



Yosef's Father: A Symbol of the Future

R. Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

Parashat VaYeishev 5786

One of the most dramatic turning points in Yosef's life is his fall from a respected and powerful position in Potiphar's house in Egypt to the status of a prisoner in jail. In the Rabbinic tradition, this moment is seen not merely as a downfall but as a moment of personal choice, a point at which Yosef chooses to invest in a future. He chooses active continuity rather than starting anew. Interestingly the character who represents this choice is one from his past: his father.

Yosef, we recall, was sold and taken to Egypt, and seems to be succeeding in his new life. One might wonder why Yosef from this high position does not reach out to his father and home, but the fact that he does not has a clear implication: it seems that Yosef is not looking back. He lives now, seemingly divorced from his past and trying to build a life anew. He imagines he is starting completely over in Egypt with no guardrails from his upbringing or any intention to continue the old mold.

The verses describe Yosef's elevated status in the house of his master:

בראשית לט:א,ד,ו

¹...וַיִּקְנֶהוּ פוֹטִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרֹעֶה שֶׁר הַטַּבָּחִים אִישׁ מִצְרִי ...⁴וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חָן בְּעֵינָיו וַיִּשְׁרֹת אֹתוֹ וַיִּפְקְדֵהוּ עַל



ביתו וכל יש לו נתן בידו: ... ⁶ויעזב כל אשר לו ביד יוסף.

Genesis 39:1,4,6

¹...Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his prefect—an Egyptian—bought him.... ⁴he took a liking to Yosef. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned.... ⁶He left all that he had in Yosef's hands.

Yosef's trustworthiness—and with it, his status and freedom—are described as virtually limitless. But so too is the depth of his fall: “- ויקח אדני יוסף אתו ויתנהו אל בית הסהר - So Yosef's master had him put in prison” (39:20).” Yosef's downfall is triggered when his master's wife confronts him with a demand—one that, if accepted, would constitute a betrayal of his master:

⁷ויהי אחר הדברים האלה ותשא אשת אדניו את עיניה אל יוסף ותאמר שכבה עמי: ⁸וימאן ויאמר אל אשת אדניו הן אדני לא ידע אתי מה בבית וכל אשר יש לו נתן בדי: ⁹איננו גדול בבית הזה ממני ולא חשך ממני מאומה כי אם אותך באשר את אשתו ואיך אעשה הרעה הגדלה הזאת וחטאתי לאלקים: ¹⁰ויהי כדברה אל יוסף יום יום ולא שמע אליה לשכב אצלה להיות עמה:

⁷It was after these things that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Yosef and said, “Lie with me.” ⁸But he refused and said to his master's wife, “Look, with me my master does not know what is in the house and everything that is his he put in my hands, ⁹there is no one greater in this house than me, and he has withheld from me nothing except you—because you are his wife. How can I do this great evil and sin against God?” ¹⁰And much as she coaxed Yosef day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her, to be with her.

“She said, ‘Lie with me.’” Her demand is persistent and unrelenting: “much as she coaxed Yosef day after day...” But Yosef refuses (וימאן)—and not just once. His refusal is repeated, consistent, and firm: “he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.”

The Torah seems to present Yosef's resolve as ironclad: “How then could I do this most wicked



thing, and sin before God?” However, a closer look at the word *vayema'en* (“and he refused”) reveals something else beneath the surface. The cantillation mark (the *te'amim* or *trop*) above this word is the rare *shalsholet*, which appears only four times in the Torah—three of them in Genesis. The *shalsholet* is long and drawn-out, its melody rising and falling in repeated waves. It conveys hesitation, inner turmoil, and emotional struggle. Yosef's refusal, according to this tradition, is a moment of internal conflict, wrestling with the temptation to give in to Potiphar's wife's advances.¹

What runs through Yosef's mind in the moments between the drawn-out hesitation marked by the word *vayema'en*, crowned by the *shalsholet* and the decisive action of “got away and fled outside” (39:12)? The verses suggest two possible sources of inner resistance. The first is Yosef's loyalty to his master: “But he refused. He said to his master's wife, ‘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’” (39:8). The second is Yosef's loyalty to **The** Master: “‘How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?’” (39:9). Yosef recognizes that succumbing to this act would not only be a betrayal of human trust but also a transgression against the Divine.

The Babylonian Talmud offers a third interpretation that is in line with this distinctive *trop* mark. According to this midrashic interpretation, Yosef's father plays a central role—not as a symbol of tradition or moral instruction from the past, but as a figure representing Yosef's potential future.

תלמוד בבלי סוטה לו:

וַיְהִי כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה וַיָּבֹא הַבִּיטָה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָתּוֹ, אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: מְלִמֵּד שְׂשֻׁנִּיהֶם לְדַבֵּר עֲבִירָה נִתְּכָוֹנוּ.

