

Comments on Vayeshev: God Was With Joseph
Rabbi Eliot Malomet December 9, 2023 26 Kislev 5784

As the story of Joseph begins we know just a few details about him. Joseph was born to Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife. He has six half-brothers and a half-sister from his father's other wife, Leah, and four other half-brothers from his father's two concubines. We know that he has another full brother, Benjamin, but it is not clear whether or not Benjamin was even born when this story begins.¹ The text tells us that:

יוסף בן שבע עשרה שנה היה רעה את אחיו בצאן

Joseph, seventeen years old, used to tend the sheep along with his brothers (37:2).

17 will be important later on in the story (Jacob will sojourn in Egypt for 17 years), but the mention of his age here draws us to consider that all the other brothers are older than him, probably in their mid to late 20s. He doesn't fit in with them because he is not of the same age-cohort as they are and it's quite plausible that some of them are already married². So when the text tells us that he shepherded with them, we get the impression that he is an outsider. He tries to fit in, but he doesn't.

והוא נער את בני בלחה ואת בני זלפה ונשי אביו

and he was a lad with the sons of Bilha and the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives.

Meaning, that these were the sons he associated with. But why does the Torah spell that out? Because this is a family with different factions. The Leah sons, the Rachel son, and the sons of the maidservants, who are referred to here as *wives*, Bilha and Zilpa. Joseph is all by himself. Everybody else has at least one sibling in their cohort. Joseph is an only-child. If we are inclined to pay extremely close attention to language, we note that the text uses the word **את** to mean *with*. **את רעה את אחיו**-*he shepherded with his brothers*. **את והוא נער את**-*he was a lad with*... This is an unusual usage because **את** usually signifies that the next word is going to be an object. And so here is the question that **את** raises: considering that when the Torah wants to indicate *with* it usually uses the word **עם**, does it mean something else when it uses the word **את**? This is significant because the word **את** will come up again in the story, when Joseph is sold to Potiphar as a slave, and when Joseph is sent to jail for the accusation of Potiphar's wife.

ויהי ה' את יוסף ויהי איש מצליח ויהי בבית אדניו המצרי.

¹There is a longstanding principle that the Torah doesn't necessarily follow chronological order. **אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה**. Items that appear earlier in the narrative may have taken place later. The birth of Benjamin is recorded in last week's parasha, Vayishlach, 35:16-19. It takes place after Jacob's name changed to Israel, on his way to Hebron from Shechem. That leads us to believe that this first Joseph story occurs after Benjamin was born. But there are a few things that are puzzling about this. 1) Benjamin is not mentioned in the early part of this story. 2) Joseph is referred to as *the son of his old age*. v. 3. But if Benjamin was born after Joseph, wouldn't Benjamin have been *the son of his old age*? 3) After the second dream, Jacob says, **What kind of dream is this that you have dreamt! Shall we come, yes, come, I, your mother and your brothers, to bow down to you to the ground?** v. 10. Yes, we could understand that Jacob is referring to Joseph's surviving stepmother, Leah, and we could also understand it as referring symbolically to Rachel, but maybe, we could opt for the simplest explanation: Rachel was still alive! This yields a very different perspective on the story including the state of Joseph's loneliness. Consider this: all the other brothers have siblings, but Joseph in the pre-Benjamin era, is the only-child of Jacob and Rachel and has no other sib to be with. He doesn't belong to the Leah group because Leah is the unloved wife of Jacob. They are already predisposed to hating him, because they see how their father treats their mother. They just transpose their resentment of Jacob to Joseph. The sons of the maidservants, Zilpah and Bilha, are in a different category. As children of maidservants, here elevated to wife-status, they are subordinate to everyone. It shouldn't surprise us then, that Joseph cohorts with the children of the lesser wives as a way of compensating for his loneliness. Later on, when Joseph hides his identity from his brothers, their claim that they were 12 brothers, *sons of a certain main in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more* (42:14) is a shocking revelation to

him! Why wouldn't he have wanted to have them bring him down to Egypt to verify the claim?! (42:34) And when this request is given to Jacob, no wonder he refuses at first. And then, when they finally bring Benjamin down to him he says, **Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?** It is not a ruse. It is because he has never met him before! This is the first time he is laying eyes on him! No wonder he immediately hurries out of the room and cries! Back to our parasha. Here is my speculative midrash: When Jacob dispatches Joseph to Shechem, his pretext is so that he can report back to him, but quite possibly, the real reason is that Jacob wanted to be alone with Rachel, just like at the beginning of their love story. It is at that point that Joseph goes missing and is presumed dead, and Jacob refuses to be comforted. But imagine how Rachel would have experienced it. Rachel is a bereaved mother and would have wanted another child. But she is now 17 years older than her first pregnancy. It was hard enough getting pregnant the first time. But even though Jacob refuses to be comforted, Rachel conceives. Unable to accept the story of Joseph's death, they do what any parent would do, which is turn the world upside down to search for their son. Their search is unsuccessful, and they return to Hebron because she is coming due. It is on the return journey that Rachel, bereft and emotionally overwhelmed, goes into a difficult labor and Benjamin is born. The midwife's statement makes perfect sense under these tragic circumstances: **בן זה לך בן**-**אל תיראי כי גם זה לך בן**-**Have no fear, for this one is also a boy for you!** (35:17) Why does she say that? Because the boy is now a substitution for the son who was lost. When she names him Ben Oni, she is not referring only to her difficulty in having him, but to her previous experience of loss.

