

פרשת וישב

OVERVIEW

The young Joseph precipitates a conflict with his brothers by telling them of a dream which they interpreted as an indication of his aspirations to become their leader. The feud intensifies as a result of a second dream and ultimately leads to an act of revenge: During a visit to his brothers upon his father's request, they seize him and throw him in an empty cistern. Soon after they sell him to a passing caravan of merchants who take him along to Egypt. Unaware of the event, Yaakov is made to believe that Joseph had become the victim of an accident.

Yehuda becomes intimate with Tamar. - In Egypt Joseph suffers many adversities then becomes a trusted official in the house of Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's ministers. He refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife who then accuses him of immoral conduct and has him put in prison. There Joseph becomes friendly with two fellow prisoners, servants of the king, one the court baker, the other the royal cupbearer. Having been able to interpret their dreams, Joseph obtains a promise from the cupbearer - whose early releases he had predicted - to intercede for him with the authorities. However, as soon as the cupbearer is released and assumes his former duties, he forgets his promise and Joseph remains in prison.

COMMENTARY

The youthful Joseph

"Joseph was seventeen years old and was a shepherd with his brothers. As a boy he associated with the sons of Bilhah and Silpah, the wives of his father". He hardly knew his mother. Yaakov lavishes on his son the intense love he felt for Rachel. Joseph reminds him of her in every way, physically and spiritually. At an early age he exhibits an unusual intelligence and quality of mind that marked him for an extraordinary career. He is the prototype of a natural leader, with all the merits and faults inherent in this role. In his early youth he is attracted to the sons of the former maidservants whom he could more easily dominate than Leah's sons. For it seems to be a fact that the class differences between the sons of the two sisters and those of the maidservants were quite evident despite Yaakov's efforts to create normal relations between the brothers. It was unavoidable that the father's disproportionate affection for Rachel's son would give rise to the envy and hatred of the other

sons. The tragic element in Joseph's life is as much traceable to the father's weakness as to the son's excessive pride.

Joseph's dream

The two dreams that Joseph reports to his brothers are marked by their improbable scenario. The first dream deals with the gathering of sheaves, an activity that was not usual among shepherds who devoted themselves mainly to cattle breeding. The second dream is so fanciful that it is little wonder that the brothers refused to accept the tale. Yaakov's intuition gives more credence to the dreams and this in turn rankles the brothers' feelings towards Joseph. Yaakov vainly attempts to calm their anger.

It should be noted that Joseph appears determined to distance himself from the affair. After all, the sheaves gather around and bow on their own volition to the center sheaf that represents him, Joseph. The eleven stars, the sun and the moon pay homage to him of their own accord. Joseph himself seems perplexed, he did not ask for or expect the honor. He almost asks for the brothers' advice concerning the relevance of the dreams. He exhibits the same naive candor towards the brothers - who do not take it lightly - that he showed when he rebuffs (later on) the advances of Potiphar's wife or relies on the promise of his fellow prisoners. Joseph has learned his lesson but he is not prepared to change his attitude. During his entire life he will not waver in his loyalty and righteousness which will stand him in good stead later on although for the present they bring him nothing but troubles.

The sale to the Yishmaelites

The brothers feel threatened. The presence of a potential "tyrant" in their midst could endanger their livelihood and also their standing as future leaders of their tribes. They deliberate in Shechem as to what action they can take. (It is interesting to note that this city traditionally was the stronghold against any threatening dictatorship. Much later, after King Salomon's death, the people gathered in Shechem in protest against the candidacy of his son Rechabeam resulting in the split of the kingdom.)

Yaakov sends Joseph to his brothers under the pretext of bringing them provisions but actually to effect a reconciliation between them. Alas, it was most certainly an inappropriate visit that could only serve to infuriate them even more.

(We think of the saying of our Sages: "Seek not to appease your fellow-man at the time of his anger"). Now the brothers have but one thought: to get rid of Joseph in order to preserve their independence.

On his arrival at the grazing area Joseph is seized by the brothers and flung in the empty pit. A caravan of Yishmaelite merchants passes by. Why not hand over the troublesome brother to them to take him to a distant place where he can indulge in his dictatorial fantasies? As it turns out it is not the Yishmaelites but other merchants who will bring him to Egypt. This explains why they never suspected that they would meet Joseph in Egypt when they went there to buy provisions. They were only burdened by the awareness of the pain their action would undoubtedly cause the aging father. In a rather crude manner they invent a tale by which a wild animal was to blame for Joseph's death.

Yaakov's grief

The father's bottomless grief is a most affecting sight. His hopes, stirred by his son's ambitious dreams, are shattered. The blood-spattered coat puts an end to his dream of glory for his favorite son. (Note: according to a touching Midrash the coat was made from the wedding dress Yaakov had presented to Rachel). Given the fact that the sons are deeply disturbed about their father's inconsolable grief, it is difficult to understand that not one of them mastered the courage to tell his father the truth. Evidently they had a notion that their brother might still be alive. Also, by telling the father what happened they would have to admit how much they feared Joseph and how seriously they took his "childish" dreams. In their hearts they could not forget his face, his ironic smile, his handsome appearance. - During these weeks of anxiety and pain Joseph is on the way to Egypt where his extraordinary career will ultimately benefit those who had attempted to eliminate him.

Joseph in Egypt

It could not have been very easy to achieve a position of responsibility in an Egyptian upper-class house. One must realize the contempt that Egyptians harbored for any stranger whatever his origin. One must also bear in mind the extreme immorality prevalent in the cities of the Nile delta, the scorn for any moral barrier, in order to understand what faced Joseph as he was accepted as the administrator of Potiphar's house. The lady of the house was attracted to the handsome newcomer and began to take advantage of his presence. Joseph was ambitious, no doubt, and his

career could surely have benefited from a "liaison" with Potiphar's wife. What firmness of character and moral fortitude was required by him whom Yaakov subsequently called "the pure one among his brothers"!

Joseph remains silent in the face of the shameless attacks on him by the furious, bitterly disappointed woman. One word from him would have convinced the master of his innocence. Potiphar trusted Joseph implicitly and he was sufficiently familiar with his wife's sexual license to realize the truth. But Joseph remains silent. He is devoted to his master who had showed him kindness in his house. He refuses to cause a domestic crisis. He accepts an undeserved prison term rather than give in to a sense of revenge - an emotion whose dire consequences he knows only too well.

The dreams of the royal servants

A talmudical saying states that "an unexplained dream is like an unopened letter". It appears that every dream contains a kernel of unconscious prophecy that can often be rationalized. The interpretation of a dream lies in its "opening" (פתור , related to פטר , to open from the inside), i.e. its meaning should not be read into it from the outside but must emerge from the dream itself. Joseph has no wish to act as a "visionary" after his fellow prisoners – the king's butler and baker – had told him of their dreams. "Do not interpretations belong to G-d?", he says. The bird that ate the cakes in the baker's basket that were meant for the king can only be a symbol of death, for birds do not molest a living person. The butler's pressing the grapes into pharaoh's cup is such a realistic and rational act that it can only mean life.

The butler's forgetfulness

Joseph's imprisonment continues. It is a lesson to him having placed his trust in the butler's promise. He did not realize that, while common troubles bring people closer together, good fortune frequently erases memories of promises. Thus Joseph experiences a rude awakening that helps to steel his character in the harsh school of life.

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