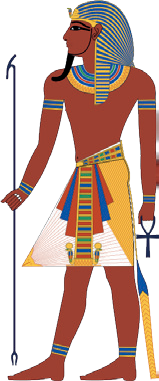
Think about the story of Jacob and Joseph. What *should* have been the moment that Jacob realized Joseph’s steadfast righteousness? When would Jacob have slapped himself on the forehead and said, “My goodness, Joseph is still a *tzaddik*, after all these years”?

At the time of this scene, it’s been *seventeen years* since Jacob and Joseph were reunited in Egypt. By this point, Jacob has had *seventeen years* to see that Joseph hasn’t assimilated, that Joseph was still a good Jew. So wouldn’t *that* time, the reunion, be the moment when Jacob should have realized that Joseph was still good? Why is the Midrash putting these words into Jacob’s mouth *now,* seventeen years later?

What is the Midrash really trying to say? We want to explore a fascinating answer to that question, an answer which probes at the very nature of Joseph’s complex identity.

## A Tale Of Two Fathers

Indeed, we want to suggest that this Midrash is building off of an idea that we discussed in our Guide to Parshat Miketz.



The basic argument that we made there is that Joseph may have suffered from a terrible misunderstanding about his father’s role in selling him to Egypt. We know that Jacob had nothing to do with the sale of Joseph. But there are some tantalizing clues which suggest that Joseph didn’t know what we know. Joseph didn’t know that his brothers presented a bloody coat to his father. He didn’t know that his father thought he was killed by a wild animal. He didn’t know that his father mourned for him. All Joseph knew is that he was jumped, kidnapped and sold -- and there was never any search party. His father never came looking for him. So given all of that, how might Joseph have felt towards his father Jacob?

And while in Egypt, another man took Joseph in. That man gave Joseph beautiful clothes, when Joseph had once been stripped of his clothes. That man listened to Joseph’s dreams, when Joseph’s father had once gotten angry at him for his dreams. That man took care of Joseph: he gave him a wife, an elevated status, and a new name. What kind of person looks after you and gives you a wife and a job and sets you on a successful path for life? A father- type person, that’s who.

That man was none other than Pharaoh.2

In the aftermath of Joseph’s exile from his family, we would expect that Joseph felt estranged from his true father, Jacob -- and Pharaoh became a surrogate father figure to him.

If our theory is right, then this provides a crucial context for making sense of Jacob’s bow on his deathbed. If we take a deeper look inside the text, we’ll be able to see it all come together.

## Swear To Me

It has everything to do with the short conversation between Jacob and Joseph that takes place just *before* Jacob’s bow:

**Genesis 47:29-31**

##### בראשית מז:כ–�לא

**29** When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called

**כ�** ו ִ הּי ְק ְרב הּו ְי ֵמי- ִי ְ ׂ� ָר ֵאל, ָלמ הּות, ַו ִ הּי ְק ָרא ל ְב� ֹו לי ֹו ֵסף

his son Joseph and said to him, “If I have now found

ָ�א ָי ְד ָך ׂ�ים-

הּב ֵעי ֶ�י ָך, חן

ו הּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו ִאם- ָ�א ָמ ָצאתי

favor in your eyes, now place your hand beneath my

ֶו ֱא ֶמת, ַאל- ָ�א ח ֶסד

ַת ַחת ְי ֵר ִכי; ְו ָע ִ ׂ�י ָת ִע הָּמ ִדי

thigh, and you shall deal with me with lovingkindness

הּו ְ� ָ ׂ�את ִ�י ב ַתי,

ְב הִּתי, ִעם-א ו שׁ ָ� ַכ

ִמ ְצרָ ִים. **ל** הּב

ת ְק ְהּברֵ ִ�י

and truth; do not bury me now in Egypt. **30** I will lie with my forefathers, and you shall carry me out of

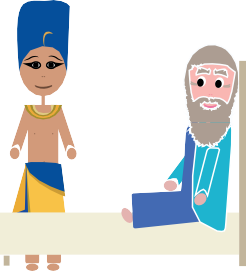
הּו ְק ַב ְר הַּת ִִ�יְק הּבֻ ָר ָתם; ַו הּיֹא ַמר, ָא ֹ� ִכי ֶא ֱע ֶ ׂ�� שׁ ָּ� ְב ָע� לי--ו ִ הּי שׁ ָּ� ַבע, ל ֹו; ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְ� הַּתחו מ הִּמ ְצ ַר ִים, כ ְד ָברֶ ָך. **לא** ו הּיֹא ֶמר, �

Egypt, and you shall bury me in their grave.” And he said, “I will do as you say.” **31** And he said, “Swear to me. “ So he swore to him, and Israel prostrated himself on the head of the bed.

.��הָּ ִמהּ �

י ְ ׂ� ָר ֵאל, ַעל-רֹא �שׁ

2 To see this in the verses, take a look at Genesis Chapter 37 and contrast it with Genesis Chapter 41. We’ve provided excerpts on your Source Sheet.

*I don’t want to be buried here in Egypt, Jacob pleads. This isn’t my place. Take me back home, to Canaan, to the cave of Machpelah, where my parents and grandparents are buried. That’s where I belong.* Joseph doesn’t hesitate to reassure his father: *I’ll do just as you’ve said.*

**PONDER THIS**



If you were Jacob and you just heard Joseph say these words, what would your response be?

We’d expect Jacob to say something like: “Thank you, my son. Now I can rest in peace.”

But that’s *not* what Jacob says. Instead, the conversation takes a bizarre turn:

**Genesis 47:31**

��הָּ מהִּ �

ַבע, ל ֹו; ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְ� הַּתחו ִי ְ ׂ� ָר ֵאל, ַעל-רֹא �שׁ לי ַו ִ הּי שׁ ָּ�

ָּ� ְבעָ� � שׁ

ו הּיֹאמֶר,

And [Jacob] said, “swear to me”, and [Joseph] swore to him, and Israel bowed down upon the bed’s head

Why does Jacob make Joseph swear? Wasn’t Joseph’s first answer good enough? Doesn’t Jacob trust Joseph? Imagine that your father asks you if you can pick up a half gallon of milk on the way home, and you say: “Sure, Dad, no problem.” But then all of the sudden, Dad gets this desperate look in his eye and he comes in real close and says: “I’m going to need you to *promise* that you’re going to get the milk.” You’d think it was really odd. You’d wonder: “Have I given him some reason to think that I *wouldn’t* do what he said?” That’s exactly the question that verse 31 is begging us to ask. Did Joseph give Jacob any reason to think that he *wouldn’t* bury him in Canaan? What’s with the third degree?

And, notice that it’s only after Joseph *swears* that Jacob bows. What’s going on here?

## It’s A Family Affair

**Here’s our take:** This moment was more than a dying father asking a final favor from his son. It was a moment when Pharaoh’s interests and Jacob’s interests stood opposite one another, and Joseph had to choose where to place his loyalty. There was no way for him to make both of them happy anymore.

Because it’s one thing for Joseph to enjoy this great relationship with Pharaoh for all these years, and to reconcile with his true father when they’re finally reunited. He can kiss and hug Jacob, can be happy to be back together with him after their long separation. But what happens when the interests of the *real father* and the *adopted father* collide? How will Joseph negotiate that? Which of his two “fathers” will he choose then?

We want to suggest that this collision of interests is exactly what is happening in our parsha, seventeen years after Jacob and Joseph were reunited.

In what sense was this a collision of interests? Well, Jacob was not a regular citizen of the Egyptian Kingdom, and his funeral was not going to be a standard affair. Jacob was the father of the man who was second in command to Pharaoh, the man who had saved the entire world with his premonitions of surplus and famine. Joseph was a

royal hero in Egypt, and his father Jacob was treated with great honor accordingly. Jacob too had become Egyptian royalty. Indeed, we see in the text, he was embalmed like Egyptian royalty, and his funeral seemed to have the status of an Egyptian state funeral, with an enormous procession of Egyptian state dignitaries.3 But how would Pharaoh feel about holding an Egyptian state funeral… in *Canaan*?

Just imagine if Queen Elizabeth died and was buried in Madagascar. That wouldn’t look very good for England, would it?

But this is what Jacob asked of Joseph, and Joseph swore that he would follow through:

**Genesis 50:4-5**

##### בראשית נ:ד–ז

**4** When the days of his weeping had passed, Joseph

ְי ַד ֵהּבר י ֹו ֵסף, ֶאל- ֵבית הַּפ ְרעֹ� ב ִכית ֹו, ַו

**ד** ו ַ הּי ַע ְבר הּו, ְי ֵמי

spoke to Pharaoh’s household, saying, “If now I have

ַ הּד ְהּבר הּו- ָ�א, הּב ֵעי ֵ�י ֶכם--

חן,

ָ�א ָמ ָצאתי אם-

לאמֹר:

found favor in your eyes, speak now in Pharaoh’s ears,

��הֵּ �

ִהּבי ַע ִ�י ֵלאמֹר, � שׁ ְא

ִבי א

ְרעֹ� ֵלאמֹר. **ה** פ

הּב ָא ְז ֵ�י

saying, **5** ‘My father made me swear, saying, “Behold, I

שׁ ָא ָהּמ� הּכ ַ� ַען,

הּב ֶא ֶרץ לי

ִתי הּכ ִרי

א ֹ� ִכי ֵמת-- ְב ִק ְב ִרי ֲא שׁ ֶאר

am going to die. In my grave, which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.” So now, please let me go up and bury my father and return.’ “

הִּת ְק ְהּב ֵר ִ�י; ְו ַע הָּת,� ֶא ֱע ֶל-� ָ�הּא ְו ֶא ְק ְהּב ָר�

את-א ִבי--ו ָא שׁא הּו ָב.�

It must have been hard for Joseph to come to Pharaoh - the man who had given him everything, who had acted towards him as a father - to make this uncomfortable request.

On the one hand, there’s Jacob, his real father, part of a nascent people who have been promised the land of Canaan

as an inheritance by God, and he’s asking his son to help him to fulfill that destiny. On the other hand, there’s Pharaoh, Jacob’s adoptive father, the leader of Egypt, who has given Joseph every opportunity to flourish as one of the Egyptian people. He has extended the same welcome to Joseph’s extended family: come join us here in Egypt, live off the best of our land, become one of us.4

And so, at that moment on Jacob’s deathbed, when he asks his son to bury him in Canaan, Jacob understands what he is asking his son to do. That’s why he makes him swear, and when Joseph does swear, that’s why he bows. *My son... he’s chosen me after all.* He knows now that Joseph is a *tzaddik*. After enduring decades of a broken relationship, this

is the moment at which Jacob and Joseph truly repair the past damage. Joseph knows who his real father is and his allegiance lies with him. Joseph says: *I choose to seal my fate with the Hebrews. This is my family.*

## Remembered Among The Thorns

Indeed, this theory might actually help to explain *another* odd Midrash which Rashi brings. The text tells us that before

Jacob was buried, he was eulogized in a place with a strange name. It was called דvָ ָא �

“a place that was surrounded by thorns.”

רֶןlֹ הּ , “Goren Ha’Atad,” which means

3 Genesis 50

4 Indeed, it was the strangest thing in the world, an Egyptian state funeral held outside of Egypt. The other nations of the world looked on in wonder: ֵבד ָכ -ֶבל ֵא ּו ְמר ּיֹא ַו ,ָטד ָא ָה ֶרן ֹג ְּב ,ֶבל ֵא ה-ֶאת ִני ֲע ַנ ְּכ ַה ֶרץ ָא ָה ֵשב ׁ ֹו י ְרא ּי ַ ַו ִים ְצרָ ִמ ְל ֶזה , “The Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, saw the mourning at Goren Ha’Atad, and they said, “This is a great mourning for the Egyptians” (Genesis 50:11).

### LOOK INSIDE: A Midrash



Read the Midrash below, which explains the meaning of this name. It’s a hard Midrash to make sense of. What do you think it means?

