

# *A Blessing Redistributed*

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## The Question

**I**n the standard reading of Bereishit, we imagine that although previously the Abrahamic blessing has been transmitted to only one chosen son, to the exclusion of other children, this pattern breaks with Yaakov and his sons, and that each of Yaakov's children is an inheritor of the Abrahamic *bracha* in his own right. While Yosef may be the favored son, first receiving the bulk of his father's love and then a double portion through the inclusion of two of his sons in the count of the tribes, he is not understood as the sole inheritor of the Abrahamic *bracha* like Yaakov or Yitzchak before him.

This reading, however, demands that we assume that the pattern of the chosen and unchosen sons simply ends with Yaakov and his children. It is unclear, however, why that might be so: however painful the plight of the unchosen child might be, in the stories of Avraham and Yitzchak it seems obvious that while all sons might inherit some sort of blessing from their father, only one son can be the inheritor of the Abrahamic *bracha*, the covenant that God made with Avraham and his descendants. Why, then, do we assume that that pattern simply ends, abruptly, after three generations, with no explanation? Why do we assume that, unlike his father and grandfather before

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him, Yaakov has the ability — or the desire — to transmit the Abrahamic *bracha* to all of his sons?

There are different possible answers to this question. Perhaps Yaakov's sons are somehow different. Perhaps the very fact that there are twelve of them, instead of the standard two<sup>1</sup>, is meant to indicate to us that we have finally arrived at the state of semi-nationhood, in which *bracha* can be transmitted to all. Perhaps the pattern is not actually a pattern at all, simply an unfortunate consequence of who the two unchosen sons were, and the individual character defects that made them unworthy as inheritors of the Abrahamic blessing.

Each of these explanations is plausible, and deserves further treatment. However, there is another possibility: Yaakov does not break the pattern. Yosef does. In this reading, Yaakov does choose Yosef to the exclusion of his other sons — a choice that is first indicated in the beginning of Yosef's story, and one that is reinforced when Yaakov and Yosef are reunited. In this reading, Yaakov follows the pattern set out by his father and grandfather before him, the pattern of the single chosen son. What is different, in this story, is not Yaakov's choice, but Yosef's. In this paper I will attempt to read the story of Yosef and his brothers as a story in which Yaakov chooses Yosef to the exclusion of his other sons, and in which Yosef, at the end of his life, breaks the pattern of chosenness and unchosenness by making the decision to share the Abrahamic blessing with his brothers.

## The Pattern: Chosen and Unchosen

In order to understand the difficulties in the standard reading of the story of Yosef it is necessary to explore the previous pattern in Bereishit: the pattern of the chosen and unchosen sons. In this pattern, while several children may be blessed, only one can be the recipient of the Abrahamic, covenant blessing that God promised to Abraham and his descendents.

Although the Abrahamic *bracha* is only introduced several chapters (and many generations) later, we first encounter the pattern of chosen and

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1. Although Avraham has six children with Keturah and possibly more with other concubines (Bereishit 25:6), the text never treats them as prospects for the covenantal blessing, as opposed to Yishmael and Yitzchak, the two sons whose births were foretold by God.

unchosen sons with the first pair of siblings in Bereishit, Kayin and Hevel. Initially, Kayin seems predestined to be the favored, chosen son. His birth is treated as a primary event, while Hevel's is treated as a mere addendum<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, while Kayin's mother explains his name as an acknowledgement that she has created a man with God's help, Hevel's name is given no explanation — although the Hebrew meaning of the root *h-v-l*, nothingness, seems to indicate that she did not consider him a son of much importance. This preference for Kayin, however, is soon upended: when the two brothers both bring offerings to God, God shows favor to Hevel and his offering, overlooking Kayin's gift. This seems to be a choice, one that marks Hevel as the chosen son, in contrast to Kayin, who is unchosen. This, at least, seems to be how Kayin understands God's actions. Furious, Kayin murders Hevel, removing his rival for God's favor. Kayin's famous words “*hashomer achi anochi*” (Bereishit 4:9), inaugurate a world in which brothers, forced to compete against each other for the status of chosen son, cannot be each other's keepers. Kayin and Hevel are the tragic beginning to generations of sibling rivalry between chosen and unchosen sons, a pattern that will endure throughout Bereishit.

Although Kayin and Hevel may be rivals for the position of chosen son, we do not encounter the covenantal *bracha* until Avraham is introduced to Bereishit. We first encounter the *bracha* in its original form, transmitted from God to Abraham, when God tells Abraham to depart his homeland for the land that God will show him:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹנֵס אֶל-אַבְרָם, לֵךְ-לָךְ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמְנוּל־דָּתְךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, אֶל-הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָה. וְאָעִשְׂהָ, לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל, וְאַבְרָכָהּ, וְאֶגְדֹּלָהּ שְׁמָהּ; וְהָיְתָה בְרָכָה. וְאַבְרָכָהּ, מִכָּרְכִיָּה, וּמִשְׁלָלָהּ, אֲדָוִי; וּנְבָרְכֻךָ בָּהּ, כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה (בראשית יב:א-ג).

This iteration of the Abrahamic *bracha*, the first we encounter, contains two main elements: the promise that Abraham's descendants will become a great nation and that he will have the ability to transmit blessing (and curses) to those around him. Later, when Abraham arrives in Canaan, another element is added to the blessing: the promise of land:

וַיֵּדָא יְקֹנֵס אֶל-אַבְרָם, וַיֹּאמֶר, לְזָרְעֶךָ אֶתְּוֹ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת; וַיְבֹן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ, לִיקְוֹס הַנִּרְאָה אֵלָיו (בראשית יב:ז).

By the time Avraham dies, God's blessing to Abraham contains three elements:

2. וַתִּסְפָּף לְלֵדָת, אֶת-אֲחִיו אֶת-הָבֶל (בראשית ד:ב).

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the promise that Abraham's descendants will become a great nation, the promise of land, and the promise of the ability to transmit blessing.

Beginning with Avraham, the covenantal *bracha* may only ever be inherited by one child. God first makes this point when Avraham, who already has a son, Yishmael, with his handmaiden, Hagar is informed by God that he will have another son, Yitzchak, with his wife Sarah.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים, אֲבֹל שָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ יֵלְדָת לְךָ בֵן, וְקָרָאתָ אֶת־שְׁמוֹ, יִצְחָק; וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם, לְזָרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְלִשְׁמֵעָאל, שְׁמִעְתִּיךָ – הִנֵּה בְרַכְתִּי אֹתוֹ וְהִפְרִיתִי אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֹתוֹ, בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד. שְׁנַיִם־עָשָׂר נְשִׂאִים יֵלִיד, וְנִתְּתִיו לְגוֹי גָדוֹל, וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי, אֲקִים אֶת־יִצְחָק, אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה, בְּשָׁנָה הַאֲחֵרֶת (בראשית יז:ט-כא).

