

PARASHAT VAYESHEV

Genesis 37:1–40:23

Vayeshev, which means “and he settled,” contains the story of Jacob and his sons, who have settled in the land of Canaan. There is jealousy between the other brothers and Joseph, who dreams of ruling them. They plot Joseph’s death, but Judah persuades them to sell him to a caravan of Ishmaelites heading for Egypt. Afterwards, they report to Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild animal. Later, Judah’s son Er dies, leaving his wife, Tamar, as a widow. Judah promises that his young son Shelah will marry Tamar, but Judah fails to keep his word. Therefore, Tamar disguises herself and tricks Judah into sleeping with her. When Judah is told that Tamar has “played the harlot” and is pregnant, he orders that she be put to death. Defending herself, Tamar reveals to Judah that he is the father of the child she is carrying. Realizing that he has not treated Tamar fairly, Judah declares: “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” The Torah portion continues with the adventures of Joseph in Egypt, where he is sold to Pharaoh’s chief steward, Potiphar, and quickly rises from being a slave to becoming manager of his master’s house. Potiphar’s wife is attracted to Joseph and tries to seduce him. Angry because Joseph refuses her advances, she reports to Potiphar that Joseph tried to force himself upon her. Potiphar has Joseph thrown into prison. There he meets Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and chief baker. They tell him of their dreams, and Joseph interprets them. (Later, as Joseph has predicted, the cupbearer is returned to Pharaoh’s service, but the chief baker is put to death.)

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

Joseph, who is seventeen years old, helps his older brothers take care of their father's herds. Seeing that sometimes they are careless about their responsibilities, Joseph criticizes them to Jacob. Jacob favors Joseph and gives him a gift of an ornamented coat of many colors. Seeing that their father loves Joseph more than he loves them, the brothers resent Joseph.

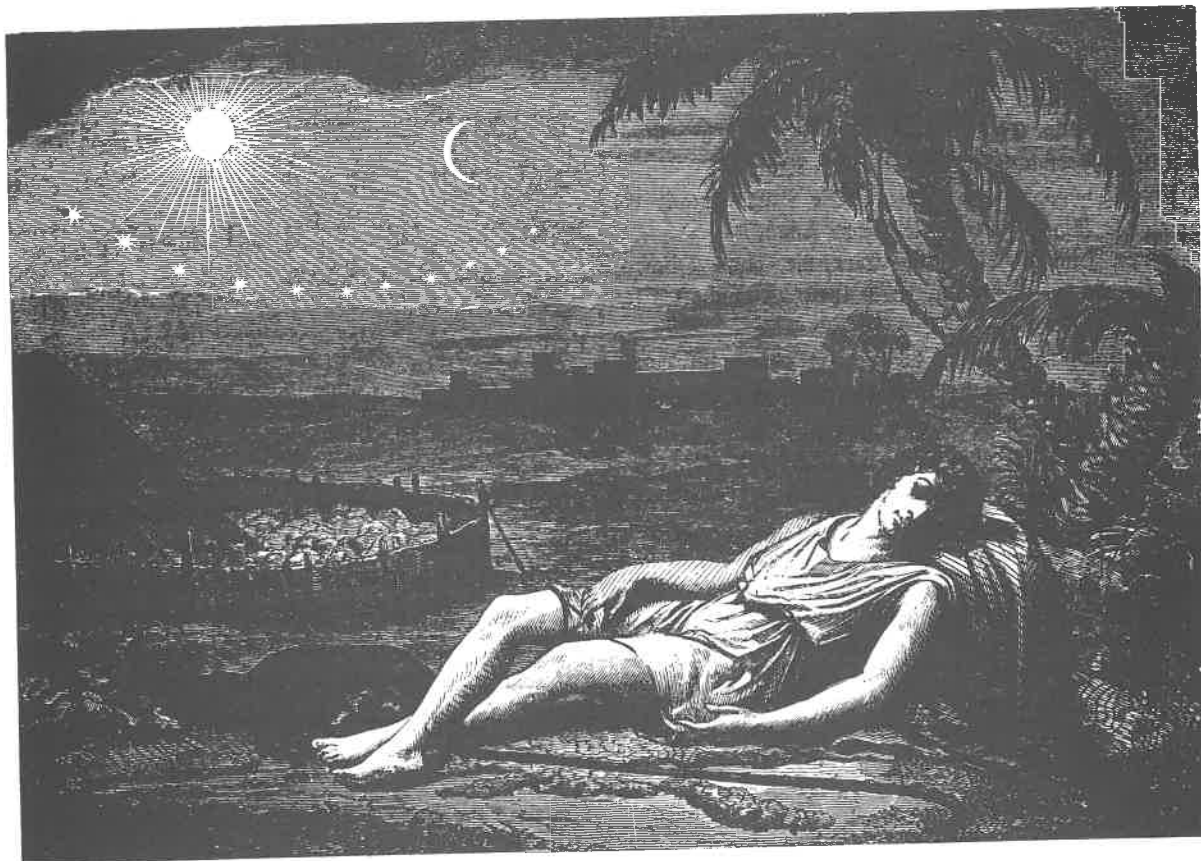
One night, Joseph dreams that he and his brothers are binding sheaves in a field. His sheaf stands up and their sheaves all bow down to his. The next day he tells his brothers about the dream. "Do you mean to rule over us?" they ask him, hating him more because of his dreams.