**“Goren Ha’Atad”:** ...Our Rabbis understood [that it was called Goren Ha’Atad] to commemorate the event when all the people of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael came to [fight a] war. When they saw Joseph’s crown hanging on Jacob’s coffin, they all stood up and hung their own crowns on it and surrounded it with crowns, like a threshing floor surrounded by a fence of thorns. -- [From Sotah 13a]

**גרן הא�ד:** ...ורבותי�ו דראו על אם �מאורע אבאו כל מלכיכ�ען ו�איאי יאמעאל למלחמ,� וכיון אראו כתרו אל יוסף תלוי בארו�ו אל יעקב, עמדו כולן ותלו בו כתרי�ם, ו�קיפו�ו

כתרים כlורן �מוקף סייl אל קוצים:

According to the Midrash, all of the kings of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael came to wage war against the Israelite family, Jacob’s funeral procession. But they saw something that made them stop and put down their weapons. What did they see? The crown of Joseph hanging on the coffin. When they saw that, they took off their own crowns and lay them on the coffin as well. And so it was a coffin encircled with crowns, as if they were a circle of thorns around the coffin. That’s why the place is called “Goren Ha’Atad,” the place surrounded by thorns.

But what are we supposed to make of this whole story?

Look at who the rabbis say were attacking the children of Jacob. It was the kings of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael.

### PONDER THIS



Think about the Biblical characters of Canaan and Ishmael. What do they have in common?

**Hint:** See Genesis 9:25 for the story of Canaan, and Genesis 21:10 for the story of Ishmael.



**We want to suggest a theory:** What is the common denominator between Canaan and Ishmael? They are both dispossessed children. Who was Canaan? He was the cursed son of Noach, thrown out of the family. Who was Ishmael? The son of Avraham, also thrown out of the family. These dispossessed children are coming now to attack the other children, the ones their fathers loved, the ones who got to stay in the family.

**CONSIDER THIS**

Why does seeing Joseph’s crown on Jacob’s coffin make them stop their attack?

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

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Thanks for understanding - we love you guys, too.

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Joseph was a child who thought himself dispossessed, too. He thought that he got kicked out of the family, out of his father’s house. But he didn’t harbor resentment against his father and brothers. He didn’t turn around to attack. He chose to forgive them. When given the choice between being the son of a wealthy, powerful Pharaoh and the son of Jacob, he said: *My family is still my family.* He buried Jacob in Canaan and put his “crown,” as it were, on that coffin. That’s what made them stop the attack.

Only Joseph held the moral force to take the thrust out of the attack of dispossessed children. Joseph saves us because he is the child who, through his own decisions, made it back to his family. Jewish history is forever indebted to him for his ultimate loyalty.



Vayechi: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 47:29-31**

**בראשית מז:כ–vלא**

**29** And the time drew near that Israel must die; and he

הּות, ַו ִ הּי ְק ָרא ל ְבı ֹו למ

**כv** ו ִ הּי ְק ְרב הּו ְי ֵמי- ִי ְ ׂא ָר ֵאל,

called his son Joseph, and said unto him: ‘If now I have

חן הּב ֵעי ֶıי ָך,

לי ֹו ֵסף ַו הּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו אם- ָıא מ ָצאתי

found favour in thy sight, put, I pray thee, thy hand under

ַחת ְי ֵר ִכי; ְו ָע ִ ׂאי ָת ע הָּמ ִדי ח ֶסד ַת

ׂאים- ָıא ָי ְד ָך

my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not,

I pray thee, in Egypt. **30** But when I sleep with my fathers,

ִıי הּב ִמ ְצ ָר ִים. **ל** ו שׁ ָאכַ ְב הִּתי, ת ְק ְהּב ֵר

ו ֱא ֶמת, אל- ָıא

thou shalt carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their

עם-אב ַתי, ו ְı ָ ׂאאת ִıי מ הִּמ ְצ ַר ִים, ו ְק ַב ְר הַּת ִıי

burying-place.’ And he said: ‘I will do as thou hast said.’ **31**

א ֹı ִכי א ֱע ֶ ׂא� כ ְד ָב ֶר ָך. **לא**

ק הּבֻ ָר ָתם; ַו הּיֹא ַמר,

And he said: ‘Swear unto me.’ And he swore unto him. And Israel bowed down upon the bed’s head.

הּי שׁ ָּא ַבע, ל ֹו; ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְא הַּתחו לי--ו ִ

ַ� ִהּמ ָ.�vהּ

ָּא ְב ָע� שׁא� שׁ ַעל-רֹא

ַו הּיֹא ֶמר,

י ְ ׂא ָר ֵאל,

##### Rashi on Genesis 47:31

**He bowed on the head of the bed:** Because his offspring were perfect, insofar as not one of them was wicked,

as is evidenced by the fact that Joseph was a king, and furthermore, that [even though] he was captured among the gentiles, he remained steadfast in his righteousness.

**Genesis 37:3**

#### רש׳׳י על בראשית מז:לא

**וישתחו ישראל על ראש המvה:** על

א�ית� מvתו אלמ� אאין ב� ראע,

א�רי יוסף מלך �וא, ועוד אıאב�

לבין l�וים, ו�רי �וא עומד בצדקו.

#### בראשית לז:ג

**3** And Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was a son of his old age; and he made him a fine woolen coat.

##### Genesis 37:10

ıים

מ ָהּכל- ָב ָıי ִו-י-- הֶּכבן-זקֻ

ַפ הִּסים.

**ג** ְו ִי ְ ׂא ָר ֵאל, א ַ�ב את-י ֹו ֵסף

� הּוא, ל ֹו; ְו ָע ָ ׂא� ל ֹו, הּכתֹ ֶıת

#### בראשית לז:י

**10** And he told [it] to his father and to his brothers, and his

אל-א ִביו, ְו ֶאל-א ָחיו, ַו ִ הּי ְl ַער-ב ֹו א ִביו, ַו הּיֹא ֶמר

**י** ו ְי ַס הֵּפר

father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream

ח ָל ְמ הָּת: �ב ֹוא ָıב ֹוא, א ִıי

א שׁ ֶאר � ֶ הּז�

ל ֹו מ� � ֲחל ֹום

that you have dreamed? Will we come I, your mother, and your brothers to prostrate ourselves to you to the ground?”

ְר ָצ.� א

ָך, ל

ְא הַּת ֲחוֹת ל ִ� שׁ

ו ִא ְהּמ ָך ְו ַא ֶחי ָך,

##### Genesis 37:24

**24** And they took him and cast him into the pit; now the pit was empty there was no water in it.

מ ִים.

ֹו ב

אין

� הּ ֹב ָר;� ְו ַ� הּב ֹור ֵרק,

#### בראשית לז:כד

ַו ִ הּיח הּקֻ � הּו--ו ַ הּי שׁ ְא ִלכ הּו אֹת ֹו, **כד** ָ



Vayechi: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?

Source Sheet Page 2

##### Genesis 41:14-15

**14** So Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they rushed him from the dungeon, and he shaved and changed his

את-סי ֹוף, ַו ְי ִריצֻ � הּו מן- ַ� הּב ֹור; אל- הּפ ְר ֹע.� **vו** ו הּיֹאמֶר בא

#### בראשית מא:ידv–ו

**יד** ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְא ַלח ַפ ְרעֹ� ַו ִ הּי ְק ָרא

ו ְי ַl ַהּלח ַו ְי ַח ֵהּלף ׂא ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ הּי

clothes, and he [then] came to Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh

ֵתר אין אֹת ֹו; פ

ַפ ְרעֹ,� אל-י ֹו ֵסף, חל ֹום ח ַל ְמ הִּתי, ו

said to Joseph, “I have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter for it, but I have heard it said of you [that] you understand a dream, to interpret it.”

ֹום, ל ְפ הּתֹר חל

ִת שׁ ְא ַמע לאמֹר,

ֶלי ָך ע

ִıי, שׁ ָא ַמ ְע הִּתי ַו ֲא

אֹת ֹו.

**Genesis 49:33-50:11**

#### בראשית מ:vלג

**33** And when Jacob made an end of charging his sons,

ַו ֶ הּי ֱ ֹאסף ַר ְl ָליו אל- ַ� הִּמ ָ;�vהּ ַו ִ הּי ְl ַוע, את- ָב ָıיו,

**לג** ו ְי ַכל ַי ֲעקֹב ל ַצ הּוֹת

he gathered up his feet into the bed, and expired, and

ַו ִ הּי הּ ֹפל י ֹו ֵסף, על- הּפ ֵıי א ִביו; ַו ֵ הּי ְב הְּך ע ָליו, ַו ִ הּי שׁ ַּאק- אל-ע ָהּמיו. **א**

ו ֵ הּי ָא ֶסף

was gathered unto his people. **1** And Joseph fell upon his father’s face, and wept upon him, and kissed him. **2** And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. And the physicians embalmed Israel.

**ב** ַו ְי ַצו י ֹו ֵסף את-ע ָב ָדיו את- ָ�רֹ ְפ ִאים, ל ֲחıֹv את-א ִביו; ַו ַ הּי ַח ְvı הּואֶת- ִי ְ ׂא ָראֵל. **ג** ַו ִ הּי ְמ ְלאו-ל ֹו א ְר ָהּב ִעים י ֹום, הּכי הּכן ִי ְמ ְלאו ְי ֵמי לו. �רֹ ְפאִים,

ִvים; ַו ִ הּי ְב הּכ הּו אֹת ֹו מ ְצ ַר ִים, שׁ ִא ְב ִעים י ֹום. **ד** ַו ַ הּי ַע ְבר הּו, ְי ֵמי ב ִכית ֹו, � ֲחֻı

**3** And forty days were fulfilled for him; for so are fulfilled

ֵעי ֵıי ֶכם- הּב

חן,

מ ָצאתי

אם- ָıא

לאמֹר:

ְרעֹ� ַפ

ֵבית אל-

ו ְי ַד ֵהּבר י ֹו ֵסף,

the days of embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him

ֹı ִכי א

�ıהֵּ �

לאמֹר,

ְא ִהּבי ַע ִıי � שׁ

ִבי א

לאמֹר. **ה**

פ ְרעֹ�

ָא ְז ֵıי הּב

- ַ הּד ְהּבר הּו- ָıא,

threescore and ten days. **4** And when the days of weeping

הּב ֶא ֶרץ הּכ ַı ַען, שׁ ָא הָּמ� ִת ְק ְהּב ֵר ִıי; ְו ַע הָּת,� הּכ ִרי ִתי לי

מת-- ְב ִק ְב ִרי א שׁ ֶאר

for him were past, Joseph spoke unto the house of

ְקבר ו

ֶל-� ָıהּא ְו ֶא ְק ְהּב ָר� את-א ִבי--ו ָא שׁא הּו ָב.� ו ַו הּיֹא ֶמר, ַפ ְר ֹע:� ע ֵל� אֱע

Pharaoh, saying: ‘If now I have found favour in your eyes,

ָך. **ז** ַו ַ הּי ַעל י ֹו ֵסף, ל ְק הּ ֹבר את-א ִביו; ַו ַ הּי ֲעל הּו א הּת ֹו � שׁ ְא ִהּבי ֶע

שׁ ֶאר הּכֲא

את-א ִבי ָך,

speak, I pray you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying: **5** My

father made me swear, saying: Lo, I die; in my grave which

י ֹו ֵסף, הּבית

כל, ִז ְק ֵıי א ֶרץ-מ ְצ ָר ִים. **ח** ְוכל

ֹו, ְו בית

הּכל-ע ְב ֵדי פ ְרעֹ,� ִז ְק ֵıי

I have digged for me in the land of Canaan, there shalt

ְזב הּו, הּב ֶא ֶרץ ֹl שׁ ֶאן. **v** ו ְב ָק ָרם--ע

א ִביו: רק, v הָּפם ְוצֹא ָıם ו ֵבית

ו ֶא ָחיו

thou bury me. Now therefore let me go up, I pray thee, and

**י** ַו ָ הּיבאומאֹד.

ֵבד הּכ

� ַהּמ ֲח ֶ,�ı

ֶכב ַlהּם- הּפ ָר שׁ ִאים; ַו ְי ִ�י ע הּמ ֹו, ַlהּם-ר

ו ַ הּי ַעל

bury my father, and I will come back.’ **6** And Pharaoh said:

ְס הֵּפד ָlהּד ֹול ְו ָכ ֵבד מ

ַו ִ הּי ְס הְּפד הּו- שׁ ָאם, � ַ הּי ְר ֵ הּדן,

ֶבר הּב ֵע

ֶאר א שׁ

ָא ָvד, �

עד- הּ ֹl ֶרן

‘Go up, and bury thy father, according as he made thee

� ָא ֶרץ � ְהּכ ַı ֲע ִıי

ִביו א ֶבל, שׁ ִא ְב ַעת ָי ִמים. **יא** ַו ַ הּי ְרא י ֹו שׁ ֵאב א ל ָא

מאֹד; ַו ַ הּי ַע

swear.’ **7** And Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, **8** and all the house of Joseph, and his brethren, and his father’s house; only their little ones, and their flocks, and their herds,

they left in the land of Goshen. **9** And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen; and it was a very great company. **10** And they came to the threshing-floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, and there they wailed with

a very great and sore wailing; and he made a mourning for his father seven days. **11** And when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning in the floor of Atad, they said: ‘This is a grievous mourning to the Egyptians.’ Wherefore the name of it was called Abel- mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan.

