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1

Joseph

Favored Son, Hated Brother

The conception, birth, and naming of Joseph signals the arrival of a special character. Rachel is described in scripture as an “*akarah*,” properly translated as “barren woman,” but more whimsically rendered as “a woman who eventually gives birth to a terrific baby boy.” Sarah and Rebecca bore this appellation, and so will many female heroes later in the Bible, including Hannah and Samson’s unnamed mother.¹ In this case Rachel suffers years of conflict with her sister and co-wife, Leah; fruitlessly seeks Jacob’s intercession through prayer as his father, Isaac, did for Rebecca; and even attempts primitive fertility treatments in the form of mandrake plants (*dudaim*) purchased from Leah in exchange for Jacob’s company at night. Do any of these means employed by Rachel work? No, they do not.² Dan and Naphtali, Rachel’s two children through Bilhah her handmaid, do not seem to assuage her bitter feelings. After a last burst of child bearing by the fecund Leah, the biblical text turns, matter-of-factly, to what *does* work:

Now God remembered Rachel; God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away [*asaf*] my disgrace.” So she named him Joseph [*yosef*], which is to say, “May the Lord add [*yosef*] another son for me.” (Gen. 30:22–24)

Rachel produces a boy and, as it were, double-names him.

Her first name addresses the removal of shame entailed by producing a male heir; her second name is a request for another son. Unlike name changes, double-naming at birth in the Bible is rare and in this case is fraught with destiny.³ The Hebrew verbs *asaf/yosef*, if connected to the newborn child, may be imaginatively rendered as “one who is taken away, and added back with increase,” not a bad summary of Joseph’s life story. As usual for biblical naming speeches, the text says much about the namer as well as the named. Here, at the birth of her firstborn, Rachel expresses the demanding nature that makes her such a suitable spouse for the similarly characterized Jacob.⁴ Rachel’s prayer for a second son will be fulfilled with the birth of Benjamin, but it will cost Rachel her life. (We will turn to the death and burial of Rachel much later in this book.) Although she is mentioned in the Joseph story proper for one verse only (Gen. 48:7), it is a most poignant one. Her presence, moreover, hovers over the Joseph narrative as the departed mother of two favored sons and as the absent maternal figure that might have guided Joseph in his formative years.

The birth of Benjamin involves an at-birth renaming. Aware that she is dying, Rachel calls the child Ben-oni (child of my suffering), but Jacob immediately renames him Benjamin, “son of the South” or “son of my right hand.” This name suggests strength, as does Jacob’s valedictory in Genesis 49 and so do the tales of Benjamin’s progeny later in the Bible. But Genesis 37–50 presents Benjamin merely as a cipher for Joseph. Benjamin gets no spoken lines; this biblical technique often highlights that the figure is an object acted on rather than an acting subject.⁵ Benjamin’s subsequent status as Jacob’s favored son, the youngest son, Rachel’s son, makes him a perfect surrogate for Joseph.⁶ This device allows the biblical narrator to test the brothers’ spiritual growth and fraternity on the one hand; the limits of Joseph’s forgiveness and fraternal feelings on the other hand. Not only is Benjamin silent in Genesis 37–50; we are never told how Benjamin feels about his situation

at home in Canaan or before the vizier Joseph in Egypt. The eighteenth-century painting by Girodet de Roucy-Trioson in which Benjamin recognizes Joseph is a wonderful imaginative leap that underscores the connection of the full brothers.⁷

Commentators through the ages found much to say about Genesis 37, a magnificent model for anyone interested in how to start a story. The first verse contains an element of tension between permanence and impermanence, between tranquility and disturbance. “Now Jacob was *settled* in the land where his father had *sojourned*, the land of Canaan.” Settling and sojourning (or “wanderings,” as *gorei* might be rendered) could be understood as synonyms, but the language here suggests a difference nuance. The rabbis questioned whether Jacob really thought he was entitled to more peace than the peaceful Isaac.⁸ As one midrash muses, “When the righteous seek to dwell in peace in this world, Satan comes and opposes them, saying, ‘It is not enough for them that so much is prepared in the coming age, they want to live in peace in this world!’”⁹ Foreshadowing and reversals stud this chapter from stem to stern: Jacob will not find peace in Canaan; he will not even end his days in Canaan. Joseph will enjoy most-favored-son status from the onset, will end this chapter in a pit (*bor*), and will then return to his destined state.

