

VAYEISHEV—GENESIS 37:1–40:23

## *The “Original Sin” of Slavery*

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THE TORAH’S FIRST SIBLING RIVALRY ends in fratricide. Who can forget the slaughter of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain, who replies to God’s call with another question: “Am I my brother’s keeper” (Genesis 4:9)?

By the time we reach the final narrative arc of Genesis, our Jewish ancestors are still grappling with family dysfunction, brotherly jealousy, and competition for a father’s affections. The narrative of *Parashat Vayeishev* proceeds as follows: Jacob favors Joseph, his first-born from his beloved Rachel. He showers his son with affection, most notably with a coat of multiple hues and colors. The brothers become jealous and one day hatch a plan to kill Joseph. Tempered by Reuben’s caution, they throw him instead into an empty pit and then sell him into slavery through a wandering group of Ishmaelite traders. Upon arrival in Egypt, Joseph is sold as a slave into the house of Potiphar.

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg argues, “The brothers’ crime remains throughout Jewish history as a kind of ineradicable original sin, with proliferating effects. . . . Rambam refers to this original sin of our forefathers; in constant self-reminder of this evil, we sacrifice a goat for all communal sin-offerings; the goat that was substituted for Joseph’s remains a symbol of hatred and violence in the consciousness of the whole people.”<sup>1</sup> Calling Joseph’s sale into slavery our “original sin,” Zornberg suggests that the act leaves a permanent stain with ongoing consequences for Jewish history.

The same has been said about American slavery. The Reverend Jim Wallis authored a book called *American’s Original Sin: Racism, White*

*Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America.*<sup>2</sup> In June of 2020, former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice argued that “our country has a birth defect: Africans and Europeans came to this country together—but one group was in chains.”<sup>3</sup>

What can one learn by plumbing the depths of *Parashat Vayeishev* that might illuminate the very situation in which we Americans find ourselves—still living with slavery’s legacy while many white citizens of this country believe it to be an issue of our past and not our present?

Let us take a look at the motive. What leads a band of brothers to sell their own kin? At the beginning of Genesis 37, the text reads, “Yet Israel loved Joseph better than his other sons. . . . When his brothers saw that he was the one their father loved, more than any of his brothers, they hated him and could not bear to speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:3–4).

In a commentary on the phrase *v’lo yachlu dabro l’shalom* (וְלֹא יִכְלֹוּ לְדַבֵּר לְשָׁלוֹם), “could not bear to speak peaceably to him,” the medieval commentator Sforno says, “Even though the brothers had to speak to Joseph pertaining to their business dealings, both concerning household problems and problems with the herds and flocks, something imposed upon them by their father’s command to see in him their manager, they did not speak to him concerning any private matters, brotherly concerns.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the relationship between Joseph and his brothers is purely transactional, built on maintaining the family business and ensuring household efficiency. They have no real relationship to speak of, no emotional intimacy, no sense of kinship and love. To borrow the phrase coined by Martin Buber, Joseph and his brothers lack an I-Thou relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Radak took a different direction with this same verse: “Any conversation with Joseph did not revolve around peacefully discussed matters of common interest, but concerned only matters of dispute between them.”<sup>6</sup> In this telling, there are only matters of conflict between the brothers. There is nothing of shared interest, concern, and commonality, at least as the brothers can see.



A commentary by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, the *Tur HaAroch*, states, “You will note that the Torah did not write that the brothers did not speak to him altogether. Rather, whenever they spoke, even to strangers, and Joseph became part of their conversation, they referred to him negatively.”<sup>7</sup> This interpretation raises the possibility that the words of peace the brothers could not speak to Joseph were not conversations with him but rather conversations with others, even complete strangers. This reading leads one to imagine that the brothers engaged in smear tactics against their brother, fueled by jealous rage.