ֵכן ָק ָרא על-

ָvד, ַו הּיֹא ְמר הּו, א ֶבל- ָכ ֵבד ֶז� ל ִמ ְצ ָר ִים; הּב ֹl ֶרן � ָא

מ ְצ ַר ִים, א שׁ ֶאר, הּב ֵע ֶבר � ַ הּי ְר ֵ הּדן.

ָ� ֵא ֶבל, א ֵבל את- ְא ָמ ,�הּ



Vayechi: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?

Source Sheet Page 3

##### Rashi on Genesis 50:11

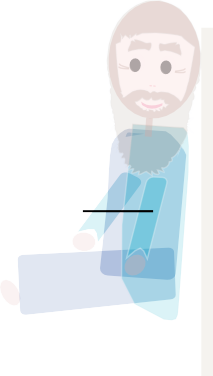
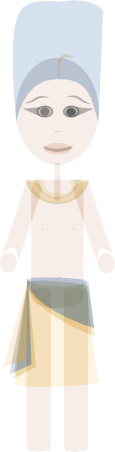
**“Goren Ha’Atad”:** ...Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it [that it was called the threshing floor of the thornbushes] to commemorate the event, when all the people of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael came to [fight a]

war. When they saw Joseph’s crown hanging on Jacob’s coffin, they all stood up and hung their own crowns on it and surrounded it with crowns, like a threshing floor surrounded by a fence of thorns.

#### רש׳׳י על בראשית נ:יא

**גרן האvד:** ...ורבותיıו דראו על אם �מאורע אבאו כל מלכי כıעןוıאיאי יאמעאל למלחמ,� וכיון אראו כתרו אל יוסף תלוי בארוıו אל יעקב, עמדו כולן ותלו בו כתרי�ם, ו�קיפו�ו כתרים כlורן

�מוקף סייl אל קוצים:



**VAYECHI: WHO IS JOSEPH’S REAL FATHER?**

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayechi!

## Jacob Takes A Bow

Parshat Vayechi opens with a moving scene. Jacob has reached the ripe old age of 147, and he senses that his death is near. He calls for his son Joseph to approach. He once thought that his beloved Joseph was lost forever, mauled to death by a wild animal; but for these past seventeen years, father and son have been reunited in the land of Egypt.

Joseph rushes to Jacob’s bedside. As Joseph stands there looking on, his father bows down dramatically towards the head of the bed.

Why was Jacob bowing? It may seem like a small question. But it turns out to be quite a big question indeed. The midrash offers an answer which unearths a hidden truth at the heart of the children of Israel’s story. Let’s uncover it for ourselves.

### LOOK INSIDE: A Midrash



Read the midrash below. What do you think it means? Is there anything strange about it?

**Rashi on Genesis 47:311**

##### רש״י על בראשית מז:לא

**[He bowed] on the head of the bed:** Because his

ָ� ְי ָת� ִמ ָ�הּת ֹו שׁ ְ� ֵל ָמ,� ְולֹא � ָי� ב �הּ ָר שׁ ָ�ע, **ה ִטּמ ָ�טּה –** ַעל שׁ ֶ�

##### על רֹא שׁש

offspring were perfect, insofar as not one of them was wicked, as is evidenced by the fact that Joseph was

a king, and furthermore, that [even though] he was captured among the gentiles, he remained steadfast in his righteousness.

ִים, ַו ֲ� ֵרי �וא ע ֹו ֵמד � �הּ ֹו

ל ֵבין

ֶ� ֲ� ֵרי י ֹו ֵסף ֶמ ֶל ְך �וא, ְוע ֹוד שׁ ֶ� ִ�הּ שׁ ְ� ָהּב�

ְהּב ִצדְק ֹו.

According to the Midrash, Jacob was bowing because he saw that his legacy was finally complete. None of his children were evil-doers; they were all good, fine Israelites. This became clear to him when he saw that even Joseph - who was separated from his family for many years, who lived among another nation and held a position of great power in Egypt - was as righteous as he had been when he had lived in Jacob’s house.

1 This midrash can be found in Sifrei Va’etchanan 31 and Sifrei Ha’azinu 334. We’ve quoted it here as Rashi brings it in his commentary on the verse.

### 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: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?” (available for viewing at [www.](http://www/) alephbeta.org). This guide was written by Ami Silver, edited by Rivky Stern and Beth Lesch, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

Now, this Midrash offers an inspiring message about Joseph’s steadfastness and his commitment to his faith, but it seems to come at the wrong time. According to the Midrash, Jacob realizes that Joseph is a *tzaddik*...when? It’s at the very end of his life, as Jacob is lying on his deathbed. Isn’t that a bit odd?

### PONDER THIS



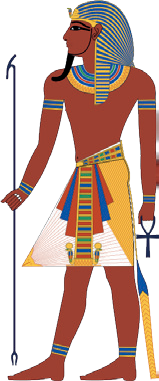
Think about the story of Jacob and Joseph. What *should* have been the moment that Jacob realized Joseph’s steadfast righteousness? When would Jacob have slapped himself on the forehead and said, “My goodness, Joseph is still a *tzaddik*, after all these years”?

At the time of this scene, it’s been *seventeen years* since Jacob and Joseph were reunited in Egypt. By this point, Jacob has had *seventeen years* to see that Joseph hasn’t assimilated, that Joseph was still a good Jew. So wouldn’t *that* time, the reunion, be the moment when Jacob should have realized that Joseph was still good? Why is the Midrash putting these words into Jacob’s mouth *now,* seventeen years later?

What is the Midrash really trying to say? We want to explore a fascinating answer to that question, an answer which probes at the very nature of Joseph’s complex identity.

## A Tale Of Two Fathers

Indeed, we want to suggest that this Midrash is building off of an idea that we discussed in our Guide to Parshat Miketz.



The basic argument that we made there is that Joseph may have suffered from a terrible misunderstanding about his father’s role in selling him to Egypt. We know that Jacob had nothing to do with the sale of Joseph. But there are some tantalizing clues which suggest that Joseph didn’t know what we know. Joseph didn’t know that his brothers presented a bloody coat to his father. He didn’t know that his father thought he was killed by a wild animal. He didn’t know that his father mourned for him. All Joseph knew is that he was jumped, kidnapped and sold -- and there was never any search party. His father never came looking for him. So given all of that, how might Joseph have felt towards his father Jacob?

And while in Egypt, another man took Joseph in. That man gave Joseph beautiful clothes, when Joseph had once been stripped of his clothes. That man listened to Joseph’s dreams, when Joseph’s father had once gotten angry at him for his dreams. That man took care of Joseph: he gave him a wife, an elevated status, and a new name. What kind of person looks after you and gives you a wife and a job and sets you on a successful path for life? A father- type person, that’s who.

That man was none other than Pharaoh.2

In the aftermath of Joseph’s exile from his family, we would expect that Joseph felt estranged from his true father, Jacob -- and Pharaoh became a surrogate father figure to him.

If our theory is right, then this provides a crucial context for making sense of Jacob’s bow on his deathbed. If we take a deeper look inside the text, we’ll be able to see it all come together.

## Swear To Me

It has everything to do with the short conversation between Jacob and Joseph that takes place just *before* Jacob’s bow:

**Genesis 47:29-31**

##### בראשית מז:כ–�לא

**29** When the time drew near for Israel to die, he called

**כ�** ו ִ הּי ְק ְרב הּו ְי ֵמי- ִי ְ ׂ� ָר ֵאל, ָלמ הּות, ַו ִ הּי ְק ָרא ל ְב� ֹו לי ֹו ֵסף

his son Joseph and said to him, “If I have now found

ָ�א ָי ְד ָך ׂ�ים-

הּב ֵעי ֶ�י ָך, חן

ו הּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו ִאם- ָ�א ָמ ָצאתי

favor in your eyes, now place your hand beneath my

ֶו ֱא ֶמת, ַאל- ָ�א ח ֶסד

ַת ַחת ְי ֵר ִכי; ְו ָע ִ ׂ�י ָת ִע הָּמ ִדי

thigh, and you shall deal with me with lovingkindness

הּו ְ� ָ ׂ�את ִ�י ב ַתי,

ְב הִּתי, ִעם-א ו שׁ ָ� ַכ

ִמ ְצרָ ִים. **ל** הּב

ת ְק ְהּברֵ ִ�י

and truth; do not bury me now in Egypt. **30** I will lie with my forefathers, and you shall carry me out of

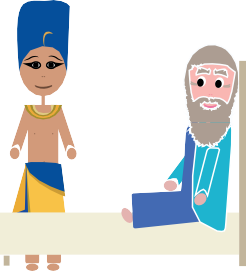
הּו ְק ַב ְר הַּת ִִ�יְק הּבֻ ָר ָתם; ַו הּיֹא ַמר, ָא ֹ� ִכי ֶא ֱע ֶ ׂ�� שׁ ָּ� ְב ָע� לי--ו ִ הּי שׁ ָּ� ַבע, ל ֹו; ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְ� הַּתחו מ הִּמ ְצ ַר ִים, כ ְד ָברֶ ָך. **לא** ו הּיֹא ֶמר, �

Egypt, and you shall bury me in their grave.” And he said, “I will do as you say.” **31** And he said, “Swear to me. “ So he swore to him, and Israel prostrated himself on the head of the bed.

.��הָּ ִמהּ �

י ְ ׂ� ָר ֵאל, ַעל-רֹא �שׁ

2 To see this in the verses, take a look at Genesis Chapter 37 and contrast it with Genesis Chapter 41. We’ve provided excerpts on your Source Sheet.

*I don’t want to be buried here in Egypt, Jacob pleads. This isn’t my place. Take me back home, to Canaan, to the cave of Machpelah, where my parents and grandparents are buried. That’s where I belong.* Joseph doesn’t hesitate to reassure his father: *I’ll do just as you’ve said.*

**PONDER THIS**



If you were Jacob and you just heard Joseph say these words, what would your response be?

We’d expect Jacob to say something like: “Thank you, my son. Now I can rest in peace.”

But that’s *not* what Jacob says. Instead, the conversation takes a bizarre turn:

**Genesis 47:31**

��הָּ מהִּ �

ַבע, ל ֹו; ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְ� הַּתחו ִי ְ ׂ� ָר ֵאל, ַעל-רֹא �שׁ לי ַו ִ הּי שׁ ָּ�

ָּ� ְבעָ� � שׁ

ו הּיֹאמֶר,

And [Jacob] said, “swear to me”, and [Joseph] swore to him, and Israel bowed down upon the bed’s head

Why does Jacob make Joseph swear? Wasn’t Joseph’s first answer good enough? Doesn’t Jacob trust Joseph? Imagine that your father asks you if you can pick up a half gallon of milk on the way home, and you say: “Sure, Dad, no problem.” But then all of the sudden, Dad gets this desperate look in his eye and he comes in real close and says: “I’m going to need you to *promise* that you’re going to get the milk.” You’d think it was really odd. You’d wonder: “Have I given him some reason to think that I *wouldn’t* do what he said?” That’s exactly the question that verse 31 is begging us to ask. Did Joseph give Jacob any reason to think that he *wouldn’t* bury him in Canaan? What’s with the third degree?

And, notice that it’s only after Joseph *swears* that Jacob bows. What’s going on here?