Talking About My Generations

Commentators have lavished even more attention on the second verse than the first. Gen. 37:2 reads, “This, then, is the line of [*v’eleh toldot*] Jacob: At seventeen years of age Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah.” The New Jewish Publication Society translation (NJPS) is wonderful: it is used throughout this book. But every translation (and translator) makes choices. In this case NJPS separates the names “Jacob” and “Joseph” by five words, where the original has them in succession, and introduces a paragraph break after “This, then, is the line of Jacob.”¹⁰ This

successful attempt at clarity on the part of the translators obscures a clear problem for the reader of the Hebrew original (*v'eleh toldot Yakov Yosef*).¹¹ The opening constitutes a well-established genealogical formula, “so and so begat so and so,” which appears nine other times in Genesis. What ordinarily follows is a listing of the sons in age order. In other words the verse ought to read, “This, then, is the line of Jacob: *Reuben*.” Why does the Bible fail to render the genealogical list and then turn to Joseph’s story? This anomaly demands explanation.

One midrash contends that since Jacob’s family was saved only as a result of Joseph’s being in Egypt, the fates of Jacob and Joseph were inextricably linked.¹² By this logic placing their names consecutively makes narrative sense. Another midrash suggests that the uncanny similarities between the lives of Jacob and Joseph justified the variation from the formula. Here are some of the obvious parallels: Jacob and Joseph were both children of mothers who suffered infertility and difficult pregnancies (Rebecca and Rachel, respectively). They were both threatened by their brothers. They were both exiles. They both experienced alienation from their families and then reunited with them. They both had offspring in a foreign land. Other similarities between father and son enumerated by this midrash have fewer bases in the text, including my students’ perennial favorite—that Jacob and Joseph were both born circumcised. The rabbis recoiled from the idea that the patriarchs might have been uncircumcised, yet, unlike with Abraham and Isaac, there is no biblical narration of their circumcisions. Even excluding more far-fetched midrashim, the likening of the fates of Jacob and Joseph has much to commend it.¹³

Much later both Jacob and Joseph announce in the same words, “I am about to die.” Although “gather” is a mundane word, it is also the root of Joseph’s name, and it is used twice in the Jacob’s deathbed scene. Life and death seem also at play in Gen. 45:26, when Jacob’s sons tell him that “Joseph is yet alive,” preceding the announcement that “the spirit of their

father Jacob revived” (Gen. 45:27) and Jacob’s declaration that “Joseph my son is yet alive” (Gen. 45:28). Although Judah uses the phrase “*nafsho k’shurah nafsho*” (his soul is bound up with his soul; Gen. 44:30) to connect Jacob with Benjamin, who is called the son of his old age, Benjamin is often a stand-in for Joseph, and this seems to be the case here. Jacob’s soul (*nefesh*: life breath) is bound up with Joseph’s too.

But one may ask if all that “likening” is a sufficiently technical answer to our question: why the variation of the genealogical formula? Rashi endorses the midrashic solution linking and likening the fates of Jacob and Joseph but reads *v’eleh toldot* less literally than “generations” or “line.” Instead Rashi reads this phrase as “this is the story” or “this is the history,” another common use of the word *toldot* in the Bible. It is worth noting here that much rabbinic literature did not have the burden of translating the text—the rabbis assumed the superiority of the Hebrew text over any versions or languages and commented in Hebrew as well.¹⁴ Famously Rashbam rejected his grandfather’s solution to the problem contained in this verse (Gen. 37:1). Rashbam considered *v’eleh toldot* a formula indeed, only one completed in the genealogies of Gen. 46:8–27 and Genesis 49. More globally Rashbam considered the entire Joseph cycle anticipatory background, allowing Moses to declare, “Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons in all” (Deut. 10:22).¹⁵ Rashbam’s position may strike readers here as forced, but it expresses Rashbam’s principled support of *peshat*, a mode of reading Bible that struck twelfth-century practitioners as being more precise than the age-old mode of midrash.¹⁶

The Elder Shall Serve the Younger

If, however, we follow the midrash and Rashi in their likening of Jacob and Joseph in Gen. 37:2, we have a link to the most prominent topic of this opening chapter: the brothers’ hatred toward Joseph, enumerated briskly, almost clinically, by the Bible:

JOSEPH: FAVORED SON, HATED BROTHER

v. 2 Joseph is a tattletale: “And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.”

v. 3 Joseph is Jacob’s declared, open favorite: “Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age.”

v. 3b Joseph gets a visible symbol of that favoritism: “and he made him an ornamented tunic.” Whether one translates *ketonet passim* as “technicolor dream coat” à la Andrew Lloyd Webber, or as “ornamented tunic” in the more sober NJPS rendering, this article of clothing offers a physical prompt to hatred.

vv. 5–11 Joseph relates two sets of self-aggrandizing dreams that a prudent teenager, possibly an oxymoron, ought to keep to himself.

