

## What Does the Story of Yosef Come to Teach Us?

By Rav Elchanan Samet

### A. GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE STORY OF YOSEF AND HIS BROTHERS

What is the subject of the story of Yosef and his brothers, and what does it come to teach us? For the purposes of addressing this question, we must examine the schematic structure of this long story, such that we will be able to discern at a glance its major parts and their interrelationship. Before doing this, let us take note of some data.

The story stretches from the beginning of parashat Vayeshev to the end of Sefer Bereishit, covering fourteen chapters (37-50) and a total of 449 verses. But within this vast expanse there are three "islands" that stand apart, each for its own reasons.

The story can quite clearly be divided into four main "sections" in accordance with the characters upon whom it focuses: the entire united family, Yosef alone, or the brothers.

**FIRST SECTION:** Chapter 37 – a single literary unit of 35 verses. The location is Canaan, and the story describes the family as a whole. The subject of this unit is the rift in Yaakov's family, with its consequent destructive division.

**SECOND SECTION:** Chapters 39-41 – three literary units, with a total of 103 verses. The action here takes place in Egypt, and at its center stands Yosef. This section contains no description of what is happening to Yaakov's family. The content of this section is a description of the ups and downs of Yosef's fortunes as a slave and a prisoner, until he becomes viceroy to the King of Egypt.

**THIRD SECTION:** Chapters 42-46:27. This section, too, comprises three literary units, describing the three descents by the brothers of Yosef to Egypt, and it concludes with a list of the seventy souls that finally make their way to Egypt for a prolonged stay. The events of this section thus take place in Canaan and Egypt alternately, as well as on the way between these two places. The total number of verses in this section is 161. The narrative's focus here on the brothers of Yosef and their movements does not hide Yosef, and the brothers' encounters with him under various circumstances stand at the center of the narrative. The content of this section is a description of the three "descents" of the family to Egypt, the first two taking place while Yosef hides his identity from his family, and the third – after he has revealed himself to them.

**FOURTH SECTION:** 46:28-50:26 (end of Sefer Bereishit). This section includes Yaakov's blessings to his sons in chapter 49. The section comprises five literary units, with a total of 119 verses. The location is Egypt, and again the text here describes the united family. The content of this section is a description of the reunification of the family on Egyptian soil, under the patronage of Yosef and surrounding the character of Yaakov – both during his life and after his death.

An examination of the relationship between the four sections from the point of view of content reveals that the connections between them form a chiasmic structure:

Section 1: The rift in Yaakov's family; the family is together in Canaan.

Section 2: The trials and tribulations of Yosef in Egypt until he becomes the King's viceroy.

Section 3: The trials and tribulations of the brothers in their descents to Egypt until Yosef reveals his identity to them.

Section 4: Reconciliation in Yaakov's family; the family is together again, this time in Egypt.

### B. SUBJECT OF THE STORY: SINS AND THEIR PUNISHMENT

Does the structure of the story, as analyzed above, aid us in any way in discovering its subject? It would seem so. An inverse parallel exists between section 1 and section 4, both of which describe the family as a whole. The fact of the family dwelling together in Canaan in section 1 contains the seeds of the future rift and disintegration, because of the behavior of each of the family's components. Indeed, by the end of section 1 this rift and disintegration are realized. In contrast, the reunification of the family on Egyptian soil in section 4 is characterized by reconciliation and peace between all its members, and the story's focus on the family as a whole this time expresses its essential unity.

How, then, does this deeply divided family eventually attain unity and reconciliation? The answer to this is to be found in the two middle sections – 2 and 3. The disintegration is the result of both Yosef's superior attitude towards his brothers, and their jealousy and hatred towards him - as described in section 1. Both sides must therefore cleanse themselves of their sins and change their attitude towards each other. In section 2 Yosef experiences great suffering: his ups and downs in this section match the degree of his purification from the pride and superiority that characterized him in section 1. Upon reaching the station of viceroy, Yosef completes his process of cleansing; he is now ready to fulfill his role in the support of his

family during the famine, and in reunifying them under his patronage in Egypt.

