

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter IX: Vaveishev (Gen. 37:1–40:23)

Essay 3. Joseph's punishment for the bad reports he brought against his brothers

פסוק "וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת־דְּבָרָם רָעָה" וכו'. פֶּרֶשׁ רַש"י, וּבִשְׁלֹשְׁתָּם לָקָה: עַל דְּבַר שֶׁסָּפַר עֲלֵיהֶם שֶׁהָיוּ אוֹכְלִים אֶבֶר מִן הַחַי וַיִּשְׁחָטוּ שְׁעִיר עֲזִים בְּמַכִּירְתּוֹ וְכו'.

There is a **verse**: “At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah; **and Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.**”¹ **Rashi explains**, based on Gen. Rabbah 84:7:

Whatever he saw wrong in his brothers, the sons of Leah, he reported to his father: that they used to eat flesh [cut off] from a living animal; that they treated the sons of the handmaids with contempt, calling them slaves; and that they were suspected of sexual immorality. **With three such similar matters he was therefore punished. In consequence of his having stated that they used to eat flesh [cut off] from a living animal,**² Scripture states, “**And they slew a he-goat**”³ **upon his sale** and they did not eat its flesh while the animal was still living. And because of the slander which he related about them that they called their brothers slaves, “Joseph was sold for a slave.”⁴ And because he charged them with immorality, “his master’s wife cast her eyes upon him.”⁵

- Rashi on Gen. 37:2

קָשָׁה מֵה גִלְקָה יוֹסֵף בְּשָׁחִיטַת שְׁעִיר זֶה, דְּבִשְׁלֹשָׁם עַל מֵה שֶׁסָּפַר עֲלֵיהֶם שֶׁהָיוּ קוֹרִיין לְאֶחָיו עֲבָדִים גִּיחָא שְׁנַמְכָר לְעֶבֶד. אֲבָל שְׁחִיטַת שְׁעִיר עֲזִים מֵה לְקוֹת הוּא זֶה לְיוֹסֵף אִם אֵם נֶאֱמַר שֶׁשְׁחָטוּהוּ לְפָנָיו קוֹדֵם מַכִּירְתּוֹ. וְעוֹד לְמַה תִּכְף וּמִיָּד שֶׁחָטוּ שְׁעִיר עֲזִים? וְעוֹד צָרִיף עֵינָן בְּמַה שֶׁכָּתַב בְּעַל זֶרַע בְּרָךְ (רִישׁ פְּרִשְׁתׁ שְׁמוֹת) בְּשֵׁם רַבּוֹ מוֹהֲר"ן ז"ל דְּשָׁר גְּדוֹל יֵשׁ בְּרַקִּיעַ אֲמוֹן מִזּוֹא וְהוּא נָשָׂר שֶׁל מְצָרִים וְאֵחָז בְּנֵד יְמִין שְׁעִיר עֲזִים שֶׁהִנֵּה מְקַטְרֵג בָּהּ עַל מַכִּירַת יוֹסֵף שֶׁשְׁחָטוּ שְׁעִיר עֲזִים עַכ"ל. דְּקָשָׁה מֵה לוֹ לִיקַח בְּיָדוֹ דְּנָקָא שְׁעִיר עֲזִים?

A difficulty is how was Joseph punished by the slaughtering of this goat? Granted that because of what he said about them, that they had called their half-brothers by the

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¹ Gen. 37:2.

² Proscribed by Deut. 12:23.

³ Gen. 37:31.

⁴ Ps. 105:17.

⁵ Gen. 39:7.

handmaids “slaves,” it was fair that he was sold as a slave. But regarding the slaughter of a goat, what distress was this to Joseph if it was said that they slaughtered it before him, prior to his sale? That is, they slaughtered the goat in order to dip Joseph’s coat into its blood, with which they would trick their father into believing that Joseph had been killed by an animal. That would cause distress to Jacob, but how would it distress Joseph? Also, why did they immediately sacrifice the goat?

