

# TRAGIC SHECHEM

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Vayeishev

## Tragic Shechem

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Today's Learning:  
Tanach: Melachim I 13-14  
Mishnah: Shevi'it 4:9-10  
Halachah: O.C. 575:12-576:1  
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Zevachim 17  
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Ma'aser Sheni 18

Near the end of this week's parashah, we find Yosef telling Pharaoh's Cupbearer (40:15), "For indeed I was kidnaped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing for them to have put me in the pit." Why, asks R' Yehonatan Eyebchutz z"l (1690-1764; Central European rabbi and rosh yeshiva and prolific author), did Yosef mention to the cupbearer that he had been kidnaped from the land of the Hebrews (i.e., Eretz Yisrael)?

R' Eyebchutz explains: The pious men of old would, from time-to-time, leave society and live in caves or other lonely places in order to meditate on spiritual matters and distance themselves from sin. Thus we read, for example, that the prophet cried (Yirmiyah 9:1), "If only someone would give me a travelers' lodge in the wilderness . . ." Likewise, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai spent years in a cave. Was that the only place he could find to hide from the Romans? Rather, he hid in a cave by choice, and he therefore rose to greatness.

R' Eyebchutz continues: Yosef should have wanted to remain in prison, where he was removed from society, serving Hashem in poverty and privation. Indeed, we read about Yosef's imprisonment (in our parashah - 39:21), "Hashem was with Yosef." In contrast, when Yosef circulated in society, his physical beauty lead him and others to temptation [as related in our parashah and in Rashi to Bereishit 49:22].

Why, then, did Yosef want to leave prison? Because, he explained to the cupbearer, his true place was in Eretz Yisrael. That is where a person can achieve true spiritual growth. As long as Yosef remained in prison, he had no hope of ever returning to the Holy Land. [As it turned out, Hashem had other plans for Yosef.] (Ya'arot Devash Vol. I, No. 14)

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"Now Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his sons since he was a child of his old age, and he made him a ketonet pasim / fine woolen tunic." (37:3)

Rabbeinu Machir z"l Hy"d (14th century) writes: "Pasim" is an acronym for the four individuals or groups that persecuted Yosef: Potiphar, the socharim / merchants, the Yishmaelim, and the Midyanim. (Avkat Rocheil)

R' Raphael Emanuel Chai Riki z"l (1688-1743; author of Mishnat Chassidim and other works) offers another interpretation: "Pasim" is an acronym for the four dreamers who changes Yosef's life: Pharaoh; the Salai / basket-man, an allusion to the baker who dreamed that birds were eating bread out of a basket on his head; Yosef himself; and the Mashkeh / cupbearer. The reason the baker is referred to anonymously as the "basket-man" and not by his occupation of "baker" is because his dream foreshadowed his disappearance from the world, i.e., his death. (Chosheiv Machashavot)

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"So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father shamar / kept the matter in mind (literally, 'guarded the matter')." (37:11)

Rashi z"l explains: "He awaited and looked forward to the time when this would come to pass."

It is said in the name of R' Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov z"l (founder of the chassidic movement; died 1760) that it is in the same sense that King Shlomo wrote (Kohelet 8:5), "Shomer mitzvah / One who

'guards' a mitzvah will know no evil." This means that a person who is constantly looking for and anticipating opportunities to perform mitzvot will experience protection from evil. At a minimum, the Ba'al Shem Tov teaches, a person should not permit a single day to pass without performing some mitzvah. (Tzava'at Ha'Rivash No. 17)

R' Shalom Schwadron z"l (1912-1997; the Maggid of Yerushalayim) related that he learned from the following story how one can turn even his mundane daily activities into mitzvot:

One day, R' Schwadron was walking with R' Elya Lopian z"l (1872-1970; one of the elders of the mussar movement) when they saw a Jewish worker patching potholes in the street. R' Lopian said to R' Schwadron, "Look at this Jew who is engaged full-time in the performance of a mitzvah, specifically, the mitzvah of building Eretz Yisrael. Only one thing is missing; he does not intend to do his work for the sake of performing a mitzvah, but only to earn a living."

