

Parashah Thirty-Four

Genesis 37:1–36; Jeremiah 38:1–13; Matthew 3:13–17

Notes by Tim Hegg

Joseph, Beloved of Jacob

The *parashah* begins like the last, with a תּוֹלְדוֹת, *toledot*, the normal heading for a generational list. But when the list is begun with “These are the generations of Jacob,” the narrative continues with the opening story of Joseph instead of the expected genealogical listings. Why? It is to show us that from this point on the generations of Jacob are in the hands of Joseph. From the first sentence of the Joseph story, he is the savior of the offspring of Jacob. Had Joseph not arisen to a place of prominence in Egypt through God’s kind providence, there would have been no more family of Jacob. The promises of the covenant, made initially with Abraham, passed to Isaac and Jacob, would have failed, for the seed of Abraham would have perished in the famine, or been entirely eclipsed through assimilation with the nations. But in God’s mysterious wisdom and providence, Joseph is maligned and ill-treated, and it is from this severe rejection by his own brothers that he arises to the throne in order to save them all, and to preserve them so that the generational promises of God would be realized. Here, in seed form, we understand what Paul later penned when he wrote: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Romans 11:33).

The first notice about Joseph (v. 2) is interesting, and could be taken two ways. It could be translated “Joseph was 17 years old. He was shepherding his brothers with the flock” or “Joseph was 17 years old. He was shepherding with his brothers among the flock.” That the preposition נֶגַם, *’et*, “with” can also be the sign of the direct object makes the sentence ambiguous—it can be read two ways. Was this the intention of Moses, that both ideas be incorporated? What would it mean that Joseph was shepherding his brothers?

We already know that there is a great deal of inner turmoil among the brothers of this family. Reuben has (without immediate consequences) attempted to usurp the authority of Jacob through sexual advancements against Bilhah. That in itself should alert us to the fact that the family is not functioning as it should. Does the text, therefore, tell us that Joseph has been given to shepherd his family by a ambiguous opening sentence? I think it is at least possible.

What is more, why does the text specify his age? Usually in the genealogical lists, the age of the progenitor is given. “When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness...(5:3),” “These are the records of the generations of Shem. Shem was one hundred years old, and became the father of Arpachshad...(11:10),” and so on. But here, rather than giving the age of Jacob when he begat his sons, it gives Joseph’s age of 17 years. Why?

Seventeen years old is one year before the common age of marriage according to *Avot* (5:21), making Joseph just becoming ready for the wedding *chuppah*. In the overall scheme of this narrative, in which the continuation of the covenant made to Abraham continues to be the central theme, this cannot be a coincidence. We are not sure now to whom the covenant will go. It has been passed to Isaac, and then to Jacob, but which of his sons will carry it after him? At this point in the story, it appears as though that chosen one is Joseph, and the narrator wants us to believe this to be so. That is because he wishes to teach us the prophetic lesson so bound up in the life of Joseph, that the one we would think to be the victorious one is actually the rejected one who suffers for his people, and saves them through his suffering.

This was so evident to the Sages that they actually believed that two Messiah’s must appear: one related to Joseph (who would suffer and die) and one related to David (who would rule and reign). What becomes evident in the progressive revelation of the Prophets is that these suffering and reigning Messiahs are actually fulfilled in one Messiah, Yeshua. For He comes, suffers, raises

from the dead, ascends, and then returns a second time to rule and reign. He is both Mashiach ben Yosef and Mashiach ben David.

Moreover, when Joseph does ascend to the throne of Egypt as the Savior of the then-known-world, and when through circumstance beyond the control of anyone, his brothers come face to face with him, Joseph is unknown to his brothers—his identity is masked. “He came unto His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).

The story that follows is well known: Joseph is loved by Jacob, and given a pledge of this love in a special multi-colored or multi-panelled coat (כְּתוֹנֶת, *k'tonet*). Beside the use of this word in the Joseph narrative, the next time we find it is in the descriptions of the priestly garments (Ex 28:4ff). Since Moses is writing this, and since he wrote it most likely after receiving the Torah on Sinai, it should cause us to consider the emphasis put upon the *k'tonet* that Jacob gave to Joseph. If we read it with the whole Torah in mind, this separates Joseph out as parallel to the priests. Indeed, he will offer himself (as it were) for the redemption of his brothers, even though they rejected him.