## It’s A Family Affair

**Here’s our take:** This moment was more than a dying father asking a final favor from his son. It was a moment when Pharaoh’s interests and Jacob’s interests stood opposite one another, and Joseph had to choose where to place his loyalty. There was no way for him to make both of them happy anymore.

Because it’s one thing for Joseph to enjoy this great relationship with Pharaoh for all these years, and to reconcile with his true father when they’re finally reunited. He can kiss and hug Jacob, can be happy to be back together with him after their long separation. But what happens when the interests of the *real father* and the *adopted father* collide? How will Joseph negotiate that? Which of his two “fathers” will he choose then?

We want to suggest that this collision of interests is exactly what is happening in our parsha, seventeen years after Jacob and Joseph were reunited.

In what sense was this a collision of interests? Well, Jacob was not a regular citizen of the Egyptian Kingdom, and his funeral was not going to be a standard affair. Jacob was the father of the man who was second in command to Pharaoh, the man who had saved the entire world with his premonitions of surplus and famine. Joseph was a

royal hero in Egypt, and his father Jacob was treated with great honor accordingly. Jacob too had become Egyptian royalty. Indeed, we see in the text, he was embalmed like Egyptian royalty, and his funeral seemed to have the status of an Egyptian state funeral, with an enormous procession of Egyptian state dignitaries.3 But how would Pharaoh feel about holding an Egyptian state funeral… in *Canaan*?

Just imagine if Queen Elizabeth died and was buried in Madagascar. That wouldn’t look very good for England, would it?

But this is what Jacob asked of Joseph, and Joseph swore that he would follow through:

**Genesis 50:4-5**

##### בראשית נ:ד–ז

**4** When the days of his weeping had passed, Joseph

ְי ַד ֵהּבר י ֹו ֵסף, ֶאל- ֵבית הַּפ ְרעֹ� ב ִכית ֹו, ַו

**ד** ו ַ הּי ַע ְבר הּו, ְי ֵמי

spoke to Pharaoh’s household, saying, “If now I have

ַ הּד ְהּבר הּו- ָ�א, הּב ֵעי ֵ�י ֶכם--

חן,

ָ�א ָמ ָצאתי אם-

לאמֹר:

found favor in your eyes, speak now in Pharaoh’s ears,

��הֵּ �

ִהּבי ַע ִ�י ֵלאמֹר, � שׁ ְא

ִבי א

ְרעֹ� ֵלאמֹר. **ה** פ

הּב ָא ְז ֵ�י

saying, **5** ‘My father made me swear, saying, “Behold, I

שׁ ָא ָהּמ� הּכ ַ� ַען,

הּב ֶא ֶרץ לי

ִתי הּכ ִרי

א ֹ� ִכי ֵמת-- ְב ִק ְב ִרי ֲא שׁ ֶאר

am going to die. In my grave, which I dug for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me.” So now, please let me go up and bury my father and return.’ “

הִּת ְק ְהּב ֵר ִ�י; ְו ַע הָּת,� ֶא ֱע ֶל-� ָ�הּא ְו ֶא ְק ְהּב ָר�

את-א ִבי--ו ָא שׁא הּו ָב.�

It must have been hard for Joseph to come to Pharaoh - the man who had given him everything, who had acted towards him as a father - to make this uncomfortable request.

On the one hand, there’s Jacob, his real father, part of a nascent people who have been promised the land of Canaan

as an inheritance by God, and he’s asking his son to help him to fulfill that destiny. On the other hand, there’s Pharaoh, Jacob’s adoptive father, the leader of Egypt, who has given Joseph every opportunity to flourish as one of the Egyptian people. He has extended the same welcome to Joseph’s extended family: come join us here in Egypt, live off the best of our land, become one of us.4

And so, at that moment on Jacob’s deathbed, when he asks his son to bury him in Canaan, Jacob understands what he is asking his son to do. That’s why he makes him swear, and when Joseph does swear, that’s why he bows. *My son... he’s chosen me after all.* He knows now that Joseph is a *tzaddik*. After enduring decades of a broken relationship, this

is the moment at which Jacob and Joseph truly repair the past damage. Joseph knows who his real father is and his allegiance lies with him. Joseph says: *I choose to seal my fate with the Hebrews. This is my family.*

## Remembered Among The Thorns

Indeed, this theory might actually help to explain *another* odd Midrash which Rashi brings. The text tells us that before

Jacob was buried, he was eulogized in a place with a strange name. It was called דvָ ָא �

“a place that was surrounded by thorns.”

רֶןlֹ הּ , “Goren Ha’Atad,” which means

3 Genesis 50

4 Indeed, it was the strangest thing in the world, an Egyptian state funeral held outside of Egypt. The other nations of the world looked on in wonder: ֵבד ָכ -ֶבל ֵא ּו ְמר ּיֹא ַו ,ָטד ָא ָה ֶרן ֹג ְּב ,ֶבל ֵא ה-ֶאת ִני ֲע ַנ ְּכ ַה ֶרץ ָא ָה ֵשב ׁ ֹו י ְרא ּי ַ ַו ִים ְצרָ ִמ ְל ֶזה , “The Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land, saw the mourning at Goren Ha’Atad, and they said, “This is a great mourning for the Egyptians” (Genesis 50:11).

### LOOK INSIDE: A Midrash



Read the Midrash below, which explains the meaning of this name. It’s a hard Midrash to make sense of. What do you think it means?

**“Goren Ha’Atad”:** ...Our Rabbis understood [that it was called Goren Ha’Atad] to commemorate the event when all the people of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael came to [fight a] war. When they saw Joseph’s crown hanging on Jacob’s coffin, they all stood up and hung their own crowns on it and surrounded it with crowns, like a threshing floor surrounded by a fence of thorns. -- [From Sotah 13a]

**גרן הא�ד:** ...ורבותי�ו דראו על אם �מאורע אבאו כל מלכיכ�ען ו�איאי יאמעאל למלחמ,� וכיון אראו כתרו אל יוסף תלוי בארו�ו אל יעקב, עמדו כולן ותלו בו כתרי�ם, ו�קיפו�ו

כתרים כlורן �מוקף סייl אל קוצים:

According to the Midrash, all of the kings of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael came to wage war against the Israelite family, Jacob’s funeral procession. But they saw something that made them stop and put down their weapons. What did they see? The crown of Joseph hanging on the coffin. When they saw that, they took off their own crowns and lay them on the coffin as well. And so it was a coffin encircled with crowns, as if they were a circle of thorns around the coffin. That’s why the place is called “Goren Ha’Atad,” the place surrounded by thorns.

But what are we supposed to make of this whole story?

Look at who the rabbis say were attacking the children of Jacob. It was the kings of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael.

### PONDER THIS



Think about the Biblical characters of Canaan and Ishmael. What do they have in common?

**Hint:** See Genesis 9:25 for the story of Canaan, and Genesis 21:10 for the story of Ishmael.



**We want to suggest a theory:** What is the common denominator between Canaan and Ishmael? They are both dispossessed children. Who was Canaan? He was the cursed son of Noach, thrown out of the family. Who was Ishmael? The son of Avraham, also thrown out of the family. These dispossessed children are coming now to attack the other children, the ones their fathers loved, the ones who got to stay in the family.

**CONSIDER THIS**

Why does seeing Joseph’s crown on Jacob’s coffin make them stop their attack?

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.

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Then SHARE and SUPPORT!

Joseph was a child who thought himself dispossessed, too. He thought that he got kicked out of the family, out of his father’s house. But he didn’t harbor resentment against his father and brothers. He didn’t turn around to attack. He chose to forgive them. When given the choice between being the son of a wealthy, powerful Pharaoh and the son of Jacob, he said: *My family is still my family.* He buried Jacob in Canaan and put his “crown,” as it were, on that coffin. That’s what made them stop the attack.

Only Joseph held the moral force to take the thrust out of the attack of dispossessed children. Joseph saves us because he is the child who, through his own decisions, made it back to his family. Jewish history is forever indebted to him for his ultimate loyalty.



Vayechi: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?

Source Sheet Page 1

**Genesis 47:29-31**

**בראשית מז:כ–vלא**

**29** And the time drew near that Israel must die; and he

הּות, ַו ִ הּי ְק ָרא ל ְבı ֹו למ

**כv** ו ִ הּי ְק ְרב הּו ְי ֵמי- ִי ְ ׂא ָר ֵאל,

called his son Joseph, and said unto him: ‘If now I have

חן הּב ֵעי ֶıי ָך,

לי ֹו ֵסף ַו הּיֹא ֶמר ל ֹו אם- ָıא מ ָצאתי

found favour in thy sight, put, I pray thee, thy hand under

ַחת ְי ֵר ִכי; ְו ָע ִ ׂאי ָת ע הָּמ ִדי ח ֶסד ַת

ׂאים- ָıא ָי ְד ָך

my thigh, and deal kindly and truly with me; bury me not,

I pray thee, in Egypt. **30** But when I sleep with my fathers,

ִıי הּב ִמ ְצ ָר ִים. **ל** ו שׁ ָאכַ ְב הִּתי, ת ְק ְהּב ֵר

ו ֱא ֶמת, אל- ָıא

thou shalt carry me out of Egypt, and bury me in their

עם-אב ַתי, ו ְı ָ ׂאאת ִıי מ הִּמ ְצ ַר ִים, ו ְק ַב ְר הַּת ִıי

burying-place.’ And he said: ‘I will do as thou hast said.’ **31**

א ֹı ִכי א ֱע ֶ ׂא� כ ְד ָב ֶר ָך. **לא**

ק הּבֻ ָר ָתם; ַו הּיֹא ַמר,

And he said: ‘Swear unto me.’ And he swore unto him. And Israel bowed down upon the bed’s head.

הּי שׁ ָּא ַבע, ל ֹו; ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְא הַּתחו לי--ו ִ

ַ� ִהּמ ָ.�vהּ

ָּא ְב ָע� שׁא� שׁ ַעל-רֹא

ַו הּיֹא ֶמר,

י ְ ׂא ָר ֵאל,

##### Rashi on Genesis 47:31

**He bowed on the head of the bed:** Because his offspring were perfect, insofar as not one of them was wicked,

as is evidenced by the fact that Joseph was a king, and furthermore, that [even though] he was captured among the gentiles, he remained steadfast in his righteousness.

**Genesis 37:3**

#### רש׳׳י על בראשית מז:לא

**וישתחו ישראל על ראש המvה:** על

א�ית� מvתו אלמ� אאין ב� ראע,

א�רי יוסף מלך �וא, ועוד אıאב�

לבין l�וים, ו�רי �וא עומד בצדקו.

#### בראשית לז:ג

**3** And Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was a son of his old age; and he made him a fine woolen coat.

##### Genesis 37:10

ıים

מ ָהּכל- ָב ָıי ִו-י-- הֶּכבן-זקֻ

ַפ הִּסים.

**ג** ְו ִי ְ ׂא ָר ֵאל, א ַ�ב את-י ֹו ֵסף

� הּוא, ל ֹו; ְו ָע ָ ׂא� ל ֹו, הּכתֹ ֶıת

#### בראשית לז:י

**10** And he told [it] to his father and to his brothers, and his

אל-א ִביו, ְו ֶאל-א ָחיו, ַו ִ הּי ְl ַער-ב ֹו א ִביו, ַו הּיֹא ֶמר

**י** ו ְי ַס הֵּפר

father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream

ח ָל ְמ הָּת: �ב ֹוא ָıב ֹוא, א ִıי

א שׁ ֶאר � ֶ הּז�

ל ֹו מ� � ֲחל ֹום

that you have dreamed? Will we come I, your mother, and your brothers to prostrate ourselves to you to the ground?”

ְר ָצ.� א

ָך, ל

ְא הַּת ֲחוֹת ל ִ� שׁ

ו ִא ְהּמ ָך ְו ַא ֶחי ָך,

##### Genesis 37:24

**24** And they took him and cast him into the pit; now the pit was empty there was no water in it.

מ ִים.

ֹו ב

אין

� הּ ֹב ָר;� ְו ַ� הּב ֹור ֵרק,

#### בראשית לז:כד

ַו ִ הּיח הּקֻ � הּו--ו ַ הּי שׁ ְא ִלכ הּו אֹת ֹו, **כד** ָ



Vayechi: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?

