

The story of Joseph begins with seven pieces of information that are crucial.¹ (Gen. 37:2-3)

- (1) יוסף בן שבע עשרה שנה
 (2) הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן
 (3) וְהוּא נָעַר אֶת בְּלִהָה וְאֶת בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה נְשֵׁי אָבִיו
 (4) וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת דְּבָרָם רָעָה אֶל אָבִיהֶם.
 (5) וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת יוֹסֵף מִכָּל בְּנָיו
 (6) כִּי בֶן זָקֵנִים הוּא לוֹ
 (7) וַעֲשֶׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים.

- (1) Joseph, seventeen years old,
 (2) used to tend the sheep along with his brothers,
 (3) for he was serving-lad with the sons of Bilha and the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives.
 (4) And Joseph brought a report of them, an ill one, to their father.
 (5) Now Israel loved Joseph above all his sons,
 (6) for he was a son of old age to him,
 (7) so he made him an ornamented tunic.

This is an example of great storytelling. Close attention to these details and their structure gives us a deep appreciation for the characters, the story and the art of this great storyteller. **Each item simultaneously reveals and conceals.**² Each disclosure reveals an element of the story, while at the same time, conceals a lot of information from us in order to arouse our curiosity and create more suspense.

1. Joseph, seventeen years old.

Why does the narrator tell us this? Throughout Genesis, time-stamps are crucial in understanding how the chaotic vicissitudes of human lives fit within a divinely ordered plan. Stating Joseph's age at the beginning of the story signals that the listener should be alert to this detail. Indeed, the number 17, appears at the end of the story as we will learn that **Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years.**³ (Gen. 47:28) The ages tell a story:

Jacob lives with Joseph in Canaan	17 years.
Jacob lives in Canaan without Joseph	22 years.
Jacob lives in Egypt with Joseph	17 years.

Life with Joseph is the symmetrical framing of the final 56 years of Jacob's life. But there's more than just artful symmetry here. The narrator is priming the audience, all of us, to create our own relationship with Joseph. Young

listeners will project their own aspirations onto this youth. Older listeners hearing this little detail of Joseph's age, will think back to their own period of inflated self-importance, exuberance and sexual maturation, perhaps with longing and nostalgia.⁴

2. **Used to tend sheep with his brothers.** He used to be a shepherd, **that is when he was much younger** maybe from ages 10-14. But he no longer is a shepherd. With his brothers. The narrator lifts a veil here: something happened and Joseph is no longer joining them. This of course will be crucial to the unfolding of the story. What was it? We don't know. But something happened. Add to this the subtlety of Hebrew: **הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן** which means, quite literally, that **he was shepherding his brothers - in the midst of the sheep!** Ah, maybe that's what happened! He was bossing them around. Usurping their seniority. We already know he is the youngest of the sons. But he most likely did not act like it.

3. **He was serving-lad with the sons of Bilha and the sons of Zilpa, his father's wives.** This is an odd piece of information that invites curiosity. Why is he grouped with the sons of Bilha and Zilpa, the lesser handmaiden-wives of unknown ethnic provenance, and not the sons of Leah? Does the rivalry between the two sisters extend to their children? And where is Benjamin? We feel Joseph's differentiation and alienation. He is a first-born child in a second-class fraternity.

4. **And Joseph brought a report of them, an ill one, to their father.** At whose initiative? Did Jacob ask him or did Joseph volunteer to do this? And how did Jacob respond? And what exactly was in the ill-report? Rashi, provides some colorful speculations: **Joseph told his father that the brothers ate flesh from living animals (feh!), insulted the sons of Bilha and Zilpa by calling them slaves (terrible!), and were suspected in engaged in illicit sexual encounters (depravity!).** But intuitively, we understand that the content of the communication is secondary. **The important element here is that by reporting to his father he is creating a secret bond with him** (Yonatan Grossman). This detail is part of a larger theme which we will address below.

5. **Now Israel loved Joseph above all his sons.** This detail drives the plot. But we can't read this item without thinking about the other disastrous parental loves up until now, to wit:

¹ The first verse of the parasha, **וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב** **And Jacob dwelt...** (Gen. 37:1) ought to be properly understood as a coda to the family-building period of his life, culminating in the birth of Joseph. Even though we read of the birth of Benjamin and death of Rachel in the previous parasha, there is some debate among interpreters as to whether or not Benjamin was alive yet during the opening scenes of the Joseph story. Chronology does not always follow the sequence of the stories as they are told in the Torah. The words **אֵלֶּה תִּלְדוֹת יַעֲקֹב** **these are the generations of Jacob** function as the literary divide between past and future. The narrator cues the listener to consider everything until now as

past, and to pay attention to everything that is about to be told as it will shape the way we understand what is going to happen.

² **"Storytelling is a dance between suspense and revelation."** Dan Yashinsky, **Suddenly They Heard Footsteps** (Vintage Canada, 2004), p. 153. This is a big theme in Chaim Nachman Bialik's classic essay, **Revelment and Concealment in Language.**

³ After coming down to Egypt to live out the remaining years of his life.

