

**37** Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This, then, is the line of Jacob:

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. <sup>3</sup>Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his

וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מְגֹרֵי אָבִיו  
בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן: <sup>2</sup>אֵלֶּה | תְּלֻדֹת יַעֲקֹב  
יוֹסֵף בֶּן־שִׁבְעֵ-עָשָׂרָה שָׁנָה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת־  
אָחָיו בְּצֹאן וְהוּא נֶעַר אֶת־בְּנֵי בְלָהָה  
וְאֶת־בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה וְלָפָּה נָשִׂי אָבִיו וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף  
אֶת־דִּבְרֹתָם רָעָה אֶל־אֲבִיהֶם: <sup>3</sup>וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל  
אֶהָב אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִכָּל־בָּנָיו כִּי־בֶן־זִקְנָיִם

### PROLOGUE TO THE JOSEPH STORY (37:1–36)

The story of Joseph and his brothers initiates the chain of events that leads to the descent to Egypt. It is the prelude to the drama of oppression and redemption that constitutes the central motif of biblical theology.

#### THE BEGINNING OF HOSTILITY (vv. 1–4)

**1. Now Jacob was settled in the land** In contrast to Esau, who had migrated. The specific reference is to the Hebron region (see v. 14).

**where his father had sojourned** That is, the land of Canaan. Only Isaac, of the three Patriarchs, had never left it.

**2. This, then, is the line of Jacob** Mention of Joseph and his brothers here is, in effect, an abbreviated genealogy, the full version of which was already listed in 35:22–26.

**as a helper to the sons of** He was an assistant to Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. The word translated as “to” (*et*) often means “with.” Here it has the meaning of “subordinate to.”

**Bilhah and Zilpah** The order of the wives is here reversed, because Joseph would have been closer to Bilhah, his late mother's maid. The concubines, until now referred to as “maid-servants” when mentioned together with Rachel and Leah, are here called “wives.” This may indicate a new status acquired after their mistresses had died, as Ramban suggests.

**bad reports of them** The content of the “reports” is not given. This is the first of several causes of simmering enmity between Joseph and his brothers.

**3. Israel loved Joseph best** Jacob's favoritism is understandable, because Joseph was the

### CHAPTER 37

The story of Joseph occupies the last four *parashiyot* of Genesis, the longest single narrative in the book. It is the story of a young man blessed by God with a special grace, so that no matter what misfortunes befall him, he is able to surmount them. But it is also a story of unintended consequences, of an effort to do harm that ended up doing good and of an apparent triumph that set the stage for the Israelites' descent into slavery. “On the surface, the actors in the story make their own way in life. In fact, however, it transpires that it is Divine Providence that is carrying out, through mankind, its own predestined plan” (N. Leibowitz).

**1. Jacob was settled** Jacob thought he was going to settle down after all he had been through, but events would not permit him to

(Rashi). We often think that, once we reach a certain milestone, we will be able to settle down to a life free of challenges. But life never promised to be tranquil. The Sages see this “settling” (*va-yeishev*), as an effort to disengage from the problems of living. Zornberg comments, “The full tension of composure and discomposure, of order and disorder in the world is felt most acutely by the righteous, by those whose sense of beauty and desire for order exposes them to the shock of reality.” Esau, by contrast, “settles” in the land of Seir without incident (Gen. 36:8).

Joseph, the favored child, apparently felt closer to his father than to his siblings. A *mid-rash* suggests that the “bad reports” had to do with the sons of Leah mistreating the sons of the lower-caste wives (Gen. R. 84:7).

sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic. <sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: <sup>7</sup>There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf." <sup>8</sup>His

הוא לו ועשה לו כְּתֹנֶת פְּסִים: <sup>4</sup>וַיִּרְאוּ אָחָיו כִּי־אָתוֹ אָהַב אָבִיהֶם מִכָּל־אָחָיו וַיִּשְׂנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוּ לְשָׁלָם: וַיִּחְלֶם יוֹסֵף יוֹסֵף חֲלוֹם וַיַּגִּד לְאָחָיו וַיּוֹסְפוּ עוֹד שָׁנְאָ אֹתוֹ: <sup>6</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם שְׁמְעוּ נָא הַחֲלוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חֲלַמְתִּי: <sup>7</sup>וְהִנֵּה אֲנִיחֲנוּ מֵאֲלָמִים אֲלָמִים בְּתוֹךְ הַשָּׂדֶה וְהִנֵּה קָמָה אֲלַמְתִּי וְגַם־נִצְבָּה וְהִנֵּה תִסְבְּינָה אֲלַמְתֵּיכֶם וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶינּוּ לְאֲלַמְתִּי: <sup>8</sup>וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אָחָיו הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ אִם־מָשׁוּל תִּמְשָׁל בָּנוּ

son of his beloved wife Rachel, born after years of heartbreaking frustration. This partiality is the second cause of enmity between Joseph and his brothers.

*Israel* Throughout the narrative the two names of the patriarch are interchanged indiscriminately.

*the child of his old age* He was the last of the sons to be born in Paddan-aram.

*an ornamented tunic* Such a tunic was a mark of high social standing, as is known from Assyrian inscriptions. Egyptian tomb paintings show Semitic men and women wearing multi-colored tunics draped over one shoulder and reaching below the knees. Syrian ambassadors dressed in elaborately designed long robes wrapped around the body and over the shoul-

ders. Others interpret it as a sleeved garment, a tunic reaching the wrists and the ankles.

*4. speak a friendly word* They rebuffed every attempt by Joseph to be friendly.

#### JOSEPH'S DREAMS (vv. 5–11)

Everywhere in the ancient Near East dreams were recognized as a means of divine communication. It was assumed that dreams foretold events.

#### THE FIRST DREAM (vv. 5–8)

*5. to his brothers* He did not tell his father, who does not figure in the first dream.

*7. stood up . . . bowed low* A clear assertion of authority by Joseph and of submission on the part of his brothers.

*3. child of his old age* Benjamin was in fact younger, causing Rashi to understand these words (*ben z'kunim*) as "a child with the mature wisdom of an older person." Or possibly, Joseph could be playful with children and mature in the company of adults (*K'li Yakar*).

*Israel loved Joseph best* "See the consequences of favoring one child over another. Because of those few ounces of wool [the 'coat of many colors' Jacob gave Joseph], our people were enslaved in Egypt" (BT Shab. 10b). One would expect Jacob of all people, having suffered the consequences of parental favoritism, to avoid repeating his parents' mistake. Perhaps it is easier for us to see a problem intellectually than to free ourselves of the tendency to imitate our parents.

5. Why does Joseph tell his brothers his

dream, which will only inflame their jealousy? Because he was too young and naive to anticipate their reaction (Sforno; also Hirsch, who sees Joseph's immaturity as the result of growing up without a mother)? Because he thought they would respect him more if they knew that his eminence was God's will (*Hizz'kuni*)? Or perhaps because he thought the dream was a message from God, and a prophet may not withhold God's message, whatever the consequences for him personally (Vilna Gaon). Zornberg sees the adolescent Joseph "behaving with the narcissism of youth, with a dangerous unawareness of the feelings of others." Years later, the vicissitudes of life will have matured him to the point where he could look at a person's face and ask, "Why do you appear downcast today?" (Gen. 40:7).

brothers answered, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.

<sup>9</sup>He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” <sup>10</sup>And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. “What,” he said to him, “is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?” <sup>11</sup>So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.

<sup>12</sup>One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father’s flock at Shechem, <sup>13</sup>Israel said to Joseph, “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He

ויוספו עוד שָׁנָא אֹתוֹ עַל-חֲלֻמֹתָיו וְעַל-דְּבָרָיו:

<sup>9</sup>וַיַּחְלֵם עוֹד חֲלוֹם אַחֵר וַיְסַפֵּר אֹתוֹ לְאָחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה חֲלֻמֹתַי חֲלוֹם עוֹד וְהִנֵּה הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְאַחַד עָשָׂר כּוֹכָבִים מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לִי: <sup>10</sup>וַיְסַפֵּר אֶל-אָבִיו וְאֶל-אָחָיו וַיַּגְעֲרֻבוּ אֹבָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ מָה הַחֲלוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חֲלַמְתָּ הֲבֹא נִבּוֹא אֲנִי וְאִמִּי וְאָחֶיךָ לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לָךְ אַרְצָה: <sup>11</sup>וַיִּקְנְאוּבוּ אָחָיו וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת-הַדָּבָר:

<sup>12</sup>וַיִּלְכְּדוּ אָחָיו לְרַעוּת אֹתוֹ\* צֹאן אָבִיהֶם בְּשֶׁבֶם: <sup>13</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא אָחֶיךָ רְעִים בְּשֶׁכֶם לָכֵה וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ

v. 12. נקוד על א' ת'

**8. And they hated him** The phrase is repeated three times, suggesting an increasing hostility.

**for his talk about his dreams** Some commentators believe that this refers to the boastful way he recounted them.

**dreams** The plural either anticipates the second dream or implies a previous, unreported history of similar dreams.

THE SECOND DREAM (vv. 9–11)

**9. another dream** In the literature of the ancient Near East there are descriptions of repeated dreams in which one symbol is successively substituted for another, although the basic meaning and theme remain the same. In the Joseph narratives, dreams come in pairs to demonstrate their seriousness.