¹ In Genesis 19:16, above the word *וַיִּתְמַהֵּמָה* (“and he lingered”), when Lot hesitates to leave Sodom on the eve of its destruction. In Genesis 24:12, it appears above *וַיֹּאמֶר* (“and he said”), as Abraham's servant turns to God for help in fulfilling the mission assigned to him by his master, Abraham. The third instance is the one above—with Yosef. And the *shalsholet* appears just one more time in the Torah: in Leviticus 8:23. On especially this last *shalsholet*, see the essay on Parashat Tzav of my colleague, R. David Kasher, “Four Links in a Chain,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/four-links-chain>.



Babylonian Talmud Sotah 36b

One such day, he came into the house to do his work” (39:11). R. Yohanan said: This teaches that both Yosef and Potiphar’s wife had intended to commit a transgression.

This *midrash* begins by suggesting that something changed on that particular day. Unlike previous occasions, when Yosef firmly resisted Potiphar’s wife’s advances, this time **he too** came with the intent to give in. This idea is reinforced by the rare *shalshelet* cantillation mark above the word *vayema’en* earlier in the narrative—Yosef hesitates and lingers, and it appears he is on the verge of giving in.²

If, as the *midrash* suggests, Yosef was prepared to yield—what stopped him? Why did he flee at the last moment? The *midrash* continues with its dramatic answer: “בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה בָּאָתָהּ דִּיּוֹקָנוֹ” - שֶׁל אָבִיו וְנִרְאָתָהּ לוֹ בַּחֲלוֹן - At that moment, the image of his father appeared and was visible to him in the window.”

Just as the temptation reaches its peak—when both Potiphar’s wife and Yosef himself are prepared to act—the figure of Ya’akov, Yosef’s father, appears in the window. It is perhaps not surprising that the figure who holds the moral line—the one who calls for ethical behavior and social responsibility, a call likely tinged with some guilt over the very thought of yielding to temptation—is none other than Yosef’s father.³ But the *midrash* does not stop there. The voice of the father that appears to Yosef is not the voice of law, nor the voice of social norms, nor even the voice of tradition. It is a voice turned toward the future.

אָמַר לוֹ יוֹסֵף! עֲתִידִין אַחֲרֶיךָ שֶׁיִּכְתְּבוּ עַל אֲבְרָם אֶפֶוד וְאַתָּה בִּינֵיהֶם, רְצוֹנְךָ שֶׁיִּמְחָה שְׁמֶךָ מִבִּינֵיהֶם?

Ya’akov said to him, “Yosef! Your brothers are destined to be engraved on the stones of the

² The Talmud immediately follows with a debate about Yosef’s true intentions at that moment: “‘And he came into the house to do his work’ (Genesis 39:11)” —Rav and Shmuel disagree: one says it means he came to attend to his actual work; the other says he entered to fulfill his desires.”

³ Or perhaps Yosef, now that he has grown older, sees his own reflection in the window—but now he resembles his father! And perhaps with maturity, Yosef understands aspects of his father that he never understood when he was young, and it is those that he understands now.



ephod, and you will be among them. Do you wish for your name to be erased from their midst?”

This is not simply a rebuke; it is a reminder of destiny. Ya’akov’s intervention speaks to Yosef’s potential role in something larger than himself—a future of shared identity and national purpose. Ya’akov’s image, appearing to his son at the decisive moment, warns Yosef that he is about to make a choice that could erase him from a meaningful future. And this warning certainly surprises Yosef. Intimacy is, of course, deeply tied to the future—and at this moment, Yosef, sold by his brothers, cut off from family and connection, living alone in Egypt, may feel entirely unmoored—nothing but a man of the present. Perhaps, in his mind, lying with this woman might offer some sense of connection, perhaps even a future.

At that moment, according to the *midrash*, the image of Yosef’s father appears—reminding him of his past and declaring that he still has a future in relation with that past. In that future, his brothers have a place—they are inscribed on the stones of the ephod⁴—and Yosef has a place among them. Thus, in this moment, Yosef faces a choice: will he choose a future among his brothers, or will he choose this moment, the present, with Potiphar’s wife?

In a striking reversal, it is the figure of the father—a symbol of the past—who represents the future. And not just the future in general, but Yosef’s ability to participate in it, to take responsibility, to have a voice in shaping what comes next—as one of the names engraved on the ephod stones. If Yosef chooses not to see Ya’akov, not to see the past, he too will not be seen in the future. A refusal to look back becomes a refusal to be visible in the future.

We often think of our parents or ancestors as symbols of the past, who are backward facing, this *midrash* suggests that (only) if we are attentive to the past can we open a door to the future.

⁴ Exodus 28:29. See also Numbers 27:21; perhaps this is not simply a location but also a role.