These dreams get much more textual space than the other reasons for the brothers’ hatred, and so it is no surprise that when Joseph finds his brothers at Dothan they exclaim, a little more aggressively than the NJPS translation has it: “Here comes that dreamer!” In the original one can practically hear the brothers choking on their resentment:

“Hinei ba’al ha-halamot ha-lazeh—bah”

Dreams play such a prominent role in the Joseph narrative that chapter 2 of this volume is devoted to them. For the purposes of unfolding Genesis 37, the reader observes that the dreams serve as the proverbial final straw, cementing the hatred narrated in the opening verses. Additionally the dreams establish Joseph not only as the object of his father’s favoritism but as a person of exceptional ability. The young man’s self-confidence can be detected in Joseph’s first spoken words, “Hear this dream which I have dreamed.”

The dreams are central. Yet each of these causes gets weighed in the rabbinic balance. What, for instance, was the nature

of the “bad reports”? Were these reports about all the brothers, or exclusively about the sons of the midwives? Midrash imagined a variety of misdeeds, including the eating of limbs from living animals, a dietary practice banned since the time of Noah. Joseph’s “shepherding” of the brothers has been read ironically. But other commentators wonder whether or not the brothers actually did anything wrong at all. Nearly everyone in this story practices deception: Jacob, Joseph, the brothers, Mrs. Potiphar, and Tamar.¹⁷ Joseph bears derogatory tales, but the text does not tell us what they are or whether they are true.

What does the description “son of his old age” (*ben zekunim*) signify? Joseph is not the youngest son; Benjamin had been born two chapters ago. As James Kugel comments, “If anything, Benjamin should have been loved more than any of the older brothers.”¹⁸ Rashi, playing on an Aramaic homonym, imagined that father and son looked alike. Just as likely, should one travel down this route, is that Joseph looks like his mother, Rachel, since their physical attractiveness is described in similar language.¹⁹ Perhaps Jacob’s favoritism stems partly from this visible reminder of his beloved wife. The preceding verse describes Joseph as both a youth (*na’ar*) and also as seventeen years old. Kugel points to a tradition that these ancient interpreters equated “old age” and “wisdom,” thus “son of his old age” was understood as a comment on Joseph’s wisdom, arguably quite limited in Genesis 37, but certainly evident in the remainder of the story. Whatever “son of his old age” means, it is given as the reason that “Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons.” This narrative declaration should not be skipped: since we see signs of this favoritism right and left, this verse seems an affirmation of what might be deduced anyway. But the verse highlights the public nature of Jacob’s feelings, in turn a further cause of jealousy.

The “ornamented tunic,” magnificently imagined by Thomas Mann to be Rachel’s tunic, is a visible reminder to the brothers of Joseph’s status. Items of clothing often play an impor-

tant role in biblical stories.²⁰ The narrator further implies that Joseph handled this item of clothing indiscreetly, for it is clear that he appeared in Dothan before his brothers wearing that *ketonet passim* (Gen. 37:23), and that the brothers used this bloodied coat in Gen. 37:31–33 to deceive Jacob about Joseph's fate.²¹ Once again Mann seems spot-on when he imagines the brethren shredding the coat in anger. Many commentators stress the poetic justice of Jacob being fooled by a garment as he fooled his own father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing intended for Esau's many years earlier. I would add that the brethren display passive-aggressive behavior here by asking Jacob to examine with his own eyes this garment, just as he had allowed Joseph to wear this sign of favoritism in plain sight of his brothers (Gen. 37:23). What *ketonet passim* actually means is open to doubt. The term appears again only in 2 Samuel 13, at the rape of Tamar by her half brother Amnon. In that chapter the *ketonet passim* signifies a costly or royal garment, and this is the meaning ascribed to the cloak by Speiser.²² The text emphasizes sight and sound: directly after receiving the *ketonet passim*, the brothers *see* that Joseph is Jacob's favorite, and as a consequence, the text tells us, the brothers could not *speak* a peaceful word to him.

How Do I Hate Thee? Let Me Count the Ways

These causes for sibling hatred in Genesis 37 seem more than adequate. But as the great German Jewish literary scholar Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) noted, the Bible is “fraught with background.”²³ How true this is in the case of Joseph! Long before Genesis 37 the brothers already have ample reason to despise Jacob's favorite. Readers who rush to censor the violence perpetrated on Joseph by his elder brothers, without question a terrible deed, should recall the suffering of Leah as the unloved wife and consider what effect this had on her *and her sons*, for Jacob's partiality toward Joseph stretches back before his birth, to his preference for Rachel over Leah, made explicit in the

Bible (Gen. 29:18, 29:30).²⁴ Evidence for this paternal favoritism continues when the birth of Joseph prompts Jacob to return to his homeland, although the Hebrew (*ka'asher*),²⁵ translated in NJPS as “after,” leaves the degree of causality uncertain:

Va'yehi ka'asher yalda rachel yosef, . . .