Another night, Joseph dreams that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars are all bowing to him. He tells Jacob and his brothers about the dream. His father scolds him, "What do you mean by such a dream? Are we all to bow down to you?"

Later, Jacob sends Joseph out to bring him a report on how his brothers are caring for the herds. When his brothers see him coming, they plot to kill him. Reuben suggests that they throw Joseph into a pit rather than kill him, hoping that afterwards he might rescue Joseph.

The brothers strip Joseph of his colorful coat and throw him into a pit. As they sit down to eat, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites heading toward Egypt. Judah suggests that they sell Joseph. "What do we gain by killing him?" he asks his brothers. They agree and sell Joseph into slavery.

Reuben returns to find Joseph gone. He tears his clothes as a sign of mourning and says to his brothers, "The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?" The brothers tear Joseph's coat, dip it in goat's blood, and take it to their father. They tell Jacob that Joseph has been killed by a wild beast. He weeps and tears his garments in mourning. Though his children try to comfort him, Jacob continues to cry over the loss of Joseph.



· 2 ·

Soon afterwards, Judah marries Shua, a Canaanite woman. They have three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er marries Tamar but dies leaving no son. According to the tradition of the time, Judah asks Onan to marry Tamar and to continue his brother's line by having children with her. Although Onan marries Tamar, he refuses to father children. God punishes Onan for this by taking his life. So Judah now promises Tamar that, when Shelah matures, he will make sure that Shelah marries her and continues Er's line.

As the years pass, however, Judah does not keep his word. Since she is growing older and is still without children, Tamar decides to trick Judah. She dresses as a prostitute and sits by a road where she knows Judah will pass. When he sees her, Judah promises her a goat if she will sleep with him. When Tamar demands a guarantee until the goat is delivered, Judah gives her his seal, cord, and staff. Not knowing she is Tamar, Judah sleeps with her, and she becomes pregnant.

Three months later, Judah is informed that Tamar pretended to be a prostitute and is pregnant. He orders that she be put to death. Hearing this, Tamar sends Judah his seal, cord, and staff, telling him: "I am pregnant by the man to whom these belong."

Judah is shocked and realizes that he has

wronged her. He declares: "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah."

· 3 ·

Meanwhile, Joseph has been taken to Egypt where Potiphar, Pharaoh's chief steward, purchases him from the Ishmaelites. Seeing that Joseph is a talented manager, Potiphar appoints him to run his entire household. As a result, Potiphar's riches increase.

Potiphar's wife is attracted to Joseph and says to him: "Lie with me." When he refuses, she spitefully tells Potiphar that Joseph has tried to take sexual advantage of her. Furious, Potiphar has Joseph thrown into prison.

While in prison, Joseph impresses the warden with his abilities and is put in charge of all the prisoners. He meets Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker who are in prison for angering the king. Both of them have dreams and tell them to Joseph. He interprets them, predicting death for the baker and a second chance at court for the cupbearer. "Don't forget me," Joseph tells the cupbearer, hoping that he will one day be free.

The Torah portion ends with Pharaoh's cupbearer restored to his position at court, but forgetting all about Joseph.

THEMES

Parashat Vayeshev contains three important themes:

1. Suspicion and hostility among children.
2. Assuming responsibility for what we promise; refusing to demean or embarrass others.
3. Measuring loyalty and success.