**the sun** This dream, with its celestial setting, presents Joseph’s innermost thoughts and aspirations in a clear and distinct manner, and includes his parents among those who are to be subservient to him.

**stars** The symbolism is probably suggested by the repeated image comparing the Israelites to the stars of the heavens.

**10. and brothers** For the second time, Joseph recounts his dream, this time in the presence of his father as well. On the second occasion, the brothers are ominously silent.

**berated him** This was done publicly, in the hope of easing the tension and curbing Joseph’s sense of self-importance.

**your mother** To reconcile this with the death of Rachel (35:19), some see this either as a dream distortion or as a reference to Joseph’s stepmother Bilhah.

**to the ground** Joseph did not utter this phrase. Jacob, in adding it, echoes the manner in which he himself made obeisance to his brother Esau (33:3).

**11. his brothers were wrought up** The repetition of the dream has validated its message. The brothers now look on Joseph with hatred.

THE SALE OF JOSEPH (vv. 12–36)

**12. his brothers** Joseph did not go with them, perhaps because he was exempt from labor.

**at Shechem** Being pastoral nomads, the brothers move from one area to another to secure pasturage for their livestock. The region around Shechem has rich soil and an adequate water supply.

**13. I will send you to them** The brothers had hidden their true feelings about Joseph. Otherwise, Jacob would not have sent him to them—and Joseph would not have gone so eagerly.

answered, "I am ready."<sup>14</sup> And he said to him, "Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

When he reached Shechem,<sup>15</sup> a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, "What are you looking for?"<sup>16</sup> He answered, "I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?"<sup>17</sup> The man said, "They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan." So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.

<sup>18</sup>They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him.<sup>19</sup> They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer!"<sup>20</sup> Come now, let us kill him and

אֲלֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַנְּנִי: <sup>14</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֶךְ-  
נָא רְאֵה אֶת-שְׁלוֹם אַחֶיךָ וְאֶת-שְׁלוֹם  
הַצֹּאן וְהַשְּׂבִינִי דְבַר וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ מֵעִמְק  
חֶבְרוֹן

וַיָּבֹא שְׂכֵמָה: <sup>15</sup> וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָנָה  
תַּעֲה בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר  
מִהֲתִבְקֶשׁ: <sup>16</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת-אֲחֵי אָנֹכִי  
מִבְּקֶשׁ הַגִּידָה-נָא לִי אֵיפֹה הֵם רְעִים:  
<sup>17</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה בִּי שְׂמַעְתִּי  
אֲמַרִים גֹּלְכָה דַתִּינָה וַיִּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֲרֵ  
אָחָיו וַיִּמְצְאֵם בְּדוֹתָן:

<sup>18</sup> וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרְחֹק וּבְטָרִם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם  
וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ: <sup>19</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ  
אֶל-אָחָיו הִנֵּה בָעַל הַחֲלָמוֹת הַלְזָה בָּא:  
<sup>20</sup> וְעַתָּה | לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ וְנִשְׁלַחְהוּ בְּאֶחָד

**14. bring me back word** Jacob is anxious about the well-being of his sons.

**valley of Hebron** A name found nowhere else. Hebron itself was located on a hill. The cave of Machpelah, in which Abraham was buried, was in a field outside the city and the text may be referring to that area.

**Hebron . . . Shechem** A distance of some 50 miles (80 km). The south–north watershed road that traversed the central hill country connected these two cities. It split into two at Shechem, one branch turning northwest to Dothan (v. 17).

**When he reached Shechem** A journey of about five days by foot.

**15. a man** The exchange between Joseph and the man is reported only in briefest outline. The stranger surely must have asked for the identity of the brothers, if only to be of help.

**17. Dothan** An ancient fortress town about 13 miles (21 km) northwest of Shechem, lying in a valley known for its rich pasture land.

**18. They saw him from afar** The mere glimpse of Joseph incites the murderous hatred of the brothers, who are now far away from their father's restraining presence.

**20. kill him** The verb translated as "kill" (הרג), which connotes ruthless violence, is the same verb used when Cain slays Abel.

**14. see how your brothers are** Literally, "see the *shalom* (the integrity and the peacefulness) of your brothers." Why does Jacob send his favorite son on this dangerous venture? "You who complained about them and brought back bad reports (v. 2), go and discover their admirable qualities" (Simḥah Bunem).

**15. a man** Maimonides takes this stranger to be an angel, sent to make sure that Joseph would not give up on his mission when he could not find his brothers immediately. A modern scholar has noted that Dothan (v. 17) was a city, not a place of pasture. Perhaps Joseph discovered that his brothers were neglecting the sheep to explore the pleasures of the city, and it was to

hide this embarrassing disclosure as well as for reasons of jealousy that they were moved to get rid of him.

We never hear of this man again. Yet if Joseph had not met him, he never would have found his brothers. He never would have been sold into slavery. The family would not have followed him into Egypt. There would have been no Exodus. The history of the world would have been so different! Could that man have known how his chance encounter changed history? Do we ever know the consequences of the little acts of thoughtfulness we perform?

throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!”<sup>21</sup> But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.”<sup>22</sup> And Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father.<sup>23</sup> When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing,<sup>24</sup> and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from

הַבְּרוֹת וְאָמְרָנוּ חַיָּה רָעָה אֶכְלֶתְהוּ וְנִרְאָה מִהֵיְהִי חֵלְמֵתָיו: <sup>21</sup> וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיִּצְלָהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נִבְנוּ נַפְשׁ: <sup>22</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם | רְאוּבֵן אֶל־תִּשְׁפְּכוּדָם הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בַּמִּדְבָּר וְיָד אֶל־תִּשְׁלַחוּבוּ לְמַעַן הֲצִיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ אֶל־אָבִיו: <sup>23</sup> וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר־בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל־אָחָיו וַיִּפְשְׁטוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף אֶת־כִּתְנֵתוֹ אֶת־כִּתְנֵת הַפְּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו: <sup>24</sup> וַיִּקְחֵהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ הַבְּרָה וְהַבּוֹר רֶק אֵין בוֹ מַיִם: <sup>25</sup> וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל־לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם

**one of the pits** These were cisterns hewn out of rock intended for gathering and storing water in the rainy season. At times murderers may have slaughtered their victims near such pits, which varied in depth from 16 to 24 feet, to dispose of the corpses there.

**21. when Reuben heard it** Being the firstborn, he would surely bear the main share of blame for any misfortune that befell Joseph.

**he tried to save him** The Hebrew verb *vayatzileihu*, “he saved him,” also can mean “he came to the rescue.”

**Let us not** That is, “We shall not!” Reuben speaks with a decisiveness that tolerates no opposition. The use of the first person plural makes clear that this is to be their collective decision. Indeed, the brothers do not say another word.

**22. Reuben went on** He pauses for his words to take effect and then continues.

**Shed no blood** By using the Hebrew second person plural in addressing them, he dissociates himself from them and emphasizes his loathing for the idea.

**out in the wilderness** The abundant, unin-

habited pasture land in the region of Dothan. The brothers believe that Joseph will die of hunger and exposure; Reuben thinks he can rescue him somehow without their noticing.

**23. the ornamented tunic** The explanatory comment is necessary in light of verse 33.

**24. cast him into the pit** The narrative tells us nothing here of Joseph’s reactions to their deeds, although it is clear from 42:21 that he pleaded to be released.

**no water in it** This is a necessary observation, because such pits were dug largely for water storage.

**25. sat down to a meal** They ate in callous indifference to their brother’s anguished pleas. Reuben, in the meantime, leaves (v. 29).

**a caravan of Ishmaelites** Apparently, they buy Joseph, take him down to Egypt (v. 28), and sell him to Potiphar (39:1). In verse 28, however, it is Midianite traders (or “Medanites”) who are said to have sold Joseph to Potiphar (v. 36). Rashi suggests that Joseph probably was traded several times. Some modern commentators explain the discrepancy as being the result of different traditions.

21. Reuben’s relationship with Joseph may have been the most complicated of any of the brothers. As the eldest son, he would be held responsible for what happened. Moreover, Joseph, as the firstborn son of the favored wife,

would be Reuben’s chief rival for family supremacy (Hirsch).

25. they sat down to a meal This detail not only conveys the callousness of the brothers but foreshadows the consequences of their action.

Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>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.

