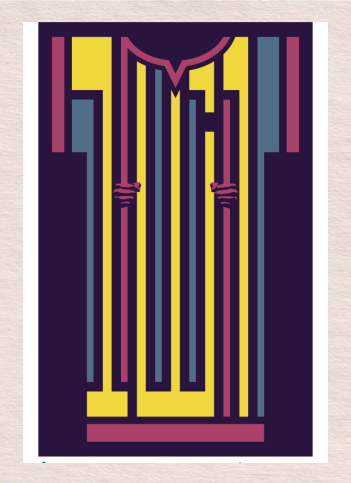
Vayeshev: Bereshit (Genesis)

What's it all about?



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Jacob and his twelve sons settle in Hebron. **His favorite is the 17-year-old Joseph, to whom he gifts a coat of many colors.** The other brothers, naturally, are jealous, and Joseph doesn't exactly make things better when **he shares two of his dreams, both of which foretell that Joseph will one day rule over the rest of his brothers.**

Simeon and Levi plot to kill Joseph, but Reuben intervenes and suggests that they throw him in a pit instead. **While Joseph is in the pit, Judah sells him to a band of Ishmaelites.** The brothers, meanwhile, dip the technicolor coat in goat's blood and show it to Jacob, making it look like Joseph was eaten by a wild animal.

We get an account of Judah's sons, two of whom die young. The elder son's wife, Tamar, disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces Judah. When he hears that she is pregnant, he accuses her of harlotry and orders her executed, but Tamar then produces a few of Judah's belongings she had kept in lieu of payment, and Judah is forced to admit that he is the father. Tamar gives birth to twins, Peretz and Zerach.

Joseph, meanwhile, is taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's ministers. He soon becomes successful and is appointed overseer of Potiphar's property, but when he rebukes the advances of Potiphar's wife, **she accuses Joseph of trying to force himself on her**, and Joseph is thrown in jail. There, he gains the trust of his jailers and is promoted to a position in the prison's administration.

While in prison, Joseph meets Pharaoh's butler and baker, both incarcerated for offending the king. **They have troubling dreams, which Joseph interprets.** Joseph then asks the butler to intervene on his behalf, but the butler forgets and does nothing to help.

> "Joseph also knew that his brothers were probably scheming against him. Nonetheless, in deference to his father's will, he replied to him, 'Here I am, ready to do your bidding.'"

Take a deeper dive

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes for a moment: **You're young, smart, and very well-aware that your brothers, to put it mildly, aren't exactly your fans.** And then, one day, your father calls you over and says, "Hey, your brothers are out with the flock; do me a favor and go out and find them." You realize full well the errand might not end well for you; **do you go?**

Joseph doesn't hesitate. He answers by uttering his great-grandfather Abraham's catchphrase: "Hineni," here I am, standing at the ready to honor his father and do his bidding. But the story grows more intricate: Joseph doesn't find his brothers right away; instead, he gets lost in the wilderness, only to be eventually discovered by a mysterious man.

Who is this stranger? Rashi suggests that the man talking to Joseph was none other than the angel Gabriel. But whoever he might have been, argued the great 13th century Rabbi Nachmanides, also known as the Ramban, the important fact is that the mystery man found Joseph rather than the other way around. HaShem, the Ramban explained, sends many emissaries and signs our way, always and forever. Joseph's righteousness was the reason he was able to see them rather than give up long before God's emissary could find him in the wilderness.

But let's return to Joseph. He agrees to go on his father's perilous mission even though he realizes it will likely end poorly. Then, he fails to find his brothers, even though he wanders in the wilderness for a bit. Finally, a mysterious emissary finds him and tells him that his brothers are plotting to kill him. At every turn, Joseph is given more than ample reason to abort his mission. And yet, at every turn, he persists.

Why? The more warnings Joseph ignores, the more foolish he may seem to us. After all, had he consulted any rabbi and asked whether or not he was obligated to go look for his brothers when it's almost certain that finding them would mean death or injury, he would've surely been told to forget about the whole thing because saving his own life is paramount to all other mitzvot. Why, then, does he go through with it?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe addressed this question in one of his teachings. The problem with Jacob's sons, he taught, was that they were disrespectful of their father. **Joseph understands that to correct this, he must embody the radical opposite, an uncompromising display of *kibbud av*, or honoring thy father.** He must take action, not settle for words. And he mustn't let any excuse deter or delay him. And while peril does come his way, his actions, as we'll see in future parashot, are ultimately successful in reuniting the family.

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