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בס"ד

Parashat Vayeshev Part I
Genesis 37

1. Setting

The first verse of our chapter – וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵי אָבִיו ("Jacob settled in the land of his father's sojournings, the land of Canaan" [Gen. 37:1]) – parallels the וַיֵּשֶׁב עֵשָׂו בְּהַר שֵׂעִיר ("Esau settled in the mountain-land of Seir" [36:8]) of the previous chapter. In effect, our verse is official notice that after all was said and done the promised land was secured for Jacob and his progeny while Esau went his own way and settled in Seir, having relinquished any claim to the land of his father.

Referring to the land Jacob settled in as "the land of his father's sojournings" is particularly apt as it calls to mind the important detail that Isaac never left the land.

The next verse in our *parasha*, which begins with אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת יַעֲקֹב ("These are the *toledot* of Jacob"), parallels in general structure the following verse in that Esau context, וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת עֵשָׂו ("And these are the *toledot* of Esau") but with a significant difference that sets our passage off in a new direction. In the Esau case, the word *toledot* means "begettings" and introduces details of a genealogical nature, as is the case in all other biblical attestations of this word when referring to a person, except in our case of Jacob. Here, the text immediately begins to provide details of "happenings" that befell Jacob and his family, utilizing a derivative meaning of the word *toledot*, based on its י-ל-ד root ("a child," "to birth"). This is consistent with the usage in Proverbs 27:1, כִּי לֹא תֵדַע מַה יֵּלֶד יוֹם, "for you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Ibn Ezra).

This distinctive usage reflects the fact that henceforth the Torah's primary focus of interest will be on matters concerning Jacob and his children.

The first section of our *parasha* portrays the situation that prevailed among Jacob's young adult sons; it strikingly parallels the first section of *Parashat Toledot*, which depicted the situation that obtained among Isaac's young twin sons (27:22 ff.). In both contexts, there is an underlying motif that G-d kept His promise to the patriarchs, providing both Isaac and Jacob with sons endowed with the disposition, desire and potential to carry on the family heritage. In both cases, however, the sons have serious shortcomings and they create major impediments that will have to be overcome to bring about the desired results.

Joseph's dreams, despite their self-centeredness, indicate a visionary capacity and leadership disposition and were especially portentous in the ancient world when dreams were often viewed as containing divine messages. His practice of bringing the negative reports concerning his brothers' behavior to his father, unbecoming as such tattling may be, establishes the fact of his bonding with his father and identifying with his values and heritage. This parallels Jacob's keen interest in firstborn rights, and his youthful exploitation of Esau to acquire them. Although they were wrongful tactics, they do reveal concern for the future and the aspiration for carrying on the covenanted line.

The specially endowed sons of both Isaac and Jacob, however, are each confronted with major familial problems. Jacob was not adequately loved by his father and was in a position of rivalry with his very differently disposed brother, a situation that included – strictly due to his own provocative machinations – a threat of bloodshed. Joseph, overly loved by his father, is beset by immense problems of sibling hatred and jealousy – similarly, in large part, a result of his

own irritating behavior – which also included the possibility of fratricide.

In stating Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons – at this point the patriarch is termed יִשְׂרָאֵל, apparently connoting that in his relationship with this son that important dimension was prominent – the reason given is "for he was a בֶּן זְקֻנִים to him" (37:3). It is difficult to simply translate this as "the son of his old age" since several brothers were virtually the same age as Joseph, while Benjamin was substantially younger. Onqelos translated that he was a בַּר חַכִּים, a "wise son" to him, employing a traditional interpretation of זָקֵן as connoting "wise," surely not the *peshat*. Perhaps the explanation is that Jacob *considered* Joseph to be a *ben zequnim*, that is, "he was a *ben zequnim* to *him*." Undoubtedly, his preference for Joseph is related to his being the firstborn of his beloved wife Rachel and our interpretation of the verse should be consistent with that notion. Regardless of the other children's feelings, he was treated as special, in the manner the elderly treat the singular son of their old age.