In section 3 the brothers undergo their own suffering, reminding them of their sin towards Yosef, their brother, and towards Yaakov, their father. They become aware of the need to atone for their sins with regret and suffering, and to radically change their attitude towards the unity of the family.

It is only after this dual cleansing of Yosef and the brothers, and after both sides have been purified in the furnace of trials and suffering – and have prevailed, that the family is ready for reunification. This reunification takes place under circumstances that differ, both internally and externally, from the period when the whole family lived in Canaan.

The story of Yosef and his brothers, then, is a variation on one of the central themes of the Torah as a whole: sin – punishment – teshuva – redemption. All of these components in this biblical process turn, in our story, on the value of family unity and responsibility for its continued existence. It is against this value that all of them sin (in section 1), it is to this central value that they all return (in sections 2-3), and it is itself ultimately realized in the stage of "redemption" (section 4).

### C. SUBJECT OF THE STORY: DESCENT INTO EXILE

The above description of the message of the story is somewhat deficient, as may quite easily be demonstrated. The use of the concept of "redemption" with relation to the fourth section is most disturbing: this section describes the family in EXILE, and we – as readers – know that this exile will eventually develop and deteriorate into a cruel slavery, as described in Sefer Shemot. We are also aware of the background to this exile: it is a fulfillment of God's promise to Avram in the "berit bein ha-betarim" ([Bereishit 15](#)). Are not the concepts of "exile" and "redemption" mutually contradictory? If the family eventually had been reunited in Canaan, the above description would have been appropriate. But considering the circumstances, how can we accept it?

The fact is that this is the story of the beginning of Am Yisrael's exile. Is it possible to connect this significance of the story to that discussed in the previous section? A remarkable quote from Massekhet Shabbat in the name of Rav answers this question in the positive:

"Rabba bar Machsia said in the name of Rav Chama bar Guria, who said in the name of Rav: A person should never favor one child over the rest of his children, for it was for the sake of the weight of two sela'im of fine wool (that Yaakov used to prepare the special coat for Yosef) over and above (what he gave to) the rest of his sons that they were jealous of him, AND THE MATTER DEVELOPED UNTIL OUR FOREFATHERS DESCENDED TO EGYPT."

According to Rav, the reunification of the family in Egypt is still part of their punishment. The story does describe the beginning of the exile; however, we perceive it not as a decree that had to be realized specifically in the generation of Yaakov and his sons, but rather as an option that became a reality as a result of sin. The exile came about at this juncture because of Yaakov's sin, in openly favoring Yosef over the rest of his brothers and thereby arousing their jealousy, and the sin of his sons – who were jealous of Yosef and acted on this jealousy.

But the more mainstream opinion among Chazal sees our story as the realization of a decisive Divine decree, which had to come about specifically in the lifetime of Yaakov. The Gemara ([Shabbat 89b](#)) teaches:

"Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Yaakov, our forefather, should rightfully have descended to Egypt in chains of iron (Rashi: as is customary for all exiles, for after all it was because of the decree of exile that he went there), but his merit caused him (to descend in a different way), as it is written ([Hoshea 11:14](#)), 'I drew you with mortal cords (chavlei adam), with reigns of love.'" (It should be noted that "adam" – man – is a reference to Yosef in several places in Tanakh and in Chazal's writings.)

In [Bereishit Rabba \(86:2\)](#) the way in which Divine Providence brings about Yaakov's descent to Egypt is presented in the form of a metaphor:

"(He was) like a cow being led to the slaughterhouse, that refused to be drawn there. What did they do to the cow? They led her calf before her, and she walked after it – against her will, and against her interests. Likewise, Yaakov should rightfully have been led to Egypt in chains and a collar. (But) the Holy One said, He is My first-born (Yaakov), and I should take him down in shame and humiliation?! ... Instead, I shall lead his son before him, and he will follow him, against his will and against his interests."

According to this view, the descent of Yaakov and his household to Egypt should not be regarded as a punishment; on the contrary, "Yaakov's merit caused him" to descend under more pleasant conditions, whereby he was drawn to see his beloved son.