And why did his brothers hate him? Because he was loved by his father! While they would never have admitted it, their hatred of Joseph was a slap in their father's face. When we hate the One whom the Father loves, we are in that hatred despising the Father Himself. Never forget that anyone who rejects the Father's Messiah, also, in that repudiation, rejects the Father (John 15:23).

Let us contemplate an application of this: the voice of HaShem Himself was heard when Yeshua underwent the *mikvah* in anticipation of His public ministry: “This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” Like Joseph, however, the brethren of Yeshua despised Him because He was beloved of the Father. What is our response to Yeshua? How do we relate to this One who is loved of the Father, but despised by His brothers?

But the text makes it clear from the beginning that Joseph was an outsider. He was not of the sons of Bilhah or Leah, but of Rachel, and was therefore alone. Some have thought that Joseph was unwise to have brought an “evil report” back to his father regarding his brothers. What exactly the report was we do not know, but it is likely that Joseph was reporting the actions of his brothers which were dishonorable or even illegal. Perhaps they were killing lambs for their own food, or selling parts of the flock without Jacob's knowledge and personally profiting from the sales. Maybe they were just doing half-hearted work. Whatever the case, the narrative would have us take the viewpoint that Joseph was righteous, and that for his righteousness, he is maligned, abused, left for dead, and eventually sold into slavery. “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.”

Joseph became known as “that dreamer.” What exactly were his dreams? How should we class them? It is evident (since we already know the end of the story) that his dreams were prophetic revelations from God. The very things that his dreams included came true in the course of time—his brothers bowed to him, and his father became dependent upon him. (It is curious that in the 11 stars, sun, and moon, his mother Rachel must also be included, and even Jacob questions this. But his mother dies before his ascent to power in Egypt, so it appears almost as though an eschatological reference is hinted at.) These dreams were therefore from God. They were prophetic visions or revelations.

Now here is a most interesting point: each time he relates one of his dreams (which were God's divine revelation), it caused his brothers to hate him more. And we may use this as an illustration of what happens when people are given the revealed truth of God apart from the Ruach opening their eyes to it—they grow in the hatred for the very Messiah Who could save them.

We are struck with the notice about Jacob's response (v. 11) because it reminds us of a similar response of Miriam, the mother of Yeshua when she was informed of the child that had been conceived within her (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). Our text relates that “His brothers hated him, but his father guarded the matter.” We might say he “treasured” the matter in his heart—he held it away as

something far more significant than merely a passing dream. Jacob, with some spiritual discernment, realized that what may be laughable to man, is sometimes exactly what God intends to do.

The next event in the narrative is phenomenal, at least from a narrative standpoint: the brothers go to shepherd the sheep near Shechem, but Joseph stays behind. When Jacob calls him to “come and I will send you...,” Joseph answers with *הִנְנִי*, *hineini*, “here I am.” Where have we heard that before! It is exactly the same answer Abraham gives to God when He calls him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22). For Jacob to send Joseph out toward Shechem is to invite the same kind of danger that befell Shechem! Joseph is hated by the same men who ruthlessly murdered people at Shechem. Jacob may as well be sending Joseph to his death, and the narrator wants us to read it this way. Yet in the face of this clear and present danger, Joseph responds with *הִנְנִי*, *hineini*. “Not my will, but yours” (cf. Lk 22:42).

The text says that he (i.e. Jacob) “sent him (i.e. Joseph) from the valley of Hebron” (v. 14). Hebron is the burial place of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah, so the narrative once again brings in the picture of death, but also of the on-going covenant from generation to generation. Yet Hebron is situated on a high point of the Land, not in a valley. “The valley of Hebron” may therefore be an allusion to the burial place.