Something else that requires investigation is what the author of the *Zera Berach*⁶ wrote (at the beginning of parashat Shemot) in the name of his teacher, Our Teacher, Rabbi Natan Shapira of blessed memory,⁷ that there’s a great minister in the Heavens, Amon Mino,⁸ and he is the ministering angel of Egypt, and he holds in his right hand a goat. [Amon Mino] was prosecuting Israel by testifying about the sale of Joseph, that they slaughtered a goat. A difficulty is what significance is there for him to specifically take a goat in his hand? I.e., why was he holding a goat, as it was not a principal part of the sale of Joseph, as it was only to trick Jacob.

ולפי מה שנתכתב לקמן על הפסוק "הרעתם אשר עשיתם" שיוסף הנה מתנאה על אחיו באמרו כי אילולי הוא יהיו כלם מסורים ביד עשו. כי יוסף הוא שטנו של עשו, ועשו נקרא שעיר כמו שאמרו במדרש רבה על הפסוק "ונתן אתם על-ראש השעיר" "הו עשו אחי איש שעיר" וכו'. לכן כשאמרוהו מיד שחטו שעיר עזים לפניו לרמוז לו שבגדמם יש פס להציל מיד השעיר על ידי מעשיהם הטובים, כי על ידי השחיטה שהיא מצנה יתחלש פס השעיר.

According to what is written below⁹ on the verse where Joseph had the house steward accuse the brothers of stealing a goblet, “It was a wicked thing for you to do,”¹⁰ that Joseph acted haughty toward his brothers, saying that if not for him, all of them would have been delivered into the hand of Esau. For Joseph was an adversary of Esau, and Esau was called a goat, as they said in Midrash Gen. Rabbah 64:15 on the verse, “Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated agent.”¹¹ The Midrash points out the verse: “Jacob answered his mother Rebekah, ‘But my brother Esau is a hairy man [שער] [sa’ir] and I am smooth-skinned,’ ”¹² in which the word for “goat” is used to designate “a hairy man.”

⁶ Rabbi Berachia Berech ben R’ Yitzchak Izaak Shapiro, *Zera Berech* (Krakow 1646), commentary on the Torah.

⁷ Rabbi Natan Shapira (1585-1633), Polish rabbi and Kabbalist, *Megaleh Amukot* (1637), section 193.

⁸ Amon Mino is mentioned in Jer. 46:25, “The L-rd of Hosts, the G-d of Israel, has said: I will inflict punishment on Amon of No and on Pharaoh—on Egypt, her gods, and her kings—on Pharaoh and all who rely on him.” Abarbanel identifies No as being a great city, with Amon being its king. Rashi identifies No as Alexandria, with Amon its prince. Rabbi Abraham Saba (1440–1508), wrote in *Tzror HaMor* (Venice 1523) that Amon Mino was the ministering angel of Egypt, embodied in a giant crocodile lying in its rivers.

⁹ *Zera Shimshon*, Chapter X, Miketz, essay 14.

¹⁰ Gen. 44:5.

¹¹ Lev. 16:21.

¹² Gen. 27:11.

Therefore, when they sold him, they immediately slaughtered a goat before him, to hint to him that even without him, in their hands there was also the strength to save themselves from the hand of the goat, i.e., from Esau. This was because of their good actions, namely by their ritual slaughter, for even though their main intent for the goat was to dip Joseph's coat in its blood, they slaughtered the goat according to the laws of kashrut, which was a mitzvah. Thus, they would weaken the power of the goat, i.e., Esau.

וּכְלָפִי מֵהַ שְׂפָתָיו הַמְּפָרְשִׁים שְׁטַעַם אִיסוּר אֲבָר מִן הַחַי הוּא כְּדֵי שֶׁלֹּא יִתְהַוֶּה בְּנוֹ מִדַּת אֲכִלְיֹת הַמְּגוּנָה. יֵשׁ לוֹמֵר שִׁיּוֹסֵף סִפֵּר לְאָבִיו שֶׁהָיוּ אוֹכְלִים אֲבָר מִן הַחַי שֶׁהָיָה מְתִירָא פֶּן יִחְשׁוּב אָבִיו בְּלִבּוֹ שֶׁהִטְעַם שֶׁכָּל אֲחָיו שׁוֹנְאִים לְיוֹסֵף יִהְיֶה מִחֲמַת שֶׁרָאוּ בּוֹ אִיזוֹ עֲבִירָה שֶׁמִּצְנָה לְשִׁנְאוֹתוֹ כְּדִאֲמַרִּינֵן בְּפִסְחִים. וְשָׂמָא גַם הוּא יִשְׁנֵאֵהוּ כְּמוֹתָם, לְכֵן הִבִּיא דְבַתָּם שֶׁהָיוּ אוֹכְלִים אֲבָר מִן הַחַי לְרַמּוֹז לֹ שֶׁזֶה אֵינוֹ אֵלָּא מִחֲמַת טַבַּע הָאֲכִלְיֹת הַנּוֹלֵד בָּהֶם בְּאֲכִילַת אֲבָר מִן הַחַי.