<sup>29</sup>When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes. <sup>30</sup>Returning to his brothers, he said, “The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?” <sup>31</sup>Then they took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered

וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אֲרֻחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בְּאֶה מִגְלָעָד וּגְמֻלֵיהֶם נִשְׂאִים נִכְאֹת וְצָרִי וְלֹט הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִמָּה: <sup>26</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל־אָחָיו מִה־בְּצַע בִּי נִהְרַג אֶת־אָחִינוּ וְכִסִּינוּ אֶת־דָּמּוֹ: <sup>27</sup> לָכֵן וְנִמְכְּרֵנוּ לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים וַיְדַנּוּ אֶל־תְּהִיבּוּ בֵּי־אָחִינוּ בְּשָׂרֵנוּ הוּא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אָחָיו: <sup>28</sup> וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִדִּינִים סְחָרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִן־הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִצְרַיִמָּה: <sup>29</sup> וַיָּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל־הַבּוֹר וְהִנֵּה אֵין־יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו: <sup>30</sup> וַיִּשָּׁב אֶל־אָחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הַיֵּלֶד אֵינְנוּ וְאָנִי אָנֹכִי אֲנִי־בָא:

**from Gilead** The central mountainous region east of the river Jordan.

**camels** See Comment to 12:16.

**gum** Gums and resins were vital to the economy of Egypt, where they constituted the ingredients of perfumes, cosmetics, and medicines, all of which were used in the worship of the gods, in embalming the dead, as sanitizing and deodorizing agents, as insect repellents, and for cleansing the body.

**26. killing** Leaving him to die in the pit would be the same as killing him. It is also possible that in Reuben’s absence the idea of murdering Joseph had been revived.

**covering up his blood** In the language of the Bible, the blood of a murder victim is said to “cry out” for justice (see 4:10). Uncovered blood was a constant reminder of a crime and an incitement to revenge.

**27. flesh** This is a metaphor for kinship relationship.

**agreed** Literally, “heard.” The Hebrew verb here may connote listening in stony silence as well as willing assent.

**28. Midianite** See Comment to 37:25.

**twenty pieces of silver** The 20 shekels is the average price of a male slave between 15 and 20 years of age (see Lev. 27:5).

**to Egypt** They intended to sell him in the slave market. There is pictorial evidence for the presence of a brisk trade with Egypt in Asian slaves.

**29. he rent his clothes** This was a sign of grief. Clearly, Reuben knows nothing about the sale and believes Joseph to be dead.

**30. to his brothers** They had left the scene after the sale.

**is gone** Or “is no more!”—perhaps meaning that Joseph must be dead.

**what am I to do?** An agonized cry. Literally, “as for me, where can I go?”—to escape my father’s grief.

Because they will sell Joseph into slavery, Israelites and Egyptians will have food to eat during the famine.

**27.** Though Judah saves Joseph’s life with this suggestion, the Sages condemn him. One is not to be praised merely for being less wicked than one’s companions (BT Sanh. 6b).

**30.** Reuben despairs that despite his best efforts, Joseph may have died. In fact, Reuben’s

suggestion (v. 22) saved his life. Often, we despair that the good deeds we have done have made no difference, when in fact they have made a great difference (*S’fat Emet*).

**31.** Jacob, who had deceived his father with goatskins and borrowed clothing (Gen. 27:15–16), is deceived by his children with stolen clothing and goat’s blood. Maimonides suggests that the goat sent to destruction in the

a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood.<sup>32</sup> They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, “We found this. Please examine it; is it your son’s tunic or not?”<sup>33</sup> He recognized it, and said, “My son’s tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!”<sup>34</sup> Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days.<sup>35</sup> All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, “No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.” Thus his father bewailed him.

<sup>36</sup>The Midianites, meanwhile, sold him in

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחֲטוּ שְׂעִיר עִיִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת־הַכְּתֹנֶת בְּדָמָם׃<sup>32</sup> וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת הַפְּטִים וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל־אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מִצְּאֵנוּ הַכֶּר־נָא הַכְּתֹנֶת בְּנֵךְ הוּא אִם־לֹא׃<sup>33</sup> וַיִּכְרָה וַיֹּאמֶר כְּתֹנֶת בְּנֵי חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָּהּ וְטָרַף טָרַף יוֹסֵף׃<sup>34</sup> וַיִּקְרַע יַעֲקֹב שְׂמֹלְתָיו וַיִּשֶׂם שָׁק בְּמַתְנָיו וַיִּתְאַבֵּל עַל־בְּנוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים׃<sup>35</sup> וַיִּקְמוּ כָל־בָּנָיו וְכָל־בָּנֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיִּמָּאֵן לְהַתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־אֶרְדּוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי אָבִל שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּבְרַךְ אֶתֹּ אָבִיו׃<sup>36</sup> וְהַמְדַּנִּים מָכְרוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־מִצְרַיִם

**32. ornamented** That distinctive feature is what establishes for Jacob the identity of its owner.

**and they said** The brothers now use the explanation they originally had planned to use (Gen. 37:20).

**is it your son’s tunic** It is not the brothers who ask this, but those with whom they sent the tunic.

**33. He recognized it** Jacob becomes aware of the full horror of the situation only in stages. First he recognizes the tunic. Then its bloody and tattered condition leads him to infer that a wild beast had devoured his son. Then he has a vivid mental image of his beloved Joseph actually being torn to pieces.

**Joseph was torn by a beast** Jacob has been maneuvered into uttering the very words the brothers originally had planned to say (v. 20).

**34. rent his clothes** A symbol of grief. See Comment to verse 29.

**sackcloth** The wearing of sackcloth, a coarse material probably made of goat hair or camel hair, is another symbol of grief.

**many days** His inconsolable sorrow was no doubt intensified by feelings of guilt at having sent Joseph alone on such a long and perilous journey.

**35. daughters** Both his daughter Dinah and his daughters-in-law.

**go down mourning** That is, he never will cease to mourn until the day of his death.

**Sheol** This is the most frequently used term in biblical Hebrew for the abode of the spirits of the dead. The region was imagined as situated deep beneath the earth, enclosed with gates. It was a place of unrelieved gloom and silence; it received everyone, good and bad, great and small. All were equal there, and none who entered it could leave. There is no concept of “heaven” and “hell” in the Hebrew Bible.

**36. the Midianites** In 39:1, those who sell Joseph are called “Ishmaelites.”

**Potiphar** The name of Joseph’s master is almost identical with that of his future father-in-law, Potiphera (41:45). This latter name has been explained as the Egyptian *Pa-di-pa-re*, meaning “he whom Re (the sun god) has given.”

**courtier** The term translated as “courtier” (*saris*) means “the one at the head,” that is, a high officer of the realm.

**chief steward** The literal meaning of the word translated as “steward” (*tabbah*) is either “cook” or “slaughterer” (i.e., executioner). The full title refers to persons attached to the services of nobles, princes, and kings.

wilderness on Yom Kippur is meant to be an atonement for the sin of hatred of one Israelite for another (*Guide* III:46).

**35. he refused to be comforted** Was this because he felt guilty for having sent Joseph on

that doomed mission (Gen. R. 84:13)? Or was it because at some level he intuited that Joseph might still be alive (Gen. R. 84:21)? The Hebrew word translated as “to be comforted” (*l’hitnahem*) is reflexive; he refused to comfort himself.

Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward.

לְפֹטִיפָרֹ סֶרְיִס פְּרִעָה שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים: פ

**38** About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. <sup>2</sup>There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. <sup>3</sup>She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. <sup>4</sup>She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. <sup>5</sup>Once again she

**לח** וַיְהִי בַעַת הַהוּא וַיֵּרָד יְהוּדָה מֵאֵת אָחָיו וַיֵּט עַד-אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי וּשְׁמוֹ חִירָה: <sup>2</sup>וַיִּרְאֶשֶׁם יְהוּדָה בַּת-אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וּשְׁמוֹ שׁוּעַ וַיִּקְחָהּ וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ: <sup>3</sup>וַתְהַר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ עֵר: <sup>4</sup>וַתְהַר עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ

JUDAH AND TAMAR (38:1–30)

The story of Joseph is interrupted by a narrative about Judah. Modern scholars point out that although the Joseph narratives describe the rise of Joseph, they also subtly register the ascendancy of Judah, the fourth son, over Reuben, the firstborn. Two kingdoms resulted from God’s promises to Abraham (17:6) and to Jacob (35:11): Judah became the name of the southern kingdom, and the northern kingdom of Israel became known as Joseph (Zech. 10:6). This chapter alludes to the future Joseph–Judah polarity in the history of the people Israel (see 1 Chron. 5:1–2).

JUDAH’S MARRIAGE (vv. 1–5)

**1. left his brothers** The literal meaning of the word translated here as “left” (*va-yeired*) is “went down from,” that is, from the hill country of Hebron (Gen. 37:12,14).

**Adullamite** A man of the city of Adullam, which is in the northern sector of the Judean lowland, about 9 miles (14.4 km) northeast of modern Beit Guvrin.

**2. Canaanite** The wife herself is identified as a Canaanite in 1 Chron. 2:3. Simeon also had a Canaanite wife. In both cases, the foreign woman is absorbed into the Israelite tribe. Conscious of the later prohibition on intermarriage with Canaanites (Deut. 7:1,3), traditional Jewish commentators have understood the word for “Canaanite” (*k’na-ani*) here in the sense of “merchant.”

