

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(Email address: office@etzion.org.il)

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

**In Loving Memory of Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and
Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z"l**

**"Your descendants shall be a stranger in a land that is not
theirs"**

The Fulfillment of the Decree of Bondage in Egypt¹

By Rav Gad Eldad

In our *parasha*, we encounter the tense relationships that developed in the house of Yaakov. The story has a dynamic of its own, and it develops in accordance with the lines drawn by the characters who advance the plot. From a broader perspective, however, this plot has a second role. It begins with Yaakov's nuclear family in the land of Canaan, but in the end the members of Yaakov's family find themselves in Egypt, and from there the story progresses to servitude and slavery that continues for centuries. The patriarch Avraham had already been warned about this enslavement in the *Brit Bein Ha-Betarim*:

And He said to Avram, "Surely know that your descendants shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years." (*Bereishit* 15:13)

At first glance, these appear to be two parallel processes, without any connection between them; they simply meet at the end. In this study, we will attempt to demonstrate that in the course of the narrative, which purportedly advances exclusively on the basis of human actions, Scripture indicates that God is tracking the events for the purpose of ensuring that the story will conclude with the fulfillment of His promise.

**"AND THEY HATED HIM AND COULD NOT SPEAK
PEACEABLY TO HIM"**

Scripture involves us in the development of the negative relationships in Yaakov's household. Yosef is given preferential treatment, which stirs up his brothers' jealousy. If that were not enough, he begins to share his dreams with his brothers, the apparent interpretation of which was anathema to them, and this adds fuel to the already burning flames of hatred:

Now Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat of many colors. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him. And Yosef dreamed a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him yet the more. (37:3-5)

The first time that the opportunity affords itself, the brothers express their hatred through action. Yosef is sent by his father to check on his brothers' welfare, but when he arrives, a

shocking surprise awaits him, turning his world upside down:

And they saw him afar off, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to slay him. And they said one to another, "Behold, this dreamer comes..." And Reuven said to them, "Shed no blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him" – that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. And it came to pass, when Yosef was come to his brothers, that they stripped Yosef of his coat, the coat of many colors that was on him; and they took him and cast him into the pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it... And Yehuda said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? Come, and let us sell him to the Yishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him; for he is our brother, our flesh." And his brothers hearkened to him. And there passed by Midyanites, merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Yosef out of the pit and sold Yosef to the Yishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they brought Yosef into Egypt. (37:18-28)

In order to conceal their actions, the brothers come up with a cover story, and in order to substantiate their claim, they dip Yosef's coat in blood:

And they took Yosef's coat, and killed a he-goat, and dipped the coat in the blood; and they sent the coat of many colors, and they brought it to their father. And they said, "This have we found. Know now whether it is your son's coat or not." (37:31-32)

"AND YOSEF WAS BROUGHT DOWN TO EGYPT"

Yosef finds himself as a slave in the house of Potifar. Over time, it becomes clear that he excels in his work and gains his employer's trust:

And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand... And he left all that he had in Yosef's hand; and, having him, he knew not ought save the bread which he did eat. And Yosef was of beautiful form and fair to look upon. (39:3-6)

But as it turns out this fact gets him into trouble, when his employer's wife sets her eyes upon him. When Yosef refuses her, she tries to take action, but once again she fails. This time, she exacts vengeance for his rejection of her advances:

And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Yosef, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused, and said to his master's wife... "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" And it came to pass, as she spoke to Yosef day by day, that he hearkened not to her... And it came to pass on a certain day, when he went into the house to do his work, and there was none of the men of the house there within, that she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." And he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out. And it came to pass, when she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and was fled forth, that she called to the men of her house and spoke to them, saying, "See, he has brought

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all citations are from the book of *Bereishit*. This *shiur* is based on my article: "Ma'aseh Adam Ve-Tachbulotav – Be-Ikvot Bnei Yaakov Be-Darkam Mitzrayima," *Megadim* 39 (Kislev 5764), pp. 33-39.

in a Hebrew to us to mock us; he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice. And it came to pass, when he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried, that he left his garment by me, and fled, and got him out.” (39:7-15)

The story ends sadly with the blame falling on the shoulders of the weak, and Yosef is thrown into prison by his employer:

And it came to pass, when his master heard the words of his wife, which she spoke to him, saying, “After this manner did your servant to me;” that his wrath was kindled. And Yosef’s master took him, and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were bound; and he was there in the prison. (39:19-20)

From the continuation of the story, we learn that the prison is nothing but a pit, as it is described when Yosef is removed from it:

Then Pharaoh sent and called Yosef, and they brought him hastily out of the pit. And he shaved himself, and changed his clothing, and came in to Pharaoh. (41:14)

Thus, we see that over the course of time Yosef is twice cast into a pit. The first time he is cast into a pit by his brothers and then taken out of the pit when he becomes a slave, but owing to his life as a slave, he finds himself once again cast into a pit.