According to what the commentators wrote, the reason for the prohibition of flesh [cut off] from a living animal is that there should not emerge in us the character of disgusting cruelty.¹³ It can be said that Joseph told his father that they were eating flesh [cut off] from a living animal, because he was afraid lest his father think in his heart that the reason that all his brothers hated Joseph would be because they saw in him some violation of a mitzvah for which they should hate him, as it says in tractate Pesachim.¹⁴ Lest [Jacob] hate him too as they [hate him], therefore he brought a bad report of them, that they were eating flesh [cut off] from a living animal. That was to hint to [Jacob] that [they didn't hate him because of some violation of a mitzvah,] but because of the cruel nature that was created within them by eating flesh [cut off] from a living animal.

אָמְנָם עָתָה בְּמִכִּירְתּוֹ רְצוֹ לְהִרְאוֹת לוֹ שֶׁאֲדַרְבָּא הֵם מִתְנַהֲגִים בְּמִדַּת הַרְחֻמְנוּת, וְהוּא סִימֵן שֶׁלֹּא אֲכָלוּ אֲבָר מִן הַחַי, שֶׁהָרִי הֵם שׁוֹחֲטִים אֶת הַשְּׁעִיר לְפִי שֶׁדָּמוֹ דּוֹמֵה לְדַם אָדָם. וּבְזֶה יִהְיֶה סוֹבֵר יַעֲקֹב שֶׁ"חַיָּה רַעָה אֲכָלְתָּהּ", דָּאֵם אֵיתָא שִׁיּוֹסֵף הָיָה צָדִיק לֹא הָיָה לוֹ לִיעֲקֹב לְעֵלוֹת בְּדַעְתּוֹ סְבָרָא זֶה כָּלֵל, שֶׁהָרִי קִיַּמָּא לֵן אִין חַיָּה רַעָה שׁוֹלֵטָת בְּאָדָם אֵלָּא אֵם פֶּן נִדְמָה לוֹ כְּכֹהֵם, אֵלָּא וְדַאי צָרִיד לוֹמֵר שֶׁלְּפִי מַעֲשָׂיו הָיָה חַיָּב מִיתָה, שֶׁהִסְפִּיר לְשׁוֹן הָרַע רָאוּי לְהַשְׁלִיכוֹ לְכַלְבִּים, וּמִן הַדִּין הָיוּ יְכוּלִים הֵם לְהַרְגוֹ, וְיֵמָה שֶׁמְכָרוּהוּ לֹא הָיָה אֵלָּא מִמִּדַּת רְחֻמְנוּת, וְיוֹסֵף נִלְקָה שֶׁנִּתְפָּרַס בְּמַעֲשֵׂה זֶה שֶׁהוּא חָטָא וְסִפֵּר לְשׁוֹן הָרַע עָלֵיהֶם.

Actually, now by selling him they wanted to show him that, to the contrary, they were behaving according to the attribute of mercy. [Their action] was a sign that they did not eat flesh [cut off] from a living animal, since they ritually slaughtered the goat in accordance with halacha, in order to dip Joseph's coat in its blood, as its blood is similar in appearance to human blood.

¹³ Sefer haChinuch, parashat Re'eh, mitzva 454; Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed [Moreh Nevuchim]*, 3:48.

¹⁴ Pesachim 113b: "Rabbi Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak said that Rav said: [Although one who sees another committing a sin should not testify against him by himself,] he is [nonetheless] permitted to hate him, as it is stated: 'If you see the donkey of he who hates you lying under its load' (Ex. 23:5)."