As an expression of his love, Jacob made Joseph a כְּתֹנֶת פַּסִּים, an ornamented tunic worn by members of the nobility (cf. 2 Sam. 13:18-19). This indicates that Jacob was priming this son for a major leadership role and expected his other sons to recognize it. Having personally experienced the unhappy reality that resulted from lacking paternal love and (as he and his mother saw it) of not being acknowledged as the son with the desire and potential to bear the family heritage, Jacob does not want to repeat the mistake. However, he exhibits extreme naiveté in not realizing that his expression of greater love for Joseph and grooming him for leadership could prompt sibling hatred, and that when combined with Joseph's provocative behavior toward his brothers and dreams of superiority over them could lead to a dangerous situation. Despite Jacob's many and varied experiences he remains to a great degree the אִישׁ תָּם יֹשֵׁב אֹהָלִים ("simple man who dwells in tents" [Gen. 25:27]) that he was in his youth.

Between the lines the point is continuously made that even the founding fathers of the nation of G-d, outstanding individuals though they were and recipients of prophecies and blessings from G-d, are human and fallible. Like other people, they may be partial in their outlooks and not sufficiently conscientious in their relationships with members of their own family. They may not recognize the enormous harm that could be fostered by favoritism and in their behavior may cause much travail to their children. This brings out a fundamental lesson of Scripture: Even the greatest of human beings, including those who communicate with G-d and for whom He performs miracles, should not be thought of as flawless, let alone divine.

In the realm of what many commentators have seen and termed as מַעֲשֵׂי אָבוֹת סִימָן לְבָנִים (the doings of the fathers are "signs" for the sons), these sibling rivalries appear to reflect conflicts that plagued their descendants through many centuries and which remained unsettled throughout biblical history. The prophets strove to ameliorate the failings and consistently taught the nation to aspire to a future of genuine brotherhood and unity.

2. Sending Joseph to Shechem

Joseph's brothers had gone to tend their father's sheep in Shechem. The reader assumes that the reason Joseph is not with them is another manifestation of favoritism toward him: Jacob's desire to keep his preferred son with him. At some point, however, Jacob sends Joseph to visit his brothers in order to report back on their welfare and on that of the flock. Sending him alone to his brothers under the family circumstances that prevailed, especially given that they had been living independently for a time about fifty miles away from home, is further evidence of Jacob's naiveté. Although he did admonish Joseph upon his public recital of his second dream – obviously in an attempt to maintain harmony in the family – it is again clear that he did not sense a fraction of the extent of their hatred and jealousy of Joseph.

Joseph's behavior is also perplexing. Surely he realized that his tattling on his brothers had caused animosity toward him. His senior brothers had previously relegated him to a subordinate status, he was נַעַר, "an assistant" (see Ex. 33:11), consigned to serving with (or under) the sons of Jacob's secondary wives (Gen. 37:2). He knew that his father made a *ketonet passim* only for him. He cannot have missed the implications of his dreams – of his brothers'

sheaves kneeling to his or of the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing to him! His father had reproached him with the obvious interpretation. Could he have been oblivious of the repellent effects all this had on their relationship? Was he unaware that they could not speak to him peaceably? The answers appear to be yes.

At this time in his life, Joseph appears ignorant of the great importance one must attach to the feelings of others. His later manifestation of sensitivity to others and his skill in the area of human relations indicates character growth. Thus, when his father asks him to go to Shechem, he readily answers *hineni* ("Here I am"), and departs wearing, remarkably, the sign of his favoritism, his *ketonet passim*. Neither father nor son can possibly conceive that the family problems are so severe that they may lead to fratricide or kidnapping.