Source Sheet Page 2

##### Genesis 41:14-15

**14** So Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they rushed him from the dungeon, and he shaved and changed his

את-סי ֹוף, ַו ְי ִריצֻ � הּו מן- ַ� הּב ֹור; אל- הּפ ְר ֹע.� **vו** ו הּיֹאמֶר בא

#### בראשית מא:ידv–ו

**יד** ַו ִ הּי שׁ ְא ַלח ַפ ְרעֹ� ַו ִ הּי ְק ָרא

ו ְי ַl ַהּלח ַו ְי ַח ֵהּלף ׂא ְמלֹ ָתיו, ַו ָ הּי

clothes, and he [then] came to Pharaoh. **15** And Pharaoh

ֵתר אין אֹת ֹו; פ

ַפ ְרעֹ,� אל-י ֹו ֵסף, חל ֹום ח ַל ְמ הִּתי, ו

said to Joseph, “I have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter for it, but I have heard it said of you [that] you understand a dream, to interpret it.”

ֹום, ל ְפ הּתֹר חל

ִת שׁ ְא ַמע לאמֹר,

ֶלי ָך ע

ִıי, שׁ ָא ַמ ְע הִּתי ַו ֲא

אֹת ֹו.

**Genesis 49:33-50:11**

#### בראשית מ:vלג

**33** And when Jacob made an end of charging his sons,

ַו ֶ הּי ֱ ֹאסף ַר ְl ָליו אל- ַ� הִּמ ָ;�vהּ ַו ִ הּי ְl ַוע, את- ָב ָıיו,

**לג** ו ְי ַכל ַי ֲעקֹב ל ַצ הּוֹת

he gathered up his feet into the bed, and expired, and

ַו ִ הּי הּ ֹפל י ֹו ֵסף, על- הּפ ֵıי א ִביו; ַו ֵ הּי ְב הְּך ע ָליו, ַו ִ הּי שׁ ַּאק- אל-ע ָהּמיו. **א**

ו ֵ הּי ָא ֶסף

was gathered unto his people. **1** And Joseph fell upon his father’s face, and wept upon him, and kissed him. **2** And Joseph commanded his servants the physicians to embalm his father. And the physicians embalmed Israel.

**ב** ַו ְי ַצו י ֹו ֵסף את-ע ָב ָדיו את- ָ�רֹ ְפ ִאים, ל ֲחıֹv את-א ִביו; ַו ַ הּי ַח ְvı הּואֶת- ִי ְ ׂא ָראֵל. **ג** ַו ִ הּי ְמ ְלאו-ל ֹו א ְר ָהּב ִעים י ֹום, הּכי הּכן ִי ְמ ְלאו ְי ֵמי לו. �רֹ ְפאִים,

ִvים; ַו ִ הּי ְב הּכ הּו אֹת ֹו מ ְצ ַר ִים, שׁ ִא ְב ִעים י ֹום. **ד** ַו ַ הּי ַע ְבר הּו, ְי ֵמי ב ִכית ֹו, � ֲחֻı

**3** And forty days were fulfilled for him; for so are fulfilled

ֵעי ֵıי ֶכם- הּב

חן,

מ ָצאתי

אם- ָıא

לאמֹר:

ְרעֹ� ַפ

ֵבית אל-

ו ְי ַד ֵהּבר י ֹו ֵסף,

the days of embalming. And the Egyptians wept for him

ֹı ִכי א

�ıהֵּ �

לאמֹר,

ְא ִהּבי ַע ִıי � שׁ

ִבי א

לאמֹר. **ה**

פ ְרעֹ�

ָא ְז ֵıי הּב

- ַ הּד ְהּבר הּו- ָıא,

threescore and ten days. **4** And when the days of weeping

הּב ֶא ֶרץ הּכ ַı ַען, שׁ ָא הָּמ� ִת ְק ְהּב ֵר ִıי; ְו ַע הָּת,� הּכ ִרי ִתי לי

מת-- ְב ִק ְב ִרי א שׁ ֶאר

for him were past, Joseph spoke unto the house of

ְקבר ו

ֶל-� ָıהּא ְו ֶא ְק ְהּב ָר� את-א ִבי--ו ָא שׁא הּו ָב.� ו ַו הּיֹא ֶמר, ַפ ְר ֹע:� ע ֵל� אֱע

Pharaoh, saying: ‘If now I have found favour in your eyes,

ָך. **ז** ַו ַ הּי ַעל י ֹו ֵסף, ל ְק הּ ֹבר את-א ִביו; ַו ַ הּי ֲעל הּו א הּת ֹו � שׁ ְא ִהּבי ֶע

שׁ ֶאר הּכֲא

את-א ִבי ָך,

speak, I pray you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying: **5** My

father made me swear, saying: Lo, I die; in my grave which

י ֹו ֵסף, הּבית

כל, ִז ְק ֵıי א ֶרץ-מ ְצ ָר ִים. **ח** ְוכל

ֹו, ְו בית

הּכל-ע ְב ֵדי פ ְרעֹ,� ִז ְק ֵıי

I have digged for me in the land of Canaan, there shalt

ְזב הּו, הּב ֶא ֶרץ ֹl שׁ ֶאן. **v** ו ְב ָק ָרם--ע

א ִביו: רק, v הָּפם ְוצֹא ָıם ו ֵבית

ו ֶא ָחיו

thou bury me. Now therefore let me go up, I pray thee, and

**י** ַו ָ הּיבאומאֹד.

ֵבד הּכ

� ַהּמ ֲח ֶ,�ı

ֶכב ַlהּם- הּפ ָר שׁ ִאים; ַו ְי ִ�י ע הּמ ֹו, ַlהּם-ר

ו ַ הּי ַעל

bury my father, and I will come back.’ **6** And Pharaoh said:

ְס הֵּפד ָlהּד ֹול ְו ָכ ֵבד מ

ַו ִ הּי ְס הְּפד הּו- שׁ ָאם, � ַ הּי ְר ֵ הּדן,

ֶבר הּב ֵע

ֶאר א שׁ

ָא ָvד, �

עד- הּ ֹl ֶרן

‘Go up, and bury thy father, according as he made thee

� ָא ֶרץ � ְהּכ ַı ֲע ִıי

ִביו א ֶבל, שׁ ִא ְב ַעת ָי ִמים. **יא** ַו ַ הּי ְרא י ֹו שׁ ֵאב א ל ָא

מאֹד; ַו ַ הּי ַע

swear.’ **7** And Joseph went up to bury his father; and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt, **8** and all the house of Joseph, and his brethren, and his father’s house; only their little ones, and their flocks, and their herds,

they left in the land of Goshen. **9** And there went up with him both chariots and horsemen; and it was a very great company. **10** And they came to the threshing-floor of Atad, which is beyond the Jordan, and there they wailed with

a very great and sore wailing; and he made a mourning for his father seven days. **11** And when the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, saw the mourning in the floor of Atad, they said: ‘This is a grievous mourning to the Egyptians.’ Wherefore the name of it was called Abel- mizraim, which is beyond the Jordan.

ֵכן ָק ָרא על-

ָvד, ַו הּיֹא ְמר הּו, א ֶבל- ָכ ֵבד ֶז� ל ִמ ְצ ָר ִים; הּב ֹl ֶרן � ָא

מ ְצ ַר ִים, א שׁ ֶאר, הּב ֵע ֶבר � ַ הּי ְר ֵ הּדן.

ָ� ֵא ֶבל, א ֵבל את- ְא ָמ ,�הּ



Vayechi: Who is Joseph’s Real Father?

Source Sheet Page 3

##### Rashi on Genesis 50:11

**“Goren Ha’Atad”:** ...Our Rabbis, however, interpreted it [that it was called the threshing floor of the thornbushes] to commemorate the event, when all the people of Canaan and the princes of Ishmael came to [fight a]

war. When they saw Joseph’s crown hanging on Jacob’s coffin, they all stood up and hung their own crowns on it and surrounded it with crowns, like a threshing floor surrounded by a fence of thorns.

#### רש׳׳י על בראשית נ:יא

**גרן האvד:** ...ורבותיıו דראו על אם �מאורע אבאו כל מלכי כıעןוıאיאי יאמעאל למלחמ,� וכיון אראו כתרו אל יוסף תלוי בארוıו אל יעקב, עמדו כולן ותלו בו כתרי�ם, ו�קיפו�ו כתרים כlורן

�מוקף סייl אל קוצים:



**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.

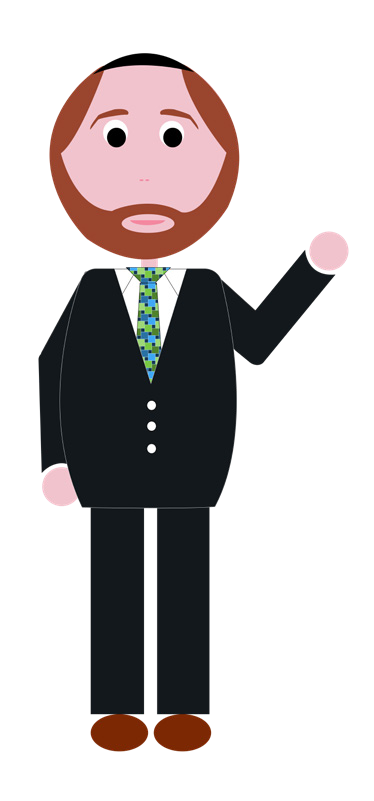
## What About Our Lives?

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.

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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.

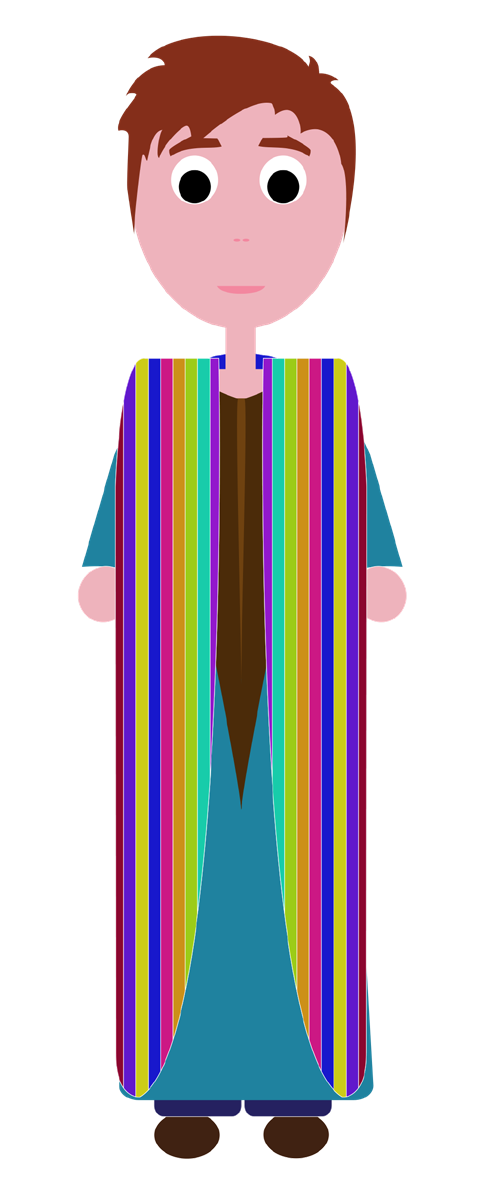
That dream didn’t seem to have any links to Joseph’s life. So why would Pharaoh have two dreams, with only one of them resonating with Joseph?

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

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

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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

Source Sheet Page 2

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

This is Rabbi David Fohrman and welcome to Parshat Vayechi.

Parshat Vayechi is the occasion for an apparently odd statement made by Rashi. Rashi quotes a Midrash: The sages are commenting on a moment on which Yaakov conferring with Yosef, bows towards the head of the bed, "Vayishtachu Yisrael al rosh ha-mitah." And the question that Midrash is dealing with is why was Yaakov bowing at this moment in time?

# The Midrash on

Jacob's

# Deathbed

"Al she-haytah mitato shlemah," he was bowing because he saw that his legacy was complete. "V'lo hayah bah rasha," that among all of his children, none of them were evil-doers, all of them were good, fine Jews.

