

Vayeshev

וישב

“He continued living”

Genesis 37:1 – 40:23

Torah Together



Joseph takes over center stage in this *Torah* portion. Joseph is a type and shadow of *Yeshua*, and great insight can be found in examining these two lives together. However, there are equally important things to be learned by considering the lives of Joseph’s brothers and father, Jacob. This *Torah* portion begins the story that takes us to the end of the book of Genesis.

1. Joseph: his dreams and his brothers - 37:1-11

a) Where was Jacob living at this time?

Jacob and his family were living near Hebron.

b) Why were Joseph’s brothers jealous? How did their jealousy manifest itself?

Joseph’s brothers had several reasons to be jealous. First, Jacob clearly favored Joseph (e.g., the fine tunic). Second, Joseph had given a bad report on them to Jacob concerning their work. Finally, the tunic and other actions by Jacob left no doubt that he intended Joseph to inherit family leadership. His brothers were so jealous that they “couldn’t even speak civilly” to Joseph.

c) What was Joseph’s first dream? How would you interpret it? How did his brothers react when they heard about this dream?

In Joseph’s first dream, his 11 brothers (represented as sheaves of wheat) bowed down to Joseph. The sheaves of wheat indicated that they would bow down to Joseph for their food. Since this dream seemed to confirm their subservience to him, his brothers “hated him all the more because of it.”

d) What was Joseph’s second dream? How did this dream differ from his first one? He told both his father and his brothers of this dream. What was their response?

In his second dream, both his brothers and his father & mother bowed down before him. His brothers became even more angry and his father rebuked him, but “kept the matter in mind.”

Jacob’s Favoritism

Jacob seemed to make no attempt to hide or apologize for his favoritism of Joseph. Joseph was the oldest son of the wife he loved most and Jacob wanted him to receive the family birthright and God’s blessing, as he had. Even though Jacob’s favoritism might have been unwise from our standpoint, was it wrong by God’s standards? Does Jesus’ parable in **Matthew 20:1-16** apply in this case?

Joseph's Guilt

Can you see anything that Joseph had done to earn such deep hatred from his brothers? Certainly some of his actions might have fanned the flames of their anger toward him, but Joseph had not sinned against his brothers.

Family Leadership

Notice which of Joseph's brothers tried to keep him alive. Reuben, as the oldest brother, moved to make sure that they didn't murder Joseph. Later, Judah suggested that they sell Joseph as a slave rather than leave him to die.

Scripture Link:

There are many parallels between Joseph and *Yeshua*. For example, both men were sold for the price of a slave. Here, Joseph's brothers received 20 shekels of silver for him. In **Matthew 26:14-15**, Judas Iscariot received 30 silver coins for turning over *Yeshua* to the Pharisees.

Jacob's Anguish

Try to put yourself in the position of one of the brother's who went to Jacob with the news of Joseph's death. Imagine the atmosphere that the news of Joseph's "death" created in the family. Now try to imagine keeping this secret for the rest of your life.

2. Joseph sold into slavery - 37:12-36

a) Jacob sends Joseph to his brothers who are pasturing the sheep. Where does he send Joseph and where does Joseph find his brothers? How does he find them?

Jacob sent Joseph to Shechem to check up on his brothers who were with the flocks. When Joseph got to Shechem, he didn't find his brothers, but "a man" (angel?) told him they went to Dothan, which was ~20 miles NW of Shechem. Dothan was on the main trade route between Damascus & Egypt.

b) As his brothers see him approaching, what do they do? Who suggested that they modify their plan and in what way?

His brothers began to plot to kill Joseph. Rueben suggested that they not murder their own brother but rather throw him in an empty cistern. (He planned to return later to rescue him.) As the eldest of the family, Rueben may have had a stronger sense of responsibility than the others.

c) What did they do to Joseph? Who suggested that he be sold? Why? How much money did they receive?

They took Joseph's tunic and threw him into the cistern. It was Judah's idea to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelite traders for 20 silver shekels.

d) Who's actions are described in verses 29 & 30? What does this imply about his participation in this affair? Why might he have been opposed to his brothers' plans?