PEREK ALEF: *What Went Wrong between Joseph and His Brothers?*

We have already seen the results of jealousy and hatred between Cain and Abel, and Jacob and Esau. Now, once again, the Torah returns to the theme of hostility between brothers. Clearly, problems of parental favoritism and sibling rivalry

occur in every family and in each generation. By returning to these themes, the Torah emphasizes the need to deal directly and honestly with all their troubling aspects. We see something of ourselves and our own families in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Many questions emerge: What went wrong between Joseph and his brothers? Why did they feel such anger toward him? What did he do

to make them want to kill him or sell him into slavery? What role did Jacob play in this grim drama?

Joseph's character

Elie Wiesel comments on Joseph's character: "Jacob refused him nothing. He owned the most beautiful clothes, for he liked to be regarded as graceful and elegant. He craved attention. He knew he was the favorite and often boasted of it. Moreover, he was given to whims and frequently was impertinent. Arrogant, vain, insensitive to other people's feelings, he said freely whatever was on his mind. We know the consequences: he was hated, mistreated, and finally sold by his brothers, who in truth were ready to kill him." (Messengers of God, pp. 145-146)

Joseph loved himself

Maurice Samuel in conversation with Mark Van Doren:

Samuel: Do you ever think of Joseph as a loving person?

Van Doren: No, he's a person who loved to be loved. He assumed that people loved him. (In the Beginning . . . Love, John Day Co., New York, 1973, p. 104)

Some biblical interpreters claim that Joseph was "spoiled" by Jacob. He was given whatever he wanted, including a beautiful coat of many colors. Because his father favored him, Joseph believed that he was superior to his brothers and, eventually, that he was even more important than his father.

Other commentators emphasize Joseph's immaturity. He was just seventeen, still a very self-centered young boy. He was concerned with how he looked to others. He used special brushes and pencils to color around his eyes. He curled his hair. He put high heels on his shoes so that he would appear taller and, perhaps, older than his age. (*Genesis Rabbah*, 84:7)

Furthermore, according to the rabbis, Joseph made up stories about his brothers and then told them to his father. He lied about his brothers in

order to make himself look good. For example, he told his father that his brothers were eating meat that was not kosher and that they were insulting to one another. (*Genesis Rabbah* 84:7)

Rashi



Rashi claims that Joseph took advantage of every opportunity to gossip about his brothers to his father. Though he knew the truth about what they were doing, he deliberately misinterpreted whatever they said or did to his own selfish advantage. He slandered their intentions as well as their accomplishments. For these reasons, Rashi concludes, they mistrusted and hated him.

It is clear that most Jewish interpreters evaluate Joseph as an immature, self-centered gossip. Some even blame Jacob for spoiling him. Why, they ask, did Jacob single out Joseph for such special treatment and affection?

Rabbi Judah believed that Jacob favored Joseph because they looked alike. Rabbi Nehemiah thought that Jacob loved Joseph because Jacob spent more time teaching Joseph the fundamentals of his tradition than any of his other sons. Could that explain Jacob's preference for Joseph? Might this also explain why the brothers were jealous of him? (*Genesis Rabbah* 84:8)

Do not favor one child over another

Resh Lakish, quoting Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, said: "A person should not favor one child over another, for Joseph's brothers hated him because their father made him a coat of many colors." (*Genesis Rabbah* 84:8)

Morgenstern



Partiality is injustice

Jacob was at fault for manifesting greater love for Joseph than for his other sons and for spoiling him as he did. Partiality is always a form of injustice, and injustice is always wrong and

causes evil. We have seen this already in Isaac's greater love for Esau and in Rebekah's greater love for Jacob. (Julian Morgenstern, The Book of Genesis, Schocken Books, New York, 1965, pp. 264-265)

Other interpreters express sympathy for Joseph, blaming his brothers for the hostility between them. Writer Elie Wiesel comments: "They should have felt sorry for their small orphaned brother, whose mother had died tragically; instead they pounded on him, harassed him. They should have tried to console him; instead they made him feel unwanted, an outsider. Their father favored him above all others, and why not? Jacob loved him best because he was unhappy. But they refused to understand and treated him as an intruder. He spoke to them, but they did not answer, says the Midrash. They turned their backs on him. They ignored him; they denied him. To them he was a stranger to be driven away." (*Messengers of God*, p. 153)

Wiesel's interpretation does not excuse Joseph's bad behavior, but it does explain Joseph's feelings. He lied to his father about his brothers because he felt rejected by them. By putting them down, he hoped that his father would love him more. Perhaps, had his brothers been concerned about him, Joseph would have been loyal to them.