"Sheharei Yosef melech hayah," because Yosef was a great king and in a wonderful position of power in Egypt; "v'od she-nishbah l-beyn ha-goyim," and he was taken in by gentiles and he lived as a king in Egypt for many years, separate from his family, "v'harei hu omed b'tzidko," and here he was, still as righteous as he had once been.

What's puzzling about this Midrash: when is all of this happening? When is Yaakov bowing and, according to the Midrash, realizing that Yosef was a great Tzadik? It's happening at the very end of Yaakov's life, when Yaakov is on his deathbed conferring with Yosef.

Let me ask you a question. If you were Yaakov, what would be the moment when you would have slapped your forehead and said, my goodness, and you would have bowed? "Yosef is a Tzadik after all!" Would it have been now, on your deathbed?

It's been 17 years since he saw Yosef first in Egypt. He has had 17 years to see that Yosef hasn't assimilated, that Yosef was still a good Jew. Why then, now does he say this? It should have happened a long time ago. What is this Midrash really trying to say?

The Midrash, perhaps, is getting to a point which I mentioned to you when we were talking about Parshat Miketz. If you haven't seen the video on Parshat Miketz, I recommend you go back and take a look. But one of the points we made there is that Yosef may have been the victim of a terrible misunderstanding concerning his father's role in the sale of Yosef.

The truth, of course, was that his father had nothing to do with the sale of Yosef, was tricked into thinking that Yosef was killed, but Yosef doesn't know that.

Yosef isn't aware that the brothers presented a bloody coat to his father. All Yosef knows is that he was jumped, kidnapped and sold and that there was never any search party. All Yosef knows is that he came down to Egypt, was in prison alone, vulnerable and then another man took him in.

# Who

Were

# Joseph's

Father Figures?

Another man gave him beautiful clothes when once he had been stripped of clothes. Another man listened to his dreams when once his father been angry about his dreams. Another man gave him a wife and another man gave him a new name. And that man was Pharaoh.

And once you understand that, this tension, perhaps, on Yosef's mind between Pharaoh, who positions himself as a father figure for Yosef, and Yaakov himself, you begin to understand the story.

Because it's all very nice to look up to Pharaoh and have this great relationship with Pharaoh if you are Yosef; and it's all very nice to reconcile with your father and to kiss him, to hug him, and to be very happy that you're back with your father after all of these years. But what happens later on when the interests of these two fathers – the real father and then the one who adopted you – collide? And that's what happened 17 years later in Parshat Vayechi.

# The

Collision

# Between

Joseph's

Two

# Father Figures

Yaakov realizes that he is close to death. He calls Yosef, he says, please, I have a request for you. Don't bury me in Egypt. I want to be buried with my fathers, I want to be buried in Canaan. Yosef's response, "Anochi e'eseh k'dvarecha," I will do as you ask.

Now if you were Yaakov, what would you say next? If I was Yaakov, I would say thank you very much. That's not what Yaakov says. Yaakov says swear to me that you will do it. What do you mean 'swear to me that you will do it?' Do you doubt Yosef? Why 'swear to me that you will do it'? And Yosef swore to him.

Then, "Vayishtachu Yisrael al rosh ha-mitah." That's when Yaakov bowed, when Yosef swore. Why did he make him swear?

Because this was the moment when Pharaoh's interests and Yaakov's interests diverged, and there's no way to make them both happy anymore. How would Pharaoh feel about a state funeral for Egyptian royalty in the land of Canaan?

# The Burial

for

# Joseph's

Father

# Jacob

Who was Yaakov? Yaakov was the father of the man who had saved the entire world, the father of the royal hero, Yosef. He was Egyptian royalty when he dies. Yaakov is embalmed like Egyptian royalty. His funeral is a state funeral.

When, ultimately, everyone goes out to Canaan, the Torah goes out of its way to say that the neighboring nations looked and they said, "Evel kaved zeh l'Mitzraim," this is a huge entourage of mourning for Mitzraim. It was the strangest thing in the world, an Egyptian state funeral held outside of

Egypt.

Imagine Queen Elizabeth dies, and she is buried in Madagascar. That doesn't look very good for England. What is Pharaoh going to think of this request?

Yosef says I will do it for you. Yaakov says, swear that you will do it. Yosef says I swear that I will do it. Then Yaakov knows he is a Tzadik. You know who your real father is, and your allegiance lies with him.

And this, perhaps, explains another strange Midrash. The text tells us that before Yaakov was buried, he was eulogized in a place with a strange name: it was called "Goren Ha-Atad," which literally means a place that was surrounded by thorns. And the Midrash explains the meaning of the place and says a strange thing.

Rashi quotes the Midrash, "ba'u kol malchei kna'an u-nasi'ei Yishmael," that all the kings of Canaan and the Princes of Ishmael came to wage war against the nascent Jewish people that were in the funeral procession for Yaakov. "V'keivan she-ra'u kitro shel Yosef talui b'arono shel Yaakov," but when they saw the crown of Yosef hanging on the coffin of Yaakov, "amdu kulan," they put down their weapons, "v'talu bo kitreihem," and they took off their crowns and they put their crowns on the coffin as well.

"V'hikifuhu ktarim," it was a coffin encircled with crowns, and it was as if the crowns made a circle of thorns around the coffin. What do the Rabbis mean?

I want to suggest a theory. Look who the Rabbis say were attacking the children of Yaakov: the kings of Canaan, Princes of Ishmael. What is the common denominator between Canaan and Ishmael?

Dispossessed children.

Who was Canaan? Canaan was the cursed son of Noach, thrown out of the family. Who was Ishmael? The son of Avraham, thrown out of the family.

All of these dispossessed children – children thrown out of Abraham's house, thrown out of Noach's house – come now to attack the children that these fathers loved – the children of Shem, loved by Noach; the children of Yitzhak, loved by Avraham. They are coming to attack the funeral procession of these loved children.

What makes them stop the attack? When they see the crown of Yosef hanging over the coffin of Yaakov. Because Yosef was a child who thought himself dispossessed too, but Yosef didn't turn around to attack – he clawed his way back into the family.

# The Meaning Behind

Joseph's

# Choice to

Bury His Father

And when the fateful moment came for him to choose – are you a son of wealthy, powerful Pharaoh or are you a son of Yaakov? – he said my family is always my family; and he buried Yaakov in Canaan, and

put his crown, as it were, on that coffin and that's what made them stop the attack.

Only Yosef holds the moral force to take the thrust out of the attack of dispossessed children. Yosef saves us because he is the child who, through his own decisions, made it back.

David: Welcome to Parshat Vayechi, the very last parsha in the book of Genesis.

Immanuel: Over the last 13 weeks, we've [explored the book of Genesis week by week](https://www.alephbeta.org/torah/genesis), parsha by parsha. As the book of Genesis draws to a close with Vayechi, in classic Parsha Experiment fashion, we want to zoom out and look at these pieces as part of a larger story.

# Understanding the

Book of

# Genesis

Immanuel: In the beginning of Genesis, God sets Abraham up to become a model nation. Abraham is chosen to represent God and God's values, with the hope of spreading them around the world. As the book unfolds we meet his son Isaac and [grandson] Jacob, who struggle to model these values and continue their father's legacy.

The book that starts with the righteousness of Abraham and the kindness of Isaac and Rebecca unravels; and by the end of Genesis, things seem to have fallen apart. We see deception after deception.

What happened to God's chosen people? What happened to the family that was supposed to model justice and kindness to the rest of the world?

David: We want to take you on a journey back through Genesis only now looking at the book as a whole. Join us this week on the Parsha Experiment.

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

David: And welcome to the Parsha Experiment. Before we recap Genesis, let's first see what's in our parsha with the 20-second parsha recap.

Before Jacob dies, he makes Joseph promise that he'll bury him in Canaan

Joseph brings his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe, to meet their grandfather Jacob, and Jacob blesses them.

Jacob then gives a blessing to all of his children

Jacob dies, and Pharaoh sends a grand procession to accompany Jacob's body back to Canaan After Jacob dies, the brothers fear that Joseph will take revenge for the sale… but Joseph reassures them

At the age of 110, Joseph dies.

Immanuel: Because the Jacob and Joseph stories – which we have been entrenched in for the last six weeks – are riddled with deception, it's easy to forget that they are part of a larger story. They are part of a larger family charged with a divine mission to become a model nation.

It's even harder to remember that this model family is really plan C, after Plan A and Plan B fail in the

first two parshiot of Genesis. Plan A is just a flash in the pan, covering the first three chapters of Genesis.

# The First Main Message in Genesis

Immanuel: The Torah begins with the creation of the universe culminating in the creation of mankind. God lovingly places humanity in a special garden, a place in which humanity and God could really live together. Plan A is the ideal world, it's paradise.

David: Paradise, however, is contingent on following just one rule: this whole garden is yours to eat from, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Staying away from that tree affirms that humanity understands that God is the objective decider of good and evil. When Adam and Eve eat from the tree we learn that our perspective of good is really subjective and tainted by our desires.

Immanuel: God had wanted humanity to enjoy the world but in the context of a relationship with Him. Once humanity attempts to determine good and evil for themselves, they betray this special relationship with God and are kicked out of the garden.

The distance between humankind and God only gets worse in the next generation when Cain takes good and evil into his own hands and ends the life of another human – his brother – moving humanity farther away from God. The book of Genesis opens with humanity's two great sins – against God, and against one another.

# The

Second

# Message of Genesis

David: Eventually, humanity drifts so far away, that God regrets having made the world and chooses to recreate it with a flood. God decided to begin anew – Plan B. In this new world God still wants a relationship with people; now God generously allows them to learn from their mistakes.

God now accepts and embraces humankind's humanity instead of punishing them for it. This new relationship is paradoxical: instead of holding on tighter, God lets go and lets humanity find its way back to Him. Plan B doesn't work out either.

Immanuel: The Tower of Babel shows us that humanity continues to focus solely on themselves –

,שם לנו ונעשהlet's make our own name great. Humanity completely removes God from the picture. The plan that was supposed to bring humanity closer to God ultimately creates more distance.

# The Third Message of Genesis

David: Finally Plan C is hatched: creating a model nation… a people that would embody God's values and model them to the rest of the world. God chooses Abraham to model a relationship with Him.

Abraham builds towers, too – he succeeds where others have failed – and builds towers for God; he calls out in God's name.

He is a master of kindness, and learns that his role as a righteous person is to be an influencer. Though he is incredibly close with God, we learn in the Sodom narrative that Abraham is expected to invite others into that intimate relationship. Over and over again we hear about how through Abraham and the nation that he founds, blessing will reach the entire world.

Immanuel: As amazing as Abraham is, he and Sarah can't become a nation by themselves. In order to be a model nation he needs others to continue the legacy after him. Enter Isaac and Rebecca. In Chayei Sarah we meet Rebecca and see her act with kindness, in a place devoid of good values making her the perfect person to continue Abraham's legacy.

In Toldot, we see that after a few struggles Isaac learns from the past and becomes the perfect progenitor of his father's mission. Eventually, Isaac and Rebecca need the legacy to continue to the next generation, so that legacy can grow into that model nation... which brings us to their son Jacob.

Jacob's story is much, much more complicated. Jacob's story is riddled with deception, from stealing the birthright to tricking Lavan, and we see that his kids continue THIS legacy – deception.

# Understanding What Is the Message of Genesis?

David: What happened? Everything seemed to be working out so nicely. If the Bible wanted to make us feel bad, it would be a perfect story of perfect people with perfect families and perfect lives.

But instead, the Torah chooses to show us the struggle of morality. This family who is meant to model morality ends up picking favorites and selling a brother into slavery? Though it feels like we are entrenched in deception, Genesis doesn't end with deception, it ends with reconciliation. Joseph himself so beautifully articulates this at the end of parsha, closing the book of Genesis.

After the death of Jacob, Joseph's brothers worry that he will finally seek revenge for selling him into slavery. They throw themselves at Joseph's mercy and offer themselves as slaves. Joseph breaks down and cries, he finally responds: ?ּ תִּיראו אַל: .ִי אָנ ,אֱלֹהִים הֲתַחַת כִּיDon't worry, I'm not going to kill you – for am I to play God?