In these *pesukim*, God not only informs Avraham of Yitzchak's impending birth, but announces that it is Yitzchak, not Yishmael, who will be the inheritor of God's covenant with and promises to Avraham. While God promises that Yishmael will be blessed as well, only one son can be the inheritor of the covenant, and that son — the chosen son — is Yitzchak. Yishmael, the unchosen son, will be the father of many nations, but it is Yitzchak who will carry the Abrahamic covenant with God, the covenant that links Avraham's family to God and the land they have been promised.

After Avraham's death, God appears to Yitzchak and affirms him as the inheritor of the covenantal blessing:

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְקוֹק וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל־תֵּרַד מִצְרָיִם. שָׁכֵן בְּאֶרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אִמְרָ אֵלֶיךָ. גֹּיֵר בְּאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת, וְהָיָה עִמָּךְ וְאֲבָרְכָךָ. כִּי־לָךְ וּלְזָרְעֶךָ, אֶתְּנוּ אֶת־כָּל־הָאֲרָצוֹת הָאֵל, וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת־הַשְּׁבָעָה, אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ. וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת־זָרְעֶךָ, כְּכֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְנִתְּתִי לְזָרְעֶךָ, אֶת־כָּל־הָאֲרָצוֹת הָאֵל, וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזָרְעֶךָ, כָּל־גּוֹיֵי הָאֲרָץ. עַקֵּב, אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַע אֲבָרְהָם בְּקִלְיָ, וַיִּשְׁמֹר, מִשְׁמֵרֶתִי, מִצְוֹתַי, חֻקֹּתַי וְתוֹרֹתַי (בראשית כב:ה-).

This blessing contains the three original elements: the promise of land, the promise of numerous descendents, and the ability to transmit blessing to others. This time, though, the blessing contains an additional element: the identification of the blessing with Avraham. God emphasizes that the *bracha* is transmitted to Yitzchak because of his descent from Avraham and the promise that God made to him. These elements will reappear when Yaakov inherits the covenantal blessing — and, importantly, will be present in Yaakov's blessings to Yosef, and absent in those he gives his other sons.

This pattern of the chosen and unchosen children continues with Yitzchak's children, Yaakov and Esav. Once again we encounter two children, only one of whom can be the inheritor of the covenant. Although it is initially

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assumed that Esav, the older son, is destined to inherit the covenant, Yaakov conspires first to have Esav sell him the birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentils, and then, later, disguises himself as Esav in order to fool his nearly blind father into giving him the blessing. The plot succeeds, and Yitzchak blesses Yaakov, thinking that he is actually blessing Esav:

וַיִּתֵּן-לָהּ, הָאֱלֹקִים, מִטַּל הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּמִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ – וְרֹב דָּגָן, וַיִּתְּרֶשׁ. וַעֲבָדוּךָ עַמִּים, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ (וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ) לְךָ לְאֹמִים – הַהֵנּוּ גְבִירֵי לְאַחֶיךָ, וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לְךָ בְּנֵי אִמָּךְ; אֲרֻרֵךְ אֲרוּר, וּמְבֻרָכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ (בראשית כז:כח-כט).	May God give you from the dew of heaven, and of the fat of the earth, and plenty of wheat and wine. Nations will serve you, and peoples will bow to you. Be lord over your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow to you. Those who curse you will be cursed and those who bless you will be blessed (Bereishit 27:28–29).
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Esav quickly discovers his brother's deception. In one of the Torah's most heartbreaking scenes, which underscores the tragedy of the rejected son, Esav begs his father for a blessing of his own. Yitzchak blesses Esav, but makes it clear that he cannot give him the same blessing that he gave Yaakov; that blessing once granted cannot be taken back, and, it seems, cannot be shared. Instead of the Abrahamic blessing, Esav receives a blessing for material success and the occasional ability to overcome his brother's dominance. Notably absent from this blessing are the Abrahamic elements: fertility, relationship with God, the ability to bless, and the the promise that his descendants will be entitled to the promised land.

For Yaakov, the Abrahamic blessing actually comes in two waves: the first, as noted above, he receives when he disguises himself to steal the blessing Yitzchak had intended for Esav. The second, however, is given when he is about to depart for Haran to evade Esav's murderous rage. Before he departs, Yitzchak (knowingly, this time) blesses him:

וְאֵל שְׂדֵי יִבְרַךְ אֶתְּךָ, וַיִּבְרַךְ וַיְרַבֶּה; וְהָיִיתִי, לְקַהֲל עַמִּים. וַיִּתֵּן-לָךְ אֶת-בְּרִכַּת אֲבִרְהָם, לָךְ וּלְיִצְחָק אֶתְּךָ  
– לְרִשְׁתָּךְ אֶת-אָרֶץ מִצְרָיִם, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַן אֱלֹקִים לְאַבְרָהָם (בראשית כח:ג-ד).

This second blessing, unlike the first, explicitly invokes the Abrahamic covenant: it refers to the blessings of Abraham, and promises that that blessing will be extended to Yaakov's children after him as well. Just as God emphasized the familial, ancestral aspect of the *bracha* when God transmitted it to Yitzchak, Yitzchak emphasizes that aspect in transmitting it to Yaakov in turn — this time going so far as to coin the phrase “*birkat Avraham*,” Avraham's blessing.

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Yitzchak is not simply blessing Yaakov as any father might bless a son; he is choosing him — however forced that choice may be — as the recipient of the familial, Abrahamic blessing, a blessing he will transmit to his descendants in turn.

The pattern and language of the covenantal blessing, then, have been clearly established by the time we are introduced to Yaakov's sons. The blessing may only be transmitted to one son to the exclusion of the others (even when deception or heartbreak is involved) and contains identifiable elements: the promise of land, fertility, the ability to transmit blessing, and a direct link to Avraham. These elements will all be associated with Yosef in the story of Yaakov's sons, and markedly absent from his brothers and their blessings.

## Yosef as the Chosen Son

אֵלֶּה תְּלִדוֹת יַעֲקֹב, יוֹסֵף בְּרִשְׁבֵּעַ-עֶשְׂרָה שָׁנָה הָיָה...

