

3 Asking the Right Question

The second principle of *Parshanut* is to pay close attention to the larger scheme of things within the narrative. It is all too easy (and common) to be caught up in the solution of “local” problems (i.e., the meaning of words and phrases, inferences to be drawn from them, etc.) and to miss the larger issues that need to be addressed. We will continue looking at the Joseph story, take a step back, and ask a “global” question that will be answered only after attending, carefully and rigorously, to the nuances of the text.

I. JOSEPH'S BROTHERS IN EGYPT

The story of the encounter between Joseph and his brothers in Egypt is well-known; however, a closer look at the text reveals some seemingly strange behavior on the part of the brothers. I would like to begin by posing several questions. Through a careful look at some of the events that led up to the stand of the brothers in Joseph's quarters, we will not only answer these questions, but also gain a clearer understanding of the debate between Joseph and his brothers.

Now Jacob saw that there was corn in Egypt, and Jacob said unto his sons: “Why do you look one upon another?” And he said: “Behold, I have heard that there

is corn in Egypt. Go down to that place, and buy for us from there, that we may live, and not die." And Joseph's ten brothers went down to buy corn from Egypt. (42:1–3)

Why did Jacob send nearly all of his sons down to Egypt? From everything we have ever heard about this family—going back to Abraham's first "ascent"—it is a wealthy family. This family (from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to his 12 sons) has plenty of cattle, sheep, and slaves (but see ibn Ezra's treatment of Isaac's wealth at Genesis 25:34 and Nachmanides's critique *ad loc.*). Because Jacob was concerned that the way to Egypt was dangerous (which is why he didn't send Benjamin—see 42:4), why did he send any of his sons? Why not send some of the servants of the household, or, at least, one or two sons with some slaves to carry back the grain?

When Joseph's brothers came down to Egypt, they were brought to the great viceroy (their brother) who was reputed to have great powers of clairvoyance (See 44:5, 15). The viceroy accused them—three or four times—of being spies (42:9–16). Finally, he agreed to allow them to come back to buy more grain (and to free their brother, Simeon), only if they would return with the younger brother of whom they spoke. (How the return with Benjamin would prove their honesty is not made clear by the text.)

The brothers knew that the viceroy was wrong about their being spies! As they averred, time and again, they were only interested in purchasing grain. Since the supposedly clairvoyant viceroy was so "off-base" about their motivations, how would he know if the "Benjamin" they brought back was really a younger brother? Why didn't the brothers find some young man, dress him up like a Canaanite (see Joshua, Chapter 9), and give him enough information to play the role of Benjamin? The viceroy—whose reputed powers of insight were obviously "smoke and mirrors"—would never know the difference

between this “shill” and the real Benjamin! Why put their father through the heartbreak of sending Benjamin—and delay their next trip to the Egyptian grain center—when they could have avoided all of it with this ruse?

II. JOSEPH’S BROTHERS IN CANAAN

Before addressing these questions, let’s look back at the events at the beginning of the Joseph cycle. There are two more questions I would like to ask about the brothers and their associations and location.

At the beginning of the Joseph story, we are told that Joseph had a special relationship with the four sons of Jacob’s concubines. (Jacob’s children were born of four different mothers: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun shared Leah as a mother; Joseph and Benjamin were Rachel’s sons; Gad and Asher were born to Zilpah, Leah’s handmaid; and Dan and Naphtali were born to Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaid.)

These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren, being still a lad even with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought evil report of them to their father. (37:2)

Why did Joseph associate with the sons of the concubines? (Rashi explains that the sons of Leah degraded him and so he built an alliance with the “lesser” sons of Zilpah and Bilhah; see, however, Nachmanides’s response *ad loc.*)

Furthermore, since Jacob lived in and around Hebron (see 37:1, 14), why were his sons shepherding his flock in the vicinity of Shechem, approximately 60 miles to the north? (37:12) The mountain range that extends from south of Hebron northwards to Shechem includes plenty of good grazing land—why was his flock so far away?

In sum, we have posed two “local” questions about the brothers’ behavior on their descent into Egypt and two more going back to the original presentation of the family dynamic.

III. THE FINAL QUESTION

Within the spirit of “spreading the net far and wide” I would like to address a seemingly unrelated question about a verse in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy represents Moses’s farewell address, presented to the Israelites in the plains of Moab during the fortieth year after the Exodus (Deuteronomy 1:1–5). In the second chapter, Moses describes the military and political history of the surrounding lands, including that of Seir (southwest Jordan):

And the Horites formerly dwelt in Seir, but the children of Esau succeeded them; and they destroyed them from before them, and dwelt in their place; as Israel did unto the land of his possession, which the Lord gave them. (Deuteronomy 2:12)

This verse challenges our traditional approach to Revelation and to the Mosaic authorship of the Torah. Moses is describing what had happened in Seir to the Israelites, and is relying on an event they knew well to illustrate it. How could the Joshuan conquest—which was a year in the future—serve as an illustrative model for them?

