

WHY THE STORY OF YOSEF MAKES NO SENSE

Vayeshev 5779

I.

THE STORY OF YOSEF and his brothers is one of the best-known Biblical stories – it’s so popular it’s also a musical. And so, it’s really easy for us to turn up this week in *shul* and just know the story. But that’s a problem. Because the story we know isn’t the story the Torah tells. When you look closely at the text itself, it becomes clear very quickly that the narrative is different. In fact, the truth is that there isn’t much of a story *per se*. Because the beginning of *Parashat Vayeshev*, the start of the Yosef story, makes absolutely no sense when you read it and it’s even worse when you stop and think about it. And I want to illustrate this with three examples from the beginning of the Yosef story that we read this morning that show just how nonsensical this story is.

II.

The first is something so obvious but also something we don’t notice. Once Yosef has met up with his brothers and they’ve thrown him in a pit rather than kill him, we read the following:

וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל-לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אַרְבַּת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד ...
הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל-אֶחָיו מַה-בְּצַע כִּי נִהְרַגְתֶּם אֶת-אֶחָיו
וְכִסִּינוּ אֶת-דָּמוֹ: לָכוּ וְנִמְכְּרוּ לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים וַיִּדְנֹה אֶל-תְּהִי-בֹ כִּי-אֶחָיו בְּשָׂרְנוּ הוּא
וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶחָיו:

Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, ... going down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed (Gen. 37:25–27).

Their plan has changed: at the encouragement of Yehudah, the brothers decide that, rather than kill Yosef, they’ll sell him to a band of Yishmaeli spice-bearers travelling down to Egypt. But then, in the very next verse, we read:

וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִדִּינִים סַחְרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִן-הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף
לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף וַיְבִיאוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִצְרַיִם:

When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt (v. 28).

Out of nowhere a different group of merchants appear – not Yishmaelim but Midianim – who pick up Yosef and sell him to the Yishmaelim. What’s going on here? Where do they come from? Why do they suddenly appear and sell Yosef to the Yishmaelim rather than the brothers? It makes no sense!

But wait, there’s more. The final verse in the chapter tells us the following:

וְהַמְדַּנִּים מָכְרוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל-מִצְרַיִם לְפֹטִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרִעֵה שֶׁר הַטַּבָּחִים:

The Midianites, meanwhile, sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward (v. 36).

The Midianim, who we just read picked up Yosef and sold him to the Yishmaelim we are now told sold him to Potiphar in Egypt. So who did the selling? What did the Midianim do, what didn’t they do? What did the Yishmaelim do, what didn’t they do? What did the brothers do, and what didn’t they do? This story makes no sense! It’s all over the place! And this is but the first example of the story’s nonsensical nature!

III.

The second strange feature of the story is its setting. This isn’t clear at all from the verses themselves without a knowledge of the Land of Israel’s geography, but when you have that in mind, there’s another narrative quirk.

We’re told that the brothers go to Shechem to feed their flocks. This makes a lot of sense because the area of Shechem is perfect for pasture. But then, before Yosef even arrives on the scene, we learn that they’ve moved to a place called Dotan. What’s strange is that Dotan isn’t as good a place for pasturing flocks as Shechem. But here’s the thing: Shechem is hill-country, Dotan is flatland. Or, put another way, Dotan is by the road – it’s on the trade route going through Canaan down to Egypt – Shechem is not.

In other words, long before the brothers even know Yosef is coming, long before they even think about selling him, they’ve already positioned themselves – at a disadvantage to what they should be doing – on a trade route that will, conveniently, allow the Yishmaelim (and Midianim) to appear. But, again, this makes no sense! Why are the brothers putting themselves at a disadvantage in order to fulfil the future plot of the story?

IV.

And this brings us to our third and final strange feature of the story. It’s something so clear yet hidden in plain sight. There is one pretty major character missing from this story. Someone who’s not just central to this story but to everything we’ve read: God. We’ve grown so accustomed to coming across Him during *Sefer Bereishit* that His absence here should surprise us. God does not

appear in the entire chapter that starts the Yosef story – and that’s not only strange but pretty rare. Why does God disappear suddenly from the Torah at this point?

V.

The answer to this question explains all the other quirks in the Yosef story. The previous stories in the Torah have all featured God front-and-centre: commanding the *Avot* to do certain things, go to certain places, and act in a certain way. They do very little that doesn’t have God’s direct approval. Even Yaakov, who acts a lot on his own initiative, still gets several conversations with God to approve his actions.

And while there’s a tremendous amount to be learned from everything that has happened until now in the Torah, it’s very different from anything we can experience. But, in contrast, while the details of the Yosef story are aliens to us the general theme of the Yosef story is incredibly familiar. And that’s why the beginning of the story of Yosef is supposed to make no sense. It’s supposed to be an enigma. We’re not supposed to see any rhyme or reason to what’s going on. We’re supposed to think it is utter madness, it’s bizarre, it’s nonsensical – because that is often the case with our own lives.

Things happen that don’t make sense, that don’t follow any order. Many of us act as irrationally as the brothers do when they move from Shechem to Dotan for no valid reason. Many of us can feel like Yosef – that the most significant parts of our lives are at the whim of an unknown and growing amount of people: is it the brothers who sell him? Or the Yishmaelim? Or the Midianim? It doesn’t matter – because the point is that his life, like ours, is very often controlled by the actions of unknown others.

And yet, despite all of this, despite the Yosef story making no sense, the message is clear: God is working behind the scenes, not at the forefront. Though He may be missing from the chapter, He’s still controlling things. The brothers’ actions make no sense because God is making sure they’re on a trade route. It doesn’t matter who gets Yosef to Egypt, all that matters is that he gets there – and God ensures it.

A few weeks from now, in *Parashat Vayiggash*, Yosef himself will acknowledge this – he’ll admit to his brothers that he sees that God’s hand has been directing his whole life. But he never gets to speak to God – unlike his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather; instead, like us, he can only hope, believe, and trust that God is working out his life behind the scenes.

VI.

There’s another, very popular *sefer* in Tanakh that bears this same message. It’s also very strange and bizarre – and get this: it does the same thing as the beginning of the Yosef story and omits the name of God entirely, *Megillat Esther*, the story of Purim. It’s similarity to our *parashah* don’t end there: there are many verses in Esther that uniquely borrow the exact same structure and word-choices of the Yosef story.

But today is not the day before Purim, it’s the day before Chanukah. And tomorrow night as we start lighting our *nerot chanukah* you may wonder: what is so special about a military victory and

the discovery of a pot of oil that compels us to celebrate for eight nights? Okay, the oil lasts longer than it should, but the truth is that Chanukah is about some pretty mundane and not-so-special things: wars are won the whole time, things are found the entire time. Why celebrate?

But that's the point of Chanukah. They are miracles because we celebrate God's actions behind-the-scenes in freeing us and the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. We praise God even when – especially when – we can only feel His presence in the background.

We need to look at the Yosef story – not as it's told on Broadway but in the Torah – and embrace its nonsensicality. Because in doing so we realize that Yosef and his story is our story. And that it's a story of hope. However hidden God may seem, however crazy the world may appear, and however much we often feel at a loss to describe the events around our own lives, God is still directing it, especially when it seems hard to realize.