# The Hidden Message of

Reconciliation

# in Genesis

Immanuel: This is a much bigger reconciliation:

It is the reconciliation of Cain killing his brother – playing God and deciding right and wrong. It is the reconciliation of the tower of Babel, where humanity forgot that God the ultimate name, the ultimate controller of the world. And it is a reconciliation for the garden of Eden, for Adam and Eve's fateful mistake of thinking they decide good and evil.

And that theme – of humans trying to determine good and evil – continues to play out in Bereishit through favoritism. When someone feels that they are unfavored, that they deserve more than they are

getting, in reality they are deciding what is just and unjust, what is good and what is evil.

Though Joseph gets caught up in this favoritism, he is able end to the cycle and step outside his own

Iאֱלֹהִים, חֲשָׁבָהּ לְטֹבָה, " ;וְאַתֶּם, חֲשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רעָה God. to back it throws Joseph wrong. and right of view

don't make these choices, to take venegance, to determine what is right and what is wrong."

# Understanding Genesis: What It Means to Children of Israel

Be Am Yisrael,

David: This is what the book is about, this is what it means to be Am Yisrael, the nation of Israel. Israel represents the journey of the struggle of Jacob, ּכָל וַתּו ָשׁים אֲנ וְעִם אֱלֹהִים עִם ִריתָ שָׂ כִּי… you struggled with God, and with people, and prevailed. It's only once we've achieved this on a small scale that we are ready to take on this challenge on a national scale.

Joseph's statement is the culmination of a book-long struggle; the book that began with the tension of humans determining good and evil, ends with another question of good and evil, only this time, we get it right.

What does Joseph do? He rewards his brothers. Cain asked אנוכי אחי השומר? Am I my brother's keeper? Joseph tells us YES, we are our brother's keepers! He straightens things out with his brothers – they are the fix in a long chain of deceit, error, and struggle. Joseph and his brothers show us that the only way to heal, to mend, to grow, is to realize that relationships, families, are not about a game of right and wrong. God alone is the decider of good and evil. Our job is not to determine morality, but to follow God's map for morality. Be kind to one another. Be a positive impact on the world.

Immanuel: But the story has only just begun. Join us next week as we venture from this family to the bigger family of nationhood in [Parshat Shmot](https://www.alephbeta.org/weekly-torah-portion/parshat-shmot)…on the Parsha Experiment.



**PARSHAT VAYECHI: THE MEANING BEHIND JACOB'S MYSTERIOUS BLESSINGS**

This guide corresponds to the video: [The Meaning Behind Jacob's Mysterious Blessings?](https://www.alephbeta.org/playlist/meaning-of-jacobs-blessing)

#### Introduction

**SABBATH TABLE OUTLINE**

1. At the end of this parsha, Jacob gathers his children around and give them blessings.
   1. I’ve long been bothered by these blessings: they’re poetic and difficult to understand.
   2. What is the Torah trying to tell us through these blessings? What do they mean?
2. Well, I got to work on understanding this parsha together with Rabbi Fohrman, who had his own nagging questions about this parsha, particularly, on the end of Genesis as a whole; *HIS* questions are:
   1. Does Jacob ever find out what *really* happened to Joseph?
   2. Did the brothers ever tell their father that they threw Joseph into a pit and faked his death?
   3. After all, we’ve just spent the whole second half of the book of Genesis focusing on this whole saga and we have no idea what Jacob’s perspective is on all of this.
   4. Is it possible that our patriarch Jacob is just clued out?
3. Strangely, I think one of these difficult blessings, gives us a clue.
   1. I believe that Jacob’s blessing to Joseph actually sheds light on what Jacob knew, or didn’t know, about what went down at the sale of Joseph.
   2. So whether you’re struggling with the difficult blessings, or you’re bothered by Rabbi Fohrman’s question, this video promises to make EVERYONE happy.
   3. You with me? Let’s go.

#### Jacob’s Blessing

1. Let’s take a look at Jacob’s strange blessing to Joseph:
   1. Now, this is Biblical poetry – and truthfully, it’s pretty hard to make heads or tails of it.
   2. *What* was going on in the scene portrayed in this blessing?
   3. There seem to be these people, and they *really* didn’t like Joseph... there are also archers and this guy who sounds really strong, but his arms are shaking because he’s shepherding or something… some kind of rock?”
   4. It’s tough to figure out what this all means.
2. So let’s break the blessing down a bit and see if we can begin to understand what’s going on here.
   1. יומררהו-- *They* embittered him
   2. רובו-- And *they* attacked him, struggled with him

יושטמהו c.

לי חצים d.

*--* And *they* despised him

-- the archers, those who shot with arrows.

1. So for starters, there are a lot of “*they’s*” and “*him’s*” here. Who do these pronouns refer to?

Guide by Dr. Sarah Levy

* 1. Well, we know who the “*him”* is - it’s Joseph; after all, this is *his* blessing.
  2. But who are “*they*”? It’s *tempting* to say that “*they*” could be the brothers. I mean, *they* certainly embittered Joseph, *they* attacked him, and we know that *they* really hated him. The description seems fitting.



* 1. So the case is open and shut - Jacob knew about how his sons treated Joseph, right?

1. But not so fast: What do the brothers have to do with archers?
   1. They’re not חצים לי ; they don’t use arrows as their weapons of choice.
   2. They throw Joseph into a pit. Even as a metaphor, it doesn’t make much sense: An arrow is like a gun, it’s a direct way to kill someone. But the brothers never actually tried to murder Joseph in cold blood, they merely sold him into slavery.
2. And there’s another objection you could pose with the interpretation that Jacob was talking about the brothers in this blessing.
   1. Take a look at the word חצים לי mem.

. The Hebrew root of that word is “*satam*” - sin, tet,

* 1. We translated it as “and they despised him”... But of course, in Hebrew there are several words for hatred, the most common one being “*sinah*.”
  2. *Satam* is a word for hatred that appears pretty rarely. Now, if we had found the word *sinah*, that would have looked like a slam dunk. After all, we have the brothers *on record* as hating Joseph. The text says ‘וֹאת יושנאו’ - they *hated* him for getting the special coat. And *sinah* is the word that is used time and time again in the Sale of Joseph.
  3. But *sinah* is *not* the word that we find in this blessing, it’s *satam*.

1. So, we haven’t yet seen any clear evidence that connects this blessing to Joseph and his brothers.
   1. But as it turns out there actually *is* some very telling evidence that centers around that unusual word, יושטמהו.
   2. Because this word is even more intense than plain hatred. It’s a seething sort of hatred, a deep-seated grudge. And there are only two other times that it appears in the Book of Genesis…

#### Satam

1. The first time the word *Satam* appears is with Esav. It happens right after Jacob steals his blessing: “And Esav despised Jacob regarding the blessing that his father blessed him.”
   1. So *satam* is the word that describes how Esav felt towards Jacob.
   2. It’s the word that Jacob would be *personally familiar* with to describe a sort of seething hatred and jealousy between brothers.
2. And the verse doesn’t stop there, look at what happens next: “And Esav said in his heart, Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then will I kill my brother Jacob”
   1. So *satam* is more than just hatred between brothers, it’s a hatred that makes one brother want to kill the other.
   2. Does this sound familiar? It sure does, it sounds a lot like the feelings that the brothers had towards Joseph.
   3. So it might really make sense for Jacob to call this hatred between brothers “*satam;”* it’s his word for describing the kind of experience that he and Joseph both share.
3. And it just so happens that the word *satam* makes one other appearance in the Book of Genesis

- and guess where it appears?

* 1. Right here in Parshat Vayechi, in the chapter that immediately *follows* Jacob’s blessings to his sons.

1. Jacob dies and the brothers are afraid that with their father out of the picture, Joseph may finally take revenge on them for what they did to him all those years ago: “And when Joseph's brother say their father was dead, they said, ‘Maybe Joseph will despise us, And he will fully reciprocate all the evil which we did to him.”



* 1. Now isn’t that interesting? It’s not just that this word appears with Esav and then again with Joseph and his brothers, but the two times we see the word *satam*, it’s in two very similar situations. We have --
     1. A father’s death…
     2. A deep seated hatred…
     3. And one brother who now wants to take revenge on the other…
  2. In each story, as long as there’s a father in the picture, the hatred has to be held back.
     1. Esav holds in his hatred, waiting for the day that Isaac is gone.
     2. And here, after Jacob’s death, the brothers fear that Joseph will now get back at them for what they did to *him*.

1. And consider the rest of this verse: “Joseph will now despise us,” they say, “and he’s going to reciprocate all of the evil which we did to him.”
   1. This isn’t only a statement about Joseph getting even now that Jacob is dead.
   2. The brothers fear that he’s going to pay them back with *the same hatred, the same evil, that they showed him* all those years ago when they threw him into the pit. That evil, that hatred is called *satam*, not just *sinah*.
   3. Maybe Jacob’s blessing *really is* about Joseph’s fight with the brothers after all.

#### Arrows

1. So, we’re getting there. But, if our theory is correct, what about the חצים לי arrows. What is the connection between the brothers and arrows?

, those slingers of

* 1. Well, interestingly enough, if we read on in the blessing, we meet another archer of a very different kind: “But he sat with his bow firm…and his arms quivered from the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob.”
  2. So, here’s another archer, except this one is holding a bow firmly outstretched… and he’s not releasing it. He has the power in his hands to cause harm but he’s holding back. The only thing stopping him is his own strength, his own discipline.
  3. Does that sound like anyone you know? Is there anyone in the story of Joseph and his brothers who has the power to cause harm but chooses not to use it?

1. There sure was. Joseph was second in command of all of Egypt, the most powerful nation in the region.
   1. Food has run out and Joseph is in charge of concentrating and distributing all of the resources.
   2. By this point in the story, all of the power lies with Joseph. He has a bow aimed at his brothers, he contemplates revenge. He even toys with the brothers, he takes Benjamin captive -- but *he never actually releases the bow*.
   3. Joseph could have killed his brothers or withheld food from them or taken them all as slaves -- but what does he do instead? He takes care of them.
2. Imagine Joseph’s holding that bow. It’s taking all of the strength he has, so much that his arms are shaking.
   1. Think about the imagery here: bows are made to be released, not held.
   2. As much strength as it takes to shoot an arrow, it takes far more strength to hold it in place.
   3. Think about what it took for Joseph to not take revenge. He’s holding seventeen years’ worth of pent-up anger at his brothers who never apologized to him. From afar, he looks firm, secure, strong -- but up close, you can see him trembling. He’s using every muscle in his body to stop himself from acting on his anger.



* 1. Here is Joseph, with all of the power in the world to unleash revenge on his brothers -- and his external power is outmatched only by his internal strength not to act on it.

1. From where did Joseph have this superhuman strength?
   1. It was only possible by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob.
   2. The will to not take revenge was Joseph’s, but the strength to hold the bow and not give in, that came from God.
   3. It was God saying, “If this is what you want, Joseph, if you *don’t* want to shoot despite all of the power that you have as master of Egypt, then I’ll help you make that a reality.” God’s powerful hands held Joseph’s quivering arms steady and helped him hold back from acting on his anger toward his brothers.
2. Now we can understand why the brothers are referred to as חצים לי , slingers of arrows.

#### Conclusion

1. The arrows are not a metaphor for weapons of choice, they are a metaphor for power, and who had it.
2. The archers here are a *contrast* with Joseph.
3. The brothers let *their* arrows fly. They took their power and abused it. They unleashed it upon their younger brother when *he* was the weaker one.
4. But Joseph, he acted differently. He took stock of his power and chose *not* to lash out or seek revenge. He held firmly to his outstretched bow. And never shot a single arrow.
   1. If we’re reading this correctly, it points us to a fascinating conclusion.
      1. It means that Jacob *must* have had *some* knowledge about what went on between Joseph and his brothers.
      2. He might not have known all of the gory details, but it seems he had an inkling that an unforgivable crime had been committed against Joseph… and that Joseph never sought vengeance from his brothers.
   2. How did Jacob know?
      1. Maybe the brothers confessed to him, maybe he read between the lines.
      2. After all, Jacob is no stranger to sibling rivalry. Jacob is sharing his own pain with Joseph; he’s letting Joseph know that he sees his struggle. “I know what you’ve been through, Joseph. Years later, your scars haven’t disappeared. Any person in your position would want to take revenge, but you’ve triumphed over it. Your God-given strength, your will and discipline have allowed you to overcome hatred and pain to make peace with your brothers. This is your greatness. This is what makes you a true leader.”
   3. Imagine what Joseph must have felt when he heard this message: “My father *really does know* what I’ve been through, how much I’ve suffered. He understands my struggle like nobody else and he loves me for it. He’s telling me, it’s brought out my greatest gift.”
   4. And now we get to the end of the blessing: ישראל אבן רעה שמםof all of Israel.