The devotees of the schools of Higher Biblical Criticism (see Chapter VII) have a field day with this verse. Various traditionally oriented solutions (e.g., S’forno, Hizkuni), usually associated with the conquest of the lands on the East Bank of the Jordan (which had already happened), have been proposed, but they are all relatively weak because that land was never considered “*The Land*.” This is a troubling verse that awaits a comfortable and traditional resolution.

IV. THE FOURTH GENERATION

To solve this larger problem, which has a strong element of the polemic associated with it, we will need to step further back from the trees and survey the forest of Jacob's behavior upon his return home.

I have already pointed out that we, the reader, are somewhat wiser than any of the human characters in the Bible by virtue of our "prescience"; that foreknowledge is often an obstacle to proper understanding, as will be demonstrated below.

A careful reading of the activities of Jacob and his children, beginning after the successful reunion with Esau, reveals that this family had already begun realizing the promise given to their great-grandfather (Abraham), grandfather (Isaac), and father. Abraham was promised that his descendants—who would return after four generations—would inherit the Land (15:16). The divine promise to Abraham of the Land was not an immediate gift; rather, it was a commitment that the Land would eventually become the property of his descendants. By virtue of Isaac never having left the Land (see Genesis 26:1–4), God's promise to him was, similarly, one of potential and not to be actualized in his life. (Note that throughout their lifetimes, both Abraham and Isaac are considered "sojourners" or "strangers," and never settle anywhere within the Land. Note especially Abraham's self-description in his negotiations with Ephron [Genesis 23:4].) Jacob was given a similar promise on his way out of the Land (28:13), but from the wording in God's promise to him upon his return (35:12), it seems that the time had come for the promise to be realized. This is why Jacob requested to be freed from Laban immediately when Joseph—the fourth generation from Abraham—was born (30:25). He had every reason to believe that the "Covenant between the Pieces" made with Abraham (Chapter 15) was about to become fully realized. Since we, the all-knowing reader, are fully familiar

with the way the Covenant was actualized (servitude and Exodus), we barely give a thought to how Jacob would have thought about it—the pitfall of knowing too much.

Excluding Abraham's purchase of a (necessary) burial plot, Jacob was the first of our ancestors to actively try to settle the Land. Immediately after his successful rapprochement with Esau, he purchased land in Shechem (33:19). As a result of the Shechem-Dinah episode, Simeon and Levi, two of Leah's sons, conquered the town of Shechem (34:25).

We then come to an anomaly in Chapter 37. When the brothers (how many of them?) debate what to do with Joseph, Reuben speaks up and implores them not to kill him (37:22). It is reasonable that Judah, who later spoke up about the possible profit to be made from the sale of Joseph (v. 26), was not present when Reuben made his plea, or else why didn't Judah speak up then? Although the text is not clear about Judah's presence, Reuben certainly "disappeared" while Joseph was in the pit (v. 29: "And Reuben returned to the pit; and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit . . ."). Where did Reuben go?

In the next chapter, we read about Judah's "separate" life away from his brothers. There is a serious chronological problem with this story. If it took place immediately after the sale of Joseph (which is one way to read 38:1—see Rashi), we have seemingly irreconcilable information, as follows:

The text clearly tells us that no more than 22 years passed from the sale of Joseph until the reunion with his brothers. (Joseph was at least 17 when sold; he was 30 when brought before Pharaoh; there were 7 years of plenty and then, after 2 years of famine, the brothers were reunited.) In Chapter 38, Judah began a business relationship with a local Canaanite man, married a local woman, and had three sons with her (and the third son was significantly younger than the second—see 38:11). The oldest son married Tamar and died, the second son refused to fulfill his obligation to his dead brother and died, and the youngest son finally grew up (see 38:14). Tamar had relations

with Judah and gave birth to Peretz and Zerach. In Genesis 46:12, we are told that the *children* of Peretz were among the group that came down to Egypt—no more than 22 years after the sale of Joseph! It boggles the imagination to suppose that Judah would marry and have children, marry those children off, and then have his own children with Tamar and that those children would marry and have their own children—all within 22 years.

For this reason, Gersonides (among others) concludes that the Judah story occurred concurrently with the events in Chapter 37. In other words, while the brothers were still tending their father's flock as young men (early 20s), they (or at least Judah) were also entering into independent business relationships.

We know that Simeon and Levi had already conquered the city of Shechem, and that Judah's business took him to Chezib, near the "seam" between Philistine and Judean territory of later years (see 38:5). If Reuben was able to be away from the brothers (to tend to his own affairs) while they were in Dothan (near Shechem) and return to them, he must have also had some land and/or business in the north.

The picture that emerges is quite clear. The children of Leah were beginning to settle the Land, mostly in the north. Because of this, they shepherded their father's flock (evidently in rotation) near their own holdings in Shechem. Before going further, we can provide a clear and reasonable explanation for the enigmatic and troubling verse in Deuteronomy (2:12):

And the Horites formerly dwelt in Seir, but the children of Esau succeeded them; and they destroyed them from before them, and dwelt in their place; as Israel did unto the land of his possession, which the Lord gave them.
(Note the mention of Esau, Jacob's brother.)

