**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT VAYESHEV**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the worldwide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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In loving memory of my parents:

Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z”l

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Dedicated in memory of my father, Hillel ben Yechiel (Herman) Reiter, of Debrecen, Hungary, whose yahrzeit falls on the 24th day of Kislev. May his soul be among the Righteous in Gan Eden.

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**Yosef and His Brothers — The Hatred**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

### I. Yaakov's Love for Yosef

… Yosef, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren, being still a lad even with the sons of Bilha and with the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives; and Yosef brought evil report of them unto their father. Now Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat of many colors. And when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him. (*Bereishit* 37:2-4)

The sin of the sale of Yosef begins with the inordinate love that Yaakov lavishes upon Yosef, a love much greater than his love for his other children. Does Yaakov conduct himself appropriately in this matter?

"And he made him a coat of many colors" — Resh Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya: A man must not distinguish between his sons, for because of the coat of many colors that the patriarch Yaakov made for Yosef, "they hated him." (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:8)

The Midrash seems to have learned this from the dramatic climax of the brothers' hate for Yosef:

And they sent the coat of many colors, and they brought it to their father; and said: This have we found. Know now whether it is your son's coat or not. (*Bereishit* 37:32)

The coat is at fault!

Why does Yaakov act so carelessly and with so much bias toward his children? Elsewhere we suggested two different possibilities, both of which might be correct.

The first possibility is that Yosef was the son of his beloved wife, the keystone of his house, Rachel. Yaakov's love for Rachel, especially according to the accepted understanding that Rachel died before Yaakov came to Chevron, finds expression in his strong love for her son, who might very well have been similar to her in appearance and in character. We find a phenomenon of this sort much later among the kings of Yehuda:

And Rechavam loved Ma’akha the daughter of Avshalom above all his wives and his concubines… And Rechavam appointed Aviya the son of Ma’akha to be chief, even the prince among his brethren; for he was minded to make him king. (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 11:21-22)

Moreover, elsewhere we suggested that Yaakov fears that not only did his curse regarding the matter of the theft of the *terafim* hurt his wife Rachel, but it might also hurt her children. Thus, he protects Yosef and Binyamin from all dangers, keeps them close to him, and refuses to send them out to graze the animals. His special concern for Yosef arouses the jealousy of his brothers, who feel themselves deprived because they are the sons of the hated wife (Lei’a) or the sons of the maidservants.

The second possible way of explaining Yaakov's preference for Yosef is that Yosef is the firstborn of his mother Rachel. Reuven is the natural candidate to receive the birthright, as he too is the firstborn of his mother Lei’a, but he is also the oldest among his brothers and Yaakov's first child. Yaakov rejects Reuven because he defiled his father's bed, strips him of the birthright, and gives it to Yosef, Rachel's firstborn, even though he is younger than his other brothers.

The second reason, in view of the exceptional circumstances of Reuven's sin, may justify Yaakov's conduct. The first argument, however, seems to be contrary to the Torah's commandment:

If a man have two wives, the one beloved, and the other hated, and they have borne him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated; then it shall be, in the day that he causes his sons to inherit that which he has, that he may not make the son of the beloved the firstborn before the son of the hated, who is the firstborn; but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the hated, by giving him a double portion of all that he has; for he is the first-fruits of his strength, the right of the firstborn is his. (*Devarim* 21:15-17)

It is, however, possible that the Torah writes the prohibition in the wake of the story of Yaakov and Yosef and his brothers, and its bitter consequences.

Let us clarify the halakha that follows from the section dealing with the laws of inheritance, and the relationship between it and what happens to Yaakov and his sons. The Torah raises the possibility that a father might want to give the double inheritance that is due to his firstborn to his son from a more beloved wife, even though he is the younger son.

We can understand that a man might feel special love for one of his wives. However the Torah emphasizes that the second wife is hated. Why would a man hate his wife? Is he at all permitted to hate her?[[1]](#footnote-1)

The probable answer is that the man hates his wife because he suspects that she is guilty of sexual misconduct. Elsewhere we suggested that Lei’a’s deceiving Yaakov at her father's command might be seen as bordering on sexual misconduct. This explains the harsh result — the hatred. So too, then, in the section in *Devarim*,it may be understood that the husband suspects his wife of having had an affair. He is therefore liable to think that her son (the firstborn) is not his son, and thus he is unfit to inherit his estate. The Gemara in *Bava Batra* (126b) learns from here that a father is authorized to decide matters of paternity, whether or not a certain person is his son. The Torah prohibits the father from using false pretexts against the son of his hated wife and claiming that he is not his son, in order to deprive him of his inheritance; but when he makes such a claim, he is in fact believed.

