

## Parshat Vayeshev - Who Really Sold Yosef?

After throwing your brother into a pit to die, would you be able to sit down to eat? Yosef's brothers did, as the Torah tells us (see 37:24-25)!

However, the Torah **does not** tell us if they sat **near** the pit, listening to Yosef's screaming and pleading, **or** if they sat **far away** from the pit, to enjoy some peace and quiet.

So what difference does it make?

Believe it or not, this tiny detail affects our understanding of almost every aspect of the story that ensues. In this week's shiur, as we study the story of Yosef and his brothers, we will entertain each of these two possibilities - showing how this 'missing detail' leads several commentators to conclude that the brothers may never have sold Yosef after all!

### Introduction

Did we hear correctly? The brothers **did not** sell Yosef! This statement shocks almost anyone who is familiar with the story of Yosef and his brothers. However, the closer we scrutinize the details of this narrative and the more we take into account geographic considerations, the more convincing the possibility becomes.

We begin our study by paying careful attention to the brothers' various plans to 'get rid' of Yosef, but as we continue, we will focus primarily on Reuven's plan.

### Plan A - The Brothers': First Degree Murder

Recall that as soon as Yosef arrives at Dotan, where his brothers were, the brothers conspire to kill him (see 37:18-20). However, their plan of **how** to kill him is revised several times. Let's begin with **Plan A**:

"They (the brothers) saw him from afar, and before he came close ... they conspired to kill him. And they said to one another, 'Behold the "dreamer" is coming. Now, let's **kill** him and throw his body into one of the pits...' " (see 37:18-20)

Note that the brothers first plan to kill Yosef on the spot and 'bury him' in a pit, and thus 'cover-up' any future evidence against them.

Although Reuven opposes Yosef's murder, he realizes that the brothers will not accept his opinion. Therefore, instead of arguing with his brothers, he

devises a shrewd plan that will first postpone Yosef's execution and later enable him to secretly bring Yosef back home.

[See "Further Iyun" at the end of this article for an explanation of **why** specifically Reuven wants to save Yosef.]

### **Plan B - Reuven's:**

#### **Second Degree Murder**

As you read Reuven's plan, be sure to differentiate between what Reuven **says** (to his brothers) and what Reuven **thinks** (to himself):

"And Reuven said ... 'Do not shed blood, cast him into a pit [in order that he die] **out in the midbar** (wilderness), but do not touch him yourselves.'

[End of quote! Then the narrative continues by informing us of Reuven's true intentions...]

in order to save him [Yosef] from them and return him to his father." (37:22)

Reuven's 'official' plan is to let Yosef die a less violent death, i.e. to throw him alive into a deep pit instead of murdering him in cold blood. However, his 'secret' plan is to later return to that pit and free him.

Note how Reuven even suggests the specific 'pit' in which to throw Yosef - "ha'bor **ha'zeh** asher ba'Midbar!" Most probably, this is so that he can later sneak away to that pit and save him.

[Compare this to the brothers' original plan to throw him into "one of the pits" (37:20) - possibly a pit closer by.]

Unaware of Reuven's true intentions, the brothers agree.

Yosef arrives, and in accordance with **Plan B**, the brothers immediately strip Yosef of his special cloak and throw him alive into the pit (see 37:23-24). Afterward, they sit down to eat (see 37:25).

### **Who's Where?**

Until this point, the plot is clear. Now, two important details that affect our understanding of the rest of the story are both missing:

a) **Where** did they sit down to eat, i.e. close by or far away?

b) **Where** is **Reuven**? Eating with the brothers or off on his own?

To answer these two questions, let's employ some deductive reasoning.

#### **a) Where are the brothers eating?**

Considering that they threw Yosef into a pit 'out in the **midbar**,' most probably they returned back to their camp site in the Dotan area to eat (see 37:16-17). [Besides, it would not be very appetizing to eat lunch while

listening to your little brother screaming for his life from a nearby pit; see 42:21 for proof that he was indeed screaming.]

