



Some In-Sight-ful Comments on Vayeshev

Rabbi Eliot Malomet December 17, 2022 23 Kislev 5783

Alex Colville, To Prince Edward Island, 1965 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Look how significant seeing is in the first story of our parasha. The brothers see that

of seeing, after all, what is a dream if not seeing something in your sleep state. When you see it you experience as something real. And the only way you can convey what you see in a dream is through storytelling. The narrator tells us what Joseph sees in his dream, and tells us what everybody else sees

Jacob loves Joseph the most. Jacob asks Joseph to go and see what is going on with the brothers as they pasture the flock in Shechem. At the critical moment of the story, the mid-point of the text, they see Joseph from a-far. When they conspire to kill him they say *Let's see what becomes of his dreams*. Finally, after they throw him in the pit, they see a band of Ishmaelites coming from afar. What is the purpose of all this seeing? The more the characters see things, the more we, the readers/listeners, also see things in this story. This is what makes this story great, and this is what makes the storytelling of this story so great. The narrator is expertly telling a story by enabling us to see in our imaginations what the characters see in the story. Moreover, the story is built on the theme

37:4	ויראו אחיו קייאמו אהב אביהם מבלי אחיו	His brothers saw that it was he whom their father loved above all his brothers,
37:14	ויאמר לו לדגא ראה את-שלום אחיך ואת-שלום הצאן	And he said to him: Come, pray, see into the well-being of your brothers and into the well-being of the sheep,
37:18	ויראו אתו מרחק ובטרם יקרב אליהם ותתקבלו אתו להמיתו:	They saw him from afar, and before he had gotten near them, they plotted-cunningly against him to cause his death.
37:20	ואמרו מזה רעה אכלתהו ויראה מה יהיו חלמתי:	and say: An ill-tempered beast devoured him! Then we will see what becomes of his dreams!
37:25	וישבו לאכל לחם וישאו עיניהם ויראו והנה ארחת ישמעאלים באה מגילעד	And they sat down to eat bread. They lifted up their eyes and saw: now here, a caravan of Yishmaelites coming from Gil'ad,

right in front of them and far away from them. In turn, we get to see everything, as it is unfolding right before our eyes as if it were a play. Obviously, from antiquity to our own day, people saw this theatrical quality to the story and adapted it in so many artistic ways. Are there other instances of lifting up eyes? Take a look at this list and see if you can identify all of this seeing

Some interesting observations: The expression lift up eyes occurs 14 times in the book of Genesis. Multiples of 7 always catch our attention. In only one instance there is lifting up eyes without seeing. That takes place in our parasha when Potifar's wife, lifts up her eyes upon Joseph. Why doesn't the text say that she saw him? Abarbanel: she was pleading with him. The same way the psalmist peads to God without having to specify seeing. (Psalm 123:1 נשא את-עיני and also 121:1 - אשא עיני אליההרים - in both those instances, there is lifting up of eyes but not seeing. And both of those are the expression of deep longing, which is what is going on here.) We might point out that in 37:18 the brothers is see Joseph without lifting up their eyes. Why? This indicates that they were just minding their own business. They were involved in other matters. We might note that they returned to the

13:10	וישא-לוט את- עיניו וירא	Lot lifted up his eyes and saw...	Lot looking out at the richly watered Jordanian plain.
13:14	שא נא עיניך וראה	Pray lift up your eyes and see...	God tells Abram to look at the land that is being promised.
18:2	וישא עיניו וירא	He lifted up his eyes and saw...	Abraham sees the visitors. They far away but also near.
22:4	וישא אברהם את-עיניו וירא	Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw...	Abraham sees the place where he is to offer Isaac, Mount Moriah.
22:13	וישא אברהם את-עיניו וירא	Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw...	Abraham sees the ram caught in the thicket by its horns.
24:63	וישא עיניו וירא	He lifted up his eyes and saw...	Isaac sees the camels coming with Rebekah.
24:64	ותשא רבקה את-עיניה וירא	And Rivka lifted up her eyes and saw...	Rebekah sees Isaac from a distance while she is traveling.
31:10	ואשא עיני וארא	that I lifted up my eyes and saw...	Jacob tells Rachel and Leah his dream vision of the flocks.
31:12	שא נא עיניך וראה	Pray lift up your eyes and see...	The angel speaks to Jacob in his dream telling him to see.
33:1	וישא יעקב עיניו וירא	Yaakov lifted up his eyes and saw...	Jacob sees Esau coming toward him with 400 men.
33:5	וישא את-עיניו וירא	Then he lifted up his eyes and saw...	Esau sees Jacob's wives and children.
37:25	וישאו עיניהם ויראו	They lifted up their eyes and saw...	The brothers see the band of Ishmaelites.
39:7	ותשא אשת- אדוני את-עיניה	his lord's wife lifted her eyes...	Potifar's wife casts her eyes upon Joseph and tries to seduce him.
43:29	וישא עיניו וירא	He lifted up his eyes and saw...	Joseph sees Benjamin and breaks down.

Shechem area, the scene of their slaughter of the Hivites. (Gen. 34). In all the other instances of **lifting eyes** there is a sense that the **lifters of eyes** have a distinct desire or interest in seeing something. Here, the brothers have no desire to see Joseph. He appears as a complete surprise to them. Their desire to kill him is all the more heinous because it is impulsive and visceral, solely based on seeing him from a distance.