²This is because when Jacob mourns for Joseph upon seeing his bloodied tunic, **all of his sons and daughters arose to comfort him** (37:35). Who were the daughters here? His daughters-in-law according to Rashi, or even his granddaughters, according to Ramban.

But God **was with** Joseph, so that he became a man of success: while he was in the house of his lord the Egyptian, (39:2).

ויקהי ה' את יוסף ויט אליו חסד ויחן חנו בעיני שור בית הספר. **God was with Joseph and extended kindness to him: he put his favor in the eyes of the dungeon warden** (39:21). In what way was God **with** Joseph? And was it the same way God was **with** Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Moses was for that matter?

Abraham	Gen. 21:22	אלהים עמה בכל אשר עשה.	God is with you in all that you do.	Spoken to Abraham by Avimelekh.
Isaac	Gen. 26:3	גיר בארץ הזאת ואהיה עמה ואברכה	Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will give you blessing	God's promise to Isaac when there is a famine in the land and told not to leave it.
Jacob	Gen. 28:15	והנה אנכי עמך ושמרתך	Here, I am with you; I will watch over you	God's message to Jacob in his dream upon his escape.
Moses	Exod. 3:12	ויאמר כי אהיה עמה	He said: Indeed, I will be with you,	God to Moses at the Burning Bush.

עם is not **את** and **את** is not **עם**. God is with the three patriarchs and Moses in a much more intimate way than he is with Joseph. In Abraham's case God is so palpably present with him, that others take note of it. In each of the other cases, God makes the promise personally that he will be **with** them. But in Joseph's case, God doesn't speak directly. God's relationship with Joseph is different. And that is the point reflected by the two different words **את** and **עם**. Joseph is not an 'Abraham', nor is he an 'Isaac', nor is he a 'Jacob'. And he certainly is not a 'Moses'. He is an extraordinary, talented, prodigious, and brilliant young man, but he's not a patriarch and he's not a prophet. He's a great administrator, executive and politician. He may be the principal player in this story, but he will never rank with the others, even though, deep down, he may have truly wanted to be like them. Throughout his entire story, God doesn't speak to him. Joseph will attribute his dream-interpreting abilities to God, and he will attribute everything that happens to a divine plan, but all of that is based on his reflection. He never has a direct revelatory experience. So then why does the text say when he is sold to Potiphar, or sent to jail, that **God is with him**? This chapter (39) is the only one in the entire story where God's name appears - and it appears in it no less than 8 times! Joseph may be annoying and obnoxious, but he didn't deserve to be thrown into a pit and sold as a slave! Of course, in the end, everything

³For I was stolen, yes, stolen from the land of the Hebrews, (Gen. 40:15).

⁴And he that steals a man, whether he sells him or whether he is found in his hand, is to be put to death, yes, death. (Exod. 21:16) See also Rashi to

worked out for him, but look how much suffering he endured! All we need to do is be attentive to the suffering of the 138 hostages still in Gaza to understand what it means to be kidnapped. Stolen from your land. Subjected to humiliation, torture, and indignities. Joseph was **stolen** from his homeland³ and sold as a slave. In the Torah, kidnapping, the stealing of human beings, is punishable by death!⁴ God is compassionate to those who suffer. Hagar for example, is humiliated by Sarah. She is cast out and forced to endure an uncertain fate unfairly. God compensates her suffering by having an angel appear to her and promise her that her son will be blessed. Each of the matriarchs underwent their own suffering and become the recipients of divine attention as compensation. Here God is with Joseph simply as a recognition that what he went through was unfair and cruel. At the very least he will be able to endure his suffering with the perception that God is with him.

ויברך ה' את בית המצרי בגלל יוסף. **God blessed the Egyptian's house because of Joseph;** (39:5). Joseph is not a patriarch but he carries with him the patriarchal legacy going all the way back to Abraham, **be a blessing**. Joseph's presence brings God's blessing to Potiphar's household. But this particular verse reminds us of a similar instance with Joseph's own father, Jacob:

ויאמר אליו לבן אם נא מצאתי חן בעיניך נחשתי ויברכני ה' בגללה. **Lavan said to him: Pray, if I have found favor in your eyes ... I have become wealthy, and God has blessed me because of you.** Jacob and Joseph have many similarities:

Jacob	Joseph
Left his homeland because of a fight with his brother	Stolen from his homeland because of a fight with his brothers.
He worked for someone in the new place, Padan Aram.	He became a slave to someone in the new place, Egypt.
The person, Laban, was blessed because of Jacob.	The person's household, Potiphar's, was blessed because of Joseph.
Jacob was cheated by Laban.	Joseph was wrongfully accused by Potiphar's wife.

And we haven't even scratched the surface!

שבת שלום!
חג אורים שמח!
עם ישראל חי!
Shabbat Shalom!
Happy Hanukah!
Am Yisrael Hay!



Exod. 20:13. When the Ten Commandments says, **Thou shalt not steal**, it means thou shalt not kidnap. It is grouped with murder and adultery to teach us that just as those violations are punishable by death, so is kidnapping. (See also San. 86a).