Instead, he spied on them and spread evil reports about what they were doing. Joseph's brothers hated him for criticizing and ridiculing them. After he told them his dreams of how they would bow down to and be ruled by him, their hostility hardened into cruelty. They decided to kill him.

His dreams fanned their hatred

When he related his dreams, their hatred for him was fanned even more. This is the nature of hatred. Once a new motive for it is found, additional hostility is felt. (Gur Aryeh)

They decided to kill him

They saw Joseph coming, and one brother said to the other: "Let's shoot him with arrows, for

one who spreads lies or evil gossip is like one who shoots arrows."

Another brother said: "His tongue is like a poisonous snake. Let's throw him into a pit filled with snakes." (Genesis Rabbah 84:13)

So what went wrong between Joseph and his brothers? Our interpreters offer several considerations: (1) Joseph's arrogance, his vanity, his self-centeredness, his lies about his brothers, his foolish declarations of superiority over his family; (2) Jacob's favoritism of one son over another; and (3) the brothers' isolation of Joseph, their insensitive treatment of a fearful and lonely young boy. Could it be that all these factors combined to spell tragedy for Jacob and his sons?

**PEREK BET: *Judah and Tamar—
Models of Moral Action***

Speiser



E. A. Speiser, the modern biblical scholar, calls the story of Judah and Tamar "a completely independent unit." It does not seem connected in any way to the story of Joseph and his brothers. In fact, it seems to interrupt the story. Once Joseph is sold as a slave, we are anxious to know what happens to him. Instead, we are given a story about Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. Why? What is its message?

The Torah tells us that Judah and his wife, Shua, had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Er married Tamar but died before they had a son. According to Deuteronomy 25:5-10, if a man died leaving no male heirs, his brother was obligated to marry his widow and continue his line. The marriage was called a "levirate" marriage. In Latin, *levir* means "husband's brother."

Ancient peoples were concerned about producing children and assuring the future of their families and tribes. We see emphasis upon each marriage being "fruitful" in the first chapters of Genesis when God commands Adam and Eve:

“Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it. . . .” (Genesis 1:28) The rule of the “levirate marriage” was of great importance. To ignore it was to *deny* a future for your brother’s name and line.

In this story about Tamar and Judah, God brings death to Onan because he refuses to impregnate Tamar, his dead brother’s childless wife. Furthermore, when Judah does not give his surviving son, Shelah, to Tamar in marriage, he is not carrying out the responsibility he owes to his dead son Er and to the widow, Tamar.

Does that, however, justify the trick Tamar plays on Judah? Was Tamar “right” in disguising herself as a prostitute and allowing Judah to impregnate her? Do the ends justify the means here?

According to Rashi, “Tamar acted out of pure motives.” She wanted to fulfill the commandment to have children for the sake of her first husband. Rashi also points out that she acted in a way that protected Judah from public shame. Instead of publicly revealing that he had fathered the child she was carrying, Tamar sent him a private message. Rather than declaring what Judah had done, she hired a messenger to deliver his seal, cord, and staff and to inform him that she was pregnant by the person who owned them. Although Judah declared publicly that Tamar should be put to death for prostitution, she chose not to embarrass him. Instead, she revealed the truth quietly and discreetly.

Rashi concludes that we learn an important lesson from Tamar’s behavior. It is “far better for a person to risk death—as Tamar did—than to shame another person publicly.” (*Sotah* 10b) Tamar’s reward, Rashi suggests, was that future kings of Israel, among them King David, would be born from her line.

Ramban (*Nachmanides*)



Nachmanides agrees with Rashi’s interpretation. He explains that, in her case, the ends justified the means. She was desperate. Judah was not fulfilling his responsibility and promise to her. Even he realized how wrong he had been when he admitted publicly: “She is more in the right than I. . . .” By that statement, Nachmanides explains

that Judah meant to say: “She acted righteously, and I am the one who sinned against her by not giving her my son Shelah.”