**daughter . . . Shua** The daughter’s name is not recorded. She is called “Shua’s daughter” (*bat-shu-a*) in Gen. 38:12. In 1 Chron. 2:3 she is called “Bath-Shua the Canaanite woman.”

**3. he named him** In some manuscripts, as well as in the Samaritan version and in an Aramaic translation, the reading here is “she named”—that is, the mother named all three sons.

**Er** No interpretation is given for the names of Judah’s sons. Er probably was understood to mean “watchful, vigilant.”

**4. Onan** This possibly was understood to mean “vigorous.”

We can never truly comfort a mourner, even when we have known a similar loss. We can only surround the mourners with a sense of being cared about, in the hope that this will bring them to the point of comforting themselves (Hirsch).

(e.g., “examine it/these,” *hakker na*, in 37:32 and 38:25). Another connection is suggested by a *midrash*. It imagines God saying to Judah, “How could you have done such a thing to your father? Don’t you realize how a parent feels when a child dies? You will come to know that feeling” (Tanḥ.).

CHAPTER 38

What is this story doing here, interrupting the Joseph narrative? There are thematic connections and there are parallels of language

**1. Judah left his brothers** He left either out of feelings of guilt for what he had done with Joseph, or because his brothers blamed him (Tanḥ. B.).



bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

<sup>6</sup>Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup>But Er, Judah's first-born, was displeasing to the LORD, and the LORD took his life. <sup>8</sup>Then Judah said to Onan, "Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother." <sup>9</sup>But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. <sup>10</sup>What he did was displeasing to the LORD, and He took his life also. <sup>11</sup>Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Stay as a widow in your father's

אונן: <sup>5</sup>וַתִּסֶּף עוֹד וַתֵּלֶד בֵּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת־  
שְׁמוֹ שֵׁלָה וְהָיָה בְכוֹזִיב בְּלִדְתָהּ אֹתוֹ:  
<sup>6</sup>וַיִּקַּח יְהוּדָה אִשָּׁה לְעֵר בְּכוֹרוֹ וּשְׁמָהּ  
תָמָר: <sup>7</sup>וַיְהִי עֵר בְּכוֹר יְהוּדָה רַע בְּעֵינֵי  
יְהוָה וַיִּמָּתְהוּ יְהוָה: <sup>8</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה  
לְאוֹנָן בָּא אֶל־אִשְׁתִּי אַחִיךָ וַיְבִיֵם אֹתָהּ  
וְהָקָם זֶרַע לְאַחִיךָ: <sup>9</sup>וַיִּדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ  
יְהִיָה הַזֶּרַע וְהָיָה אִם־בָּא אֶל־אִשְׁתִּי אַחִיו  
וְשָׁחַת אֶרְצָה לְבַלְתִּי נִתְּנוֹ זֶרַע לְאַחִיו:  
<sup>10</sup>וַיִּרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּמָּת גַּם־  
אֹתוֹ: <sup>11</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְתָמָר כְּלֹתוֹ שְׁבִי  
אֶל־מְנַגְּהַ בֵּית־אָבִיךָ עַד־יִגְדַּל שְׁלָה בְנֵי כִּי

**5. Shelah** Perhaps this means "drawn out" (namely, out of the womb).

**Chesib** Elsewhere this city is called Achzib. It was situated in the territory of Judah, south-west of Adullam.

THE LEVIRATE OBLIGATION (vv. 6–11)

**6. got a wife** Judah, the father, selects a bride for his son, as was the custom in biblical times.

**Tamar** The word means "a palm tree."

**7. displeasing** The text does not specify the sin.

**8. Join with your brother's wife** The marriage of a man and his brother's wife is forbidden by the Torah (see Lev. 18:16, 20:21). An exception is made only when a married brother dies without a son. According to Deut. 25:5, the brother of the deceased is obligated to take the widow as his wife. This institution is known in Hebrew as *yibbum*. In English it is called "levi-

rate marriage" (from Latin *levir*, "a husband's brother").

**provide offspring for your brother** There was no requirement to name the son of such a union after the dead brother. The child, however, was considered to be the dead man's heir.

**9. would not count as his** With the death of the firstborn, Onan stood to inherit one-half of his father's estate, because his brother left no heir. Should he provide an heir to his brother, however, his own portion would be less.

**let it go to waste** Literally, "he let it spoil on the ground." Apparently, there was no provision at that time for the kind of voluntary renunciation of the levirate duty that is permitted in Deut. (25:7–9).

**10. What he did was displeasing** Onan incurs the anger of God because he evades his obligation to his dead brother, not because of the manner in which he acts. The issue here is the levirate obligation, not birth control.

**11. as a widow in your father's house** She was not free to remarry, but she could return to

**7. displeasing to the LORD** Early levels of the biblical narrative could understand the untimely death of a young person only as being caused by some sin on that person's part. Other-

wise, the world would make no sense. Later in the biblical period, and in the time of the Talmud, a more nuanced, less judgmental approach to misfortune emerges.

HALAKHAH L'MA'ASEH

**38:9 let it go to waste** Jewish law permits various forms of contraception for medical and other reasons but prefers methods that do not destroy the generative seed (MT Forbidden Intercourse 21:18). Using gametes in infertility treatments does not constitute wasting them.

house until my son Shelah grows up”—for he thought, “He too might die like his brothers.” So Tamar went to live in her father’s house.

<sup>12</sup>A long time afterward, Shua’s daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup>And Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing.” <sup>14</sup>So she took off her widow’s garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. <sup>15</sup>When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup>So he turned aside to her by the road and said, “Here, let me sleep with you”—for he did not know that she was his

אָמַר פְּנֵי־יָמוֹת גַּם־הוּא כְּאָחָיו וַתִּלְךָ תָמָר  
וַתָּשֶׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ:  
<sup>12</sup>וַיִּרְבּוּ הַיָּמִים וַתָּמָת בֶּת־שׁוּעַ אִשְׁת־  
יְהוּדָה וַיִּנָּחַם יְהוּדָה וַיַּעַל עַל־גִּזְזוֹן צֶאֱנוּ  
הוּא וְחִירָה רֵעֵהוּ הָעֹדְלָמִי תַמְנָתָה:  
<sup>13</sup>וַיִּגַּד לְתָמָר לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה חָמִיךָ עֹלֶה  
תַמְנָתָה לָגֹז צֶאֱנוּ: <sup>14</sup>וַתִּסַּר בְּגָדֶיהָ  
אֶלְמְנוּתָהּ מֵעֲלֶיהָ וַתִּכְסַּב בַּצְּעִיף  
וַתִּתְעַלֶּף וַתָּשֶׁב בַּפֶּתַח עֵינַיִם אֲשֶׁר עַל־  
דְּרָךְ תַמְנָתָה כִּי רָאָתָהּ כִּי־גִדְּלָה שְׁלָה  
וְהוּא לֹא־נָתַןָּהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: <sup>15</sup>וַיִּרְאֶהָ  
יְהוּדָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לְזוֹנָה כִּי כִסְתָה פָּנֶיהָ:  
<sup>16</sup>וַיֵּט אֵלֶיהָ אֶל־הַדֶּרֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵה־נָא  
אָבּוֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי לֹא יָדַע כִּי כַלְתּוֹ הוּא  
וַתֹּאמֶר מַה־תִּתְּנֶנִּי לִּי כִּי תָבֹא אֵלַי:

live with her parents while still subject to the authority of her father-in-law.

*for he thought* Judah had no intention of marrying her to Shelah.

#### THE DECEPTION OF JUDAH (vv. 12–26)

**12. A long time afterward** About one year has elapsed.

*died* The death of Judah’s wife is mentioned as an extenuating circumstance to account for his consorting with a harlot.

*his period of mourning was over* Literally, “he was comforted.” The official mourning rites had ended.

*went up* In contrast to “went down” (Gen. 38:1).

*Timnah* This is west of Beth-Shemesh.

*sheepshearers* The shearing season was filled with joy and revelry.

**14. her widow’s garb** This was the kind of clothing worn by a widow in mourning.

*a veil* Tamar normally was not veiled. She

simply wanted to conceal her identity, as is clear from verses 15 and 19.

*Enaim* Probably the village Enam in the territory of Judah.

*Shelah* Nothing more is reported of him here, but his clan is mentioned in Num. 26:20.

*she had not been given* Apparently, Tamar has no claim against Shelah, only against Judah. The responsibility for the enforcement of the levirate obligation here, as in the Hittite and Assyrian laws, seems to have rested with the widow’s father-in-law. Deut. 25:5–10 modified the levirate institution by restricting responsibility to the brothers of the deceased.

Tamar was unafraid to assert herself in the face of social disapproval. Because of this, she is considered to be a heroine, like Ruth, and like Ruth she is worthy of being an ancestress of David.