Actually, even this opinion does not contradict the previous view of the story, according to which the message is one of sin and punishment. Admittedly, the descent to Egypt EVENTUALLY came about in a pleasant way – "with mortal cords, with reigns of love" – because of Yaakov's merit. But how the family suffered UNTIL that pleasant descent! Yaakov endured twenty-two years of mourning for his son, and both Yosef himself and the brothers also endured their share of suffering during all that time. Was it really necessary, for the purposes of drawing

Yaakov and his family to Egypt, for everyone to suffer so much? Surely Divine Providence could have arranged Yaakov's journey to Egypt in search of his son in many different ways that would not have necessitated such anguish. This suffering, described in sections 2 and 3 of our story, are the path of atonement and purification that Yosef and his brothers had to undergo in order that, in the end, the decree of exile for Yaakov and his sons could come about "with mortal cords, with reigns of love," and in order that when the decree finally was realized, the family would be united and ready for the impending period of exile.

If we look at the four sections of the story from this perspective – as a description of the circumstances in which Yaakov's family became a family of exiles in Egypt – we may describe the story's structure as one of development, reaching its climax in the fourth section. (This perception is reflected in chapter 105 of Tehillim.)

#### D. "THESE ARE THE GENERATIONS" IN SEFER BEREISHIT

Let us now attempt to analyze the question of the subject of the story and its message from a different angle. Although this lengthy narrative may be divided into many literary sub-units, some of which have a clear, formal introduction, we find that the verse and the half-verse with which chapter 37 opens – the introduction to the story as a whole – have special significance:

(37:1) "And Yaakov dwelled in the land of his forefather's sojourns, in the land of Canaan.

(2) These are the generations of Yaakov..."

What does verse 1 teach us? Where would Yaakov be dwelling, if not in Canaan? Furthermore, what is the meaning of the phrase, "These are the generations of Yaakov"?

Let us begin with a clarification of the second question, whose importance influences not only this verse, and not only the entire story of Yosef and his brothers, but rather many sections of Sefer Bereishit – if not the whole Sefer.

Eleven times in Sefer Bereishit we find the expression, "(and) these are the generations..." ("eileh toledot"). Outside of Sefer Bereishit it appears only twice. It appears, therefore, that a clarification of the word "generations" in this expression is of utmost importance.

The root of the word "generations" (toledot) is y-l-d (child), and hence a person's "toledot" – his generations – are his offspring. Indeed, most times that the expression, "These are the generations of..." appears, it is followed by a genealogical list. But there are some places in Sefer Bereishit where this interpretation does not seem possible, since the introduction is followed not by a list of descendants, but rather by a story: 2:4, 6:9, 25:19, 37:2. What is the meaning of "these are the generations" in these instances?

In the Rashbam's view (37:2), this introduction defines the subject and message of the story: the story of a person's

"generations" is the story of all the circumstances in which a person brought children or grandchildren to the world. This innovation of the Rashbam is two-fold: firstly, it discerns that the expression "these are the generations of..." involves even a person's distant descendants, and not only his direct offspring. Secondly, it explains that even a story – however long and complex – can be a story about bringing offspring (children or grandchildren) into the world, and therefore it is appropriate that such a story should be introduced with the heading, "These are the generations."

The definition of the story of Yosef and his brothers and a story of "the generations of Yaakov" – a story of the circumstances in which Yaakov's offspring came into being – seems strange. The story of Yosef and his brothers is a story of the disintegration of Yaakov's family and the disasters that befell it, and in this sense it is opposed to the idea of bringing about offspring.

Let us examine the context of the three places in Sefer Bereishit where the expression "These are the generations" introduces a STORY. All three are to be found immediately after a previous appearance of "These are the generations...":

1. (5:1) This is the Book of the generations of Adam...

(6:9) These are the generations of Noach...

2. (25:12) These are the generations of Yishmael...

(ibid, 19) And these are the generations of Yitzchak...

3. (36:9) And these are the generations of Esav... in the mountain of Se'ir...

(37:1-2) And Yaakov dwelled... in Canaan; These are the generations of Yaakov...

What is the connection between the first mention of "generations" in each pair and the second, which follows soon afterwards?