In this regard, Jacob would think, “A savage beast devoured him,”¹⁵ for if Joseph had been righteous, Jacob wouldn’t have had this idea in his mind at all, for we maintain as Rami bar Abba taught that there is a savage beast does not overpower a man unless he appears to it as an animal.¹⁶

Rather, certainly it needs to be said that according to his actions, he was liable to receive the death penalty, for one who speaks derogatory statements [*lashon ha’ra*] deserves to be thrown to the dogs.¹⁷ According to the law, they could have killed him, and thus selling him was nothing other than the attribute of mercy, and Joseph was punished that this action would be publicized, that he had sinned and spoke derogatory statements against them.

ובנה ותורץ למה אותו השר היה לוקח בידו ונקא שער לקטרג וכו', מפני שהשכטים שחטו השעיר לרמוז שיש בידם מצות להנצל מעשו, ולאחר מיתתם שלא היה בישראל כל כך זכות אז לקח בידו השעיר וכו'.

In this way will be solved why the ministering angel of Egypt specifically held in his hand a goat to prosecute Israel for the sale of Joseph, because the tribes had slaughtered the goat to hint that they had in their hands the mitzvot to save from Esau. After their deaths, when Israel didn’t have so much merit, then the ministering angel took in his hand the goat to prosecute Israel.

ועדיין יש לדקדק על מה שכתב שעל הדבה שחשודים על העריות "ותשא אשת-אדניו את-עיניה" וכו'. והלא אדרבא זה היה שבת לו שזכה למלוכה בשביל זה, כמו שאמרו במדרש רבה, פה שלא נשק בעבירה וכו'.

We still need to check what [Rashi] wrote in his Torah commentary, that because of the reports that Joseph brought to his father, that [his brothers] were suspected of sexual immorality, “his master’s wife cast her eyes upon him.” On the contrary, it was a praise for him that he merited to be vizier because of this, as they said in Midrash won the kingship for this, as they said in the Midrash Rabbah, “a mouth that did not kiss sinfully, ‘by your mouth you shall kiss [i.e., command] all my people.’”¹⁸

ונש לומר מפל מקום "מידי הרהור לא נצא", בנדאמרין בסוטה מלמד שעלו שניהם למטה ערומים וכו'. ועוד שהיה לו בושת מהלעז שהיו העולם סוברים שהוא רצה לשכב עמה והיא לא רצתה, ועוד שבשביל זה ישב כמה שנים בבית האסורים. ועוד דאמרין בפרק ז' דסוטה ראויה היה יוסף לצאת ממנו י"ב שבטים כשם שיצאו מעקב אביו, אלא שיצא לו ורעו מבין צפרני ידיו, כדכתיב "ויפזו זרעי ידיו" וכו'.

It can be said that in any case, even “if he emerged from the grasps of [actual] transgression, he did not emerge from the grasps of thoughts [of transgression],”¹⁹ For as we

¹⁵ Gen. 37:33.

¹⁶ Shabbat 151b.

¹⁷ Pesachim 118a.

¹⁸ Gen. Rabbah 90:3 (quoting Gen. 41:40); Lev. Rabbah 23:9 and Num. Rabbah 14:7 include the same teaching.

¹⁹ Cf. Shabbat 64a; Kallah 2:1.

said in tractate Sotah, “we learned that the two of them went downstairs naked,” i.e., both Joseph and Potiphar’s wife initially intended to sin.²⁰

Furthermore, he was ashamed of the slander that the world believed, that he wanted to sleep with her, but that she did not want to do so, and also that for this reason he sat for several years in the prison.

Furthermore, as it is said in the 7th chapter of tractate Sotah, “Joseph deserved that 12 tribes would issue from him, just as they issued from his father Jacob . . . , but he did not merit this because his semen was emitted from between his fingernails,”²¹ as it is written, “and his arms became firm.”²²

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²⁰ The quotation is from Judah Loew ben Bezalel (“Maharal of Prague”) (c.1512–1609), *Netivot Olam*, Netiv Ahavat Hashem 2. Sotah 36b: “ ‘And it came to pass on a certain day, when he went into the house to do his work’ (Gen. 39:11). Rabbi Yochanan says: This teaches that both [Joseph and Potiphar’s wife stayed in the house, as they] intended to [perform] a matter of sin.” See also Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeishev, 9:1–2.

²¹ Sotah 36b.

²² Gen. 49:24.