After Rachel had Joseph, Jacob spoke to Laban. He said, “Send me on my way. I want to go back to my own home and country.” (Gen. 30:25)

Consider this: imagine being one of the older siblings, suddenly asked to leave grandparents, familiar friends, school systems, and sports teams because of the arrival of the twelfth named child (eleven boys plus Dinah). Scholars who isolate the Joseph story as a completely independent unit from the rest of Genesis have much to learn from the rabbis who kept the biblical context constantly in mind. Jacob’s early favoritism toward Joseph is displayed most egregiously when Jacob prepares to meet Esau. Fearing the worst, Jacob arrays his camp such that the most precious members (Rachel and Joseph) are placed in safest place. “And there was Esau, coming with his 400 men! So Jacob separated the children. He put them with Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the servants and their children in front. He put Leah and her children next. And he put Rachel and Joseph last” (Gen. 33:1–3, 33:6).²⁶ These details in the story of Jacob and his wives, which precede the Joseph story, add considerable depth to two key themes in the Joseph story—Jacob’s favoritism and the brothers’ hatred. As *The Jewish Study Bible* puts it, “Joseph is caught between his doting father and his envious siblings.”²⁷

One must consider the sibling competition for privileged status, which also began before Genesis 37. The natural candidate is Reuben, the firstborn (*bekhor*), who according to Deut. 21:15–17 ought to receive a double portion as his birthright. But those familiar with the Bible recognize that this law will be

overturned again and again by God, and that primogeniture may not be the norm in ancient Israel.²⁸ Cain, after all, is Abel's older brother and takes the initiative to bring an offering, yet God accepts Abel's sacrifice instead. This sets a pattern that recurs with Ishmael and Isaac, and Esau and Jacob, as well as in the lesser-known cases of Manasseh and Ephraim, and Zerah and Peretz. Only in the first of these examples, Cain and Abel, does God intervene tangibly at the moment of supplanting, yet the reader emerges in each case with the sense that the result accords with God's wishes. The oldest son's status as *bekhor* turns out to be less than meets the eye—neither being the oldest nor being the youngest guarantees success in the Bible. But if God ultimately disposes, human agency plays a role in the disposition. Reuben contributes to his own displacement by sleeping with Jacob and Rachel's handmaid Bilhah (Gen. 35:22). 1 Chron. 5:1–2 recalls Reuben's scandalous act many centuries later as a reason for his demotion: "The sons of Reuben the first-born of Israel (He was the first-born; but when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph son of Israel, so that he is not reckoned as first-born in the genealogy; though Judah became more powerful than his brothers and a leader came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph.)"

Ironically two biblical texts referring explicitly to the competition between Joseph and Judah highlight their ultimate collaboration. 1 Chron. 5:1–2 insists that the birthright still belongs to Joseph, despite Judah's ultimate political triumph as leader of the nation, which Ezekiel 37 emphasizes. Reuben's moral failure (Gen. 35:22), recalled pointedly in Genesis 49 by Jacob, is followed by the reprimand to Simeon and Levi for their brutal slaughter of the town of Shechem in revenge for the rape of Dinah. (Dinah, though clearly the victim by modern standards, seems less the object of her brothers' sympathy than of their wounded pride.) Simeon and Levi get the last words in Genesis 34, but Jacob clearly disapproves of their actions,

indicting their political judgment as risking the destruction of his entire family.²⁹ Since family rivalry has been a theme throughout Genesis, including the sororal competition between Leah and Rachel, we should not be surprised to find it in the next generation too. Thus the three oldest sons of Leah, jockeying for position, all show themselves unfit for responsible leadership, clearing the way for the fourth, Judah. But Judah is not the only dark horse. Yair Zakovitch notes that Joseph begins the story in a surprisingly disadvantageous starting point: “The storyteller does not explain how it is that the son of Jacob’s favorite wife has been relegated to such a subordinate position, to serving the sons of concubines.”³⁰ This status imbalance reflects the prehistory: sibling jockeying for power precedes Joseph’s provocative behavior and continues in Canaan long after Joseph is erroneously presumed dead. But in both Judah’s and Joseph’s case there is an arch of triumph that bridges Genesis with later books.