**15. she had covered her face** The narrator, conscious of the contradiction between the moral standards of a later age and the fact that the offspring of Judah’s venture with his daughter-in-law bore no stigma of illegitimacy, is care-

**14.** Tamar is another in the line of biblical women who long to be mothers and who are rewarded by becoming the mother of a special

person (in this case, an ancestor of King David and the messianic line).

daughter-in-law. “What,” she asked, “will you pay for sleeping with me?”<sup>17</sup> He replied, “I will send a kid from my flock.” But she said, “You must leave a pledge until you have sent it.”<sup>18</sup> And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” She replied, “Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry.” So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him.<sup>19</sup> Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow’s garb.

<sup>20</sup>Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adulamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. <sup>21</sup>He inquired of the people of that town, “Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?” But they said, “There has been no prostitute here.” <sup>22</sup>So he returned to Judah and said, “I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute here.” <sup>23</sup>Judah said, “Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her.”

<sup>24</sup>About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” <sup>25</sup>As she was being brought out, she

וַיֹּאמֶר אָנֹכִי אֲשַׁלַּח גְּדִי־עֵיזִים מִן־הַצֹּאן<sup>17</sup> וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־תִּתֶנּוּ עֶרְבוֹן עַד שְׁלֹחָהּ: וַיֹּאמֶר מָה הָעֶרְבוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּן־לְךָ<sup>18</sup> וַתֹּאמֶר חֲתָמִי וּפְתִילִי וּמִטָּה אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדִי וַיִּתֶּן־לָהּ וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ וַתְּהַר לּוֹ: וַתִּקַּם וַתִּלְךָ וַתִּסַּר צְעִיפָה מֵעֲלֶיהָ וַתִּלְבַּשׁ בְּגָדֵי אִלְמָנוּתָהּ:

וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוּדָה אֶת־גְּדִי הָעֵיזִים בְּיַד רַעְהוּ הָעַדְלָמִי לְקַחַת הָעֶרְבוֹן מִיַּד הָאִשָּׁה וְלֹא מָצָאָהּ: וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־אֲנָשֵׁי מְקוֹמָהּ לֵאמֹר אַיֵּה הַקְּדוּשָׁה הוּא בְּעֵינֵינוּ עַל־הַדֶּרֶךְ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא־הִיְתָה בֹזֵה קְדוּשָׁה: וַיִּשָּׁב אֶל־יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא מָצָאתִיהָ וְגַם אֲנָשֵׁי הַמְּקוֹם אָמְרוּ לֹא־הִיְתָה בֹזֵה קְדוּשָׁה: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה תִּקַּח־לָהּ פֶּן נִהְיֶה לְבוֹז הַנֶּגֶה שְׁלַחְתִּי הַגְּדִי הַזֶּה וְאַתָּה לֹא מָצָאתָהּ:

וַיְהִי | כְּמִשְׁלַשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וַיֵּגֵד לְיְהוּדָה לֵאמֹר זָנַתָּה תָמָר כִּלְתֶּךָ וְגַם הִנֵּה הָרָה לְזָנוּנִים וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה הוֹצִיאֶנָּה וַתִּשְׂרֹף: וְהוּא מוֹצֵאת וְהִיא שְׁלֹחָה אֶל־

ful to emphasize that had Judah known the identity of the woman, he never would have had relations with her.

**17. a kid from my flock** Judah carried nothing at that moment with which to pay for the woman’s services—a clear indication that he acted on impulse.

**a pledge** This is security to be held until the fulfillment of the obligation.

**18. seal and cord** Judah gave Tamar his cylinder seal, a small object made of a hard material and engraved with distinctive ornamentation. Its center was hollowed out and a cord passed through so that it could be worn around the neck. This highly personal object performed the function of a signature in modern society.

**staff** It must have had some distinguishing sign. Scepter heads, some incised with names, have been discovered over a wide area of the Near East.

**20. the woman** The relationship was so casual that he had not even bothered to find out her name.

**24. Judah was told** He had not seen her himself because she had returned to her father’s house (Gen. 38:11).

**Bring her out** To the city gate, where justice was administered. Judah, as head of the family, exercises his power of life and death here, even though Tamar lives with her parents.

**let her be burned** The tie between the childless widow and the levir exists automatically from the moment of widowhood. Thus a sexual relationship with anyone other than the levir would be adulterous, an offense punishable by the death penalty, according to Lev. 20:10 and Deut. 22:22.

**25. Examine these** Tamar, who has maintained her self-restraint until the last moment, confronts Judah with unimpeachable evidence.

sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?”<sup>26</sup> Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again.

<sup>27</sup>When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb!<sup>28</sup> While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first.<sup>29</sup> But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” So he was named Perez.<sup>30</sup> Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah.

חַמִּיּהָ לְאִמֹּר לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-אֵלֶּה לּוֹ אֲנֹכִי  
הָרָה וְתֹאמֶר הַכֹּרֶנָּא לְמִי הַחֹתֶמֶת  
וְהַפְתִּילִים וְהַמָּטָה הָאֵלֶּה: <sup>26</sup>וַיִּבֶר  
יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי-עַל-כֵּן  
לֹא-נִתַּתִּיהָ לְשִׁלָּה בְנִי וְלֹא-יִסַּף עוֹד  
לְדַעְתָּהּ:

<sup>27</sup>וַיְהִי בַעֲת לְדָתָהּ וְהִנֵּה תֹאמֹתִים  
בְּבֶטְנָהּ: <sup>28</sup>וַיְהִי בְלִדְתָהּ וַיִּתֵּן יָד וַתִּקַּח  
הַמִּילָדָת וַתִּקְשֹׁר עַל-יָדוֹ שָׁנִל לְאִמֹּר זֶה  
יֵצֵא רֵאשֹׁנָה: <sup>29</sup>וַיְהִי אִ כְּמָשִׁיב יָדוֹ וְהִנֵּה  
יֵצֵא אַחִיו וְתֹאמֶר מִה-פְּרָצַת עָלֶיךָ פֶּרֶץ  
וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ פֶּרֶץ: <sup>30</sup>וְאַחֵר יֵצֵא אַחִיו  
אֲשֶׁר עַל-יָדוֹ הַשָּׁנִי וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ זֶרַח: ס

חמישי

Her tactic of indirect accusation results in a minimum of embarrassment and so elicits a noble response.

**26. he was not intimate with her again**

There is a distinction between this incident and the levirate law of Deut. 25:5. There, the widow becomes her brother-in-law's wife. Here, it would appear that Tamar has only a clear right to conceive a child but no claim on marriage. Again, the present narrative reflects a much earlier society than that of Deuteronomy.

**THE BIRTH OF THE TWINS** (vv. 27–30)

**27. When the time came . . . twins** Unlike the case with Rebekah (as told in Gen. 25:24), twins apparently were not expected here.

**28. came out first** The narrative seems to

echo a history of rivalry between the two clans (see 25:22–23).

**29. she said** That is, the midwife.

**breach** From the Hebrew *peretz*. Perez is the only name in this chapter for which an explanation is given, a fact that reflects the pre-eminence of the Perezite clan within the tribe of Judah. The birth of Perez is taken to be a historic turning point; 10 generations separate him from King David (see Ruth 4:18–22).

**he was named** Literally, “he called his name;” that is, Judah did, on the basis of the midwife's words.

**30. Zerah** No interpretation of the name is given. The Hebrew stem means “brightness,” suggesting an allusion to the crimson thread. The Zerahites were a clan of Judah.

**26.** Tamar does not embarrass Judah publicly. Her life is spared because Judah recognizes and admits his guilt when he could have denied

it. Judah, as a man who can accept responsibility, steps forward to heal the breach between Joseph and his brothers in chapter 44.

**39** When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. <sup>2</sup>The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master. <sup>3</sup>And when his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD lent success to everything he undertook, <sup>4</sup>he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned. <sup>5</sup>And from the time

**ל**ט חמישי וְיֹסֵף הוֹרֵד מִצְרַיִם וַיִּקְנֵהוּ פוֹטִיפָר סָרִיס פְּרֹעֶה שׂוֹר הַטְּבָחִים אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מִיַּד הַיִּשְׁמְעֵאלִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרְדוּהוּ שָׁמָּה: <sup>2</sup>וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶת־יֹסֵף וַיְהִי אִישׁ מַצְלִיחַ וַיְהִי בְּבֵית אֲדֹנָיו הַמִּצְרַיִ: <sup>3</sup>וַיֵּרָא אֲדֹנָיו כִּי יְהוָה אִתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהוָה מַצְלִיחַ בְּיָדוֹ: <sup>4</sup>וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חֵן וַעֲבִיבוּ וַיִּשְׁרַת אֹתוֹ וַיִּפְקְדוּהוּ עַל־בֵּיתוֹ וְכָל־יִשְׁלוֹ נָתַן בְּיָדוֹ: <sup>5</sup>וַיְהִי מֵאִזְּכֵן הַפְּקִיד

JOSEPH IN POTIPHAR'S HOUSEHOLD (39:1–23)

**1. When Joseph** The narrator resumes the story of Joseph, returning to the events in the last verses of chapter 37.

**a certain Egyptian** The national identity of Joseph's master is repeated three times for emphasis (vv. 1,2,5), probably because the sale of Joseph into Egyptian slavery sets the stage for the enslavement and redemption of the Israelites. The prophecy to Abraham (15:13) is being fulfilled.