With these words, Bereishit 37 introduces us to the story of Yosef and his brothers — or, more specifically, the story of Yosef versus his brothers.

From the beginning, Yosef is designated as special. Rather than reintroducing us to all twelve of Yaakov's sons as one imagines a verse that begins with “these are the generations of Yaakov” might do, we are introduced only to Yosef, Yaakov's designated and obvious favorite. Yaakov feels uncompelled to hide his favoritism for Yosef, going as far as to make Yosef a *ketonet pasim*, a garment that seems to indicate Yosef's special status.

The exact translation and nature of the *ketonet pasim* is famously obscure. What we do know, is that we encounter the phrase “*ketonet pasim*” only one other time in *Tanach*, in 2 Samuel 13:18–19 where we are told the *ketonet pasim* is worn by the king's virgin daughters. In this context, the *ketonet pasim* seems to be a sign of royalty. Indeed, the Sforno states that the *ketonet pasim* “indicated that Yosef was to be the leader in the house and field, just as we find Elyakim being figuratively enrobed with the mantle of Shevna, as an expression of his assumption of authority” (see Isaiah 22:21). In this reading, the *ketonet pasim* is a sign that Yosef is not just beloved, but different; marked for a different fate than his brothers. Yosef, cloaked in the *ketonet pasim*, is elevated above his brothers, a sort of aristocrat among shepherds. It seems, then, that the *ketonet pasim* is not just a marker of Yaakov's love for Yosef, but

of Yosef's elevated, chosen status among his brothers. Although Yaakov has many children, only one child is destined to inherit Yaakov's status as the carrier of blessing, as Yaakov's true heir and the heir to the covenantal blessing. Yaakov, and the Torah itself, are not simply marking Yosef as a favorite son but as a covenantal chosen one.

Yaakov's choice of Yosef is not arbitrary. The text informs us that Yaakov loves Yosef the most because he is his *ben zekunim*, the child of his old age. This phrase is difficult to understand: Yosef, after all, is not Yaakov's youngest son. If the phrase *ben zekunim* simply means a child who is the favorite because he was born in his father's old age, it would make more sense for Binyamin, Yaakov's youngest, to be Yaakov's *ben zekunim*. Additionally, as several commentators point out, there does not seem to be any significant age gap between Yosef and several of his older brothers. At most, Yaakov's final children with Leah are likely only a year or two older than Yosef, hardly the sort of significant age difference that would make Yosef a favored child of old age in contrast to his brothers.

It seems, in context, that "*ben zekunim*" does not simply indicate a child born in the parent's old age, but something else as well: a much-anticipated child born in a parent's old age. Yosef is not the favorite simply because he was born to Yaakov when Yaakov was old, but because Yosef is the much-anticipated, prayed for child of Rachel, Yaakov's favorite wife, finally born when his father is old<sup>3</sup>. If this is the case, then Yosef is similar, in many ways, to Yitzchak: a child born of a designated/favorite wife to a father who already has other children. In telling us that Yosef is the favorite because he is a *ben zekunim* the text links Yosef to Yitzchak, another chosen son whose birth narrative centers around his parents advanced age.

Yosef, then, is not simply his father's second-to-youngest (more specifically, eleventh-born) son, who becomes his favorite because he is born when his father is old. Instead, Yosef is the favorite because he is the much anticipated oldest son of Yaakov's favorite wife — one of two potential "*bechor*"s and inheritors of the covenantal blessing. Reuven, Leah's oldest son and other possible *bechor*, has disqualified himself from that position as heir through his actions with Bilhah, his father's concubine. In fact, Leah's three oldest children have all seemingly disqualified themselves — Reuven, through his

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3. In fact, Yaakov only leaves Haran once Yosef is born, an indication that he may have been waiting for Yosef's birth to return to the covenantal land.

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actions with Billhah, and Shimon and Levi through their actions in Shechem. Yosef, Rachel's oldest son and Yaakov's second "bechor" is, in many ways, the next logical choice — if not directly after Reuven (although I would argue that Yosef would be a logical choice as second-in-line, as the second possible bechor), then certainly after Leah's first three children.

In addition to being a bechor, Yosef fits the pattern of the covenantal heir established in previous generations. Like Yitzchak and Yaakov, Yosef is one of two children. Similarly, like Yitzchak and Yaakov, Yosef is a son born after an extended period of barrenness and, implicitly at least, an appeal to God.

The idea that Yosef seems to fit the role of a single, chosen son is not a new one. The Malbim, in his commentary on Bereishit, argues that this is, in fact, how Yosef's brothers interpreted the situation:

ולכן וישנאו אותנו, והוא כי עד  
עתה רק אחד מן הבנים היה הלב  
והסגולה ויתר הבנים היו  
כקליפות, וישמעאל נדחה מפני  
יצחק ועשו מפני יעקב, ויצחק  
ויעקב ירשו ברכת אברהם:  
הבכורה והברכה וירושת הארץ  
והדבוק האלקי, ... ובאשר לא  
ידעו השבטים שעתה יתנוצץ  
הענין האלקי על מטה שלמה  
ושכל שבטי קה יהיו לב וסגולה,  
וראו שיעקב אהב רק את יוסף,  
חשבו שזה מפני שחושב שהוא  
הלב והסגולה ויתר בניו כקליפות,  
ובפרט שעשה לו כתנת פסים  
שמורה שרוצה ליחדו לעבודת ה'  
ולתת לו מעלת הבכורה (מלבים  
על בראשית לז:ד).

And as a result they hated him; because until now only one of the sons would be the chosen one, and the rest like extraneous husks. Yishmael was pushed away because of Yitzchak and Esav pushed away because of Yaakov, while Yitzchak and Yaakov inherited Avraham's blessing: the birthright, the blessing, the inheritance of the land, and the connection to God... And since the tribes did not know that now the Divine Matter sparked over a complete bed, and that all the tribes of God would be chosen, they saw that Yaakov loved Yosef alone, and thought that because of this, he was the chosen son and the rest of them would be extraneous, and they especially thought this because Yaakov made Yosef a *ketonet pasim* which showed that he wanted to single him out to worship God and to give him the birthright (Malbim on Bereishit 37:4).

The Hoil Moshe, a nineteenth century Italian commentary, similarly argues that Yosef's brothers assume he is to be Yaakov's exclusive heir:

המלך תמלך עלינו – אחי יוסף  
קנאו בו כי יראו פן יחשבהו  
יעקב בכור, ואחרי מות אביהם  
יצטרכו ללכת אל ארץ אחרת.