Judah’s use of power

Tamar, in her righteousness, does not accuse Judah of being the father but sends him a quiet, dignified message saying that the father is the one who is also the owner of the seal, cord, and staff. When Judah sees this, he has the option of carrying through with the cover-up by throwing away the symbols and letting Tamar be burned. Instead, however, he publicly acknowledges his mistake. . . . Judah shows that the proper exercise of power involves the capacity to admit when one is wrong and to act accordingly. (Reuven P. Bulka, Torah Therapy, pp. 24–25)

Commenting on the dramatic events surrounding Judah’s admission that Tamar was justified—and that he had wronged her—the fourteenth-century Aramaic translation of the Torah, called *Targum Yerushalmi*, claims that Judah was one of the judges before whom Tamar appeared when she was accused of being a prostitute. The *targum* imagines Judah, rather than remaining silent or condemning Tamar, rising to his feet and declaring:

With your permission, my brothers, I proclaim here and now that each human being is treated measure for measure, be it for good or for bad, and happy is the person who recognizes his sin. It is because I dipped Joseph’s coat in the blood of a goat and brought it to my father, saying: “Please identify it. Is it your son’s shirt or not?” that I must now identify before this tribunal to whom the seal, cord, and staff belong. . . . So, I acknowledge that Tamar is innocent. She is pregnant from me not because she yielded to any illicit passion but because I did not give her to my son Shelah.”

This passage from the *Targum Yerushalmi* not only portrays Tamar as justified in what she did, but it also depicts Judah as courageously admitting that he has wronged Tamar and denied his son’s rights.

Yet, as the *targum* claims, Judah also admits that he is guilty for having wronged his father, Jacob. In telling his father about Joseph, he misrepresented the facts. By lying, he abused his trust and power as a son. Now, in the case of Tamar, Judah uses his power and position as a judge to condemn his behavior with Tamar by attesting to her innocence.

This explanation of *Targum Yerushalmi* may help solve the question of why this story of Judah and Tamar is placed in the midst of the tale about Joseph.

Judah lied to his father. He told him that Joseph had been killed, not sold into slavery. As a result, he brought great sorrow upon Jacob. Now, in the case of Tamar, he was again deceptive. He lied to her, promising her a marriage to Shelah, which he failed to arrange. This time, however, when Judah is confronted with the truth about what he did to Tamar, he refuses to lie. Instead, he bravely takes the blame and saves Tamar from death.

This story of Judah and Tamar, coming as it does in the midst of the tale of Joseph, contains a significant lesson about how human beings can change and grow toward honesty. Judah is portrayed as a liar who fails to make good on his promises. But he is also a person who matures. He learns from his mistakes. When Tamar confronts him with the truth, he neither makes excuses for his behavior nor continues to call for her death. Instead, he courageously admits before all his townspeople that he is wrong. And Tamar, who has been treated unjustly, forgives him rather than publicly denouncing and demeaning him.

Both Judah and Tamar emerge as models of moral integrity and behavior.

PEREK GIMEL: *How Do You Measure Loyalty and Success?*

In the story of Tamar and Judah, Tamar acts like a prostitute and easily seduces Judah. By contrast, Potiphar's wife seeks to seduce Joseph but fails. In her disappointment and anger, she accuses Joseph of raping her, and Potiphar throws Joseph into jail.

Why did Joseph resist the flirtations of Potiphar's wife? No one was at home. Potiphar's wife

is reported to have been beautiful and very much attracted to Joseph. So why did he turn her down? Why did he risk making her hostile and losing all that he had achieved?

According to an explanation in the *Sifre*, a commentary on Numbers and Deuteronomy, edited in the fourth century C.E., Joseph would not let his strong sexual desires get the best of him. He remained in control of himself. "As a righteous person, he told himself not to give in to the temptations Potiphar's wife was putting before him." (Deuteronomy 3:33)

In another interpretation, the *Tanchuma* explains that Joseph resisted her because he took an oath never to approach his master's wife. Putting words in Joseph's mouth, the author of the *Tanchuma* writes that Joseph said to himself: "How can I do such an evil thing as to sin against God by breaking my oath?"

A great hero

Is there among the virtuous a greater hero than a young seventeen year old surrounded by loose women who manages to keep himself from them? Because he did so, Joseph was rewarded when, much later, his children were blessed with the words of his father, Jacob. (Zohar, Genesis 48:19; also Pesachim 113a-b)



Steinsaltz

Joseph was a tzadik—a righteous man

The chief argument in favor of his being called a tzadik is drawn from the climax of the story of the wife of Potiphar, whose temptations he firmly resisted. (Adin Steinsaltz, Biblical Images, p. 63)

Other interpreters, however, do not view Joseph in such a positive way. They raise serious questions about his behavior. Rashi says that, as soon as Joseph was appointed by Potiphar to a position of importance, he began to eat and drink exces-

sively like all the rest of the Egyptian ruling class. He curled his hair and lived lavishly. He forgot all about being a slave and assimilated into idolatry and the loose sexual practices of Egyptian society.