**Potiphar** The name and titles of the master are here given to draw attention to the aristocratic nature of the household into which Joseph is sold, a detail essential to the development of the story.

**2. The LORD was with Joseph** This crucial phrase appears four times in this chapter. It is intended to impart meaning to events that appear to be merely random. At the same time, it enables the reader to understand how the spoiled lad of 17, alone in a foreign land and

dire adversity, suddenly begins to mature and acquire great strength of character.

**a successful man** The phrase expresses the idea that innate gifts of intelligence and skill cannot achieve fruition without divine support.

**he stayed in the house** This is the first of four stages in the rise of Joseph: he is not sent to work in the fields.

**3. when his master saw** Joseph's competence in fulfilling his duties—not here specified—is visible proof to the master of divine support for his slave.

**4. he took a liking** Literally, "Joseph found favor in his eyes." He wins the esteem and confidence of his master—the second stage in his rise.

**his personal attendant** This is the third stage.

**in charge of his household** The fourth and final rung on the ladder of success. Joseph is now overseer of the entire estate, a function fre-

CHAPTER 39

**1. Joseph was taken down to Egypt** Of both Abraham (Gen. 12:10) and Judah (Gen. 38:1), it is said that they "went down." This implies that they lowered the moral level of their behavior. Joseph, however, did not lower himself; he was transported against his will. The episode in this chapter shows him maintaining a high moral standard.

**2.** The verse can be read, "The LORD was with Joseph when he was a successful man and also when he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master." Some people are conscious of God's presence in their lives only when they are successful. When adversity strikes, they believe God has abandoned them. Joseph felt God's presence in his life both in good times and in bad times.

that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed his house for Joseph's sake, so that the blessing of the LORD was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside.<sup>6</sup> He left all that he had in Joseph's hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome.

<sup>7</sup>After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me."<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> He wields no more

אתו בביתו ועל כל־אשר ישֶׁלוֹ ויִבְרַךְ יְהוָה אֶת־בֵּית הַמִּצְרִי בְגַלְל יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי בְרַבַּת יְהוָה בְּכָל־אֲשֶׁר יֶשְׁלוֹ בְּבַיִת וּבְשָׂדֶה: <sup>6</sup>וַיַּעֲזֹב כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ בְּיַד־יוֹסֵף וְלֹא־יָרַד אֹתוֹ מֵאוֹמֶה כִּי אִם־הִלָּחֵם אֲשֶׁר־הוּא אוֹכֵל וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יִפְה־תָאֵר וַיִּפֶּה מְרָאָה:

<sup>7</sup>וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ אֶל־יוֹסֵף וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁכַבְהָ עִמִּי: <sup>8</sup>וַיִּמָּאֵן | וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־אִשְׁת־אֲדֹנָיו הֲיֵן אֲדֹנִי לֹא־יָרַד אֹתִי מִהַבַּיִת וְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־יֶשְׁלוֹ נָתַן בְּיָדִי: <sup>9</sup>אֵינְנִי גָדוֹל

quently referred to in Egyptian texts as "controller" (*mer-per*).

**5. the LORD blessed** God brought great prosperity to the master.

**in the house and outside** Literally, "in the house and in the field." The phrase is a figure of speech that combines two contrasting elements to express totality.

**6. in Joseph's hands** Joseph has now reached the pinnacle of his career as a servant.

**the food that he ate** Egyptians did not eat with strangers (43:32). Thus early commentators understood the phrase as a euphemism for "wife."

**well built and handsome** No other male is so described in Scripture. Its insertion here serves solely to introduce the next episode.

THE ATTEMPTED SEDUCTION (vv. 7–20)

**7. After a time** Sufficient time has elapsed

for Joseph's high position to be accepted by him as normal and routine.

**his master's wife** She remains nameless.

**cast her eyes upon** With longing, lasciviously. There is irony here. The mistress of the house has become a slave to her lust for her husband's slave.

**Lie with me** There are no preliminaries, no words of love. Her demand reflects her awareness of Joseph's slave status.

**8. he refused** Sexual promiscuity was commonplace in all slave societies, and an ambitious person might have considered that the woman was presenting him with a chance to advance his personal interests.

**He said to his master's wife** Joseph explains his personal reasons for refusing her advances. First he points to the abuse of trust that would be involved, then to the violation of the husband's proprietary rights over his wife, then to the religious and moral nature of the offense.

**6. Joseph was well built and handsome** He inherited his good looks from his mother, Rachel, who is described in identical Hebrew terms in Gen. 29:17. The Midrash pictures Joseph as immersed in vanity and concerned with his appearance. This prompted God to say, "Your father is grieving and you comport yourself thus!" Immediately, his good looks get him into trouble and cause him to be cast into prison (Tanḥ.).

**8.** The Sages imagine Joseph about to yield

to the enticements of Potiphar's wife when the image of his father appears before him and strengthens his resolve to say no (BT Sot. 36b). Although Jacob had schemed and cheated when he was young, he never was guilty of sexual impropriety. The cantillation note for the word translated as "but he refused" (*va-y'ma-en*) is the rare note "*shalshelet*," which appears only four times in the Torah. It is a wavering, back-and-forth note, suggesting indecision and ambivalence on Joseph's part.

authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" <sup>10</sup>And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day, he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.

<sup>11</sup>One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, <sup>12</sup>she caught hold of him by his garment and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. <sup>13</sup>When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, <sup>14</sup>she called out to her servants and said to them, "Look, he had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud-

בְּבֵית הַזֶּה מִמְּנִי וְלֹא־חָשַׁף מִמְּנִי מְאוּמָה  
כִּי אִם־אוֹתָךְ בְּאַשֶׁר אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאִיךָ  
אֶעֱשֶׂה הָרָעָה הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת וְחָטְאתִי  
לְאֱלֹהִים: <sup>10</sup>וַיְהִי כַּדְּבָרָה אֲלֵי־יוֹסֵף יוֹם  
יוֹם וְלֹא־שָׁמַע אֲלֵיהָ לְשָׁכַב אֶצְלָהּ  
לְהִיּוֹת עִמָּה:

<sup>11</sup>וַיְהִי בְּהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וַיָּבֵא הַבְּיָתָה לַעֲשׂוֹת  
מִלְאכָתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבַּיִת שָׁם  
בְּבֵית: <sup>12</sup>וַתִּתְּפֹשֶׁהוּ בְּבִגְדוֹ לֵאמֹר שְׁכַבְהָ  
עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיֵּנָס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה:  
<sup>13</sup>וַיְהִי כִּפְרֹאוֹתָהּ כִּי־עֲזַב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיֵּנָס  
הַחוּצָה: <sup>14</sup>וַתִּקְרָא לְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר  
לָהֶם לֵאמֹר רְאוּ הֵבִיא לָנוּ אִישׁ עִבְרִי  
לְצַחֵק בָּנוּ בָּא אֵלַי לְשָׁכַב עִמִּי וְאֶקְרָא

**9. you are his wife** The second of these reasons reflects pagan legal theory that adultery was largely a private injury, an affront and indignity to the husband.

**and sin before God** The third line of argument conforms to the Israelite concept of morality as having its source and sanction in divine will, not in social convention or utilitarian considerations.

**10. she coaxed** She does not reply to Joseph's arguments and attempts to wear down his resistance.

**11. into the house** Literally, "into the interior of the house."

**to do his work** Early commentaries have Joseph attending to his master's accounts.

**there inside** In that part of the house. Servants were present elsewhere (v. 14).

**12. she caught hold** Her pleas having failed to achieve their end, she resorts to physical aggression.

**garment** The loose-fitting outer garment of the well-to-do.

**got away and fled** Literally, "he fled (*va-yanos*) and went out (*va-yetzei*) to the outside." The first verb describes his abrupt withdrawal from the room; the second suggests the assump-

tion of a normal gait, once outside, in order not to attract attention.

**13. When she saw** She must have been stricken with terror over the possibility of the truth getting out. Furious over having been refused, she was hungry for revenge.

**14. to her servants** Literally, "the people of her house," who were in another part of the building.

**Look** She may have held up the coat for all to see.

**he had to bring** She is referring to her husband.

**a Hebrew** There is a clear derogatory intent here. In addressing her domestics, who are probably Egyptians, she appeals to their instinctive suspicion of foreigners, who were looked down on by the Egyptians.

**to dally** The Hebrew stem translated here as "dally" (*צחק*) can also mean "to mock us, insult us."

**I screamed** The scream was regarded as evidence of resistance to attempted rape. Hence it was a sign of innocence. She knows that none of those to whom she speaks had been close enough to hear her (v. 11).

