

Parshat Vayeshev
On Emotional and Spiritual Growth
Rabbanit Dr. Ágnes Veto
Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2020

Anna Karenina begins with the proposition that “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” At the end of Sefer Bereishit, though, the relationships between fathers and sons (to evoke the title of another powerful Russian novel) are deeply flawed in a way that might refute this claim. For in *Vayyishlah* and *Vayyeshev*, the connections between the male members of the two families of Yitzhak and Ya’akov are plagued by the same evil—namely, the tendency of the father to favor one of his children over the other(s).

Ya’akov—who himself suffered the pain and humiliation of being second best in the eyes of his own father—did not learn from the mistake of Yitzhak, who favored Esav. Ya’akov persisted in favoring Yosef over the rest of his children in various ways. In Gen. 33: 1-3 Ya’akov believes himself and his family to be in danger from Esav’s men and as a measure of protection reorganizes his camp. The most secure position goes to Rahel and Yosef. Surely, the other mothers and children must have noticed the underlying meaning of this gesture: when Ya’akov was forced to choose which of his children should survive, the child he chose was Yosef. And he chose Yosef in less dramatic circumstances as well: after making peace with Esav, when the family was already safe and settled, it was the beloved child who received a luxury gift, a rare piece of clothing that the brothers could not ever ignore since Yosef wore it—Shabbos-worthy as it was—all the time, even on weekdays.

Yosef habitually and naturally wore this gifted garment in the way he wore his emotions “on his sleeve.” For he, unlike his father Ya’akov, was direct and upfront about his feelings and aims. Yosef hid nothing. If he felt superior to everybody else, he was also secure in feeling righteous about that feeling. And being “straightforward,” it was truth—ideal “righteousness,” rather than pragmatic peace, that he always pursued. Why would he *not* share his dreams of superiority with his brothers? After all they were his brothers, and good brothers SHOULD accept this simple statement of the truth of Yosef’s superiority!

But Yosef wanted more than superiority over his brothers, he desired their acceptance, admiration and love—which is exactly what the brothers could not give him. Unlike Ya’akov, Yosef did not cheat his brothers, and did not wish to cheat them. He desired neither the rights of the firstborn, nor the blessing of the firstborn. Why would he? He had no need of either, he had much more even without these gifts.

Had he been quietly satisfied with his special and exclusive gifts, his brothers would simply have hated him in their hearts, and, perhaps, Yosef would not have suffered his bitter trials. But Yosef wanted more—he wanted his brothers not to notice, not to feel the pain of being slighted, but rather to actually rejoice in the slight, and agree to, and delight in, being secondary and subservient. If Ya’akov could be thought of as a shifty, calculating thief, Yosef had the psychology of a totalitarian dictator.

And so, he got what dictators often get: he was ousted, and for the first time in his life he experienced what powerlessness feels like. He was sold as a naked slave in a foreign land.

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That was a worse fate and punishment than that of Ya'akov, since Ya'akov could at least decide to flee from Esav.

Yosef also had to experience—again for the first time in his life—that it is not enough to be cute and charming, one has to have skills. (As a sign in one of the great movie studios in Hollywood at the height of [Jewish] Hungarian-American dominance of the American cinema legendarily put it: “It’s not enough to be Hungarian, you have to have talent!”) He has to be able to *know* something in order to be appreciated.

Yet he manages—to our surprise— to rise to the challenge. And not only once, but repeatedly: he is able to accomplish every task set before him, not merely in the house of Potifar, where he experiences a meteoric rise as a result of talents and abilities that have hitherto never manifested themselves—but even in prison. He proves himself to be not merely a survivor but an *ish matzliah*— a person whose endeavors are crowned, consistently, by success.

And Yosef learns to master and direct the very skill that got him into trouble in the first place—his ability to interpret dreams. But he now does it in a developed, evolved way: the self-centered young boy is able to put aside his ego and think of others. Instead of telling everybody about his own dreams about his superiority, he puts himself at the service of others who need his expertise in dream interpretation. And he ascribes any success in this endeavor, not to his own prowess, but to God’s hand. Not a word about himself, only about others, only if they ask for his expertise, in order to prepare them to accept their fate. What an impressive metamorphosis!

I wish for all of us that we are able to transform our debits into credits, to master our egos, to harness our talents to the service of others, to be the *shamash*, the servant light, in the Hannukah *menorah*, transmitting a flame that is uniquely ours, with God’s help, into a torch to light up the world. Good Shabbos and a freilikhen, likhtegen Hannikeh!



Rabbanit Dr. Ágnes (Ági) Veto, who is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Religion at Vassar College, grew up in Budapest, Hungary where she studied Biblical and Jewish Studies at Eotvos Lorand University. She then spent two years in Paris at the Sorbonne, the Institut Catholique and the École Pratique Des Hautes Études, and later a year at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. Rabbanit Dr. Veto earned an MA in African and Oriental Studies at S.O.A.S. University of London, another MA in Jewish Studies at the Rothberg Graduate School of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and a PhD in Talmud and Rabbinic Literature at New York University.