Modern writer Elie Wiesel raises a serious question about Joseph's character when he comments: "One does not provoke a woman unless one wants to. One does not love a woman—or a man—against one's will. Every relationship is a two-way affair." (*Messengers of God*, p. 148)

Adding to the suspicions about Joseph's behavior with Potiphar's wife, Rav Samuel says that Joseph "deliberately entered the house in order to be seduced by her." And Rabbi Abin says that "she chased him from room to room and from chamber to chamber until she brought him to her bed." It was only when they reached her bed, according to several interpreters, that Joseph began to question the morality of what he was about to do.

According to one version taught by the rabbis, Joseph is portrayed as saying to Potiphar's wife, "I am afraid that your husband will discover our affair." She answered him, "Then I will murder him." Joseph was shocked and answered, "Then I will not only be an adulterer but also the accomplice to a murder." (*Sotah* 36b and *Genesis Rabbah* 87:5)

Elsewhere, the rabbis say that Joseph looked up from the bed where he and Potiphar's wife were embracing and saw that she had placed a sheet over the head of an idol hanging on the wall. Suddenly he realized what a mistake he was making. "You have placed a sheet over the idol because you are ashamed of what we are about to do," he said to her. "How much more should I be ashamed before God, whose eyes are everywhere in the world?" To this version, Rabbi Huna commented that Joseph also declared: "By God, I will not do this wicked thing." (*Genesis Rabbah* 87:5)

Rabbi Huna taught that it was not an idol that Joseph had seen but rather the face of his father, Jacob. In that moment of temptation, just before he was about to sin and commit adultery, "Jacob appeared to him, and Joseph's passion immediately cooled." (*Genesis Rabbah* 87:7) Some interpreters speculate that Jacob said to him: "Do you want to be called an associate of prostitutes?" (*Tosafot* to *Sotah* 36b)

Joseph's moral victory

The vision of Joseph's venerable father appeared to him just as the will of the young man weakened, just as he was about to sin. Potiphar's wife believed she had at last charmed and seduced him. It was then that the sudden vision gave him the strength to control himself, to triumph over his moment of weakness, and to conquer his nature. . . . When a child's training and upbringing are such that even if he has long been separated from the family home and even if he is lost in the midst of licentious surroundings in a faraway country, his father's influence still guides him toward moral victory; then this training is the ideal Jewish upbringing." (Sefat Emet, based on *Sotah* 36a)

Do as Joseph did

When someone tries to talk you into sinning, the first thing you must do is refuse without going into details or engaging in debate on the reasons for your refusal. Only after having made it clear that you refuse to sin may you recite reasons for refusing. Do as Joseph did. He told her no, then he gave her the reasons: "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing and sin before God?" (Sefat Emet)

Most of our commentators, it seems, conclude that Joseph came to his "moral senses" at the very last moment. Potiphar's wife offered powerful temptations. She was beautiful, alone, and anxious to make love to him. He was flattered, perhaps infatuated, by her. He nearly gave in to her flirtations and propositions. Yet, just as he was about to sleep with her, his *loyalty* to Potiphar, to the moral traditions that his father, Jacob, had taught him, and to God—all convinced Joseph to tell her: "How could I do this most wicked thing and sin before God?"

Like Judah his brother, Joseph grows and matures in his ethical sensitivity and ability to act

justly. From the spoiled youngest son who lies about his brothers to win the attentions and affections of his father, Joseph becomes a person of loyalty and praiseworthy, ethical behavior.

For his decision, Joseph is called a *tzadik*—a “righteous person.” It is a title he earns. He is not born to it. He becomes a “righteous person” through his struggle with temptations, with greed, and with selfishness. His achievement marks a turning point in his life.

Although Potiphar throws him into jail, Joseph’s loyalty and morality are ultimately rewarded. First, he is given special privileges by the warden. Later, Pharaoh appoints him as the most powerful prince in Egypt.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Can parents be expected to treat their children equally? How can parents treat each child as an individual without showing favoritism?
2. What are some of the problems caused by teachers, counselors, judges, and bosses who show favoritism?
3. Levirate marriage seems to imply that the purpose of marriage is having children. Should marriage be more than that? What? How?
4. Do you agree with Elie Wiesel that “every relationship is a two-way affair”?
5. Some commentators argue that Joseph was weak and nearly seduced by Potiphar’s wife. Others say that he was perfectly righteous in his responses to her. Which commentators have the most convincing case?
6. What role does guilt play in the transformation of both Judah’s and Joseph’s character? Is feeling guilty ever a good thing?