These three commentaries highlight a trajectory that begins with isolation and continues through to hate. There is no relationship to speak of between the brothers and Joseph. Joseph is a tool for the brothers, just part of the family business. These interpretations present a collective image of Joseph, in the eyes of the brothers, as less than human. In a commentary to *Parashat Mikeitz*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks concludes, “As far as [the brothers] are concerned, there is no Joseph. They don’t recognize him. . . . They never did. They never recognized him as one of them, as their father’s child, as their brother with an identity of his own and a right to be himself.”<sup>8</sup>

The enslavement of people of color was predicated on seeing Black and Brown individuals as property, by definition the opposite of human. The United States Constitution counted people of color as three-fifths of a person. Enslaved people became a tool for economic growth—indeed, much of the accumulated wealth of the United States could be said to have been built through the work of Black bodies.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the text, by the time Jacob sends Joseph to go looking for his brothers in Dothan, the brothers are ready for something sinister: “They saw him in the distance, and before he neared them, they wickedly plotted against him, to bring about his death. They said to one another, ‘Here comes the master of dreams! Now then, let us kill him and throw him to one of [these] pits and say, ‘A wild animal devoured him.’ Then we’ll see what becomes of his dreams!’” (Genesis 37:18–20).

The midrash in *B’reishit Rabbah* even goes on to imagine the broth-



ers unleashing their dogs on Joseph.<sup>10</sup> The commentary by Rabbi Chayim ibn Attar, the *Or HaChayim*, states, “We could say further that ‘and they saw him from afar off’ refers to the distance of their hearts, because they did not see him as brothers see their brothers, rather, they saw him like a man distant from them.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Or HaChayim* is commenting on the lack of intimacy between Joseph and his brothers. The word *meirachok* (מֵרַחֵק), “in the distance,” is no longer just a reference to physical distance but also to an emotional chasm.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and the author of *Just Mercy*, is fond of saying that our challenge is to “get proximate.” In a 2018 commencement speech, he told graduates, “You have to find ways . . . to get proximate to people who are suffering, to get closer to people who are excluded, to go into the parts of the community that other people say you shouldn’t go to.”<sup>12</sup> The brothers were far from proximate to Joseph. We in the United States, particularly those of us who are white Jews, need to become more proximate to people of color and understand the unique legacy slavery has wrought. We must not see this problem *meirachok*, but from close up.

In his commentary on Genesis 37:18, Sforno writes, “They did not think that he had come to make peace with them but that he was spying on them, to cause them to commit a sin either that would bring their father’s curses on them or that would cause God to punish them.”<sup>13</sup> The brothers are afraid of Joseph’s purpose in arriving at Dothan. They project sinister motives onto him. In this telling, the brothers jump at the chance to kill Joseph, assuming he is seeking to further hurt their standing with their father and with God.

A mindset of scarcity sets these brothers upon Joseph. A similar mindset of scarcity holds this country back in addressing the terrible devastation that slavery, convict leasing, and lynching have brought to people of color. We have not yet been able to pass a bill that would allow Congress to *explore* reparations, let alone implement them. What do we in the white community project onto the descendants of slaves? What are we so afraid of?

When Cain says to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” God replies, “Your brother’s blood is shrieking to Me from the ground!” (Genesis 4:10). The blood of Joseph, as symbolized by the blood of the goat used by the brothers to cover up their crime,<sup>14</sup> called out to Jacob as well. So too does the blood of sold, tortured, and lynched Black bodies call out to us from the soil of this country. Are we ready to get proximate, in the language of Bryan Stevenson? Or, asked another way, are we ready to respond to Cain’s eternal question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Yes. We are. We must be.

#### NOTES

1. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 271. The Rambam is taken from *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:46.
2. Jim Wallis, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017).
3. Condoleezza Rice, “This Moment Cries Out for Us to Confront Race in America,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/04/condoleezza-rice-moment-confront-race-america/>.
4. Sforno on Genesis 37:4.
5. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).
6. Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi) on Genesis 37:4.
7. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, *Tur HaAroch* to Genesis 37:4.
8. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “*Mikketz* (5771)—Sibling Rivalry,” Office of Rabbi Sacks, December 4, 2010, <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5771-mikketz-sibling-rivalry/>.
9. P. R. Lockhart, “How Slavery Became America’s First Big Business,” *Vox*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/8/16/20806069/slavery-economy-capitalism-violence-cotton-edward-baptist>.
10. *B’reishit Rabbah* 84:14.
11. Rabbi Chayim ibn Attar, *Or HaChayim* to Genesis 37:18.
12. Bryan Stevenson, 2018 Commencement address, Johns Hopkins University, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/05/24/commencement-2018-stevenson/#:~:text=I,.go%20to%2C%22%20Stevenson%20said>.
13. Sforno to Genesis 37:18.
14. See Zornberg, *Beginning of Desire*, 269.