The first verse in each pair introduces some type of genealogical LIST; each is the background to the highlighting of the chosen individual (Noach, Yitzchak, Yaakov) and to the STORY of his descendants. The stories of the "toldedot" of Noach, Yitzchak and Yaakov are the antithesis of the genealogical lists that precede them.

Let us explain this further.

Noach was selected from among his generation, as well as from among the generations that preceded him, because of his righteousness. The process of "begetting offspring" in the generations that preceded Noach proceeded directly,

generation after generation, from Adam until his own time, as described in chapter 5. But when we come to "the generations of Noach" – the story of how offspring (grandchildren) came to be born of the selected individual – it turns out that the process is not a simple one, and is no longer so direct. A difficult test threatens the continued existence of Noach's seed – the great Flood and its results. The efforts of Noach and his sons to survive, as described in the story of the Flood, are aimed at overcoming test and establishing their seed in the land after the Flood. This is also the purpose of the covenant of the rainbow that God makes with Noach and his sons. The story of "the generations of Noach" is a story about the victory of Noach and his sons over these difficulties, and their success in establishing a new world.

Yitzchak is selected over Yishmael. Again, the process of "begetting offspring" (children) in the case of Yishmael is easy and simple: twelve sons are born to him, and these establish twelve tribes (25:16). "The generations of Yitzchak," in contrast, involve difficult problems that must be overcome, and it is this battle to establish offspring (children) that the story narrates to us: "And Yitzchak entreated God in the presence of his wife, FOR SHE WAS BARREN... and the children strove within her...." The story of the "generations of Yitzchak" is the story of Yitzchak's victory in establishing his seed. The birth of his twin sons is an expression of a burst of fertility. It is, admittedly, a one-time event, and two sons are not twelve sons, but nevertheless – through the birth of these two sons, the blessing of "Be fruitful and multiply" is fulfilled.

Yaakov is selected over Esav. "The generations of Esav" are noted in the Torah at two different stages of his life, and corresponding to these we find two parallel stages of "the generations of Yaakov." During the period of Yaakov's exile from his father's house, while he was engaging in extensive efforts to establish a great family in Charan, Esav was dwelling peacefully in Canaan, close to his father, and establishing his own family. The summaries of the "generations" (children) of both brothers are provided in close proximity: at the end of chapter 35 we find an enumeration of the twelve sons of Yaakov who were born to him before he returned to Yitzchak, his father, and immediately thereafter (36:1) we find a list of Esav's sons who are born to him during the same period in Canaan: "And these are the generations of Esav... These are the children of Esav, who were born to him in Canaan."

With the arrival of Yaakov and his sons before Yitzchak in Chevron, Esav takes his wives and children and leaves the land "from before Yaakov his brother" (36:6-8). Then we find an account of "the generations of Esav... IN THE MOUNTAIN OF SE'IR" (36:9-19), and Esav's family grows with the birth of his grandchildren (36:20-28). Corresponding to this stage in the life of Esav, we find the story of "the generations of Yaakov" in Canaan: "And Yaakov dwelled in the land of his forefather's sojourns, in the land of Canaan [which Esav had left]. These are the generations of Yaakov..." (37:1-2).

In other words, the generations of Esav at this second stage – the birth of his grandchildren, until their establishment as an incipient nation – are born in his destined land, Se'ir. Similarly, the generations of Yaakov born at this second stage of his life – namely, the birth of his grandchildren, until their establishment

as an incipient nation – are born in his destined land, Canaan. It is for this reason that the story does not open with the words, "These are the generations of Yaakov," but rather with "And Yaakov dwelled in the land of his forefathers' sojourns, in Canaan."

The establishment of Esav's offspring was a simple process both at the first stage – in the birth of his sons in Canaan – and at the second stage – in the birth of grandchildren in Se'ir. But the establishment of Yaakov's offspring at both corresponding stages involved difficult struggles, suffering and victory. The greater part of parshat Vayetze is devoted to the first stage of Yaakov's "generations" – the birth of his twelve sons (the description of Binyamin's birth, and the death of his mother in childbirth, in parashat Vayishlach, are also part of this stage). When Yaakov comes to his father Yitzchak in Chevron, he is replete with suffering, as someone who has succeeded in establishing a second generation and now seeks a permanent dwelling in Canaan. Esav understands this significance of Yaakov's victory, and voluntarily leaves the destined land, turning towards the mountain of Se'ir to establish the foundation of his nation and kingdom.