The narrative is presented from the standpoint that all the protagonists were operating with free will, a fundamental principle of the Torah, and all acknowledged it throughout. True, upon Joseph's revealing himself to his brothers many years later (45:5-8), in consoling and assuring them of his good will and attempting to persuade them to focus on G-d's intentions to save the growing family from famine, he speaks somewhat ambiguously about this matter. He requests they discount their personal intentions toward him and interpret their sale of him as G-d having sent him to Egypt on their behalf. However, these ameliorating words do not mean that he believed the brothers acted out of divine compulsion; rather, they mean that he completely forgave them and henceforth related to their act as one of divine providence. The brothers recognized their moral culpability, and after Jacob's death admitted to it (50:15). When Joseph touched on the subject at that later time he treated their selling him as an act of free will, which he forgave (v. 20).

However, when viewing a confluence of decisions and actions that border on the incredulous, the observer is left with the impression that G-d sometimes intervenes in the realm of reality. He may tilt the behavior of some individuals in a manner consistent with their past behavior and blend it in with their exercise of free will in order to promote His historical purposes. In our case His purpose was to prepare the way for Jacob and his family clan to descend to Egypt and eventually for the nation-to-be to experience exile, slavery and affliction as He had informed Abraham (15:13). Surely the Torah leaves no doubt that at a minimum, in His unfathomable ways, G-d utilizes the results of human free will and interactions in this manner.

Although this latter point is made abundantly clear in the larger movements of the story, which spans many chapters, it is specifically hinted at in the three verses (37:15-17) interposed between Joseph's traveling to Shechem and his arrival at the brothers' new location of Dothan, about thirteen miles northeast of Shechem. This brief interlude depicts an incident much too trivial to be incorporated in the narrative simply for informational purposes. The Torah does not gratuitously relate the numerous human-interest details that invariably accompany any long journey, such as those of Abraham's servant or Jacob going to Haran. This episode clearly serves a larger purpose.

Joseph is lost in a field. Strangely, we are told a man finds him before we are told that he is lost: וַיִּמְצָאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהִנֵּה תֹעֶה בַּשָּׂדֶה ("a man finds him, and behold, he is lost in a field"). The man asks him, "What do you seek?" Joseph responds, "I seek my brothers, please tell me where they are shepherding." He assumes the man knows! And the man does, indeed, know. He had heard the brothers discussing their plans and so directs Joseph to them. This unusual passage appears to be a window into the Deity's methods; He provides the necessary connections to move the action along the path that suits His objectives. (Not surprisingly, the Midrash [*Tan. Va-yeshev* 2] describes the "man" as an angel.)

Given the brothers' feelings toward Joseph and their being away from their father's restraining influence, the possibility of a long series of events that will move the family toward Egypt and lead to the actualization of Joseph's dreams followed by fulfillment of the prophecy to Abraham comes into view.

3. The Sale of Joseph

The brothers see Joseph approaching from a distance, and before he arrives discuss how to relate to him. Their past aggravation from his tattling, their hatred and jealousy from his being the favorite, and his dreams of dominance over them must have all

suddenly welled up in them. They had been enjoying freedom from such provocations for a time and were away from their father's influence. Not thinking about the suffering they would be causing their father, a spontaneous feeling of ridding themselves of "the master of dreams" arose in them. They decide to kill him, "and we shall see what becomes of his dreams" (37:20).

Reuben, however, probably as a result of his position as firstborn, had a sense of responsibility (see his later statement in 37:30). He was not present when his brothers made their decision. When he heard of it, he demanded they not engage in killing (v. 21).

The next verse begins with a second *vayomer* ("he said") of Reuben, implying there was no response from his brothers to his first statement. He apparently took their silence to mean that they did not agree with his declaration, so he modified his position, and interpreted his statement to mean that there should be no direct bloodshed. He put forth the idea that they should cast Joseph alive into one of the pits around there, allowing him to die on his own. When Joseph arrived, they removed the *ketonet passim* from him and cast him alive into one of the pits. They then sat to eat. In their minds, they accomplished their nefarious goal without, technically, engaging in murder, an aberration of thought sustained by their deep hatred. These pits were cisterns carved out of the rock, situated where they would gather the rainwater, and sometimes were more than twenty feet deep with smooth sides, from which a person could not climb out. The one they cast Joseph into was at that time devoid of water (v. 24).

