

# PARASHAH THIRTY-SIX

Genesis 39:1–23; Isaiah 52:13–53:12; Acts 16:16–40

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*Notes by Tim Hegg*

*But... Adonai was with him*

After the necessary break in the Joseph story (ch. 38), in order to remind the reader that the primary message relates to the coming promised One through the line of Judah, our *parashah* takes up where we had last seen Joseph—riding away in a caravan of merchants. Having ended up in Egypt, Joseph was sold to Potipher (the name means “he whom Ra gives”) by the Ishmaelites. That our passage begins with this notice serves to tie it together with the story of ch. 37. The question of whether Ishmaelites or Midianites were the slave traders is answered several ways. Midrash Rabbah *Genesis* suggests that Joseph was sold several times. Ibn Ezra considered the two names to apply to the same people on the basis of Judges 8:24, and it is very probable that the term “Ishmaelites” designated “nomadic traders” rather than an ethnicity, though for the sake of the narrative, to reintroduce Ishmael into the story surely brings a sense of foreboding. Regardless, Joseph finds himself in a foreign land, surrounded by a godless culture, serving an official of the Pharaoh.

But from the very beginning of our *parashah* the presence of Adonai is announced: “Adonai was with Joseph” (v. 2). In fact, throughout the entire Joseph story, the Tetragrammaton (יהוה) is found only in this chapter, and it is found eight times! While Joseph is in Egypt, he will be viewed as an Egyptian, and his God will be referred to as Elohim. But Moses here uses the covenant Name to remind us that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Who faithfully keeps His covenant, is with Joseph. As we shall see, our *parashah* ends with the same notice, so that Adonai’s presence with Joseph is like book ends for our story. This, no doubt, is the primary emphasis of our passage.

Joseph is successful, and it is because Adonai is with him. Here we learn a most important lesson: success has nothing to do with our circumstances, but it has everything to do with our relationship to God. In a place where many people might have despaired, and even grown angry with God, Joseph is successful. He does his work with integrity—his true character shines forth regardless of his surroundings. His faith stands him in good stead.

Moreover, according to v. 3, even Potipher recognized that Joseph’s success was on account of his God. How did Potipher know this? One must presume that Joseph frequently spoke of his God, and perhaps it was well known that Joseph engaged in regular prayer and thanksgiving to God. Rashi comments: “the name of God was frequently on his mouth.” Here, once again, is an excellent example for us. In the midst of difficult circumstances, do those who see us recognize God’s presence with us? Is His Name frequently in our mouth as we petition the Almighty and give Him praise and thanksgiving?

God’s blessing of Joseph “spilled over” to the household of Potipher as well. Since he recognized that everything Joseph did ended in success, he appointed him as chief steward over all he owned. And as a result, Potipher prospered as well. This is how it should be. In our own daily work, as we honor God and receive from Him the blessings He promises, those for whom we work should also be blessed because God’s blessing involves real, life-to-life circumstances. When God blesses the work of our hands, those around us are also blessed.

Verse 6 shows the extent to which Potipher trusted Joseph: everything was put in his charge. Potipher only concerned himself with eating. But at the end of v. 6, a notice is given which seems

odd: “Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.” Why this sudden notice of Joseph’s appearance? It sets up the trouble into which he is about to step. By no fault of his own, the successful Joseph is about to be severely tested, and in spite of the fact that he will pass the test with flying colors, he will find himself in the lowest possible circumstances. He was taken down to Egypt, and now he will be taken down into the chains of a prison.

The test comes in the area of morality. Potipher’s wife, no doubt use to getting whatever she wanted, cast eyes upon Joseph. Her brazen approach to him is couched in only two words in the Hebrew text: *שִׁכְבָה עִמִּי*, “lie with me.” But Adonai was with Joseph. And thus the presence of the Almighty cuts both ways: His gracious presence brings blessing, and also requires that we walk in holiness.

To the woman’s two-word seduction Joseph gives a 38 word reply—a mini-sermon! It is interesting to listen to his refusal speech. Primarily, it describes Joseph’s relationship to Potipher. First, he has been put in a position of trust and authority—everything was in his charge. Secondly, no one was over him except Potipher himself, or in other words, Potipher had put a great amount of trust in him. But finally, Joseph puts his answer into a most important question: “How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” (v. 9). Do you see the point? Joseph considered giving in to her advances as a sin against *two* masters: one earthly, and one heavenly. Righteousness is a way of life, not a religious creed. The soul that has committed itself to God is likewise a soul that has determined not to sin against his fellow man.

