

These are the offspring of Jacob: Joseph, who was seventeen years old, tended the flock along with his brothers, as a helper [na'ar] to the sons of his father's wives, Bilhah and Zilpah. --- Gen. 37:2

Joseph, who was seventeen years old; and it also says he was a na'ar (which usually means a youth). Rather, it means that he did youthful things. He groomed his eyes, he picked up his heels, he curled his hair. --- Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 84:7

So that he would look attractive. --- Rashi

This is the lineage of Jacob? What happened to the other sons? Rashi explains the underlying meaning: these are the significant events in the establishment of the offspring of Jacob as a people. Joseph's being seventeen, an immature youth, is the cause of all that follows. The word **na'ar**, youth, must mean more than Joseph's age, since that is already given. The gematria, the numerical value of **na'ar**, is 320, which is the same as the word **shoteh**, meaning "fool"! --- Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher ("Ba'al ha-Turim"), 14th c.

Like many people today, Joseph thinks he must invent a false and glamorous image in order to show his worth to himself and the world. As if that weren't sufficiently pitiful, he also feels compelled to put others down in order to be noticed and appreciated. His desire to be better than everyone else expresses itself even in his dreams. Twice, Joseph dreams about his family bowing down before him. And twice he tells his family about his visions of his own superiority. The brothers, hurt and enraged by their sibling's arrogance, sell Joseph into slavery. Joseph experiences the depths of despair as an Egyptian slave and as a prisoner in an Egyptian jail. In that prison, Joseph learns how to sympathize. He learns that prisoners at the bottom are still human beings, and that one can excel without having to minimize the talents or interests of other people. In prison, Joseph accepts a basic principle of Jewish living: **kol Yisrael areivim zeh ba-zeh**--all of us are responsible for each other. In prison, Joseph shows an interest in the dreams of a deposed butler and baker, and in caring for such "lowly people," he in fact plants the seeds of his own restoration and future glory. Joseph learns that his own talent can thrive best with other people's well-being. Far from being a threat, the happiness of acquaintances, friends, and relatives form a supportive environment

in which each of us can blossom. Arrogance isolates, not skill. Ruthlessness, not drive, leads to loneliness. By living in a community, we can support each other to be the best that we can be. And in that way, we all serve to hasten the rule of God on earth. --- Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

We should have expected the verse to begin with the oldest sons: Reuben, Shimon, etc. It doesn't even mention them...just Joseph! It appears that Joseph resembled his father in all things, and all that happened to Jacob similarly happened to Joseph. --- **Midrash Tanchuma**

And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamental tunic. And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him. --- Gen. 37:3-4

One should never show favoritism to one son above the other, for because of the additional expenditure of the weight of two coins worth of fine wool for the many-colored coat that Jacob made for Joseph, beyond what he spent for his other sons, his brothers envied him, and the end result was that our forefathers went down to Egypt. --- Talmud, **Shabbat** 10b

Had Jacob shown the love to Benjamin that he showed to Joseph, the brothers would have assumed that their father loved the two because they were the children of his beloved Rachel. However, when they saw that Jacob loved Joseph more than all his brothers, i.e., even more than Benjamin, they suspected that this love stemmed from the fact that Joseph carried tales to his father, and he was building himself up at their expense. --- **Meshekh Chokhmah** (Rabbi Meir Simha Hakohen of Dvinsk, 1843-1926, Latvia)

Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. Can a righteous person then engage in slander? Rather, when a person has one son who excels above the others, the father shows him up as an example to the others. By doing so, he rebukes, punishes, and humiliates the other sons, telling them: "Why can't you take an example from him? Why don't you act as he does?" That was what happened with

Joseph. As his actions were better than those of his brothers, he brought a bad report about them to his father. In other words, he was the cause of their father rebuking them. If that is the case, the question to be asked is why Joseph was punished. The answer is that a righteous person should hide his good deeds even from his father. --- Rabbi Menahem of Amshinov (1860-1918, Poland)

They hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him. But had they sat down together, they would have spoken to one another and told one another what bothered them. Then they would have ironed out their differences. The trouble in every argument is that there is no common language and no one is listening. --- **Tiferet Yonatan** (Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschuetz, 1690-1764, Prague)

Note that it says *Israel loved Joseph*, not that "Jacob loved Joseph." There is a general understanding that usually, when the text refers to Jacob as Israel, it refers, logically enough, to the spiritual side of Jacob. When he speaks to Joseph, or loves Joseph, it is "Israel" speaking (see also 37:13). When he speaks to the others, it is only their father, or Jacob. Perhaps it isn't just that Jacob gave Joseph material things, but that this was a sign of a deeper bond, which Jacob withheld from his other sons.

This coat--the "**k'tonet pasim**"--is similar to the "**kotnot or**," the *garments of skin* woven for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3), which should be understood as "garments of light". (The words for skin and light are the same, except that the first begins with "**ayin**" and the other with "**aleph**", the two silent letters.) When Jacob made this coat, it was the kind of luxurious garment worn by princesses, that is, the souls in the celestial regions compared to daughters of the King of Kings. --- Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, **Shnei Luchot Ha-Brit**, 17th c. (As noted above, there is also a spiritual connection between father and son; it is as if in giving him this garment, he is expressing a mutual concern with higher matters.)