Similarly, said R' Schwadron, R' Yehuda Leib Chasman z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the Chevron Yeshiva; died 1936) writes about a night watchman who roams the city looking out for fires and other potential disasters. The night watchman could turn his entire night into one long mitzvah, if only his primary intent were to perform chessed for the townsfolk, while the thought of receiving a salary was secondary. Unfortunately, most night watchmen think only of their wages and lose out entirely on the mitzvah they could be performing. (Quoted in Kol Chotzeiv)

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"For indeed I was kidnaped from the land of the Hebrews . . ." (40:15)

R' Moshe Zuriel shlita (former mashgiach ruchani of Yeshivat Sha'alvim) writes: At first glance, the sin of Yosef's brothers was kidnaping. However, some kabbalists say that the true severity of their sin was due to the fact that they deprived a tzaddik of the opportunity to live in Eretz Yisrael.

R' Zuriel continues: The Zohar Chadash teaches that the reason Bnei Yisrael were in exile in Egypt for 210 years was that Yosef's 10 brothers -- Binyamin did not participate -- forced Yosef to be separated from his family for 22 years (10 x 22 = 220). From this, Hashem subtracted 10 years as compensation for the pain that the 10 brothers felt as a result of dying outside of Eretz Yisrael, leaving a "sentence" of 210 years. (Drishat Zion)

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"Yet the Officer of the Cupbearers did not remember Yosef, but he forgot him." (40:23)

Our Sages say that Yosef was punished for placing his reliance on the cupbearer to bring about his rescue. Many commentaries ask: Is not a person obligated to make an effort ("hishtadlut") to care for himself and not sit back and wait for miracles? R' Baruch Sorotzkin z"l (1917-1979; rosh yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland) answers: The obligation of hishtadlut ends at the moment that a ray of

salvation appears on the horizon. As soon as one sees that G-d "remembers" him, one should cease his efforts and rely on G-d. Here, Yosef should have recognized that his entire encounter with the Egyptians and their dreams was for the purpose of causing his rescue; therefore, he should not have asked the Egyptian to rescue him. (Ha'binah Ve'ha'berachah)

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## Tragic Shechem

"Yisrael said to Yosef, 'Your brothers are pasturing in Shechem, are they not? Come, I will send you to them.' . . . So he sent him from the valley of Chevron, and he arrived at Shechem." (37:13-14)

Rashi z"l comments: A place ready to be the scene of misfortunes; there the sons of Yaakov sinned, there Dinah was mistreated, there the kingdom of the House of David was divided, as it is written (Melachim I 12:1) "Rechavam went to Shechem . . ."

In Parashat Lech Lecha (12:6-7) we read that Avraham Avinu made Shechem his first stop in Eretz Yisrael, and he built an altar there. Rashi explains that Avraham prayed for his great-grandchildren who would fight against Shechem.

R' Moshe Wolfson shlita (mashgiach ruchani of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, N.Y.) writes that the various tragic events that occurred in Shechem are interrelated. He explains: It was in Shechem that Hashem appeared to Avram (Avraham) and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." Why? Because Yosef was the first Jew in history who was forcibly exiled from Eretz Yisrael, and that incident began in Shechem.

Avraham was the first person who left Eretz Yisrael intending to return. The halachah is that one who leaves the Holy Land intending to return retains the status of a resident. For this reason, the Jewish nation as a whole is considered to be resident in Eretz Yisrael at all times. (Of course, R' Wolfson writes, no individual fulfills his mitzvah to live in Eretz Yisrael unless he is physically there.) This status results from the promise that Hashem made to Avraham at Shechem: "To your offspring I will give this land."

Nevertheless, when one leaves Eretz Yisrael, the reality is that he is no longer in G-d's "abode." This is what happened to Yosef. In a similar sense, when Dinah left home to sightsee around Shechem, she left the confines of Hashem's abode, i.e., Yaakov's home, to go out into the impure world. Notably, the initials of the words (34:1), "She went out -- Dinah, the daughter of Leah," are (in reverse) "levado" / "Alone." She separated herself from Hashem and went alone. But, there is also an allusion here to the verse (Yishayah 2:11), "Hashem levado / alone will be exalted on that day." This refers to the time when the entire world will be recognized as Hashem's world; there will no longer be one "abode" that is His and one that appears not to be His.

Yosef did eventually return to Eretz Yisrael, but only after his death. Where was he buried? In

Shechem. Yosef's two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, also were buried in Shechem. Not coincidentally, a midrash states that they were the grandsons of Dinah and Shechem, for Dinah bore a daughter who eventually grew-up in the house of Potiphar and married Yosef. [Ed. note: R' Wolfson does not explain how the division of Eretz Yisrael into a northern and southern kingdom relates to this theme. A possible connection is the fact that the tribes that separated from the Davidic dynasty were exiled long before the tribes that did not.] (Tzion V'areha p.180)

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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