Joseph The Favorite Prisoner; the Chief Cup-Bearer and the Chief Baker

Why does Joseph get *favoured-prisoner-status* in jail? The text tells us that God was with Joseph. Fair enough. But if we dig a little deeper we discover that there are other factors. Potifar, the **Sar HaTabahim**, to whom Joseph is sold, is also, the head of the prisons. (See 39:1 and 40:3). Even Potifar would have known that there were plenty of mitigating circumstances when Joseph appeared naked

<p>וַיִּטֵּן שָׂר בֵּית־הַסֵּהַר בְּיַד־יֹסֵף אֶת־כָּל־הָאֲסִירִים אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית הַסֵּהַר וְאֵת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עֹשִׂים שָׁם הוּא הָיָה עֹשֶׂה: ל:כב</p>	<p><i>And the dungeon warden put in Joseph's hands all the prisoners who were in the dungeon house; whatever had to be done there, it was he that did it. Gen. 39:22</i></p>
---	--

outside his house. With his wife, he knew what he was dealing with. With Joseph, he knew that he couldn't let such a prodigious talent slip through his hands. For the sake of his domestic life he had to side with his wife, but for the sake of his own personal advancement, he had to keep Joseph alive so that he exploit him as much as possible. That is why Joseph is made chief prisoner. Like Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Joseph is trapped. He has privileges but no freedom. He will stay in prison for as long as he can be useful to the Potifar. He came to Egypt as a slave, and it is only worse in prison. Even (spoiler) when he is released from prison and elevated to be Pharaoh's first minister, he is still very much a slave. He has wealth, privilege, and all the trappings of power except the most important thing: freedom. He can't do anything without Pharaoh's permission.

Why did they end up in jail? The Rabbis (BR 88:2) claim that they both committed different types of infractions. The cup-bearer brought Pharaoh a drink that had a fly in it. The baker brought him bread that had a stone in it. How are these different? A fly in a drink is an accident. A stone in a bread is negligence, or maybe even intentional! Thus the baker receives the death penalty, while the cup-bearer is exonerated. R. Evyatar based his interpretation on the word *sin*. They both *wanted to marry* (ie. had sexual desire for)

<p>רָבִינוּ אָמְרִי: שָׂר הַמְשָׁקִים - זָבַב נִמְצָא בְּתוֹךְ כִּיְלֵי פוֹשֵׁרֵינוּ שְׁלוֹ, שָׂר הָאֹפִים - צָרוּר נִמְצָא בְּתוֹךְ גְּלוֹסְקֵינוּ שְׁלוֹ, הַדָּא הוּא דְקָתִיב (בְּרַאשֵׁית מ':א'): חָטְאוּ מִשְׁקָה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְהֵאֵפָה לְאֹדְנֵיהֶם, בְּתַשְׁמִישׁ אֲדוֹנֵיהֶם.</p>	<p><i>Our rabbis said: The Cup-Bearer - a fly was found in the vial of poteron a medicinal drink of his. The Chief Baker - a pebble was found in his delicate bread. This is what is written (Gen. 40:1) The cup-bearer of the king of Egypt and the baker sinned to their lord - in the service of their lord."</i></p>
<p>רַבֵּי אֵבְיָתָר אָמַר בְּקִשְׁוֹ לְהַנְדוּג לְבִתּוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ, הָאָמַר כָּאֵן חָטְאוּ, וְנָאֵמַר לְהֵלֵן (בְּרַאשֵׁית ל"ט:ט'): וְאִידֵי אֶעֱשֶׂה וְגו' וְחָטְאוּ לְאֵלֵהֶם.</p>	<p><i>Rabbi Evyatar said: They sought to marry the king's daughter - it says here they sinned and it says there (Gen. 39.9). How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?</i></p>

Pharaoh's daughter. Probably not a good thing. But why would the baker be executed and the cup-bearer set free? We don't have a good answer. Rashi rejects that R. Evyatar and only cites the Rabbis' reason.

<p>וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יוֹם הַגָּדֹת אֶת־פָּרְעֹה וַיַּעַשׂ מִשְׁתֶּה לְכָל־עַבְדָּיו... בַּר' מ:כ</p>	<p><i>And thus it was, on the third day, Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a great drinkfest for all his servants... Gen. 40:20</i></p>
--	--

Did Joseph know the royal calendar? Do the Cup-Bearer and the Baker also know it? In a palace environment, everyone

knows the king's birthday. To this day, Queen Victoria's birthday is still celebrated in a certain North American country, (and she's been dead for 121 years!) Place your bets that in the UK (and probably Canada as well) there will be an annual holiday to commemorate the late Queen Elizabeth II (z"l). Birthdays of leaders are well-known especially to people who work in the bureaucracy. (President Biden's was two weeks ago). **Everyone** would have known that Pharaoh's birthday was coming up. Surely, the Cup-Bearer and the Baker would have had alot of anxiety about this day because their services would have been in demand and their absence would have been felt. Unsurprisingly then, they dream about returning to the palace. But while the Cup-Bearer's dream is upbeat, the Baker's is ominous. Joseph accords the interpretation of the dream to God, and hints that he has a special power of interpretation. But a) he also knows the royal calendar and b) he is also astute enough to size up these two characters. The greatness of this story is that the dreams come from God, but a remarkable human being figures out how everything will unfold. **SHABBAT SHALOM!**

<p>Dear Malene Herman, Mazel Tov to you on the occasion of your special birthday! With wishes of health and happiness! Love, Your Friends.</p>
--