[Later in the shiur we will bring textual proof for this assumption as well.]

### **b) Where is Reuven?**

Considering that Reuven's entire plan is to save Yosef from the pit, it would only be logical that he either stay near the pit or remain with his brothers (wherever they may be). Certainly, it would not make sense for him to go anywhere else, surely not far away!

However, from the continuation of the story we know that he does not stay near the pit, because he **returns** to the pit only **after** Yosef is sold! Therefore, if the brothers are indeed eating away from the pit, he must be eating lunch with them! After all, not joining them for lunch could 'blow his cover.' Furthermore, the Torah never tells us that he left his brothers.

Hence, it is only logical to conclude that Reuven remains with his brothers, and they all sat down to eat **away** from the pit.

### **Plan C - Yehuda's:**

#### **A Quick Buck**

Now that we have established that Reuven and the brothers are sitting down to eat at a distance far away from the pit, we can continue our study of the narrative:

"And the brothers sat down to eat, and they lifted up their eyes and saw a caravan of Yishmaelim coming from the Gilad carrying [spices] ... to Egypt. Then Yehuda said to his brothers, 'What do we gain by killing our brother? ... Let us **sell** him [instead] to the Yishmaelim; after all he is our brother, our own flesh,' and his brothers agreed." (37:25-27)

[From Yehuda's suggestion, it becomes clear that the brothers truly planned to allow Yosef to die and were totally unaware of Reuven's intention to save him.]

**Plan C** (to sell Yosef instead) puts Reuven in a predicament. On the one hand, he cannot disagree with the brothers; if he would, they may begin to suspect his true plan. On the other hand, he cannot allow them to sell Yosef, for he feels responsible to save Yosef.

Reuven has only one alternative - he must quickly excuse himself and run to the pit to free Yosef before his brothers sell him.

What happens when Reuven returns to the pit? We'll soon see. But before we continue, we must provide a little background on Israel's geography, which is essential towards understanding the psukim that follow.

### **The Ancient Trade Route**

Recall that Yosef met his brothers while they were grazing their sheep in the hilly area of Dotan (see 37:17). Recall that during their meal, the brothers 'lifted up their eyes' (see 37:25) and noticed a caravan of **Yishmaelim** travelling down from the **Gilad** (today, the northern mountain range in Jordan), on its way to Egypt.

Now, when we read this story in Chumash, almost everyone assumes that this convoy will soon pass nearby the spot where the brothers are eating. However, they don't know their geography! The **caravan** of Yishmaelim (camels et al) travels along the ancient trade route (better known as the Via Maris) which crosses through Emek Yizrael (the Jezreel Valley) on its way toward the Mediterranean coast. Therefore, this convoy, now descending from the Gilad would pass the cities of Bet She'an, Afula and Megiddo in Emek Yizrael, but would **not** pass the hilly area of Dotan.

Dotan, today the area of Jennin [z"l], is situated about 20 kilometers (13 miles) north of Shechem, and about 10 kilometers (6 miles) **south** of this main highway (the Via Maris) crossing Emek Yizrael. In altitude, Dotan sits about 200 meters (660 feet) above Emek Yizrael. From Dotan, one has a nice view of the Gilad and parts of the Jezreel Valley.

Hence, from their vantage point in Dotan, the brothers are able to see a Yishmaelite convoy turning down into the Jezreel Valley from the Gilad, even though it is still far away. This convoy will not be passing below their feet; rather, in a few hours it will be passing about 10 kilometers to the north. In order to meet that caravan, the brothers would have to first fetch Yosef from the pit, then take a short trip from Emek Dotan to Emek Yizrael. They have ample time to first finish their meal, go fetch Yosef from the pit in the "midbar" (on their way to the Emek), and then meet the convoy at the pass to sell Yosef for the 'best price.'