But like so many, Potipher’s wife didn’t get the point of Joseph’s sermon. She was convinced to have him, so she continued to offer herself day after day. We might pause to make an application of this: in this fallen world we should never think that our battle against sin is over. Just because we have boldly refused sin once doesn’t mean we can presume that temptation will turn tail and flee. Paul wrote: “but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1Cor 9:27). The verb “discipline” is in the present tense, so the meaning is “I keep on disciplining my body.” Until mortal puts on immortality, there is no stepping away from the battle. Daily we are confronted with temptations of sin; daily we must put on the armor (Eph 6:18f), and daily, by the strength of the Spirit, we must discipline ourselves to walk in the ways of righteousness.

This is what Joseph did: he refused to listen to her. He would not allow her seductive words any lodging in his soul. And so the rebuffed, spoiled woman of leisure played her final card. In a moment where there were no witnesses, she grabbed his cloak and made her final appeal. Joseph did what any godly man would do—he let go of his cloak and ran outside. Fleeing from sin and temptation is the manly thing to do!

Now the narrative turns on an already common element. At the beginning of the Joseph story, his special cloak was used as identification of his demise. In the previous chapter, items of identification are used against Judah by Tamar who posed as a cult-prostitute. And here, a different kind of prostitute retains Joseph’s cloak as evidence to support her trumped up story. Being rebuffed this final time, she decides to frame Joseph. She calls the men of the house (was that something she did often?) and produced Joseph’s cloak as evidence that he had tried to rape her. She even kept the cloak “beside her” (v. 16), most likely meaning that she left it on her bed, in order to incriminate Joseph all the more. When Potipher comes home, and hears the story, he is rightly enraged, but the text never specifically details the object of his anger. Perhaps he suspected more than he was told. At any rate, he drags Joseph off to jail, and thus ends this first chapter of our story. Joseph had gone

to check on the shalom of his brothers, and as a result, finds himself in an Egyptian prison accused of rape. One can hardly imagine a worse scenario.

But as our portion began, so it ends: “But Adonai was with him!” All of these events fell within the predetermined plan of the Almighty. Whether Joseph sensed God’s presence at this time or not we cannot tell, but the fact remains, Adonai was with him. Then the text makes a most stunning statement (v. 21): “and (He) *extended kindness to him*. The verb (הִנָּחֵם) means “to stretch out,” in the sense of “extending a hand.” In the midst of the prison, God stretched out His hand to Joseph! And so He does to us as well. This same verb will be used throughout the exodus story when it relates that God delivered Israel with an “outstretched arm” (cf. Ex 6:6). Our lives are in His care, and regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, as we bow our hearts to Him, He extends His hand of grace to us!

The *haftarah* portion chosen by the Sages to accompany our Torah reading is from Is 52–53 in the oldest strata of the synagogue traditions (see Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* [KTAV, 1971], 1.298f). The obvious parallel in the minds of the ancient rabbis was that the suffering Messiah spoken of by Isaiah paralleled the suffering of Joseph, whom they saw as a foreshadow of the Messiah. Following the 1st Century and the division of the Church from the Synagogue, however, Is 53 can no longer be found in the *haftarah* lists for obvious reasons: the language of Is 53 too closely prophesies the historical reality of Yeshua’s crucifixion. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is, in fact, Yeshua of Natzeret, and the older rabbinic materials affirm this by linking Mashiach ben Yoseph with the suffering Messiah of Isaiah 53 (cf. the *baraita* in b.*Sanhedrin* 98a. Note also Mid. Rab. *Ruth* on 2:14; Targum Jonathan on Is 52:13).

The Apostolic portion chosen for this Shabbat is Acts 16:16–40, which recounts Paul and Silas being thrown into prison. Like Joseph, they suffered at the hands of powerful men in spite of the fact that they had done nothing wrong. Yet also like our Joseph story, the Almighty was with them. Rather than despair at their unfair treatment, Paul and Silas, like Joseph, committed themselves to His all-wise providence and engaged in outward praise and worship! Suddenly the ground began to shake and the prison doors were opened. Their release from prison proved beyond doubt that God was with them and as a result, many believed.

One primary lesson we learn from these portions of Scripture is that even though in this world the righteous will suffer, we may always take comfort and courage in the fact that God remains with us to bring about His final purposes. Indeed, Yeshua Himself promised to be with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt 28:20).