The “man” whom Joseph encounters in the field is identified by the Sages as Gabriel, for it is reasoned that surely angels were guarding his way. The suggestion is that Joseph would have had a legitimate reason for returning to Jacob and reporting that he was unable to find his brothers. But with the help of this “man,” he is directed to them, and thus the design of God to take him to Egypt is furthered.

As the reader now expects (from all of the narrative signs), when Joseph appears his brothers began immediately to plot his death. The scheme is to kill him and to lie to cover their deed: “a wild animal devoured him.” Once again, it was their unwillingness to submit to the divine revelation given via Joseph’s dreams that is emphasized as the impetus for their hatred and murderous plot.

Joseph’s rescue comes at the hands of Reuben, something that is unexpected in the story. For Reuben, who appears to be vying for top position in the family, must have known that Joseph was in place to receive the blessing of the first-born (cf. 1Chron 5:1f). Yet he could not bring himself to participate in open bloodshed. Though he could not lose face by resisting his brothers, he hoped to find a way to save him secretly.

After stripping Joseph of his robe, and casting him into a pit, the brothers go back to eat, almost as though they enact a covenant meal. Their deed against Joseph would eventuate in his going to Egypt, and the whole story which follows is now set in place.

Enter Ishmaelites/Midianites: out of nowhere Ishmael re-enters the story! Joseph is sold to them (without Reuben knowing it?!) for 20 pieces of silver, the going rate for common slaves in that era. “Mashiach ben Yosef” would also be sold for silver (30 pieces), another clear and interesting parallel.

After Reuben realizes that his idea to rescue Joseph has been undermined, the idea of presenting the bloodstained robe to Jacob as proof of Joseph’s “death” is played out. Jacob will not be comforted, and mourns for Joseph many days. He could not have known at this point that Joseph would be “resurrected” as it were, as the one who would not only save him and his family from the famine that was coming, but would ultimately stand as the savior of the then known world.

The narrative line ends in this *parashah* with Joseph being sold by the Medanites (to whom Joseph had apparently been sold by the Ishmaelites/Midianites) to a man named Potiphar, identified as a courtier of the Pharaoh in Egypt, i.e. the Chamberlain of the Guards. The word *טַבַּח*, *tabach*, translated “body guard” by the NASB, can mean either a butcher or a guard, and the Stone Chumash takes it in the former sense of “butcher.” That Potiphar is, in the subsequent story, in charge of the prison, however, seems to opt for the meaning “guard,” though “executioner” may

well combine both meanings.

Thus, the story has begun: Joseph, chosen by God, is sent to his brothers for their welfare, but is ill-treated by them. As a result, he is taken away from his family, exalted to the throne of Egypt (after much suffering), and will be reunited with his brothers, though they will not recognize him for who he is. Yet all of this is done that he might ultimately save them. The parallels are too close to a future “son of Joseph” named Yeshua, to be overlooked. The “fulfillment” of this prophetic story will be found in none other than the Messiah Himself.

The providence of God, the out-working of His sovereign plan, is thus clearly in motion. And it is given to us in this way so that we might trust God all the more. His ways are perfect, and our lives are entrusted into His care. It remains for us simply to trust Him each step of the way!

The Sages chose Jeremiah 38:1–13 as the *haftarah* because of its thematic similarity to our Torah portion. Like Joseph, Jeremiah is ill-treated by those who do not appreciate his message even though he was established as a prophet of God in the court of king Zedekiah. Jeremiah’s message of woe likewise centered on the servitude that would befall Israel as a result their disobedience and disregard for the covenant. What irked the king’s servants was that Jeremiah had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and all who remained within the city. In contrast, those who would surrender to the Babylonians would preserve their lives, albeit as enslaved to their enemy victors. In contrast, the king’s “prophets” were declaring “peace,” telling the people that no calamity would befall them (cf. Jer 23:17). They were trying to calm the people through false prophecies while the true prophet of God was warning them of sure and impending danger. From the standpoint of the “false shepherds” (cf. Jer 25:34f), everything was fine: “don’t worry; be happy!” was their message.