Reuben's intention, we are explicitly told, was to rescue Joseph. He planned to return to the well when his brothers were elsewhere and draw Joseph out. He either did not command enough respect from his brothers or lacked the confidence to insist that they refrain from all forms of treachery.

When an Ishmaelite caravan appeared – again at a time that Reuben was not present – Judah displayed a degree of compassion and leadership. Arguing from the perspectives of both self-interest and kinship, he suggested that rather than kill their brother – he recognized that what they had done will eventually be a case of killing – they should sell him. Whether from a flicker of conscience or for their personal benefit to receive some silver, the brothers agreed and Joseph was sold. Reuben was not consulted. When he discovers Joseph missing he was thoroughly distraught (vv. 29-30). Since the brothers would have then recognized Reuben's true feelings on the matter it is likely that they did not inform him of what had transpired.

At the time of the brothers' terrible deed the Torah did not mention that Joseph pleaded with them. We only know of it via flashback. Many years later, after the Egyptian viceroy detained the brothers for three days under suspicion of spying, he informed them that they all could return home except for one that he would continue to hold. Upon their realizing that once again they will face their father without one of their number, the Joseph matter arises. They express guilt feelings among themselves for what they did to their brother many years before. The salient detail they then recounted, which they assumed explained their dire predicament as being one of divine retribution, was that they witnessed their brother's deep anguish when he begged for mercy but refused to be influenced (42:21). Why was Joseph's pleading omitted from the narrative account of the event?

Perhaps, since the brothers eventually repented, it was best to minimize the depiction of their cruel behavior at the point of action and only reveal its fullness in a context of Joseph's well-being and their contrition. (A somewhat analogous case might be the Torah's not explicitly revealing Esau's murderous intentions toward Jacob when he traveled toward him with four hundred men, since he was soon to repent.) Another possibility, as Nehama Leibowitz interprets the Ramban, is that since the reader feels great indignation toward the brothers for their dreadful act, the additional information in the context of performance might create an irreversible hostility toward them and cause a loss of perspective on the part of the reader.

Or perhaps the omission of pleas that the reader should assume were made – as they invariably are when an individual is in a life-threatening situation at the mercy of others, particularly brothers – is to signal the reader that at that moment the brothers had no problems of conscience; the pleas were totally disregarded. Upon casting him in the pit they sat to

eat. In informing of this relatively minor detail, the narrative reflects their untroubled state of mind. It was only their later plight, thinking about the trouble they were in and contemplating facing their father as once before without one of their number, that their consciences were stoked and only then were Joseph's cries truly heard (based on Meir Weiss, quoted by N. Leibowitz).

The brothers dip Joseph's tunic in goat's blood, send it to their father and ask if he could recognize it. They use the key phrase הַכֶּר נָא ("please recognize"). Of course וַיַּכִּירָהּ ("he recognizes it") and of course he draws the intended false conclusion (37:31-33). He utters precisely the words his sons had proposed to say in explanation of Joseph's death at the point that they were thinking of killing him straightaway, that חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלָתְהוּ ("an evil beast devoured him" [v. 20]). Deceiving their father with the combination of their brother's garment and a goat is strikingly reminiscent of Jacob's deceiving *his* father with *his* brother's garment and a goat. Use of the ה-כ-ר stem here reminds the reader of its usage in describing Isaac's not recognizing Jacob, וְלֹא הִכִּירוֹ (27:23). In both cases this key phrase is employed at the peak of tension. This confirms another aspect of מִדָּה כְּנֶגֶד מִדָּה, a type of "measure for measure" retribution to Jacob for his deception of his father.

It should be recalled that the narrative employed the ה-כ-ר stem in another context of deception that also appears connected with the וְלֹא הִכִּירוֹ ("he did not recognize him") of 27:23, the case of Rachel having stolen the *terafim* from her father. In response to Laban's accusation, Jacob challenged him with הַכֶּר לְךָ, "recognize for yourself" (31:32). Another striking attestation of the ה-כ-ר stem appears in Genesis 38, evidently linked with the others, a connection that we will discuss in our next study.