Hatred of Joseph is central to Genesis 37–50, but other themes gain prominence by a glance backward. The burial of Isaac by Jacob and Esau (Gen. 35:28–29) offers a premonition that fraternal strife can give way to reconciliation—specifically it points toward the splendid burial of Jacob by his children. Gen. 35:22–26 offers a bland misdirection with its systematic listing of Jacob’s sons by order of birth: neither the reversal of primogeniture nor Jacob’s egregious favoritism is hinted at in this genealogy, unlike in Gen. 37:2. Genesis 36, which relates the genealogy of Esau, points both backward and forward to the difficulty of fraternal relations in Genesis—and reminds the reader that even the child not chosen has a story. The story of Joseph, from this perspective, culminates a passage from less-than-fraternal to more-than-fraternal relations begun with Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. The survival of Israel as a nation of slaves that preserves its identity for generations—the story of Exodus—depends on reaching the finish line of Genesis with some success. Joseph’s dying words connect back to the

very beginning of the Patriarchal-Matriarchal narrative: “God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land which he promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob” (Gen. 50:24).

Joseph Meets a Mysterious Stranger

Divine Providence and human agency seem at play again in his father’s request to Joseph to go find his brothers.³¹ This charge surprised many commentators, who, being parents, wondered at the former’s obliviousness to family politics. Especially since we have just been told after Joseph’s second dream that “his father kept the matter in mind” (Gen. 37:11), it is astonishing that Jacob sent Joseph off to his brothers—a significant distance—unaccompanied.³² Jacob’s instruction to “bring back word” about the brothers adds to our surprise, since Joseph’s having brought back bad words concerning his brothers (at least some of them) has been cited as one cause of their hostility. Jacob’s doubled use of the word for peace, *shalom*, applied to the brothers and to the flocks, will remind the reader that the brothers could not find a word of *shalom* where Joseph was concerned (Gen. 37:4). Finally the place that Jacob thinks his children are shepherding is none other than Shechem, the site of his daughter’s rape and his sons’ slaughter of the inhabitants. Even if every last male Shechemite was dead, as Gen. 34:25 states, the place ought to have struck Jacob as a site of excessive violence if not danger.

Joseph’s one-word response, “Here I am” (*hineni*), is the same as Abraham’s to God when the latter commands him to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1). Commentators ancient and modern have understood this one-word response as a loaded one. Midrash emphasized the vocalization of the letter *bet* preceding morning (*boker*), the very next thing Abraham does after uttering his (*hineni*), and parsed it as *early* morning, highlighting Abraham’s zealotry to fulfill God’s command. Rashi praised Abraham’s response as signifying his spiritual

readiness and obedience; Erich Auerbach focused on “*hineni*” as a literary device, noting that it cannot be a marker of location, as God knows where everyone is, but rather as an assertion of readiness: “I am prepared to do as you command.”³³ Another dimension of this combination of call and response is that when Abraham responds to God he has been called to an exceptionally difficult task. With this precedent in mind, Joseph’s call is fraught, particularly as the issuer of the command is not God but Jacob. Joseph knows what he must do. Joseph sets out, and when he reaches Shechem, “a man [comes] upon him wandering in the fields” (Gen. 37:15). This man redirects Joseph to Dothan, where the brothers are presumably tending the sheep. (Children’s Bibles often picture the brothers being negligent in their duties.)

But why does this digression appear here at all? Could not Joseph have found the brothers easily and on his own? Who is this mysterious stranger who redirects a wandering Joseph toward his brothers? The first question may be answered by appealing to a major theme in the Joseph cycle. Events operate on both a human and a divine level, only the first of which is obvious to the characters in the drama. Nevertheless commentators are divided on the identity of the stranger and the nature of the intervention. Abraham ibn Ezra considered “the man” in Gen. 37:15 to be a human wayfarer. To Joseph’s question regarding his brothers’ whereabouts, ibn Ezra added the words, “if you know,” as if to drive home the merely mortal status of this unnamed man. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Rashi stated categorically, “This refers to the angel Gabriel,” on the slim basis of a description in Dan. 10:5 of Gabriel as “the man Gabriel” (*ha-ish*), the same word used in Gen. 37:17.