### **Somebody Got There First**

With this background, we now return to the story of "mechirat Yosef." Let's take a careful look at the next pasuk, noting its grammar:

"And a group of **Midyanite traders** passed by, and **they** pulled, and they lifted Yosef out of the pit, and **they** sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty pieces of silver, and brought Yosef to Egypt." (37:28)

[Read this pasuk again carefully to note the difference between the Midyanim and Yishmaelim. Note also that in this entire pasuk, the brothers are never mentioned!]

Now, simple "pshat" is that the Midyanim and the Yishmaelim are two **different** groups of people! The Midyanim are local 'traders' ("so'cha'rim"), while the Yishmaelim are international 'movers' (transport caravans). This pasuk states explicitly that a group of Midyanite traders happened to pass by the pit (they most probably heard Yosef screaming), pulled him out, and (later) sold him to the Yishmaelim. In other words, the **Midyanim** themselves sold Yosef, and **not** his brothers, for they are never mentioned in this pasuk!

[This interpretation also explains why the Torah needs to tell us about both the **Midyanim** and **Yishmaelim**, for understanding that these are two **different** groups is a critical factor in the story.]

So where were the brothers during all of this? Most probably, still eating! Recall our explanation above, the brothers threw Yosef into a pit out in the "midbar" and returned to their grazing area to eat. It seems that they are so far away that they did not see or hear what transpired between Yosef and the Midyanim!

And **where** was Reuven? Again, as we explained above, he was eating **with** his brothers. However, as soon as he heard Yehuda's new plan to sell Yosef, he quickly excused himself and ran to the pit to get there first, **before** his brothers, just as the next pasuk explains:

"And Reuven **returned** ('va'yashov') to the pit, and behold, Yosef was no longer in the pit; then, he tore his clothes." (37:29)

Reuven is not the **last** brother to find out that Yosef was sold, as commonly assumed. Rather, he is the **first** brother to recognize that Yosef is **missing**!

[Note: The commentaries that explain differently, i.e. that Reuven was not eating with his brothers, are troubled by the word "va'yashov" in 37:29; they need to explain where Reuven had gone. Rashi, for example, claims that it was Reuven's turn to learn with his father; see "Further Iyun" section.]

What can Reuven do? Shocked, he immediately returns to his brothers [probably by now eating dessert] with the terrible news:

"And he **returned** ('va'yashov') to his brothers and said, 'The boy is gone! And for myself, what am I going to do?'" (see 37:30)

Note the word "va'yashov" [and Reuven **returned**] in both 37:29 and 37:30. This verb proves that the brothers could not have been eating by the pit, for

if so, Reuven would not need to 'return' to them. However, based on our explanation above, "va'yashov" in both psukim makes perfect sense. Since Reuven and his brothers are eating away from the pit, Reuven must first **return** to the pit, and then he must **return** back to his brothers to tell them the news - hence **twice** the verb "va'yashov!"

### **Plan D - Hashem's**

Even though the brothers had three different plans for 'getting rid' of Yosef, God's plan was quite different. At this point in the story they are totally baffled, as they have no idea what happened to Yosef. Nevertheless, they still don't want their father to worry about his fate (or don't want him to accuse **them**), so they plot one final plan which is ironically quite similar to their original plan (see "chaya ra'ah acha'lat'hu" [37:20] and compare to 37:33). They dip Yosef's coat in blood and send it to their father (see 37:31-32):

"And he [Yaakov] recognized it and said, 'My son's "ktonet," "**chaya ra'ah acha'lat'hu**; ta'rof, ta'raf Yosef" - he was surely devoured by a wild beast.' " (37:33)

Ironically, Yaakov reaches the same conclusion that the brothers themselves may have reached, but for a very different reason!

### **Rashi's Shita**

So far, our explanation has followed according to Rashbam and Chizkuni. [I recommend that you read them inside, and note how they differ slightly from our presentation above.]

Now we will take a minute to discuss the more popular interpretation, i.e. that the brothers themselves sold Yosef, which is presented by Rashi and Radak.

To explain this "shita" (opinion), we must return to the two questions raised earlier in the shiur: (a) where are the brothers eating and (b) where is Reuven - and we must change our basic assumptions.