"AND HIS MASTER'S WIFE CAST HER EYES UPON YOSEF"

When we compare the background that brought Yosef to be thrown into the pit for the first time to the background of his being cast into the pit a second time, we find a surprisingly large number of parallels:

1. In both stories, Yosef is given special treatment by the relevant authority, which focuses attention on him.
2. The act of persecution committed against Yosef takes him by complete surprise.
3. Over the course of his harassment, he is stripped of his clothes.
4. The garment that is removed from him is used by his tormentors to invent an alternative story that explains what happened.
5. As we have already noted, at the end of both stories of harassment, Yosef finds himself in a pit.

Before we consider what this all means, it should be noted that this phenomenon of two events with similar characteristics is found a second time in the vicissitudes of Yosef’s life. This second pair of events begins with the pit into which Yosef was cast by Potifar. There he meets the butler and the baker, each of whom dream a different dream on the same night. Yosef is faced with a pair of dreams, and he offers himself to interpret them:

And he asked Pharaoh’s officers that were with him in the ward of his master’s house, saying, “Why do you look so sad today?” And they said to him, “We have dreamed a dream, and there is none who can interpret it.” And Yosef said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, I pray you.” (40:7-8)

When he concludes his interpretation, he appeals to the butler, who will be restored to his position according to Yosef’s interpretation of the dream, requesting that he help him to be removed from the pit:

“But have me in you remembrance when it shall be well with you, and show kindness, I pray you, to me, and mention me to Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house. For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the pit.” (40:14-15)

To Yosef’s grave disappointment nothing happens. Two years later, Pharaoh dreams a pair of dreams and seeks someone who can interpret them. On this occasion, the butler remembers Yosef and offers his services to Pharaoh. Yosef is once again faced with a pair of dreams, and he declares once again that with the help of God he will interpret them:

And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “I have dreamed a dream, and there is none who can interpret it; and I have heard say of you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” And Yosef answered Pharaoh, saying, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace.” (41:15-16)

And once again Yosef interprets the dreams to the satisfaction of the party who dreamed them. But this time, when he concludes his interpretation, he is saved and is rewarded with high position:

And Pharaoh said to Yosef, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discreet and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and according to your word shall all my people be ruled; only in the throne will I be greater than you.” (41:39-40)

What we have here, then, is another pair of events – one in which Yosef is faced with a pair of dreams. He declares that with God’s help, he will be able to interpret them; he offers interpretations that satisfy the person who dreamt them, and later they come true. The most striking difference between them is the final chord. The first time, Yosef asks the butler to help get out of the pit, but to no avail. But when he finishes interpreting the second pair of dreams, he achieves redemption. This difference will help us fully understand the significance of this phenomenon, which we find repeated in his life. This repetition implies that it is imbued with meaning.

THE MEANING OF THESE PAIRS

It seems that the meaning of these pairs of events in Yosef’s life lies in the differences found in each pair between its respective elements. To our surprise, we find that the fundamental difference between the two elements in each pair is the same.

Yosef is completely passive with respect to his being thrown into the pit; he is surprised by his brothers, who forcibly remove his coat and then throw him into the pit. In the second story just the opposite is true. Yosef essentially takes off his cloak in order to escape the grip of Potifar’s wife. In so doing, he causes himself to be thrown into the pit. It might therefore have been argued that he was responsible for his being cast into the pit the second time, and for this we have the analogy to the first time he was cast into a pit. Seen from a very narrow prospective, Yosef is responsible for his having been cast into the pit the second time,

but it should not be forgotten that the second casting was but a mirror of the first casting, for which his brothers were responsible. Therefore, from a broader perspective, their responsibility for his being cast into the pit extends to the second incident as well; were it not for their actions, Yosef would never have ended up in Egypt, and he would never have had to contend with his employer's wife. The repetition of the component of being thrown into a pit links the events in the form of cause and effect, suggesting that the first casting projects on to the second casting.