Rashi’s association of “the man” with the angel Gabriel has midrashic roots. Still this seems like skating on thin ice. Perhaps Rashi’s identification emerges from his sense of the mystical context of these verses. According to the text Jacob sends Joseph out from the Valley of Hebron (Gen. 37:14). But Hebron,

in reality, is on the same hilly ridge as Bethlehem and Jerusalem. This slip, in Rashi's view, alludes to the spirit of Abraham, interred at Hebron, and to the promise made to the first patriarch that his family would both descend down to Egypt and return to the Land of Israel. Likewise when the mysterious stranger says, "they have gone from here" (Gen. 37:17), the Hebrew is peculiar. The stranger literally says, "they have gone from this." Rashi takes from this odd phraseology (*nasu mizeh*) hyperliterally, to mean that the brethren have lost the spirit of brotherhood, a gloss well supported by their actions in the next few verses.

Is this disagreement between ibn Ezra and Rashi merely technical, a reflection of ibn Ezra's predilection for a *peshat* analysis and for Rashi's preference for a balance between *peshat* and *derash*? Living in a pious Jewish community in northern France surrounded by equally pious Christians, Rashi felt God's presence as imminent. For Rashi God intervenes in human affairs directly, explicitly, and through divine messengers. Ibn Ezra, living in sophisticated and philosophical Spain and North Africa, stressed God's transcendent nature and experienced God's Providence accordingly.³⁴ Nachmanides effectively split the difference between the two, agreeing with ibn Ezra's view that the messenger is human, but stressing the role of the Divine Providence in sending him.³⁵ What transpires next illustrates the old adage "God works in mysterious ways."

Joseph in the Empty Pit

When the brothers see Joseph approaching them in his long-sleeved tunic they do not hesitate to condemn "that dreamer" to death, but the action that follows is quite confusing. Reuben plans on returning later to save him; Judah proposes selling Joseph. The brothers conspire (the narrator uses "they" to implicate them all), then throw him in a pit. Rashi moved to eliminate the seeming redundancy in the second half of the verse (i.e., if the pit was empty we already know "there was

no water in it”), by positing snakes and scorpions as residents. Rashi’s logic runs something like: “there was no *water* in it” so there must have been something else in the pit—snakes and scorpions certainly convey the brothers’ fratricidal impulse.

Medieval and modern commentators alike have found Rashi’s view of the well a bit fanciful. Nachmanides wrote, “In line with the simple meaning of the verse, it states that the pit was completely empty and void of water. . . . Such redundancies are all for the purpose of clarification and emphasis.”³⁶ Once again more is at stake than whether this particular pit contained snakes, a few drops of water, or rose petals. Rashi’s reading, which he culled from earlier midrashim, relies on a view of the Bible often associated with Rabbi Akiva, that every word and every letter of the text can yield a distinct teaching. Nothing can be superfluous, for the Torah presents the reader with a more than human text. Nachmanides, relying on an equally august tradition, which also affirms divine origins, presumes that the Torah speaks in human language. Just as human texts use redundancy, repetition and exaggeration to make a point, so does the Torah.

Who Sold Whom? Three Approaches to the Sale of Joseph

Confusion abounds in trying to unravel the respective roles played by the brothers, the Midianites, and the Ishmaelites in this sordid drama. Take a look at Gen. 37:25–28 in this curious, on-line, self-described Orthodox translation, which eliminates ambiguity, partly by failing to translate the Hebrew, and then in the vastly clearer NJPS translation, in which the narrative uncertainty of the original remains:

And they sat down to eat *lechem*; and they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, *hinei*, a caravan of *Yishm’elim* was coming from Gil’ad with their *gemalim* bearing spices and balm and myrrh, going to carry it down to Mitzrayim. And Yehudah said unto his *achim*, What *betza* [profit, gain] is it if we kill *achinu* [our brother], and

conceal his *dahm*? Come, and let us sell him to the *Yishm'elim*, and let not *yadeinu* [our hands] be upon him; for he is *achinu* [our brother] and *besareinu* [our flesh]. And his *achim* agreed. Then there passed by *anashim Midyanim socharim* [men of Midyan, traders]; and they drew and lifted up Yosef out of the *bor*, and sold Yosef to the *Yishm'elim* for *esrim kesef*; and they took Yosef to Mitzrayim.³⁷

Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. (NJPS)

Later references to Joseph’s sale keep the matter unclear, as Gen. 39:1 refers to the Egyptian Potiphar as having purchased Joseph from the Ishmaelites. Joseph himself adds to the textual problem, stating both that he was “stolen, stolen from the land of the Hebrews” (Gen 40:15), and also that the brothers refused to hear his entreaties (Gen. 42:2), which suggests that the sale proposed by Judah actually transpired. Joseph surely said something when he was thrown into the pit—but it is not recorded. That Joseph relates in prison that he was “stolen, stolen from the land of the Hebrews” to the Egyptian prisoners has been explained as reticence regarding the shameful circumstances of his enslavement. The exact sequence of events remains foggy.