Jeremiah’s words of truth therefore came as an unwelcomed nuisance. The only option was to silence him. So the four officials of Zedekiah sought permission of the king to put Jeremiah to death, and the king granted their request. Armed with such royal permission, they seized Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern (בֹּרַי, *bor* – the same word used in our Torah text for the “pit” into which Joseph was thrown) of Malchijah (“Adonai is my King”) Zedekiah’s son, which was in the courtyard of the guardhouse. Obviously, they expected that he would die there, just as Joseph’s brothers thought the pit into which they had thrown Joseph would become his grave.

However, the lack of rain which had brought a famine upon the Land had caused cisterns, including this one, to be empty (the same is related about the pit into which Joseph was cast, Gen 37:24). Jeremiah sank into the mud at the bottom of the cistern but his life was preserved.

Then an interesting turn of events is narrated: a foreigner, an Ethiopian eunuch by the name of Evedmelech (“servant of the king”), appealed to the king on Jeremiah’s behalf. What was to be a covert operation to rid the court of “pain-in-the-neck” prophet had become known—even the court’s eunuchs were privy to the scheme. So in a typical political flip-flop, Zedekiah grants Evedmelech permission to rescue Jeremiah. Taking 30 of the servants in his charge, Evedmelech gathers rags from the king’s storeroom, ties them together to make ropes, and with his men rescues Jeremiah from the mud of the cistern.

The rest of the story is found in the subsequent chapters of Jeremiah, and it reads like a portrait of our own times. Zedekiah and his court pretends to listen to the words of Jeremiah but act contrary to them. Instead of surrendering to Nebuchadnezer when he comes to capture Jerusalem, they flee at night into the desert but are overtaken by the Babylonian troops. Zedekiah’s sons are slaughtered before his eyes, then he is blinded and taken captive to Babylon. Nebuchadnezer appoints Gedaliah as his vassal and the poorest of the nation, along with Judean refugees living outside of the Land who returned, and Jeremiah himself, remained in the Land as the remnant God has promised. Of course, this is not the end of the story! Even after the prophecy of Jeremiah

had come true before their very eyes, the people and their leaders continue to disregard and even despise the message of God sent by His prophet Jeremiah. Believing the lies of pagan myths, they openly sacrificed to the “queen of heaven” in hopes she would bless them with prosperity:

But rather we will certainly carry out every word that has proceeded from our mouths, by burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, just as we ourselves, our forefathers, our kings and our princes did in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for then we had plenty of food and were well off and saw no misfortune. But since we stopped burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have met our end by the sword and by famine. (Jer. 44:17–18)

If we collate our *haftarah* with the story of our Torah *parashot*, we see the obvious lesson emphasized again and again: if we will accept the word of God, submit to its truths by living them out in faithfulness, God will fulfill His word to us and bless us. Joseph stands before us as a clear model of such faithfulness.

Joseph as a foreshadowing of Messiah is the impetus for our choice of the Apostolic portion for this Shabbat. Matthew relates the story of Yeshua’s *mikvah* in the Jordon where Yochanan was calling the people to return in faithfulness to God. When Yeshua comes up out of the water, the Ruach descended upon Him like a dove, and the voice from heaven (which the Sages call a *בַּת קוֹל*, *bat qol*, an “echo”) declares: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” This divine declaration was a miraculous announcement to all that Yeshua was indeed the Son of God with all of the messianic overtones that designation entails.

We may note the parallels to Israel’s early history. In the exodus, Israel, “God’s firstborn” (cf. Ex 4:22) also went through a kind of *mikvah* by crossing the Red Sea. They then came to Mt. Sinai where the very voice of the Almighty was heard as He gave them His self-revelation in the Torah. So the essential question that comes to us from the texts we have read this Shabbat is this: will we accept the word of God and act upon it or not? Joseph is given revelation from God and reports it to his brothers; Jeremiah proclaims the word of God to the people of his day; and Yeshua came as the full and perfect revelation of God as the Living Torah. God blesses those of contrite heart who tremble at His word! (Is 57:15; 66:5).