⁴ Cue Sinatra: **When I was seventeen, it was a very good year...for small town girls and soft summer nights...**

Abraham's love of Isaac. (Gen. 22:2)	וַיֹּאמֶר קח נָא אֶת בְּנֶךְ אֶת יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר אֲהַבְתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק. <i>He said: Pray take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac...</i> Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac and hardly ever spoke to him again, if at all.
Isaac's love of Esau. (Gen. 25:28a)	וַיֵּאָהֱבֵם יִצְחָק אֶת עֵשָׂו כִּי צִיד בָּפִיו <i>Isaac loved Esau, for [he brought] hunted-game for his mouth,</i> Isaac's love of Esau and his game sets Esau up for disaster.
Rebekah's love of Jacob. (Gen. 25:28b)	וַרְבֵּקָה אֲהַבְתָּ אֶת יַעֲקֹב. <i>but Rebekah loved Jacob.</i> Rebekah's love for Jacob and her desire for him to usurp Esau, sets Jacob up for disaster.

The past is prelude and our storyteller knows that we know all of this. The storyteller is signaling to us then that this will not turn out well for Joseph.

6. for he was a son of old age to him. This penultimate item in the list of seven, is brow-furrowing in its perplexity. Some take it to mean that Joseph was the youngest son. But weren't some of the other sons born roughly around the same time? And wasn't Benjamin the youngest son? Maybe Benjamin wasn't born yet, and this story is out of chronological order! (Which is not uncommon in the Torah). Others take it to mean that *Joseph was born to Jacob in his old age*. But weren't all of the sons born to him in old age? Like each of the items in this list, this one gives rise to several speculations. Here they are based on the word **זְקֻנִים-zekunim**: Onkelos considers this as a reference to *Joseph's wisdom*. A midrash suggests that this means that Joseph resembled Jacob in appearance because *zekunim* sounds a lot like *זִיב אִיקוּנִים-ziv ikunim* which means *the radiance of his features*. Sforino: Joseph was the symbol of Jacob's passion and for Rachel, *even in his old age*. Ramban: *Joseph was his father's steward*. Let's not overlook the fact that Joseph was the seventh son born to Jacob from the primary wives, and that the seventh position in a biblical list is always a subject of interest and attention.⁵ Most importantly, the birth of Joseph finally fulfilled Rachel's longing for a son⁶ and it was the birth of Joseph that prompted Jacob to initiate his departure from Lavan.

7. he made him an ornamented tunic. With this most extravagant piece of information, the storyteller artfully introduces the most powerful motif that runs through the entire story: clothing. Nevertheless, we wonder: what exactly is a **קֶטְנֶת פָּסִים-ketonet passim**? There is only one

other place where such a garment is found in the Bible: Tamar, princess in the household of David, wears one perhaps as a symbol of her royalty and possibly her virginity (2 Sam. 13:18). In both stories, the garment portends terror and violence. Here the brothers tear the garment and dip it in goat's blood to deceive Jacob. There, Tamar is brutally raped by her half-brother Amnon and tears the garment herself as a sign of shame and mourning. In this story, Joseph's transitions are always represented by a change in costume. Our story is told through clothing. *But clothing itself is a metaphor for the storytelling art, which is all about revealing and concealing. At this moment, the ornamented tunic tells a story. It reveals grandeur and favoritism but conceals Joseph's loneliness. It stimulates the audience the question that will accompany the story going forward: who is this Joseph? What will we discover about him? What will he discover about himself?*

If we increase the magnification on this list of seven items, we make another discovery. (See the text on the other side). The first three items describe Joseph and his brothers. The last three items describe Joseph and his father. The fourth item, the middle item, which in Hebrew begins with the word **וַיָּבֵא-and (Joseph) brought (the ill report)** is the link between both relationships. And it is the most important element of the introduction to the story, (I try to illustrate this by indenting it) because it hints to us what this story is all about: *revealing and concealing*. Joseph reveals information about his brothers to his father, but his father conceals his response. The brothers reveal contrived evidence of Joseph's death to Jacob but conceal their cruelty in stripping him of his garment, dipping it in blood and selling him as a slave to Egypt. Joseph reveals his nakedness when Potiphar's wife grabs his clothing off of him in her attempt to sleep with him, (he runs outside, in public, presumably naked!) but conceals his innocence from Potiphar. He doesn't protest. The wine-steward

conceals Joseph's petition for amnesty from Pharaoh, but reveals it only when it serves his purposes. And we can give many other examples from the story, culminating in the most dramatic moment of revelation: when Joseph no longer conceals his identity from his brothers, but reveals it to them, and to himself.

Shabbat Shalom.



Sticker of Omer Neutra, z'l, captioned with a verse from this week's parasha:

אֶת אָחִי אֲנֹכִי מֵבַקֵּשׁ

I am looking for my brothers.

eventually result in her own death. If Benjamin had not yet been born, Jacob's favoritism makes a lot of sense and conveys his joy. But if Benjamin had already been born (resulting in the death of Rachel) Jacob's love of Joseph would demonstrate his never-dying loyalty to Rachel and would be tinged with sorrow.

⁷ This is the precise midpoint of the preamble. The preamble consists of 42 words and this is word 21. **We always find the most important detail at the exact center of a text.**

⁵ A point made by Gary Rendsburg in various articles and lectures, including *Notes on Genesis XV*, VT 42:2, 1992.

⁶ When she names him Joseph, she declares, **God has removed my shame**. (Gen. 30:23) This has a double meaning: a) she is no longer barren, b) by birthing the seventh son, she has been elevated from shame to honor. But when she names Joseph she pleads: **May God add/yosef another son to me!** (Gen. 30:24). In this reading, Joseph signifies a paradox. While his birth removes Rachel's shame, her plea for another son will

Remembering officer Ran Gvili killed on October 7, whose body is still being held in Gaza.