"Yaakov sought to live in tranquility – but the turmoil of Yosef came upon him." Yaakov dwelled for a relatively short time in tranquility in Chevron, until his sons were grown, and then the next great battle concerning establishment of seed – the battle over the third generation, that would become the basis for the nation – came upon him. An inner process of disintegration now threatens the family, and the story of Yosef and his brothers is the story of the battle and the victory in establishing "the generations of Yaakov" at this second stage of his life.

Sefer Bereishit now assumes a new general significance: it is the Book of "the generations" of the human race, at the center of which we find the story of the generations of the select individuals and their battle to establish their seed. With relation to these select individuals, continuity is not merely a matter of biology; rather, it is their life's mission – a central objective, requiring perseverance until victory is attained. Human existence and the biological continuity of the chosen branches of humanity is not taken for granted. Because of their great value, their existence requires a real fight. It is only on the fringes, among those who are not selected, that existence and continuity come easily, with no battle.

#### E. YEHUDA AND TAMAR, AND YOSEF IN EGYPT, AS STORIES OF "THE GENERATIONS OF YAAKOV"

The story of Yosef and his brothers is therefore a story of "the generations of Yaakov" at the second stage of his life – in other words, the story of the struggle for the establishment of the third generation of Yaakov's family. But in contrast to other stories of "generations" in Sefer Bereishit, here the threat to continuity is not objective: the problem is not the barrenness of the woman in question, nor is there a flood, nor is there any danger from a threatening relative. The threat in the story of Yosef is internal. The internal structure of the family, with the addition of mistakes in its management and various sins in its operations, are what bring about the great rift described at the end of chapter 37 – at the end of the first section of the story. Therefore, the definition

of the subject of the story proposed here may be combined with the definition presented earlier – a story of sin and punishment.

As a result of the terrible rift in the family, two main branches separate from it:

(38:1) "And it happened, at that time, THAT YEHUDA WENT DOWN from his brothers..."

(39:1) "AND YOSEF WAS TAKEN DOWN to Egypt, and he was bought by Potifar, chamberlain of Pharaoh..."

These two "descents" seem to be linked: Yehuda's descent from his brothers comes as the result of Yosef being taken down to Egypt, Yaakov's mourning for Yosef and the arguments between the brothers. As Rashi explains (following in the footsteps of the Tanchuma, Vayeshev 8):

"Why is this parasha (concerning Yehuda and Tamar) placed here, in the midst of the story of Yosef? To teach that the brothers brought him (Yehuda) down from his great status when they saw the sorrow of their father. They said to him: You suggested that we sell him; had you told us to return him (to our father) we would have obeyed you."

At this point the story focuses on these two branches, that have been become severed from Yaakov's household: first, the branch of Yehuda and his "generations" (in the sense of the term as interpreted by the Rashbam) for some twenty years, during which time Yehuda is separated from his family, and thereafter the branch of Yosef and his generations for exactly the same twenty years, during which he, too, is separated from the family.

The story of Yehuda and Tamar, describing the threat to the continuity of Yehuda's family and the victory over this threat through the establishment of his seed in the merit of Tamar, was discussed at length in our study of parashat Vayeshev. We shall now complete this discussion as it concerns the story of Yosef in cha39-41.

In the description of Yosef's servitude in Egypt and his descent into the dungeon there, our attention is drawn mainly to his bitter personal fate. But this is not the main point of a story whose subject is the struggle for the establishment of seed in Yaakov's family. The main point is something that the modern reader does not pay much attention to at all: AS A SERVANT IN EGYPT, YOSEF IS PREVENTED FROM ESTABLISHING A FAMILY! From this point of view, Yaakov's mourning for Yosef is justified – even though Yosef is alive. In the ancient world, even if a slave bore offspring through a maidservant given to him by his master, such offspring were not considered his own children, but rather the property of the master (compare [Shemot 21:4](#)).