Rueben returned later and discovered that Joseph had already been sold. This seems to imply that he wasn't as involved in the deed as the other brothers.

e) How did Jacob respond when his sons presented him with the evidence of Joseph's death? Do you think they expected such a strong response? Here, Jacob is the victim of yet another deception. How do you think the brothers felt keeping this secret for over twenty years?

Jacob "mourned for his son many days and would not be consoled." The brothers probably did not expect Jacob to grieve so strongly or so long. It must have been very unpleasant to keep this deception a secret for 20+ years.

3. Judah and Tamar - 38:1-30

a) At this time, Judah moved away from his family to “go into business” with Hirah. Judah marries. What was his wife’s ancestry? How many sons did they have?

Judah married the daughter of Shua, a Canaanite, and had 3 sons: Er, Onan, Shelah.

b) Who was Tamar and how did the “Law of Levirate Marriage” apply to her? (See **Deuteronomy 25:5-10**) Why didn’t Judah give Tamar to his third son? What did he do instead?

Tamar was the wife of Judah’s first son, Er. He was evil and God killed him. Since he had no heirs, the “Law of Levirate Marriage” required his that his brother (Onan) take his wife and raise up heirs for him by her. Onan did not allow Tamar to conceive, so God killed him also. Judah’s third son, Shelah, should have taken Tamar, but Judah was afraid that he might die also. So he sent Tamar back to her father “until Shelah grows up.”

c) When she heard that Judah was going to Timnah, what did Tamar do? What items of Judah’s did she acquire as a result? Did Judah try to get these items back? Why didn’t he try harder to get them?

Tamar dressed as a harlot and arranged for Judah to go to bed with her. She took Judah’s seal, cord & staff as pledge for payment to come later. When Judah’s friend tried to redeem the items, he could not find the “harlot.” Rather than be embarrassed, Judah forgot about his belongings.

d) When Judah found out that Tamar was pregnant, what was his response? After she presented him with the evidence of the father, how did he respond? What does this show about Judah’s heart attitude at the time?

Judah’s first response on hearing of Tamar’s pregnancy was to have her burned alive, the customary punishment for this type of sin. After she confronted him with the identity of the father, Judah appeared to be truly contrite. He knew she was only trying to obtain what was rightfully hers, a male heir.

e) Tamar had twin boys. Why is the identity of these sons important?

It is from Perez’s line that King David and Yeshua eventually descend.

Childless Widows

Ancient middle-eastern culture was patriarchal and sons were expected to produce sons to carry on their branch of the family. If a married son should die without producing an heir, a brother was required to marry the dead brother’s widow for the purpose of providing an heir to carry on the family name of the dead brother. This also assured that the widow would remain in the family and not be abandoned to a life of poverty.

When Caught in Sin

Imagine Judah’s anger when he discovered that Tamar was pregnant. While he had not fulfilled his responsibility in allowing his son Shelah to take her for his wife, that was no excuse for her to “play the harlot.” So it must have been very embarrassing to learn that he was the father of Tamar’s child. Judah’s reaction however, showed a contrite and repentant heart, exactly the attitude that God would want in such a situation.

Scripture Link

Luke 3:33 and **1 Chronicles 2:3-15** help explain why it’s important to know the identity of Tamar’s twin sons.

Importance of Attitude

Through no fault of his own, Joseph seems to find himself in bad situations. Much can be learned from how he responds in these situations. First, he doesn't seem to dwell on his own misfortune but tries to make the best of the situation. Second, he doesn't seem to doubt that God is in control of his situation and he trusts God to see him through. We could probably benefit from keeping this same attitude when we face adversity.

Punishment Fitting the Crime

Given that slaves in Egypt were considered to be mere physical property, what do you think would typically happen to a slave who was accused of making sexual advances to his master's wife? Since Joseph was not immediately put to death, how do you think Potiphar felt about his wife's accusation?

4. Joseph and Potiphar's wife - 39:1-20

a) How did Joseph fare as Potiphar's slave? Who deserves the credit for this? What part, if any, did Joseph play?