This is also the axis of the comparison between the elements of the second pair of events. The first time, it is Yosef who steps forward and offers his services as an interpreter of dreams, with the help of God. But the second time, it is the butler who recommends him to Pharaoh, and Yosef is altogether passive; he is removed from the pit without being asked what he wants. It might therefore have been argued that his removal from the pit was at the initiative of the butler, but both from the course of the plot and from the words of the butler himself, it appears that this is not the case. It is clear that Yosef's initiative to interpret the dreams of the two officers is what leads to the butler's idea to remove him from the pit. Thus, it can be said that ultimately it is Yosef who helps himself and brings about, albeit belatedly, his removal from the pit.

The conclusion is that the significance of the pairs is the same. The purpose of each one is to intimate that the party who is responsible for some initial event is also responsible for another event following from it. We will return to this conclusion below.

"AND THE LORD WAS WITH YOSEF"

Before we bring this matter to a close, we must consider another matter. In the course of the narrative, God's name is mentioned many times by the various speakers, but the Tetragrammaton is mentioned only rarely:

1. When Yosef comes to the house of his Egyptian master:

And the Lord was with Yosef, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand... And it came to pass from the time that he appointed him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, that the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Yosef's sake; and the blessing of the Lord was upon all that he had, in the house and in the field. (30:2-5)

2. When Yosef comes to the prison:

But the Lord was with Yosef, and showed kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Yosef's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it. The keeper of the prison looked not to anything that was under his hand, because the Lord was with him; and that which he did, the Lord made it to prosper. (39:21-23)

Tracing God's names over the course of the story paints the following picture: When the characters speak of God, they refer to Him by the name *Elokim*, but when Scripture itself describes God's part in the story, it refers to Him by the Tetragrammaton. This fact, more than it teaches us about God's presence in the story, highlights His absence. There is no verse that states, "And the Lord was with Yosef, and he correctly interpreted his dreams," or the like. The Tetragrammaton does not

appear in the course of the human initiatives in the story, but only in the backdrop, from which they break out.

"YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE A STRANGER IN A LAND THAT IS NOT THEIRS"

This point will bring us closer to our goal. For years, Avraham's descendants have been walking about with the decree of servitude "in a land that is not theirs" hanging over their heads. No one knows how to predict when and how it will be realized, but it is always somewhere in the collective memory of Avraham's family. However, the reader, who knows how the story will develop, knows that the story of Yosef takes place on two levels. On the simple and overt level of the plot, Yosef struggles for his survival in a foreign and threatening land. The second level is more hidden; on that level, the decree of bondage that will become fully realized at the beginning of the book of *Shemot* is slowly taking form.

The *Rishonim* struggled with the various aspects of the relationship between the actions of man and God in our world, the issue of "Divine knowledge versus free will." An examination of our story might contribute to our understanding of the issue.

It may be possible to learn from an analysis of the story that God is interested in directing the course of events in a certain way, but He is careful not to influence man's actions for this purpose. On the contrary, He acts in light of man's choices. A decree had been issued that the descendants of Avraham would go down to Egypt, but the manner in which this process would be realized depends on them. If the brothers "decree" that Yosef will be thrown into a pit, he will indeed be found there, and even if he manages to escape from the pit into which he was cast by the brothers, things will develop in such a way that he will once again be cast into a pit. Thus, the brothers determined the course of the descent to Egypt, but from that same pit Yosef would also rise up to rule! In this way, God integrates His hidden direction of the events in the actions taken by flesh and blood.

There is another aspect of this understanding of how God conducts the world. A person cannot absolve himself of responsibility for his actions, claiming that God has already decreed the process and that he was therefore only a puppet in God's hands to bring about the result that He sought.² The course of our *parasha* shows that it is man who determines the course of the story, but God follows after it from on high, making sure that His will is fulfilled in light of the path down which man directs the story.

Thus, it is possible to explain why the Tetragrammaton is absent from the stories describing human initiatives and is mentioned only when Yosef has already arrived in the house of Potifar or the prison, they being the "stationary states" of the plot. After man has spoken his word and performed his deed, God reveals Himself in order to direct the story to its destination, in light of the place and conditions set by man.

(Translated by David Strauss)

Visit our website: <http://etzion.org.il/en>

² See in this context the words of the Ramban (*Bereishit* 15:14): "Know and understand that [even if] a person was written and sealed for death on Rosh Hashana, the brigand who kills him will not be cleared because he did what had been decreed against him. He is a wicked man, and will die for his sin, and his blood will be sought from the murderer." The Ramban expands there on this matter and cites also the view of the Rambam.