At the center of the story of Yosef as a slave in Egypt (chapter 39) is the failure of Potifar's wife to seduce him. The temptation offered by a woman to a man also stands as the central axis of the previous story, in chapter 38 (except there it is successful). What is the difference between these two acts of temptation? Tamar tempts Yehuda to turn to her in order to establish seed for his family, and therefore her actions are justified; Yehuda himself has no criticism because of the positive results of her actions. The temptation of Potifar's wife, in contrast, is a tragic illustration of Yosef's situation as someone who is unable to establish his seed. For it is not for the purposes of establishing seed that Potifar's wife approaches him, but rather as a means of sexual entertainment. It is Yosef's status as a slave that underlies this story, which is the very opposite of founding a family and bearing children. It is to Yosef's great credit that he withstood the temptation, believing that the day would come when he would be able to establish his seed in a proper way.

With Yosef's incarceration for an unlimited period of time, it appears that any hope of seed being established from this branch of Yaakov's family is now lost. But hidden Divine Providence brings about events in such a way that Yosef is removed from the dungeon and becomes viceroy to the King of Egypt. The climax of his ascent to greatness begins in a verse that seems quite unrelated:

(41:45) "And he gave him Osnat, daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On, as a wife."

Yosef finally marries a wife legally, thus laying the foundation for the establishment of a family. The tangible climax of the story is located near its conclusion:

(41:50-52) "And two sons were born to Yosef before the years of famine (that were borne to him by Osnat, daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On). And Yosef named the firstborn Menashe... and the second one he called Efraim, FOR GOD HAS MADE ME FRUITFUL IN THE LAND OF MY AFFLICTION."

This conclusion of the story of Yosef parallels – both chronologically and thematically – the conclusion of the story of Yehuda and Tamar. At the end of these twenty years during which Yehuda and Yosef "descended" from their family and during which the continuity of each of them faced a real threat, they both eventually establish their seed, with TWO SONS born to each – an expression of fertility. Peretz and Zerach, and Menashe and Efraim, are of more or less the same ages, and it is they who bear the message of victory in the battle to establish "generations" for the household of Yaakov.

#### F. THE DESCENTS TO EGYPT AS A CONTINUATION OF THE "GENERATIONS OF YAAKOV"

The famine that devastates the land just a short time after the birth of these four sons places the ENTIRE family of Yaakov in terrible mortal danger, as a result of which the family commences a process of reunification. It appears that it is this danger that causes Yehuda and his offspring to rejoin the family.

The encounter with the cruel Egyptian ruler – i.e., with Yosef, who hides his identity from his brothers – brings upon the family a further danger (though only imaginary) of further branches of Yaakov's family being cut off.

Reuven, who suggests later on (37), "Put my TWO SONS to death if I fail to bring him (Binyamin) to you," reveals his complete misunderstanding of the essence of the whole battle. The previous battles were fought for the birth of "two sons," and now, again, the fight is for the survival of the family as a whole – for the "generations of Yaakov."

But when the famine becomes severe, it is Yehuda who prevails:

(43:8) "Send the boy (Binyamin) with me and we shall get up and go; THAT WE MAY LIVE AND NOT DIE – BOTH WE AND YOU AND OUR CHILDREN."

In the plot of the viceroy's goblet, the (imaginary) threat of annihilation reaches its climax, but it is followed by Yosef's revelation of his identity before the brothers. The lost branch of the family (i.e. Yosef) can finally be reunited, TOGETHER WITH THE SONS born to him in Egypt.

The list of the seventy souls that descend to Egypt, led by Yaakov, is composed primarily of Yaakov's GRANDCHILDREN, and it is a song of victory in the battle for the family's survival and for the establishment of offspring. While dwelling in Canaan, Yaakov has established the real foundation for the nation that will come into being upon Egyptian soil.

Thus, the subject of our story, as we have defined it here, connects to its subject as we defined it above: as the story of the beginning of the exile. We are now aware of the great importance attached to the fact that Yaakov established "generations" – many grandchildren – in Canaan, and that he descended to Egypt not just "with his staff," but at the head of a tribe numbering seventy souls. The foundation for the development of Am Yisrael in Egypt was created in their promised land, and it will be towards this homeland of theirs that they will yearn to return.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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