

Parshas Vayeshev

For the week ending 23 Kislev 5756
15 & 16 December 1995

Summary

Yaakov Avinu settles in the land of Canaan. His favorite son, Yosef, brings him critical reports about his brothers. Yaakov makes for Yosef a fine tunic of multi-colored woolen strips. Yosef exacerbates his brothers' hatred by recounting prophetic dreams — of sheaves of wheat bowing to his sheaf, and of the sun and the moon and the stars bowing down to him — signifying that all his family will appoint him king. The brothers indict Yosef and resolve to execute him. When Yosef comes to Shechem, the brothers relent and decide, at Reuven's instigation, to throw him into a pit instead. Yehuda persuades the brothers to take Yosef out of the pit and sell him to a caravan of passing Yishmaelim. When Reuven returns to find the pit empty, he rends his clothes in anguish. The brothers soak Yosef's tunic in goat's blood and show it to their father Yaakov, who assumes that Yosef has been devoured by wild animals — Yaakov is inconsolable. Meanwhile, in Egypt, Yosef has been sold to Potiphar, Pharaoh's Chamberlain of the Butchers. In the Parsha's sub-plot, Yehuda's son Er dies as punishment for preventing his wife Tamar from becoming pregnant because he feared that she would lose her beauty after childbirth. Onan, Yehuda's second son, then weds Tamar by levirate marriage. He too is punished in similar circumstances to his brother. When Yehuda's wife dies, Tamar resolves to have children through Yehuda as this union will found the Davidic line, culminating in the Mashiach. Meanwhile, Yosef rises to power in the house of his Egyptian master. His extreme beauty attracts the unwanted advances of his master's wife. Enraged by his rejection of her, she slanders Yosef, falsely accusing him of attempting to seduce her, and he is imprisoned. While in jail, Yosef successfully predicts the outcome of the dream of Pharaoh's wine steward, who is re-instated; and that of Pharaoh's baker, who is hanged. In spite of his promise, the wine steward forgets to help Yosef after he is released, and Yosef languishes in jail.

Commentaries

SINGING IN THE RAIN

“And Yaakov sat...” (37:1)

Once, there was an old lady sipping her coffee in the restaurant of a theater long after the curtain had gone up on the first act of the play. The waiter asked her curiously why she hadn't taken her seat. She replied to him. “Oh no — it's much too crowded and noisy in there now. Once they all come out — that's when I go in. Then I can have as many seats to myself as I like!”

We tend to think that the purpose of life is those endless sunny summer days; days when you can't see a cloud and everything in life seems perfect. And when the rain falls into our lives — as it does to us all — well, that's something to be endured until the clouds clear. We put up with hardship, thinking that it's just a painful intermission, and when it ends, we will get back to

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the 'real purpose of life'.

The reverse is really the case. Life is all about the rain and the storms and our striving to overcome them. For in this way, we elevate ourselves spiritually and fulfill the purpose that we were sent down here for. Those sunny days are so we can gather our strength, and thus derive the maximum from facing life's challenges. Yaakov Avinu wanted to live in peace and tranquillity. Hashem said “Is it not enough for the righteous that they have their reward in the world-to-come — they also want to live in this world in serenity?” And Yaakov desired serenity not to idle away his hours, but so that he could have the peace of mind to devote himself to spiritual pursuits. Nevertheless it was considered improper for him to place his focus on serenity, for in life “the play's the thing” — not the intermission.

(Based on R' Yerucham Lebovitz zt"l)

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LIGHTS! CAMERA! ACTION!

"These are the generations of the Yaakov, Yosef..." (37:2)

This week's parsha is like a film-script for the entire future history of the Jewish People: Yosef (the Jewish people), the most beloved son of his father (Hashem), is compelled to leave his father and his land (the exile of the Jewish People throughout the world). He is sent to another land, under the control of a decadent nation. And they try, by all methods, to wipe him out. However, this has the reverse effect, and he rises to the pinnacle of society and success. He becomes the provider, the archetypal entrepreneur, sustaining the nations through times of famine, and eventually his brothers come and bow down in front of him, for they have caused him so much pain and affliction. Thus it will be in the future — in the final scene — when Hashem is revealed to the whole world, all will see that it was precisely the trials of the Jewish People that has propelled their ascent.

(Based on the Chafetz Chaim zt"l)

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LIVING WATERS

"And they cast him (Yosef) into a the pit. And the pit was empty — without water" (37:24)

"It was empty of water — but it did contain snakes and scorpions" (Rashi)

The Torah is compared to water. Wherever there is no Torah — the snakes and scorpions of the evil impulse will rule unhindered, because Torah is the only defense against a person's negative impulses.

(Adapted from Avnei Ezel in Mayana shel Torah)

Haftorah: Amos 2:1-3:8

TOP OF THE CLASS

"Only you have I loved of all the families of the earth, therefore, I will recall upon you all your iniquities..." (3:2)

Take a slow-witted student, devoid of promise and talent. A teacher won't punish him for his under-achieving, for punishment will serve no purpose. Such a student is just not capable of improving his performance. But when a bright scholar, who is both talented and knowledgeable, fails to reach his potential or fools around in class, he's going to get what's coming to him! "Only you have I loved of all the families of the earth" — I know you and I know your talents and abilities, therefore if you fail to listen to My voice — "I will recall upon you all your iniquities" — not out of vengeance, but because you have the ability to be "top of the class".



Insights into the Zemiros sung at the Shabbos table throughout the generations.

Mizmor L'David- שִׁשְׁקִימִן
"A Psalm of David..."

ושבתי בבית ה' לאורך ימים - V'shavti b'vais Hashem l'orech yamim
"And I shall dwell in the House of Hashem for the length of days"

When Rabbi Yochanan, the foremost sage in Eretz Yisrael, heard that there were Jews in Babylon who had reached an old age he expressed amazement: "In order that you increase the days of your lives and those of your children in the land" is the Torah's promise of a reward for fulfilling the commands of Hashem but this promise of longevity is limited to *the land* — Eretz Yisrael and not anywhere else? When he was told that these Jews were consistent in attending morning and evening services in their local synagogues he realized that it was this merit which achieved long life for them even outside Eretz Yisrael.

If "I shall dwell in the House of Hashem" then my reward will be "the length of days."

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