Three basic approaches may clarify the action at the end of Genesis 37. The first, found in traditional commentators, assumes a coherent text that can be unraveled with sufficient ingenuity. Yet not all traditional commentators unravel these verses in the same way.³⁸ Rashi attempted to solve the problem by positing a number of sales, eventuating in Joseph’s final sale

from the Ishmaelites to the Midianites. But other commentators have held that Ishmaelite is a synonym for merchant—in other words there is only one group with whom the brothers negotiated. (Midianites and Medanites are both mentioned in this text, but this minor problem may be dismissed as a scribal error.) A larger problem is how either of these groups, assuming that there were two, conveyed Joseph to the Egyptians. And, whether one group or two was involved in the sale, the problems do not end here, because the subject involved in the sale the subject of verse 28, “they,” is uncertain. Did the Midianites draw Joseph out of the pit, or did his brothers draw him out and sell him? Ultimately the brothers bear responsibility for their misdeed. But several major commentators, beginning with Rashbam, believed that the brothers did not sell him and that they believed that Joseph had been sold—or even slain by an evil beast, just as Jacob assumed.³⁹ Rashbam’s argument rested on grammar—in his view, “they” in verse 28 could only be the Midianites. But this line of argument has moral implications too. As Nehama Leibowitz writes, “Joseph was sold by heathens to heathens.”⁴⁰ As horrible as their act was, the better intentions of Reuben and Judah toward Joseph (to redeem and to sell, respectively) were not stymied by the other brothers, but by total strangers. The presumption of all these traditional Jewish sources, however, is that the text proceeds from one author and that with sufficient ingenuity the true story can be discovered.

A second approach, which prevailed in the secular academy for decades, may be found in the Documentary Hypothesis, which resolves many textual inconsistencies by identifying more than one author. In the case of Joseph, the Elohist (E), the Jahvist (J), and Priestly (P) sources all have a hand in the resulting narrative. Some find the confusion in the narrative easily resolvable by the premise that both J (with its focus on Judah) and E (with its focus on Reuben) played a role. Here is Speiser on Gen. 37:28:

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The first part of the verse is manifestly from another source which knew nothing about the Ishmaelite traders. It speaks of Midianites who pulled the boy up from the pit, without being seen by the brothers, and then sold him into slavery. This is why Reuben was so surprised to find that Joseph was gone. The sale to the Ishmaelites, on the other hand, had been agreed upon by all the brothers, so that Reuben would have no reason to look for the boy in the pit, let alone be upset because he did not find him there. *This single verse alone provides as good a case as is for a constructive documentary analysis of the Pentateuch*; it goes a long way, moreover, to demonstrate that E is not just a supplement to J, but an independent and often conflicting source. [my emphasis]⁴¹

A third approach can be found in Edward Greenstein's post-modern literary perspective. Greenstein takes no stand on whether the text proceeds from one or many authors. He writes that the complicated narrative in Genesis 37 (and elsewhere in the Bible) achieves an effect like a Faulkner novel, a Cubist painting, or an Akira Kurosawa movie, with the same story being narrated from different perspectives. Greenstein summarizes his conclusions as follows:

An equivocal reading of the sale of Joseph leads to the realization that, in the view of the narrative, it is not crucial to our understanding of the story whether the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites or whether the Midianites kidnapped him. It is important, rather, to perceive that the descent of Joseph to Egypt and his subsequent rise to power there reveal divine providence in history. This, of course, is the single most pervasive theme in the Bible. But in our text the theme is evinced not only by the action of the narrative but also, as I have tried to show, by the structural arrangement of the narrative. Somewhat simplified, one sequence of human action rivals the other, leaving only the divine manipulation of events clear and intelligible.⁴²

Liturgical Reflections on a Terrible Deed

Whatever their measure of culpability, the brothers' regret over this terrible deed constitutes an important theme in the Joseph story, one that extends until Genesis 50.⁴³ The text implies that the brothers' guilt feelings begin immediately. Reuben, the presumptive leader, declares his angst dramatically: "The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?" (Gen 37:30). No translation can quite capture the almost choked sound of this Hebrew clause, which features four words in a row starting with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet—*aleph* (*aynenu/ani/ana/ani/ba*)—and ends with the monosyllabic "*ba*." Judah, the other brother who failed to take effective responsibility for averting this borderline fratricide, leaves immediately for the hinterlands of Canaan, what would become Philistine country, at the beginning of Genesis 38.