Will you indeed rule over us — Yosef's brothers were jealous of him lest Yaakov consider him the bechor and after their father died they would have to go to a different land.

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While the Malbim and Hoil Moshe think that the brothers were mistaken, we have every reason to think that the brothers were correct — that, in fact, at this point Yaakov does intend to choose Yosef as the intended inheritor of the covenantal blessing to the exclusion of his siblings. At this point in the narrative, there is no reason to think that the brothers were incorrect in their assessment. In choosing Yosef to the exclusion of his siblings, Yaakov is following the pattern established by his father and grandfather before him.

Yaakov's other sons are understandably angry. In choosing Yosef, Yaakov is not simply perpetuating the cycle of chosen and unchosen, which, in and of itself, may have caused jealousy between brothers. By going "out of order" to favor his second wife's firstborn, Yaakov is subverting the actual birth order of his sons. While Yosef is, indeed, a firstborn, among Yaakov's family he is also the eleventh son. In choosing Yosef, Yaakov is once again choosing his second, more beloved wife, Rachel, over his first, non-chosen wife, Leah. Yosef's dreams, to the brothers, are confirmation of their suspicions. They affirm that Yosef is that chosen son — and, furthermore, that he may use his status as the covenantal heir to rule over them, a prerogative that has not been exercised by any previous covenantal heir.

## Yosef's Sale

It is this, perhaps, that explains, at least in part, why the brothers take such drastic action. They are not furious at the fact that one brother is to receive the covenantal blessing to the exclusion of the others, or because Yaakov favors one brother more than the others. What the brothers cannot tolerate is that Yaakov's favoritism causes him to choose the wrong son. It may be only right that one son should be chosen as the inheritor of the covenant, but that brother should be chosen according to the order sons were born to Yaakov — not the order in which they were born to his wives. From this perspective, once Reuven, Shimon, and Levi have disqualified themselves, it is Yehudah, the fourth born, who should inherit the covenant — not Yosef, Yaakov's eleventh son. (Interestingly, it is Reuven, the first born and would-be *bechor*, who convinces the other brothers to cast Yosef into a pit rather than murder him, and Yehudah, the would-be inheritor, who convinces the brothers to sell him rather than spill his blood.)

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This anger — anger that the blessing has been promised to the wrong son, a son who should not, according to birth order, be first in line to inherit — mirrors Esav’s anger when Yaakov, his younger brother, steals the *bracha* from him. Unlike Yaakov, however, Yosef has no mother to send him away from home to wait out his brothers’ homicidal anger. In the absence of a protective mother, fratricidal anger over the subversion of the birth order takes its course, resulting in Yosef’s sale. The would-be fratricide also recalls the story of Kayin and Hevel, the first murder in the Torah and the story in which we are first introduced to the idea of a chosen and unchosen child (demonstrated when God accepts Hevel’s offering and rejects Kayin’s). Here, however, murder is averted.

The brothers strip Yosef of his *ketonet pasim*, the symbol of his status as the chosen son. This seizure of clothing echoes Yaakov’s earlier theft of Esav’s clothing in order to steal his birthright. Here, however, the brothers cannot fool their father by donning Yosef’s garments, and, instead, shred the garment. While they may succeed in removing the symbol of the *bracha* from Yosef, no other brother can convincingly don the symbol himself.

Once Yosef has been stripped, the brothers decide not to murder him, but to sell him instead. Notably, Yosef is removed from the pit by a band of Ishmaelites. Yishmael is, in many ways, the symbol of the “unchosen” son: not only is he himself supplanted by his younger brother, but the Torah records that Esav, after the *bracha* is stolen from him, marries one of Yishmael’s daughters — symbolic, perhaps, of his new status as an unchosen son. By passing Yosef to the Ishmaelites, the brothers are literally removing him from Yaakov’s chosen, covenantal tribe, and sending him to dwell among the unchosen.

The brothers then dip Yosef’s *ketonet pasim* in blood in order to trick their father into believing that Yosef has been devoured by a wild animal. The brothers use the blood of a goat, the same animal Rivka used to pass Yaakov off as Esav. Perhaps they hope that, having rid themselves of Yosef, they will be able to use the garment and goat much the same way Yaakov used Esav’s garment and the *gdi izim*, young goat, to convince their father that, in Yosef’s absence, one of them should be chosen as the rightful heir in his place. Yaakov, however, refuses to be comforted. He continues to long for Yosef, and does not choose another son in his place.

Tali Adler

## Yosef in Egypt

Despite the brothers' best efforts, Yosef continues to play the role of covenantal heir. Much like God was with Yaakov when he left Canaan to go to Haran to escape his brother's anger, Yosef, in exile because of his brothers' hatred, is still accompanied by God. Just as Yaakov never has a direct relationship with God until he is forced to leave home, Yosef's exile and servitude seem to build a previously absent relationship with God. Like Yaakov before him, Yosef is in exile and servitude in a foreign land. Similarly, like Yaakov and Yitzchak (and as promised in the covenantal blessing) Yosef acts as a transmitter of blessing to those around him.

The language of *bracha* is repeatedly associated with Yosef in Egypt. Upon Yosef's arrival as a slave in Potiphar's house, we are told that his master sees that God is with Yosef. While God does not communicate directly with Yosef, the text makes it clear that God is with him, much as God promised to be with Yaakov when he fled to Haran<sup>4</sup>. Yosef flourishes in Potiphar's household, which is blessed on his account:

וַיְבָרֶךְ יַקְנוֹק אֶת בֵּית הַמִּצְרַיִם בְּגִלְלַי יוֹסֵף וַיְהִי בְרַבְּתָּהּ יַקְנוֹק בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ לוֹ בְּבַיִת וּבְשָׂדֶה (בראשית לט:ה).

Once again, this language is reminiscent of Yaakov's experience in Haran, where Lavan realized that he was blessed on Yaakov's account:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי לָבָן, אִם-נָא מִצְאֵתִי חַן בְּעֵינַיִךְ; נַחֲשֵׂתִי, וַיְבָרְכֵנִי יְהוָה בְּגִלְלָךְ (בראשית ל:כז).

These two repeated tropes — God being with Yosef, and blessing those around him on his account — continue to mark Yosef as the inheritor of the covenant. While Yosef's brothers may have thought that by removing Yosef from the family and from Canaan, they were effectively removing him from the line of inheritance, the Torah immediately affirms for us that Yosef is still favored by God, and has the ability to transmit blessing to those around him, a marker of the covenantal heir.