In contrast to the father described in that section, Yaakov recognizes his son Reuven as his true firstborn, born from himself and Lei’a:

Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might, and the first-fruits of my strength; the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. (*Bereishit* 49:3)

Nevertheless, he denies him the birthright because of his conduct. This fact is important not only in order to soften Yaakov's mistake and perhaps even justify his approach to his sons, but also to clarify the connection between the sale of Yosef and the incident involving Reuven and Bilha, and thus to understand the magnitude of the repair that Reuven tries to achieve when he saves Yosef from his brothers who wish to kill him. The responsibility for the hatred is largely due to his own behavior, which forces Yaakov to show preference to Yosef, the son of his beloved wife.

### II. The Dream Involving the Sun and the Moon

The Torah tells us that Yosef's behavior was an additional cause of his brothers' hatred:

And Yosef dreamed a dream, and he told it to his brethren; **and they hated him yet the more.** And he said unto them: Hear, I pray you, this dream which I have dreamed: 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. And his brethren said to him: Shall you indeed reign over us? or shall you indeed have dominion over us? **And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words.**

And he dreamed yet another 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. 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 you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brethren indeed come to bow down to you to the earth? **And his brethren envied him;** but his father kept the saying in mind. (*Bereishit* 37:5-11)

Yaakov's rebuke suggests that Yosef's problem is not only that he goes and tells his father and his brothers about his dreams, but that he has these dreams in the first place. It would seem from here that a person dreams about what his heart is already musing, so if Yosef dreams that he would rule over his father's entire house, he must already have been inclined in that direction, and he is responsible for his dream. Indeed, the brothers hate Yosef both for having his dreams and for his having told them about his dreams. Thus, they hate him for his first dream, which deals with his control over his brothers, control that finds expression in the sheaves, that is to say, in money and livelihood.

The second dream expands the circle of those bowing down to Yosef to include both his father and his mother (assuming that Yaakov correctly interprets the dream). However, this dream does not deal with sheaves, but rather with the heavenly bodies. This dream may signify trouble, for it involves a man of flesh and blood who likens himself to his Creator, and thinks that it would be appropriate for others to relate to him in the manner of "And the host of heaven bows down to you" (*Nechemya* 9:6).

Yosef sees himself in his dream as administrating a kingdom that embraces the entire world. The brothers do not hate him because of the dream, but rather they envy him. They may feel what is felt by their father, who "kept the saying in mind," that the dream is not merely the musing of his heart. How could such a young boy ponder such lofty ideas on his own? Perhaps the dream contains not only the contemplations of his heart, but also something of prophecy, some enlightenment coming in from the outside, and in this case from God, who has already spoken to Yosef's forefathers.

If we are correct about this, it may be suggested that Yaakov does not fully understand Yosef's dream. The Midrash explains that the sun and the moon that bow down to Yosef refer to the order given to them by Yehoshua in the course of his war with the Canaanites, and to the fact that they had to listen to him:

Then spoke Yehoshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Yisrael; and he said in the sight of Yisrael: Sun, stand you still upon Givon; and you, Moon, in the valley of Ayalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the nation had avenged themselves of their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Yashar? And the sun stayed in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. (*Yehoshua* 10:12-13)

The Midrash says:

Yehoshua said to the sun: Bad slave … Did not Father see you in his dream: "And, behold, the sun and the moon"? So too you stand still before me. Immediately: "And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed" (*Bereishit Rabba* 84:11).

Yehoshua is from the tribe of Efrayim, the son of Yosef. Perhaps we can also add Devora the prophetess, who judges from Mount Efrayim. The stars act in accordance with her instructions in her war against Sisera:

They fought from heaven, the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. (*Shoftim* 5:20)

Can we find a connection between Yaakov's understanding of the dream and the Midrash's understanding of the dream? Maybe so! Yosef's dream brings about that his brothers bow down to him many times, and even his father bows down when Yosef takes an oath to bury his father in the Makhpela Cave:

And he said: Swear unto me. And he swore unto him. And Yisrael bowed down upon the bed's head. (*Bereishit* 47:31)

The realization of the dream stems from Yosef's reign over Egypt, and during the years of famine, also over the surrounding countries. To establish this kingdom, God hijacks all of the forces of nature during the seven good years and the seven bad years. The host of heaven's obedience to the leadership of the descendants of Yosef for the deliverance of Israel and the conquest of the land from the kings of Canaan in the days of Yehoshua and from Yavin the king of Canaan in the days of Devora closes the circle of the Israelites' descent to Egypt at the command of Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt. Yosef and his descendants one day fulfill the dream, and the host of heaven one day bow down to them at God's command.

III. Dream and the Divine Spirit

Let us return to the dispute about Yosef's dreams and the doubts that arise in Yaakov's house in connection with them. Yosef appears convinced that his dreams come to him through the Divine Spirit, which is one sixtieth of prophecy. They are forced upon him from above, by God. His certainty about their power is too great for him to keep them within him. This is what Yirmeyahu says about his own prophecy:

And if I say: I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I weary myself to hold it in, but cannot. (*Yirmeyahu* 20:9)

The prophet describes a situation in which he does not want to proclaim the word of God, but God's word is greater than him, and it bursts out of him against his will. Yosef's dreams, as opposed to the dreams of Yaakov, are not dreams of prophecy. Still, they are delivered through the Divine Spirit, which contains a hint of prophecy. To what extent Yosef could have stopped them, and to what extent should he have done so, we will never know.