**12.** Once again, a distinctive garment gets Joseph into difficulty. Once again, as in Gen.

37:23, he is stripped of his garment and thrown into a pit.

<sup>15</sup>And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside.” <sup>16</sup>She kept his garment beside her, until his master came home. <sup>17</sup>Then she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; <sup>18</sup>but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside.”

<sup>19</sup>When his master heard the story that his wife told him, namely, “Thus and so your slave did to me,” he was furious. <sup>20</sup>So Joseph’s master had him put in prison, where the king’s prisoners were confined. But even while he was there in prison, <sup>21</sup>the LORD was with Joseph: He extended kindness to him and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him. <sup>22</sup>The chief jailer put in Joseph’s charge all the prisoners who

בְּקוֹל גְּדוֹל: <sup>15</sup>וַיְהִי כְשָׁמְעוֹ כִּי־הִרְיַמְתִּי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיֵּנָס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה: <sup>16</sup>וַתִּנַּח בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלָהּ עַד־בּוֹא אֲדֹנָיו אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ: <sup>17</sup>וַתְּדַבֵּר אֵלָיו בְּדִבְרֵים הָאֵלֶּה לְאֹמֶר בְּאֶזְרִי הָעֶבֶד הָעֵבְרִי אֲשֶׁר־הֵבֵאתָ לָנוּ לְצַחֵק בִּי: <sup>18</sup>וַיְהִי כִּהְרִימִי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיֵּנָס הַחוּצָה:

<sup>19</sup>וַיְהִי כְשָׁמַע אֲדֹנָיו אֶת־דִּבְרֵי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָה אֵלָיו לְאֹמֶר בְּדִבְרֵים הָאֵלֶּה עָשָׂה לִי עֲבָדָה וַיַּחַר אַפּוֹ: <sup>20</sup>וַיִּקַּח אֲדֹנָי יוֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ אֶל־בַּיִת הַסֹּהַר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אִסּוּרֵי אֲסִירֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אִסּוּרִים וַיְהִי־שָׁם בְּבַיִת הַסֹּהַר: <sup>21</sup>וַיְהִי יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹסֵף וַיֵּט אֵלָיו חֶסֶד וַיִּתֵּן חֲנוּן בְּעֵינָיו שָׁר־בֵּית־הַסֹּהַר: <sup>22</sup>וַיִּתֵּן שָׁר־בֵּית־הַסֹּהַר בְּיַד־יוֹסֵף

**15. with me** The same phraseology as in the report to her husband (v. 18), but she avoids mentioning that the garment was left in her hand (vv. 12,13).

**and fled outside** See Comment to 39:12. Again she is cautious in her formulation, because someone might have seen Joseph leaving her room and walking normally.

**16. his master** Not “her husband,” because it was in the capacity of slave master that she would confront him.

**17. Hebrew slave** This time she emphasizes Joseph’s slave status.

**into our house** She does not repeat to her husband the charge of attempted rape, an omission that probably saved Joseph from the executioner.

**20. had him put** Literally, “took him and put him.” High government officials in ancient Egypt also performed judicial functions.

**in prison** Imprisonment is well attested in Egypt, where each town of any size had a prison

that served as a penal institution for convicted criminals, as a labor camp for those forced into slave labor, and as the seat of the criminal court. In the present instance, the prison is under the jurisdiction of Joseph’s master and is housed on his property.

**where the king’s prisoners** Being an officer of the court, Potiphar puts Joseph in the section reserved for royal prisoners. There are many stories in ancient literature about the blameless man who repels the amorous advances of a married woman and escapes death.

#### IMPRISONMENT (vv. 20–23)

**20. But even while** Here in prison Joseph is at the lowest point of his fortunes. According to Psalms (105:17–18), his feet were fettered and an iron collar was put around his neck.

**22. The chief jailer** The jailer who is responsible to the chief steward.

**put in Joseph’s charge** He assigns Joseph duties not here specified.

**19. he was furious** With Joseph? Or with his wife, whom he suspected of fabricating her story (Gen. R. 87:9)? If Potiphar believed his wife’s account, it seems strange that Joseph’s punishment was only imprisonment in a facility for high-ranking offenders.

**22.** Once again, as with Potiphar and as will happen with Pharaoh, God’s favor and Joseph’s personal qualities bring him to the attention of powerful patrons.



were in that prison, and he was the one to carry out everything that was done there.<sup>23</sup>The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him, and whatever he did the LORD made successful.

אֶת כָּל־הָאֲסוּרִים אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית הַסֹּהַר וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עֹשִׂים שָׁם הוּא הָיָה עֹשֶׂה: 23 אֵין | שַׁר בֵּית־הַסֹּהַר רָאָה אֶת־כָּל־מְאוּמָה בְּיָדוֹ בְּאֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אִתּוֹ וְאֲשֶׁר־הוּא עֹשֶׂה יְהוָה מְצַלִּיחַ: ס

**40** Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord the king of Egypt. <sup>2</sup>Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker,<sup>3</sup>and put them in custody, in the house of the chief steward, in the same prison house where Joseph was confined. <sup>4</sup>The chief steward assigned Joseph to them, and he attended them.

**מ** וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה חָטְאוּ שְׂבִיעִי מִשְׁקָה מְלָךְ־מִצְרַיִם וְהָאִפָּה לְאֲדֹנָיָהּ לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם: 2 וַיִּקְצַף פְּרָעֹה עַל שְׁנֵי סָרִיסָיו עַל שֶׁר הַמִּשְׁקִים וְעַל שֶׁר הָאוֹפִים: 3 וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם בְּמִשְׁמַר בֵּית שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים אֶל־בֵּית הַסֹּהַר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יוֹסֵף אֶסוּר שָׁם: 4 וַיִּפְקֹד שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף אֹתָם וַיִּשְׁרֹת אֹתָם וַיְהִיו יָמִים בְּמִשְׁמַר: 5 וַיַּחְלְמוּ חֲלוֹם שְׁנֵיהֶם אִישׁ חֲלוֹמוֹ בְּלַיְלָה אַחָד אִישׁ כְּפַתְרוֹן חֲלוֹמוֹ הַמִּשְׁקָה וְהָאִפָּה אֲשֶׁר לְמֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר אֶסוּרִים בְּבֵית הַסֹּהַר: 6 וַיִּבֹּא אֲלֵיהֶם יוֹסֵף בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּרְא אֹתָם וְהִנֵּם זַעֲפִים: 7 וַיִּשְׁאַל אֶת־סָרִיסֵי

When they had been in custody for some time, <sup>5</sup>both of them—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—dreamed in the same night, each his own dream and each dream with its own meaning. <sup>6</sup>When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were distraught. <sup>7</sup>He asked Pharaoh's courtiers, who were with

JOSEPH IN PRISON (40:1–23)

**1. Some time later** Joseph is now 28 years old; 11 years have gone by since his sale into slavery. There is no way of knowing how many of those years he spent in the service of Potiphar and how many in prison.

**for some time** The Hebrew word *yamim* may indicate either indefinite time or “a year.”

**the cupbearer and the baker** The following verse identifies them as the chief officials of their professions in the royal household. The cupbearer, who is crucial to the narrative, is always mentioned first. Because he personally served wine to the king, he was an important official in the royal court. Ancient Egyptian documents attest to the wealth and power of such officials.

**5. both of them** On the subject of dreams, see the Comment to Gen. 37:9. In this case, the two dreams are needed to establish Joseph's reputation as an interpreter of dreams.

**gave offense** The details, being irrelevant to the narrative, are ignored.

**each dream with its own meaning** Literally, “each according to the interpretation of his dream.” The Hebrew can be taken to mean that the interpretation turned out to be appropriate to the content or that each dreamed as if his dream were a prediction.

**3. in custody** That is, in detention pending final disposition of their case.

**6. distraught** The anxiety normally brought on by dreams is intensified for the prisoners by the uncertainty of their fate and because they are being denied access to a professional dream interpreter. The odd coincidence of the two officials having simultaneous dreams no doubt heightens their tension.

**4. The chief steward** Joseph's own master, on whose estate the prison was situated.

him in custody in his master's house, saying, "Why do you appear downcast today?"<sup>8</sup> And they said to him, "We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." So Joseph said to them, "Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams]."