Recent scholarship pays much attention to reading communities as well as texts. The principal way Jews would experience the Joseph cycle was during the Torah reading, which takes up four full weeks—from late autumn until after Hanukkah. The Torah reading has long occupied an important place in the worship service. For the last two thousand years, more or less, congregants heard the Joseph story in conjunction with its *haftarot*.⁴⁴ While the choice of matching Torah and *haftarah* can be merely lexical, all four portions shed light on the Joseph story.⁴⁵ This effect may be heightened if the sermonizer (*darshan*) begins with a text in Ketuvim-Writings, proceeds to Neviim-Prophets and culminates in the Torah portion.⁴⁶ The prophetic passage for Va-yeshev invites auditors to focus on the shameful way Joseph found himself in Egypt: the sin for which Israel will not be forgiven is the sale of the righteous for silver and the needy for sandals (Amos 2:6). That one character in the Hebrew Bible alone, Joseph, gets awarded this appellation *righteous* probably drove this choice of *haftarah*. We know that early midrashic traditions imagined that the brethren purchased

sandals with the proceeds of Joseph's sale.⁴⁷ Auditors of this haftarah may have considered Joseph's virtue especially noteworthy when hearing the prophet condemn, "father and son go to the same girl . . . on garments taken in pledge" (Amos 2:7), reminiscent of Judah and his two elder sons sleeping with Tamar. Even before the emergence of the rabbinic movement, *Jubilees* linked the sale of Joseph to the institution of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).⁴⁸ The enormity of this transgression also informs "These I Recall" (*eleh azkarah*), recited during the additional service on the Day of Atonement until today.⁴⁹

Not Telling Jacob

One dilemma remains after the sale of Joseph: how will the brothers break the news to Jacob? When the brethren return to Jacob, they allow a third party to bear Joseph's tunic, stained with goat's blood, and allow it, in Robert Alter's words, to do the lying for them. The theme of deception and revelation, critical to the whole Joseph cycle, and often involving clothing and physical appearance, is introduced when the brethren ask Jacob whether he recognizes the bloodied tunic (*haker-na*). Jacob does indeed recognize it (*va'yaker*) and exclaims in excruciating onomatopoeia: "*tarof toraf Yosef*," which Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses* translates, "Yosef is torn, torn-to-pieces!" (37:33).⁵⁰ The bloody cloak is a provocative yet empty symbol: it cannot avert a violent act that has already been committed, and Joseph will be lost to the family for many years.⁵¹ The concluding verses of Genesis 37 detail Jacob's mourning for his favorite son. From this intense scene of grief, the rabbis derived several mourning habits and beliefs that became normative for Judaism, including the tearing of the mourner's garment (*keriyah*). If Jacob's refusal to be comforted for his remaining children and grandchildren spurs still more resentment about Jacob's favoritism, the narrator has chosen to conceal it. We are left only with a bereaved father, ten guilt-ridden men, and a hitherto insufferable seventeen-year-old boy who has learned a hard lesson

about the limits of fraternal bonds. Genesis has thirteen chapters to rectify this tragic situation, which includes one of its central themes, well expressed by Jon D. Levenson:

The story of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 is not only the longest and most intricate Israelite exemplar of the narrative of the death and resurrection of the beloved son, but also the most explicit. In it is concentrated almost every variation of the theme that first appeared in the little tale of Cain and Abel and has been growing and becoming more involved and more complex throughout the Book of Genesis. The story of Joseph thus not only concludes the book and links the Patriarchal narratives to those of the people Israel in Egypt for which they serve as archetypes; it is also the crescendo to the theme of the beloved son, which it presents in extraordinarily polished literary form. It is arguably the most sophisticated narrative in the Jewish or the Christian Bibles.⁵²

The last verse in this chapter serves as a transition and a cliff-hanger to the story's resumption with our still young but chastened and enslaved hero. "The Midianites meanwhile, sold him to Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward" (Gen. 37:36). Before the narrative resumes in chapter 39, however, let us pause to consider Joseph's dreams, the most prickly thorn in the side of the brothers, but also the vehicle of Joseph's eventual triumph.

I cannot nominate a better opening in literature than Genesis 37. We have a vivid picture of Joseph, doomed to tension with his brothers by what has come before the opening of the story. We have a father engaging in shameless favoritism, seemingly oblivious to his role in recapitulating his own fraternal conflict. We have Joseph's fateful quest for his brothers and brotherhood, and a violent response that reverberates in our liturgy until today (Christianity sees the brothers' acts against Joseph as foreshadowing the fate of Jesus). And, despite his culpability in fostering fraternal animosity, we feel Jacob's sincere mourning over the loss of his beloved son. But all is not lost.