Joseph did well as Potiphar's slave, eventually rising to a position of leadership. Both Joseph & the Torah say that "God blessed Joseph and caused everything he did to prosper." Joseph must have had a submissive heart to work as Potiphar's slave and to allow God to bless him.

"The Lord was with Joseph and . . . prospered everything he did."

Genesis 39:2-3

b) What was Joseph's response to the advances made by Potiphar's wife? Was this a frequent occurrence? What can we learn of Joseph's character from his actions?

Joseph consistently refused Potiphar's wife's advances, pointing out how he could not betray his master's confidence nor sin against God. It must have been difficult to deal with the situation day after day. Joseph had integrity and sought to be worthy of the trust that Potiphar had placed in him.

c) The accusation of Potiphar's wife presents a much different picture of Joseph's character than Potiphar must have had. Do you think he believed his wife's story?

Potiphar's wife's accusations make it appear that Joseph was a weak, lustful man who would easily betray his master's confidence. This is in stark contrast to Joseph's actions up to this time.

d) Potiphar could have sentenced Joseph to a wide array of different punishments. Why do you suppose he chose to put him in prison?

The fact that Potiphar did not sentence Joseph to death is an indication that he believed him rather than his wife.

5. Joseph in prison - 39:21 - 40:23

a) How did Joseph fare in prison? Who deserves the credit for this? What part, if any, did Joseph play?

Joseph did well in prison as he had done with Potiphar because God was with him and because he had a submissive heart.

b) What were the occupations of the two men that Joseph attended while in prison? Describe the dreams that each man had. How did Joseph interpret these dreams?

One man was Pharaoh's cupbearer, the other his baker. The cupbearer's dream involved a vine with three branches yielding wine for Pharaoh. Joseph interpreted it to mean he would be reinstated in 3 days. The baker's dream involved 3 baskets of bread with birds eating from the top basket. Joseph interpreted it to mean that he would be hanged in 3 days.

c) How did Joseph's interpretations come true? How did the Pharaoh's cupbearer repay Joseph's kindness?

Both dreams came true, but the cupbearer forgot about Joseph.

Being Forgotten

Lest we forget how unhappy Joseph was in his current situation, after he gave Pharaoh's cupbearer a favorable interpretation of his dream, he said to him, "...remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh.." (**Genesis 40:14**) Sadly, **Genesis 40:23** records that "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him."

The Power of Jealousy

Jealousy is a very common human emotion at the root of many sins. For example, consider Cain's murder of Abel recorded in **Genesis 4**. While jealousy is an emotion we all have to deal with in life, God expects us to respond to it without falling into sin. Can you think of other examples from scripture where someone either resisted falling into sin because of jealousy or succumbed to it?

Digging deeper

1. Jealousy is a very strong emotion. Analyze the jealousy that Joseph's brothers harbored and note how it grew. Was their jealousy justified in any way? What actions fueled their jealousy? How do you handle jealousy when you experience it?

Joseph's brother's jealousy grew every time Jacob did something that seemed to favor Joseph over them. On one hand, one could fault Jacob for being so blatant in his favoritism. However, Jacob could favor Joseph if he chose to and if his brothers had loving hearts toward him, they would have rejoiced in his good fortune. By responding with jealousy, they showed that they did not truly love Joseph nor did they give Jacob the honor of allowing him to favor whoever he chose. This has direct analogy to our relationship with God.

2. Joseph's world was turned upside down when he was sold into slavery. However, he prospered while in Egypt because "God was with him" (**Genesis 39:2**). Do you think Joseph's attitude had any bearing on his situation? In what way? What can you learn from this?

One can imagine how devastating it must have been for Joseph to be betrayed by his brothers and to be sold as a slave. However, rather than feel sorry for himself, Joseph chose to believe that God's hand was in the situation and that He was with him. By accepting God's will for his life and by behaving in a righteous manner, God was able to bless him with good fortune. A good lesson for all of us.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Amos 2:6-3:8

Brit Hadashah : Acts 7:9-16