Yosef does not simply passively accept God's help, but actively remarks upon it to those around him. Collectively, Yosef mentions “*Elokim*” seven times to the Egyptians around him; the first to Potiphar's wife when he refuses to sleep with her, the second to the baker and butler in prison when he tells

4. וְהָיָה אֲנֹכִי עִמָּךְ, וְשָׁמְרֶתִיךָ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֵּלֵךְ, וְהִשְׁבַּתִּיךָ, אֶל-הָאָדָמָה הַזֹּאת, כִּי לֹא אֶעֱזָבְךָ, עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם-עָשִׂיתִי, אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ (בראשית כח:טו).

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them that all dream interpretations come from God, and five times when he interprets Pharaoh's dream and implores him to pick a man of God to help him run the kingdom. The seven mentions, which indicate a complete unit, may indicate Yosef's completed transformation from a child enamored with his own destiny and unaware of God's involvement in his life to a mature man of God who is aware of the ultimate source of his own success.

While Yosef matures religiously throughout his time in Egypt, it is only when he is brought before Pharaoh that he finally ascends to the status that his dreams predicted so many years ago. Pharaoh's dreams, in many ways, recall Yosef's own: the sheaves of wheat in Pharaoh's dreams hearken back to those that appeared in Yosef's. This similarity is, perhaps, an indication that these dreams (or, more accurately, their interpretation) will lead to the fulfillment of Yosef's long deferred dreams.

Pharaoh's dreams, with their clear demarcation between good cows and sheaves, symbolic of abundance, and the bad, famished ones, are reminiscent of the marked divide we have experienced so far in Bereishit between chosen and unchosen sons: some sons are recipients of the covenantal blessing, recipients of abundance, while others are unchosen, destined for deprivation. Notably, the language used to describe the healthy cows, *yefot mareh*, is the same language the Torah uses to describe Yosef's beauty. (One cannot help but wonder if, in hearing how the famished, deprived cows devour the healthy, beautiful cows, Yosef recalls his own attack by his unchosen brothers.) Yosef's genius in this moment is not simply the interpretation of the dream — the ability to see abundance and deprivation, and to predict which will come when, which will be assigned to whom — but to realize that there is something that can be done about it. Yosef's suggestion to save from times of abundance for times of scarcity is unique in Bereishit, and seems surprising to those around him. Yosef's unique genius is the ability to see abundance and deficit and to share between the two so that there is enough to go around. It is this ability, perhaps, that will allow Yosef to see past the chosen/unchosen dichotomy, and to share his abundance (the blessing) with his brothers.

With his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams and his subsequent ascent to the throne, Yosef's time of suffering and servitude draws to a close. The text informs us that Yosef is thirty years old, the first mention of Yosef's age since his sale to Egypt. This completes the story of Yosef's youth, enveloping it with two mentions of his age; the first, at the beginning of his story, when Yosef is a seventeen year old inspiring hatred among his brothers as a shepherd, and

the second, with Yosef as a thirty year old man who has ascended to incredible power in Egypt. He is not only powerful, but a symbol and provider of abundance: he accumulates food as abundant as “the sand of the sea,” language similar to God’s promise to Avraham regarding his descendants — another reminder that Yosef, even in his role as the second most powerful man in Egypt, is still the chosen inheritor of Avraham’s blessing, including the promise of fertility and abundance (expressed through the name he gives his second son Ephraim, which he explains as “God has made me fertile in the land of my suffering” (Bereishit 41:52)) and the ability to provide blessing to all nations. This particular ability is more pronounced in Yosef than in any other covenantal heir we have previously encountered: while Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov all carry blessing to those around them, carrying gifts of prosperity and fertility to those they encounter, Yosef actually supports multiple nations through his efforts in Egypt.

## Yosef and His Brothers Reunited

Like the contrast between the healthy cows and starving cows in Pharaoh’s dreams, the contrast between Yosef’s success and fertility in Egypt and his family’s starvation in Canaan is stark. We are reintroduced to Yaakov and his family though Yaakov’s agitated question to his sons: *Why are you keeping up appearances?*<sup>5</sup> This language immediately indicates a strained relationship between Yaakov and his remaining sons; Yosef’s loss and the experience of famine, rather than creating closeness between Yaakov and his remaining sons, seems to have created more distance. Yaakov commands his sons to go down to Egypt to procure food. Their situation at this point is dire, underscored by Yaakov’s closing words: that we may live and not die.

Although Yaakov demands that his sons go to Egypt to procure food, he does not allow Binyamin, his youngest son, to go with them. Yaakov treats Binyamin specially as his one remaining son from Rachel. It may be that this is not simply out of love for Rachel, but because he sees Binyamin as his other possible heir in Yosef’s absence. Binyamin’s absence and Yaakov’s special treatment of his last remaining son by Rachel will soon become the crux of the

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5. בראשית מב:א.

### Keren III

reunion between Yosef and his brothers. Yosef will judge his brothers by how they relate to Yaakov's special treatment of this youngest, special son, and how they treat Binyamin in turn. In their conversations with Yosef, the brothers will reveal how they relate to each other, to Binyamin, to Yosef, and to their father by how they tell the story of their family, an account that changes dramatically over the course of their meetings. Ultimately, it is the change in the way the brothers tell their story, going from a narrative that tells the story of their family as they wish it was to the story of their family as it actually is, that will be the key to Yosef's trust.

In chapters 42–44 of Bereishit, the brothers give several accounts of their family structure. In the beginning, these accounts echo the reality the brothers wish for: an account where they are simply ten brothers, sons of the same man, without the added complications of Rachel's two sons, the sons for which Yaakov is willing to upend birth order in passing on the covenantal blessing. In fact, when the brothers are first brought before Yosef, they do not acknowledge the difference between Binyamin and the rest of Yaakov's sons at all. They tell Yosef that they are ten brothers, completely ignoring the existence of Yaakov's two favored sons by Rachel.

When Yosef prompts them, accusing them of being spies, the brothers expand their definition of themselves, acknowledging that they are, in fact, twelve brothers, although the youngest is at home and one is "absent." Even in this, however, the brothers elide any possible differences between them. They do not mention that they have multiple mothers, much less multiple mothers with different ranks within the family. Even in explaining that Binyamin is at home, the brothers simply refer to him as the youngest, making it seem like Binyamin remains at home because of his age, rather than his treasured status as Rachel's only remaining son and, implicitly, Yaakov's remaining heir. The brothers describe themselves as they wish Yaakov saw them, all as children of one father, equally valuable regardless of which mother they come from.