According to this opinion, the brothers sat down to eat nearby the pit, and for some reason, Reuven left them. Rashi suggests that he either went home to learn with his father, or that he had taken a short walk to do some 'soul-searching' (see Rashi, Radak, and "Further Iyun").

There are two ways to explain what happened. Either when the Midyanim came by, the brothers employed their services as 'middlemen' to sell Yosef to the Yishmaelim (see Rashbam's second explanation), **or** possibly "Yishmaelim" is synonymous with the "Midyanim" (see Radak).

## **What Does Yosef Think?**

At first glance, the interpretation of Rashbam and Chizkuni seems to explain the psukim much better than that of Rashi. Why then does Rashi explain in a different manner?

Most likely, Rashi and Radak base their "shita" on a key pasuk in Parshat Va'yigash. There, when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers, he states:

"I am Yosef your brother, whom you **sold** to Egypt." (45:4)

Yosef states explicitly that his brothers **sold** him! Given this 'fact,' it is difficult to explain the psukim in Va'yeshev in any other manner, despite the various difficulties which Rashi's interpretation present.

The Rashbam, bothered by this pasuk, explains that Yosef means to say, "who **caused** me to be sold to Egypt." However, that explanation is clearly 'reading between the lines,' and does not appear to be "pshat."

Based on the above shiur, one could suggest that Yosef truly did think that his brothers had sold him, even though they themselves never knew what really had happened.

Let's consider these events from Yosef's perspective.

Yosef was not aware of the conversations between his brothers or of their three plans. All that he knew was that as soon as he arrived, his brothers took off his coat and threw him in the pit. A short time later some Midyanim passed by, took him out of the pit and sold him to the Yishmaelim, who later sold him to the Egyptians. Yosef, trying to piece together what happened, may have assumed that his brothers had this all planned out with the Midyanim. Since his brothers did not have the 'guts' to watch him scream, they preferred not to be present when the Midyanim took him away.

According to this "shita" Yosef was totally unaware that it was only 'by chance' that the Midyanim were passing by. In fact, he had no idea that his brothers originally planned to kill him.

## **Plans and Dreams**

Despite their various plans and intense hatred of Yosef, the brothers may never have been able to gather the 'courage' to actually kill their sibling. Had they heard him screaming, they may even have retracted their plan to sell him. Nevertheless, they talked, they planned, they plotted, and therefore they are considered guilty even though they never did actually kill Yosef or sell them.

Nonetheless, the Hand of Providence led them to believe that **their** 'dream' [to rid themselves of Yosef] had come true, while in reality, it was the fulfillment of Yosef's dream that was beginning to unfold.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Menachem

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### **For Further Iyun**

**A. Rashi** quotes the Midrash that it was Reuven's turn to go home to learn with his father.

1. How far is it from Chevron to Dotan (how many days' travel?) (See Board #1.)
2. Does it make any sense that Reuven would leave for such a long time while Yosef was in the pit?
3. Do you think that this Midrash is coming to explain pshat about what 'happened' or does it give us insight regarding how 'frum' the brothers were, and the fact that they were 'makpid' on 'kibud av'? If the latter is true, what point is this Midrash making regarding the nature of 'sinat achim'?
4. Try now to explain the second possibility raised by Rashi.

**B.** For some reason, Reuven is interested in saving Yosef. Why does Reuven suddenly become so dedicated to his father?

One could suggest that Yaakov was quite angry with Reuven since the incident with Bilha (see 35:22), after which he was most likely cursed by his father (see 49:4), and hence lost his "bechora." Reuven may have hoped that by saving Yosef from the brothers, he would 'prove himself' once again worthy to his father. This would explain his reaction when he tells his brothers that Yosef is missing - "v'ani ana ani ba." This was his big chance to redeem himself. Now, it only looks worse for him. After all, should Yaakov find out what happened, bottom line, it was Reuven's idea to throw him in the pit!