<sup>9</sup>Then the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph. He said to him, "In my dream, there was a vine in front of me. <sup>10</sup>On the vine were three branches. It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms and its clusters ripened into grapes. <sup>11</sup>Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." <sup>12</sup>Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: The three branches are three days. <sup>13</sup>In three days Pharaoh will pardon you and restore you to your post; you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as was your custom formerly when you were his cupbearer. <sup>14</sup>But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. <sup>15</sup>For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the

פְּרֵעָה אֲשֶׁר אָתּוֹ בְּמִשְׁמַר בַּיִת אֲדֹנָיו  
לֵאמֹר מִדּוּעַ פָּנֶיכֶם רָעִים הַיּוֹם:  
<sup>8</sup> וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו חֲלוֹם חֲלַמְנוּ וּפְתָר אֵין  
אֵתּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא לֵאלֹהִים  
פְּתוּרִים סְפֹרוּנָא לִי:

<sup>9</sup> וַיֹּסֶפֶר שָׂרֵה־מִשְׁקִים אֶת־חֲלֹמוֹ לְיוֹסֵף  
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ בְּחֻלּוּמֵי וְהִנֵּה־גִפְן לְפָנָי:  
<sup>10</sup> וּבְגִפְן שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׂרִיגִם וְהִיא כְּפֹרְחַת  
עֲלֶתָהּ נֹצֵה הַבְּשִׁילוֹ אֲשַׁבְּלֶתִיהָ עֲנָבִים:  
<sup>11</sup> וְכוֹס פְּרֵעָה בְיָדִי וָאֶקַּח אֶת־הָעֲנָבִים  
וָאֲשַׁחַט אֹתָם אֶל־כּוֹס פְּרֵעָה וָאֶתַּן אֶת־  
הַכּוֹס עַל־כַּף פְּרֵעָה: <sup>12</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יוֹסֵף  
זֶה פְּתוּרָנוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת הַשָּׂרְגִים שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים  
הֵם: <sup>13</sup> בְּעוֹד | שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים יִשָּׂא פְּרֵעָה  
אֶת־רֹאשְׁךָ וְהִשִּׁיבְךָ עַל־כַּנְּךָ וְנָתַתְּ כוֹס־  
פְּרֵעָה בְיָדוֹ כַּמִּשְׁפֵּט הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲשֶׁר הָיִיתָ  
מִשְׁקָהוּ: <sup>14</sup> כִּי אִם־זָכַרְתָּנִי אֶתְךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר  
יֵיטֵב לְךָ וְעָשִׂיתָ־נָא עִמָּדִי חֶסֶד  
וְהִזְכַּרְתָּנִי אֶל־פְּרֵעָה וְהוֹצֵאתָנִי מִן־  
הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה: <sup>15</sup> כִּי־גָנַב גָּנַבְתִּי מֵאֶרֶץ

**8. there is no one** Here in prison.

**Tell me** "And perhaps God will reveal the meaning to me," implies Joseph.

THE CUPBEARER'S DREAM (vv. 9–15)

**9. The chief cupbearer told his dream** The dream is recounted in a rapid series of scenes: the grape-growing season, the production process, the serving of the finished wine.

**12. This is its interpretation** Joseph deciphers the dream by a scheme of equivalences. The rapidity of the action suggests imminent fulfillment. The recurrence of the number three (three days, three branches, three stages of growth, three actions performed) and the fact that both "Pharaoh" and his "cup" are men-

tioned three times, all indicate specifically three days.

**13. pardon you** Literally, "lift up your head," that is, you will regain your dignity and honor.

**14. this place** The word translated here as "place" (*bayit*) means "house." Here it is short for *beit ha-sohar*, "prison," or "the house of my master" (v. 7, 41:10). The professional diviner and dream interpreter expected to be paid for his services. Joseph, therefore, feels free to request a personal favor instead.

**15. kidnapped** Joseph is referring to the events in 37:28,36, stating in effect that it was the Midianites, not his brothers, who drew him up from the pit. He may have put it this way,

## CHAPTER 40

8. When Joseph lived in the Land, he

dreamed of his own future greatness. In exile, he would only interpret the dreams of others (Soloveitchik).

Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon.”

<sup>16</sup>When the chief baker saw how favorably he had interpreted, he said to Joseph, “In my dream, similarly, there were three openwork baskets on my head. <sup>17</sup>In the uppermost basket were all kinds of food for Pharaoh that a baker prepares; and the birds were eating it out of the basket above my head.” <sup>18</sup>Joseph answered, “This is its interpretation: The three baskets are three days. <sup>19</sup>In three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale you upon a pole; and the birds will pick off your flesh.”

<sup>20</sup>On the third day—his birthday—Pharaoh made a banquet for all his officials, and he singled out his chief cupbearer and his chief

הָעֲבָרִים וְגַם־פֶּה לֹא־עָשִׂיתִי מְאוּמָה בִּי־  
שָׁמוּ אֹתִי בְּבוֹר:

וַיִּרְא שְׂרֵה־הָאֲפִים בִּי טוֹב פָּתַר וַיֹּאמֶר  
אֲלֵיוֹסֵף אֶף־אֲנִי בַחֲלוּמַי וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה  
סִלֵּי חֲרִי עַל־רֹאשִׁי: <sup>17</sup>וּבִסֵּל הָעֲלִיוֹן  
מִכָּל מֵאֲכָל פְּרֹעָה מַעֲשֶׂה אִפֶּה וְהָעוֹף  
אֵכֵל אֶתְּם מִן־הַסֵּל מֵעַל רֹאשִׁי: <sup>18</sup>וַיַּעַן  
יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמֶר זֶה פְּתָרְנוֹ שְׁלֹשֶׁת הַסֵּלִים  
שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים הֵם: <sup>19</sup>בְּעוֹד | שְׁלֹשֶׁת  
יָמִים יִשָּׂא פְרֹעָה אֶת־רֹאשְׁךָ מִעֲלֶיךָ  
וְתָלָה אוֹתְךָ עַל־עֵץ וְאֵכֵל הָעוֹף אֶת־  
בְּשָׂרְךָ מִעֲלֶיךָ:

<sup>20</sup>וַיְהִי | בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יוֹם הַלְדֹת אֶת־  
פְּרֹעָה וַיַּעַשׂ מִשְׁתָּה לְכָל־עַבְדָּיו וַיִּשָּׂא  
אֶת־רֹאשׁ | שַׂר הַמְּשָׁקִים וְאֶת־רֹאשׁ שַׂר

מפטיר

though, because he was ashamed to tell others that his own brothers had sold him into slavery.

**land of the Hebrews** That is, the land in which the Hebrews sojourn, either Canaan or the Hebron area in which they were concentrated and were buried.

**nor have I done anything** Joseph assures the cupbearer that he would be intervening on behalf of an innocent man.

**dungeon** The word *bor* means “pit,” another term for “prison,” deriving from the subterranean nature of the place of detention (see 38:24).

THE BAKER’S DREAM (vv. 16–19)

**16. openwork** The Hebrew term for this (*hori*) has been explained as “a hole” or “white.” Here it describes either the baskets—“perforated,” “wickerwork”—or their contents, “white bread.”

**on my head** Repeated in verse 17 and of special significance for the interpretation.

**17. uppermost basket** The contents of only this basket are described because it was the one accessible to the birds.

**all kinds** The dream reflects Egyptian foods. No less than 57 varieties of bread and 38

different types of cake are known from hieroglyphic texts.

**birds** The baker has neither the strength nor the presence of mind to drive them away—an ominous detail.

**18. This is its interpretation** Joseph notes that, unlike the cupbearer, the baker in his dream does not prepare the delicacies himself; nor does he personally serve Pharaoh. In fact, the food does not even reach Pharaoh, for it is eaten by the birds.

**19. will lift off your head** The idiom “to raise the head” (נשא ראש) has the meaning of “call to account” or “bring to justice.”

**impale you** Impaling, not hanging, was a widely used mode of execution in the ancient Near East.

**pick off your flesh** The ancient Egyptians paid special attention to the preservation of the body after death. Hence, the punishment foretold here is particularly loathsome.

FULFILLMENT AND  
DISAPPOINTMENT (vv. 20–23)

**20. singled out** Literally, “lifted the head.” See Comments to 40:13,19.

16. The baker waited until he heard Joseph give the chief cupbearer a favorable interpreta-

tion and then related (or invented) a similar dream.

baker from among his officials. <sup>21</sup>He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand; <sup>22</sup>but the chief baker he impaled—just as Joseph had interpreted to them.

<sup>23</sup>Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.

הָאֲפִים בְּתוֹךְ עֲבָדָיו: <sup>21</sup>וַיִּשְׁבֵּב אֶת־שָׂרֵי  
הַמִּשְׁקִים עַל־מִשְׁקָהוּ וַיִּתֵּן הַכּוֹס עַל־כַּף  
פְּרָעֹה: <sup>22</sup>וְאֵת שָׂרֵי הָאֲפִים תָּלָה בְּאֲשֵׁר  
פְּתַר לָהֶם יוֹסֵף:  
<sup>23</sup>וְלֹא־זָכַר שָׂרֵי־הַמִּשְׁקִים אֶת־יוֹסֵף  
וַיִּשְׁכַּחְהוּ: פ

**22. just as Joseph had interpreted** The narration uses the very words of Joseph to indicate the precision with which his predictions were fulfilled.

**23. did not think of Joseph; he forgot him** The negative–positive wording is idiomatic and simply means “he completely forgot him.”

**23.** The chief cupbearer finds himself so busy dealing with important and demanding people that he forgets his anonymous prisoner until the circumstances of the next chap-

ter lead him to remember. Perhaps because the chief cupbearer believed that he was innocent and deserved to be released, he minimized his obligation to Joseph.