It is only in their final encounter with Yosef, after he has accused Binyamin of stealing, that the brothers change their narrative to one that more fully reflects their complicated, painful reality. Yehudah explains "שֵׁשׁ-לָנוּ אָב זָקֵן, וְיָלֵד יְהוָה" (Bereishit 44:20). Here, for the first time, Yehudah explains that Yaakov's sons have different mothers, and that two of those sons were special to Yaakov because of their mother. Yehudah not only centers Rachel's two children, he describes Binyamin as Yaakov's "yeled zekunim," a term that is similar to the phrase "ben zekunim" that was

previously used to indicate Yosef's status as the chosen son, indicating that he understands and accepts that, in Yosef's absence, Binyamin, Rachel's only remaining son, will likely become the covenantal heir. This account of the brothers' family is significantly different from the previous narratives. In this account, Yehudah acknowledges what the brothers have been trying to fight all along — that their father had a favorite wife, and sees that wife's children as his primary sons. Yehudah goes so far as to quote his father's words to them "אָתָם דְּעָתָם, כִּי שָׂנִים לְדָה־לִּי אִשְׁתִּי" (Bereishit 44:27). These words are doubly painful — they refer to Rachel simply as "my wife," not "one of my wives," and states simply "my wife gave me two sons," with no mention of Yaakov's ten other children — a far cry from the brothers original narratives, in which they described themselves simply as ten sons of the same man, excluding Rachel's children entirely.

In this moment, Yehudah has the opportunity to allow Binyamin to be taken by Yosef, and to remove Rachel's children from the family. It is likely that if Binyamin is taken away, Yehudah will become the presumptive heir. Similarly, with Binyamin removed from the family, they might actually become the family the brothers described in their first meeting with Yosef in Egypt: ten sons of one father, all of equal status, regardless of mother.

Instead, Yehudah accepts his father's understanding of his family, an understanding that originally led him and his brothers to sell Yosef into slavery. Yehudah not only accepts his father's account of the family, but is willing to sacrifice himself to prevent his father from suffering. (Interestingly, Yehudah's sole concern here seems to be his father's suffering. He has not yet come so far that he is willing to sacrifice himself to avoid Binyamin's suffering.<sup>6</sup>)

It is not only Yehudah's willingness to sacrifice himself to save Binyamin that leads Yosef to reveal himself, but his willingness to accept the reality of their family as it is — brothers with different mothers, with different statuses, and one, more beloved, and chosen to the exclusion of the others. Yehudah's acceptance of this reality tells Yosef what he needs to know: that his family can accept its reality, and, by extension, his place within it. The brothers' narrative, which gradually expands to include Rachel's children and then to grant them the reality of their elevated position within it, a position that once brought them dangerously close to fratricide, has finally become one that can

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6. My teacher Wendy Amsellem points out that even now, Yehudah might think Binyamin actually deserves to suffer if he stole the goblet.

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include Yosef within it as well. The Yosef who reveals himself to his brothers is a Yosef who is sure, at last, that his brothers are ready to accept him and his place as the chosen son within the family<sup>7</sup>.

## Yaakov's Blessings

Yaakov, when he can finally bring himself to believe the news that his beloved son is alive, immediately sets out for Egypt in order to see his son before he dies. As he sets out on his journey, accompanied by his entire household, God appears to him one last time. God tells Yaakov not to be frightened, and informs him that He will accompany Yaakov down to Egypt, and, more importantly, that He will bring him — and, by implication, Yaakov's chosen descendents — back to the land once again. This promise is a renewal of the Abrahamic covenant at a moment of fragility. For twenty-two years, Yaakov has believed that his chosen son, the son who was destined to inherit the covenant, was dead. This, coupled with near starvation in famine, Shimon's imprisonment, and Yaakov's desperate decision to allow Binyamin to accompany his brothers down to Egypt, may well have led Yaakov to question the terms of the covenant — whether he, Yaakov, was still the carrier of the *bracha*, and whether any of his sons would inherit that covenant after him. In appearing to Yaakov for the first time since Yaakov returned to the land decades earlier and promising him that even though he is leaving the land to go to Egypt, God will bring Yaakov's descendents out of Egypt and back to the land once again, God is assuring Yaakov that the covenant is still live. It seems that when God ends that promise by assuring Yaakov that he will die with Yosef at his side, God is not simply reassuring an old man who has lived for years believing that his beloved son is dead that their reunion will be final, but marking Yosef as the appropriate inheritor of this renewed covenant.

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7. Yehudah and Yosef play off of each other's strengths. Yehudah is a man who has the ability to accept difficult truths, as he does when he acknowledges his paternity of Tamar's unborn child. Yosef is a person who can not only see the world as it is, but decide how to use that reality to create a better one (eg., in his interpretation of Pharaoh's dream and his suggestion for how to survive and profit from the famine). It is Yehudah's acknowledgment of the difficult truth about the family that allows Yosef to reenter the family and, as we will discuss, change the reality of the family by choosing to share his blessing with his brothers.

This, at least, is how Yaakov seems to interpret God's promise. Before his death, Yaakov calls Yosef and his two children, Ephraim and Menashe, to his bedside. This moment is the climax of Yaakov's reunion for Yosef: the moment in which Yaakov will pass the covenantal *bracha* to Yosef and his sons — to the exclusion of Yosef's brothers. This is the first of two waves of blessing Yaakov will transmit to Yosef (the second occurring one chapter later, when Yaakov tells his children what will happen "in the end of days," reserving the language of covenantal blessing for Yosef alone). This scene resembles, in many ways, Yitzchak's (accidental) blessing of Yaakov. It is a type scene, in which a patriarch calls a chosen son in order to bless that son before the patriarch dies.

There are three "keys" in this scene which indicate that Yaakov is, in fact, choosing Ephraim and Menashe as his covenantal heirs to the exclusion of his other sons. The first is Yaakov's adoptive language. Yaakov begins by recounting God's promise to him that he will become a "*kehal amim*" (Bereishit 48:4) and that he and his descendants will inherit the land of Canaan. Immediately after recounting this promise, Yaakov turns to Yosef's two sons, and says that they will be to him like Reuven and Shimon. What is the meaning of this obscure statement? While many explain that "like Reuven and Shimon" simply means that Ephraim and Menashe will become tribes in their own right, like all of Yaakov's sons, I believe that the choice of sons, Reuven and Shimon, is significant. Reuven and Shimon, Yaakov's two oldest children, would have inherited the *bechora* and covenantal blessing if not for their mistakes. By stating that Ephraim and Menashe are like "Reuven and Shimon" to him, Yaakov is stating that Yosef's two children — and, by extension, Yosef himself — are his primary heirs. As in previous generations, there are two primary heirs, one of which (as Yaakov points out when he switches his hand, designating Ephraim as the *bechor* instead of Menashe) will be the primary, covenantal heir, destined to become the greater nation, while the other still inherits the "consolation blessing" of at least becoming a great nation in his own right.