The first conquest of the Land that God gave us was initiated not by Israel the Nation, but by Israel the man (Jacob). During the life of Jacob, he and his children (sons of Leah)

began purchasing and/or conquering land in Canaan in order to fulfill the promise given to their family. Moses's illustration is indeed one from a familiar past, and is therefore instructive and enlightening.

V. THE SONS OF ZILPAH AND BILHAH

Why, then, is Joseph described as associating with the children of the concubines? Why aren't they also spreading out, building their families and their estates?

In order to understand this, we have to look at the different visions for the family held by Jacob and Joseph. Jacob clearly believed that the sons were not to be treated equally or seen as a unit; witness his request to return to Canaan upon the birth of Joseph, his allowing/encouraging only the children of Leah to build their own fortunes, and the special treatment he accorded to Joseph and Benjamin.

Jacob had every reason to adopt this approach. In his family, only one son (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) was the torch-bearer of the tradition, while the other brothers (Nahor, Ishmael, Esau) were rejected and given other destinies and legacies. Jacob reasoned that he would also have to choose one son who would be the next patriarch, and that the other sons would be given separate inheritances. The sons of Leah, being the children of a proper wife, were given the opportunity to conquer and settle the Land, because it was promised to their father and his children. The sons of Rachel—who would be the true heirs—would directly inherit Jacob's holdings. The children of the concubines, coming from "second-class" wives, would not inherit anything; rather, they would remain workers for the estate of Jacob, just as he worked for his father-in-law. Jacob's vision—based on his family's experience—includes no "Israelite Nation," just "Children of Israel."

This is why Joseph associated with the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah; as Jacob's workers, they would naturally stay close to

home. Joseph was also close to home as he stood to inherit Jacob's holdings.

Joseph had a different perspective on the destiny of the family. His dream of the sheaves (Genesis 37:7) carried two messages that were offensive to his brothers—one explicit and the other implicit. Explicitly, the dream indicated that Joseph would be their ruler. Implicit in this vision is a united family/nation with one king. Following the vision of Jacob, there could never be a ruler over the brothers because they would not comprise a political unit that could be governed. Joseph's dream implied that they would eventually be united and share a common destiny.

VI. THE BROTHERS IN EGYPT

Returning with the brothers to Egypt, let's look at the family's status and fortune. At the beginning of Chapter 42, we are told that Jacob asked all of his sons (except Benjamin) to go down to Egypt, "that we may live, and not die." Clearly, two major changes had taken place as a result of the famine. First, the sons had moved back to their father's house (or extended household), such that he could address them all at one time. Second, they were in danger of starvation. Their fortunes must have been lost (since they were shepherds, it stands to reason that the famine hit them especially hard), causing them to move back to the "empty nest"—and they likely had no slaves left to send. This was the first (of many) cycles of conquest and loss of the Land.

When the brothers came before Joseph, we are told that:

And Joseph knew his brothers, but they did not know him. And Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them, and said to them: "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land."
(42:8–9)

What was it about his dreams that caused him to accuse them of being spies? What connection is there between the dreams he dreamt 22 years earlier and the presence of his brothers in his court?

When he saw Gad and Asher standing side by side with Reuben and Simeon, he understood that one of two changes had taken place in his family. Either Jacob had been persuaded that the Josephian vision of “The Israelite Nation” was correct and had unified his sons and convinced them that they had a common destiny (but, if so, where was Benjamin?). Or, the only other reasonable conclusion, they had lost their fortunes and had been drawn back together.

Here is where Joseph’s brilliance and insight came into play. A person who has never known wealth is not enraged and made jealous by exposure to opulence. On the other hand, someone who had wealth and power—and lost it—has great difficulty in accepting the other’s fortune with equanimity. He knew that the brothers would feel jealous of his wealth and that of Egypt, and would at least be contemplating military action, at least internally, if not as an outright conspiracy.

When Joseph accused them of being spies, that charge must have hit a resonant chord inside of their minds and hearts. This *Tzaphnat Pa’ane’ach* (Joseph) must really be insightful to read our minds so adroitly! When he then took Simeon (one of the two “activist” brothers—see 34:25) from them, they must have been convinced that his “second sight” was legitimate and worthy of consideration. When he demanded that Benjamin be brought down, they had no choice but to fully comply, as this viceroy could see their thoughts, read their minds, and properly identify Benjamin as “the young brother of whom you spoke.”

AFTERNOTE

What we've discovered in this chapter was achieved by applying the second rule of interpretation: In spite of our concern with detail, *stepping back and asking the global questions*. By noting the oddness in the behavior of Jacob's family, both in Canaan and in Egypt, we were able to read between the lines to follow the fortunes of the family.