The brothers, at least with the first dream, and at least some of them, see Yosef's dreams as merely the musings of his heart, musings that grow out of Yaakov's preference for him over them, just as he preferred Yosef's mother to their mother. Rachel was the younger sister; she married Yaakov after his having married Lei’a; but nevertheless Rachel is given priority in Yaakov's tent. The sense of deprivation and the fear of Yosef's taking control and of the possibility of their rejection, in the way that Yishmael and Esav were rejected, brings them to hatred. This hatred clothes itself in moral, theological, and halakhic justifications. It is difficult to distinguish between the hatred and its justification, to distinguish between the good and the evil in their reactions until the very worst happens.

In the conflict between Yosef and his brothers regarding the dreams, we are inclined to follow in the footsteps of Yosef and see the great and good hand of God leading the events happening to us. It is God who plants the dreams in Yosef's heart, and it is He who fulfills them when Yosef ascends the throne and his brothers come and bow down before him. The correlation between Yosef's dreams and their realization is not a coincidence, and therefore it is difficult to accept that his dreams from beginning to end are merely the musings of his heart.

On the other hand, we are inclined to follow in the footsteps of the brothers, and see the dreams as the musings of Yosef's heart and as his responsibility. The Torah constantly teaches us about the extent of man's responsibility and the choice laid out before him to do good or evil, with nothing forced upon him from above.

In the end we are inclined to the conclusion that Yosef's dreams are directed from above, by way of the Divine Spirit that includes a speck of prophecy. Still, the Divine Spirit leaves room for free choice and personal responsibility regarding what to do with the greatness to which one is destined, and where to channel his brothers' and father's prostrations before him: to satisfy a sterile lust for power or toward leadership in the name of God and leading the entire family along the best possible path while suffering the decree of their exile in Egypt. In the end, Yosef knows to say:

So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God… (*Bereishit* 45:8)

This solution is not a simple formula. Yosef, and we together with him, will undergo many vicissitudes until we reach it.

### IV. "And Yosef Brought Evil Report of Them Unto Their Father"

There is one more point that we would like to clarify in connection with the brothers' hatred of Yosef.

Yosef, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren, being still a lad even with the sons of Bilha and with the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives; and Yosef brought evil report of them unto their father. (*Bereishit* 37:2)

The commentators disagree about how to understand this: Chizkuni explains that it is only evil report of the sons of Bilha and the sons of Zilpa that Yosef brings to his father. It is certainly possible that the sons of the maidservants conducted themselves in a more frivolous manner than did their brothers. Rashi, on the other hand, understands that owing to his young age, Yosef prefers the sons of the maidservants, who are younger than most of their brothers, the children of Lei’a, and Yosef brings his father evil report of the sons of Lei’a, who treated them in a degrading manner. In either case, the Midrash judges Yosef's action very severely:

Two righteous men were punished for *lashon ha-ra*, namely Yosef and Yaakov: Yosef, because he spoke *lashon ha-ra*, was imprisoned for twelve years; Yaakov, because he accepted *lashon ha-ra*, the Divine Spirit was removed from him for twenty-two years. Thus you learn that one who speaks *lashon ha-ra* is punished once; and one who accepts it is punished twofold. (*Torah Sheleima*, *Vayeshev*, 37)

We find it difficult to accept that Yosef acts in this manner out of wickedness and malice, and that Yaakov blindly follows him. We also have difficulty assuming that they violate such a severe prohibition out of carelessness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We should therefore understand that owing to his dreams about his leadership of and responsibility for his family, Yosef feels a need to repair the ways of his brothers in areas in which they are lacking. Owing to his young age and sensitive position, he cannot rebuke them directly, and therefore he turns to his father and reports their conduct to him so that he would reproach them and teach them to follow in his path and in the path of his fathers.

This approach is the unripe fruit of his young age and his acceptance of excessive responsibility on his shoulders. In the future he will bring evil report of his brothers to himself, as ruler of Egypt, and accuse them of spying out the land. There too his intentions are good, to lead them to the long process of the righteous path. Yosef pays the price for the path that he takes, but he learns to direct it to its pure place on the day that he assumes overall responsibility for his brothers, not only for their maintenance and livelihood.

Translated by David Strauss

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1. The Torah also relates to hatred in the context of the *mitzvot* to help unload and reload an animal. There too *Chazal* ask how it is possible that one person should hate his fellow (see *Pesachim* 113b). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elsewhere we suggested a possible explanation for the evil report that Yosef brought his father about his brothers in the context of our discussion of the rabbinic statement: "Whoever says that Reuven sinned is mistaken." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)