The second key indicator in this scene is Yaakov's invocation of his ancestors in blessing Ephraim and Menashe. When he places his hands on Ephraim and Menashe's heads, Yaakov invokes his father and grandfather, Avraham and Yitzchak. As noted above, this is a key feature in the transmission of the covenantal blessing. While many sons may be blessed, we have only Avraham mentioned in connection with *bracha* when it is his *bracha*, the Abrahamic blessing, that is being transmitted. Significantly, Yaakov never mentions Avraham and Yitzchak when blessing any of his other sons. Furthermore, in

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blessing Ephraim and Menashe, Yaakov says that that they should be called in his name — that is, that they should be the carriers of his name, and, implicitly, his heritage. Yaakov emphasized this when he says that all of Israel should bless their children in Ephraim and Menashe's names. In the context of the birthright, this is not arbitrary. (After all, although Jews today do bless their children in Ephraim and Menashe's names, it is strange to bless your children in the name of people who are not their ancestors.) Instead, Yaakov is marking Ephraim and Menashe as the designated patriarchs of the chosen people.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Yaakov repeatedly promises, in this scene, that Yosef and his children will return to the land. While this is often interpreted as a general promise to all of Yaakov's children, it is notable that Yaakov only says this when alone in a room with Yosef and his children, and not in the next scene when he blesses the rest of his sons. Yaakov's words "God will be with you and return you to the land of your ancestors" (Bereishit 48:21), is directed only to Yosef and his sons. It seems, at this point, that only Yosef and his sons are promised an eventual return to the land. The rest of Yaakov's sons, like Yishmael and Esav before them, may be destined to find their fortune elsewhere. At this point we have every reason to believe that Yosef and his sons will be Yaakov's sole covenantal heirs, and that the eventual return to the land is promised to them alone.

Yosef's status as the covenantal heir is further affirmed in Yaakov's final gathering of his sons, in which he describes each of them and blesses them accordingly. Yosef's *bracha* contains several elements, lacking in the others, that mark it as the covenantal blessing. Yosef's blessing is the only one of the twelve that actually uses the root "*b-r-ch*," which also appears throughout Yosef's story and his time in Egypt. The root appears six times in Yosef's blessing, which, when combined with the final rejoinder regarding all twelve of the sons "אִישׁ אֶשֶׁר כָּבְדָתְנוּ, בְּרַךְ אֹתָם" (Bereishit 49:28) creates a unit of seven. Furthermore, Yosef's blessing contains explicit mention of the ancestral blessing — בְּרַכְתָּ אֲבִיקָה, גְּבִירֵי עַל-בְּרַכְתָּ הוֹרֵי — (Bereishit 49:26) something markedly missing from the blessings he grants any of his other sons. Equally notable is that none of the other sons' blessings invoke God, while Yosef's blessing invokes Him with several names — including *E-l Sha-dai*, the name that usually accompanies the covenantal blessing.

While Yaakov's other sons receive blessings, they are not the covenantal blessing, which is reserved for Yosef alone. Even Yehudah's *bracha*, which promises him rulership over his brothers, does not contain the covenantal

elements or mention God. While Yehudah is granted some sort of blessing having to do with temporal authority, he is not granted fertility, ability to transmit blessing, a promise of return to the land, or relationship with God. (Although Yehudah's blessing mentions "Shiloh," later to become a city in the land of Israel, this does not necessarily mean that Yehudah is promised a share in the land. Many commentaries instead read the word as "*shai lo*," tribute shall come to him, which seems to make more sense in the context of a blessing about rulership.) While Yehudah's blessing may grant him temporal authority, it does not include him in the covenant. The ability to rule is not a part of the covenantal blessing<sup>8</sup>. Yehudah may be blessed with the ability to reign over his brothers, even Yosef, but that ability to rule does not mean that he is part of the covenant with God.

When Yaakov dies, Yosef and his sons alone have been told of God's promise of return to the land. Not only does it seem that the other brothers are not included in the promise, they may not know about it at all. Furthermore, while all the brothers received final "blessings" from Yaakov (although some blessings seem rather negative in nature,) Yosef alone received a blessing with language that invoked Yaakov and his ancestors, or God. The brothers, who heard Yosef's distinctive blessing and seem to understand that Yaakov chose Yosef as the covenantal heir, are understandably nervous. Yosef is not only the second in command in Egypt, but also the inheritor of Avraham's *bracha*. Their fears so many years ago, that Yosef alone would receive the blessing, have been justified.

## Yosef's Choice

Of course, as readers of the Torah, we know that all twelve of the brothers do become inheritors of the covenantal *bracha*. Although Yosef receives a "double portion" in that Ephraim and Menashe both become tribes, he is not

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8. While Yaakov's initial blessing, the one he steals from Esav, does include the promise that he will rule over his brothers, this is not one of the characteristics of the covenantal blessing, being notably absent in all the promises made to Avraham and Yitzchak. In fact, Rav Amital argues that it is exactly this portion of the blessing that Yaakov returns to Esav at their reunion. (עמיטל, הרב יהודה, 'קח נא את ברכתי בית). (המדרש הוירטואלי, ישיבת הר עציון.)

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the unique carrier of the blessing and relationship with God. How, then, does the *bracha* get transmitted to the other brothers?

The answer, I believe, is that a close reading of the final *pesukim* of Bereishit shows that Yosef decides to share the *bracha* with his brothers — an unprecedented act in a book in which the struggle for status as the chosen son has led to fratricide and repeated incidents of narrowly averted murders.

After promising his brothers his protection and support for their families, Bereishit recounts that Yosef lived to be 110 years old and see his great grandchildren born in the land of Egypt. Typically, as with Yitzchak<sup>9</sup> and Yaakov<sup>10</sup>, this would be the point at which the patriarch, preparing for his death, calls his son to him in order to bless him before he dies. The text prepares us for this scene by reminding us that Yosef has descendants and, more specifically, in putting Ephraim first and noting Menashe's grandchildren as an addendum (בְּנֵי מְנַשֶּׁה בְּרִמְנָשָׁה – יְלָדָיו, עַל-בְּרַכֵּי יוֹסֵף) (Bereishit 50:23) reminding us which son has been chosen. The reader, at this point, should expect Yosef to call Ephraim to his bedside, tell him that he may die soon, and pass the covenantal blessing on to him and his family.