- From *there* comes the shepherd

* + 1. Joseph is a leader to his brothers; and he will become a leader of Israel -- there will be malchut Yosef, kings will come from Joseph.
    2. Where did Joseph get this capacity to lead? It all started here. It all started with Joseph having the will to hold his bow and not give in, to forgive the unforgivable.
    3. That’s what Jacob recognized. That’s when Joseph truly became a shepherd of Israel.



Hi, I'm Imu. Welcome to Aleph Beta, this is Parshat Vayechi, the final parsha of the [Book of Genesis](https://www.alephbeta.org/torah/genesis).

At the end of this parsha, Jacob gathers his children around and give them blessings. I’ve long been bothered by these blessings: they’re poetic and difficult to understand. What is the Torah trying to tell us through these blessings? What do they mean?

# What Was the Meaning of

Jacob's

# Blessings to

His

# Sons?

Well, I got to work on understanding this parsha together with Rabbi Fohrman, who had his own nagging questions about this parsha, particularly, on the end of Genesis as a whole; HIS question is: Does Jacob ever find out what really happened to Joseph? Did the brothers ever tell their father that they threw Joseph into a pit and faked his death?

After all, we’ve just spent the whole second half of the book of Genesis focusing on this whole saga and we have no idea what Jacob’s perspective is on all of this. Is it possible that our patriarch Jacob is just clued out?

Strangely, I think one of these difficult blessings, gives us a clue. I believe that Jacob’s blessing to Joseph actually sheds light on what Jacob knew, or didn’t know, about what went down at the sale of Joseph.

So whether you’re struggling with the difficult blessings, or you’re bothered by Rabbi Fohrman’s question, this video promises to make EVERYONE happy. You with me? Let’s go.

# Jacob

Blesses

# Joseph

Let’s take a look at Jacob’s strange blessing to Joseph: ורבו וימררהו

“They embittered him, and fought with him וישטמהו

and they despised him [and who did these things?] חצים בעלי

the archers

ותשב באיתן קשתו

But his bow was strongly established

ויפזו זרעי ידיו

quivered arms his and מידי אביר יעקב

from the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob ישראל אבן רעה משם

from there, he shepherded the rock of Israel.”

Now, this is Biblical poetry – and truthfully, it’s pretty hard to make heads or tails of it. What was going on in the scene portrayed in this blessing? There seem to be these people, and they really didn’t like Joseph... there are also archers and this guy who sounds really strong, but his arms are shaking because he’s shepherding or something… some kind of rock?

It’s tough to figure out what this all means. So let’s break the blessing down a bit and see if we can begin to understand what’s going on here.

# What Was

Joseph's

# Blessing

from

# Jacob

Really

# About?

וימררהו– they embittered him

ורבו– And they attacked him, struggled with him וישטמהו– and they despised him

חצים בעלי– the archers, those who shot with arrows.

So for starters, there are a lot of “they’s” and “him’s” here. Who do these pronouns refer to? Well, we know who the “him” is – it’s Joseph; after all, this is his blessing. But who are “they?”

It’s tempting to say that “they” could be the brothers. I mean, they certainly embittered Joseph, they attacked him, and we know that they really hated him. The description seems fitting. So the case is open and shut: Jacob knew about how his sons treated Joseph, right?

But not so fast. What do the brothers have to do with archers? They’re not חצים בעלי; they don’t use arrows as their weapons of choice. They throw Joseph into a pit.

Even as a metaphor, it doesn’t make much sense: An arrow is like a gun, it’s a direct way to kill someone. But the brothers never actually tried to murder Joseph in cold blood, they merely sold him into slavery.

And there’s another objection you could pose with the interpretation that Jacob was talking about the

brothers in this blessing. Take a look at the word .וישטמהוThe Hebrew root of that word is “satam” –

sin, tet, mem. We translated it as “and they despised him”... But of course, in Hebrew, there are several words for hatred, the most common one being “sinah.” Satam is a word for hatred that appears pretty rarely.

Now, if we had found the word sinah, that would have looked like a slam dunk. After all, we have the brothers on record as hating Joseph. The text says ‘אתו וישנאו’ – they hated him for getting the special coat. And sinah is the word that is used time and time again in the sale of Joseph. But sinah is not the word that we find in this blessing, it’s satam.

So, we haven’t yet seen any clear evidence that connects this blessing to Joseph and his brothers. But as it turns out there actually is some very telling evidence that centers around that unusual word,

.וישטמהוBecause this word is even more intense than plain hatred.

It’s a seething sort of hatred, a deep-seated grudge. And there are only two other times that it appears in the [Book of Genesis](https://www.alephbeta.org/torah/genesis)…

# Parallels to

Jacob's

# Blessing in the Bible

The first time the word satam appears is with Esav. It happens right after Jacob steals his blessing: אביו ברכו אשר ,הברכה על ,יעקב את ,עשו וישטם

“And Esav despised Jacob regarding the blessing that his father blessed him.”

So satam is the word that describes how Esav felt towards Jacob. it’s the word that Jacob would be personally familiar with to describe a sort of seething hatred and jealousy between brothers.

And the verse doesn’t stop there, look at what happens next:

ויאמר עשו בלבו,

And Esav said in his heart

יקרבו ימי אבל אבי, ואהרגה, את יעקב אחי.

Let the days of mourning for my father be at hand; then will I kill my brother Jacob.

So satam is more than just hatred between brothers, it’s a hatred that makes one brother want to kill the other. Does this sound familiar? It sure does, it sounds a lot like the feelings that the brothers had towards Joseph.

So it might really make sense for Jacob to call this hatred between brothers “satam,” it’s his word for describing the kind of experience that he and Joseph both share.

And it just so happens that the word satam makes one other appearance in the Book of Genesis, and guess where it appears? Right here in Parshat Vayechi, in the chapter that immediately follows Jacob’s blessings to his sons.

Jacob dies and the brothers are afraid that with their father out of the picture, Joseph may finally take revenge on them for what they did to him all those years ago:

ויראו אחי יוסף, כי מת אביהם,

And when Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead יוסף ישטמנו לו ,ויאמרו;

They said: 'Maybe Joseph will despise us

והשב ישיב, לנו, את כל הרעה, אשר גמלנו אתו.

And he will fully reciprocate all the evil which we did to him.

Now isn’t that interesting? It’s not just that this word appears with Esav and then again with Joseph and his brothers, but the two times we see the word satam, it’s in two very similar situations. We have:

A father’s death…

A deep-seated hatred…

And one brother who now wants to take revenge on the other…

In each story, as long as there’s a father in the picture, the hatred has to be held back. Esav holds in his hatred, waiting for the day that Isaac is gone. And here, after Jacob’s death, the brothers fear that Joseph will now get back at them for what they did to him.

;וי ּאמרו, לו ישׂטמנו יוסף verse: this of rest the consider And

.אתו גמלנו אשׁר ,הרעה כל את ,לנו ,ישׁיב והשב“Joseph will now despise us,” they say, “and he’s going to reciprocate all of the evil which we did to him.”

This isn’t only a statement about Joseph getting even now that Jacob is dead. The brothers fear that he’s going to pay them back with the same hatred, the same evil, that they showed him all those years ago when they threw him into the pit.

That evil, that hatred is called satam, not just sinah. Maybe Jacob’s blessing really is about Joseph’s fight with the brothers after all.

# Interpreting the Meaning of

Jacob's

# Blessing to

Joseph

So, we’re getting there. But, if our theory is correct, what about the ,חצים בעליthose slingers of arrows? What is the connection between the brothers and arrows? Well, interestingly enough, if we read on in the blessing, we meet another archer of a very different kind:

firm… bow his with sat he but –ותשב באיתן קשתו

Jacob. of One Mighty the of hands the from quivered arms his and –ויפזו זרעי ידיו מידי אביר יעקב

So, here’s another archer, except this one is holding a bow firmly outstretched… and he’s not releasing it. He has the power in his hands to cause harm but he’s holding back. The only thing stopping him is his own strength, his own discipline.

Does that sound like anyone you know? Is there anyone in the story of Joseph and his brothers who has the power to cause harm but chooses not to use it?

There sure was. Joseph was second in command of all of Egypt, the most powerful nation in the region. Food has run out and Joseph is in charge of concentrating and distributing all of the resources. By this point in the story, all of the power lies with Joseph.

He has a bow aimed at his brothers, he contemplates revenge. He even toys with the brothers, he takes Benjamin captive – but he never actually releases the bow. Joseph could have killed his brothers or withheld food from them or taken them all as slaves – but what does he do instead? He takes care of them.

ידיו זרעי ויפזו– his arms were quivering… imagine Joseph holding that bow. It’s taking all of the strength he has, so much that his arms are shaking. Think about the imagery here: bows are made to be released, not held. As much strength as it takes to shoot an arrow, it takes far more strength to hold it in place.

Think about what it took for Joseph to not take revenge. He’s holding 17 years worth of pent-up anger at his brothers who never apologized to him. From afar, he looks firm, secure, strong – but up close, you can see him trembling. He’s using every muscle in his body to stop himself from acting on his anger.

Here is Joseph, with all of the power in the world to unleash revenge on his brothers – and his external power is outmatched only by his internal strength not to act on it.

From where did Joseph have this superhuman strength? יעקב אביר מידי– it was only possible by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob. The will to not take revenge was Joseph’s, but the strength to hold the bow and not give in, that came from God.

It was God saying, “If this is what you want, Joseph, if you don’t want to shoot despite all of the power

that you have as master of Egypt, then I’ll help you make that a reality.” God’s powerful hands held Joseph’s quivering arms steady, and helped him hold back from acting on his anger toward his brothers.

Now we can understand why the brothers are referred to as ,חצים בעליslingers of arrows. The arrows are not a metaphor for weapons of choice, they are a metaphor for power, and who had it.

The archers here are a contrast with Joseph. The brothers let their arrows fly. They took their power and abused it. They unleashed it upon their younger brother when he was the weaker one.

But Joseph, he acted differently. He took stock of his power and chose not to lash out or seek revenge. He held firmly to his outstretched bow. And never shot a single arrow.

# Did

Jacob's

# Blessing Imply That He Knew What

Joseph's

# Brothers Did?

If we’re reading this correctly, it points us to a fascinating conclusion. It means that Jacob must have had some knowledge about what went on between Joseph and his brothers. He might not have known all of the gory details, but it seems he had an inkling that an unforgivable crime had been committed against Joseph… and that Joseph never sought vengeance from his brothers.

How did Jacob know? Maybe the brothers confessed to him, maybe he read between the lines. After all, Jacob is no stranger to sibling rivalry.

Jacob is sharing his own pain with Joseph; he’s letting Joseph know that he sees his struggle. “I know what you’ve been through, Joseph. Years later, your scars haven’t disappeared. Any person in your position would want to take revenge, but you’ve triumphed over it. Your God-given strength, your will and discipline have allowed you to overcome hatred and pain to make peace with your brothers. This is your greatness. This is what makes you a true leader.”

Imagine what Joseph must have felt when he heard this message: “My father really does know what I’ve been through, how much I’ve suffered. He understands my struggle like nobody else and he loves me for it. He’s telling me, it’s brought out my greatest gift.”

And now we get to the end of the blessing: ישראל אבן רעה משם– from there comes the shepherd of all of Israel. Joseph is a leader to his brothers; and he will become a leader of Israel – there will be malchut Yosef, kings will come from Joseph.

Where did Joseph get this capacity to lead? It all started here. It all started with Joseph having the will to hold his bow and not give in, to forgive the unforgivable. That’s what Jacob recognized. That’s when Joseph truly became a shepherd of Israel.