Instead, in a surprising turn, Yosef delivers this deathbed speech to his brothers. While his language resembles that of a patriarch (his words, אֲנִכִּי מָת, resemble Yitzchak's language when he calls Esav to his bedside, and Yaakov's when he calls Yosef and his sons to his own,) his choice of audience is a marked departure from anything we have seen before in Bereishit. Yosef informs his brothers that they will be redeemed — that God will take them out of Egypt to the land that was promised to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov.

These verses, so often overlooked, should actually be read as a surprise ending. Before this moment only Yosef has been explicitly informed of a promise of redemption and return to the land, much less promised a share. In informing his brothers that they too will be redeemed, Yosef is actually sharing a blessing that had previously been granted to him and his family alone. In an unprecedented move, where previous patriarchs chose their sons, Yosef is choosing his brothers. After generations of struggle between brothers for the covenantal blessing, Yosef chooses to end the cycle of chosen and unchosen sons. In choosing his brothers, Yosef makes the move that transforms

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9. בראשית כז:ב.

10. בראשית מח:א.

Avraham's line from a family which much continuously prune itself, removing the unchosen elements, into a blessed nation.

The problem of the *bracha* and the chosen child is, in a way, a problem of scarcity. In the model of the chosen and unchosen children the *bracha* is a scarce resource. This is underscored by the language the Torah repeatedly uses about Canaan's ability to support multiple branches of Avraham's family: we are told that both Lot and Esav, unchosen sons, leave the land because there are not enough resources to support both Lot and Avraham or both Yaakov and Esav. Until Yosef, both the land and Avraham's *bracha* are understood through the lens of scarcity. Yosef's intuition about the years of famine and abundance — the intuition that abundance can be shared in such a way that no one needs to experience scarcity — is the same understanding that leads him to share his own abundance, in the form of the Abrahamic *bracha*, with his brothers. The solution to Pharaoh's dream, which leads to the physical reunion and salvation of Yaakov's family, is the same solution that mends the longstanding pattern of rift between brothers and allows all of Yaakov's sons to be united in blessing and chosenness. Yosef is once again able to see previously unconceived solutions: to take a scarce resource and, through redistribution, make it abundant.

By closing with Yosef's choice, Bereishit heals the rift that began with Kayin and Hevel, the first incidence of competition between brothers and continued through generations — first of Noach's family, and then in Avraham's. Yosef is a direct counterpoint to Kayin. Kayin's brother Hevel is treated as extraneous, his very birth seen as a mere continuation of Kayin's own. With Yosef's birth, in contrast, Rachel immediately wishes for another son — for a brother for her first born. The phrase “וַתִּסְּרֶף לְלֶדֶת” that first marks a second son and first brother as an unnecessary addition (Bereishit 4:2, in reference to the birth of Hevel) is answered with Rachel's heartfelt “יִסְּרֶף ה' לִי בֶן אַחֵר” (Bereishit 30:24 in reference to Rachel's desire for a second son after the birth of Yosef, her first). Where Kayin's deepest desire is to destroy the second, extra son, Yosef's is to seek out the brother — and brothers — invoked at his birth. Yosef's choice offers a different model to the one that has operated throughout Bereishit. In closing with Yosef's choice, Bereishit offers Yosef's words, “*et achai anochi mevakesh*” (Bereishit 37:16) as an answer to Kayin's “*hashomer achi anochi*” (Bereishit 4:9). The answer is a resounding yes — not just my brother's keeper, but my brother's seeker and blesser as well.

## Coda: Why Yosef?

Why, though, can Yosef choose his brothers? Why does Yosef have the ability to break a cycle that has dominated the story of humanity as told in Bereishit?

### Yosef the Son of Rachel

When viewed through the lens of his mother and the circumstances surrounding his birth, Yosef may be seen as, in some way, gifted from birth with the ability to seek and choose his brothers.

While the ability to share chosenness and the covenantal blessing only begins in the male line with Yosef's decision to share the *bracha*, it may have precursors in the story of Yaakov's wives — specifically, Rachel and Leah. In this story, marriage to Yaakov, the covenantal son, is the path to chosenness and inclusion in the covenant for whoever becomes his wife<sup>11</sup>. Leah, who was supposed to be the “unchosen” daughter, through the machinations of her father (machinations which resemble the circumstances through which Yaakov himself stole the blessing from his “chosen” brother, Esav,) becomes Yaakov's first wife. In the normal model of chosenness in Bereishit, in which only one sibling can be chosen, this would preclude Rachel from becoming chosen as well. However, (at Lavan's suggestion,) Yaakov marries Rachel as well. While this situation is painful, it is the first model of something unprecedented in Bereishit: two siblings sharing blessing and inclusion in the covenant. This itself represents a radical break with the rest of Bereishit, one which could serve as a precursor to Yosef's choice.

The *midrash*, however, expands on Leah's marriage to Yaakov, painting it not simply as the result of Lavan's deception, but as a deliberate choice on Rachel's part motivated by compassion for her sister<sup>12</sup>. In this *midrash*, Rachel and Yaakov know that Lavan plans to deceive Yaakov by substituting Leah for Rachel at the wedding, and create secret signs by which Yaakov will

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11. The *midrash* that speaks about Leah having originally been intended for Esav while Rachel was intended for Yaakov — and Leah's incessant crying about that fate — further indicates that the pattern of chosenness was, in some way, meant to apply to Leah and Rachel as well as Yaakov and Esav.

12. *Eichah Rabbah*, Petichta 24.

*Tali Adler*

know whether the bride offered to him is actually Rachel. Rachel, however, has a change of heart before the wedding. Unwilling to see her sister publicly shamed, Rachel shares the signs with Leah, facilitating the deception and Leah's marriage to Yaakov.

In this *midrash*, Rachel actually makes a choice and subverts an existing paradigm: unlike Yaakov who employs deception in order to steal the blessing from his sibling, Rachel facilitates deception in order to help her sister achieve blessing as well. Rachel makes a choice to give — and later to share — blessing to and with her sister. Yosef, then, follows in his mother's example when he chooses to share his blessing with his brothers. (Interestingly, both subvert Yaakov's favoritism.) It is Rachel's choice, a choice that the *midrash* casts as the reason for the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people, that allows for Yosef's own.