YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Vayeshev**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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In loving memory of my parents

Shmuel Binyamin (Samuel) and Esther Rivka (Elizabeth) Lowinger z"l

- Benzion Lowinger

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**Yosef and His Brothers – The Pit and the Sale**

Translated by David Strauss

**I. The Pit**

And they said one to another: “Behold, this dreamer comes. Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into one of the pits, and we will say: An evil beast has devoured him; and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” And Reuven heard it and delivered him out of their hand; and said: “Let us not take his life.” And Reuven said to them: “Shed no blood; cast him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but lay no hand upon him” – that he might deliver him out of their hand, to restore him to his father. And it came to pass, when Yosef was come to his brothers, that they stripped Yosef of his coat, the coat of many colors that was on him; and they took him, and cast him into the pit – and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. (*Bereishit* 37:19-24)

The fact that there was an empty pit in the grazing land in the Dotan Valley gives us good reason to think that it was a year of drought, and the brothers therefore wandered with their flocks northwards to places where there was more water.

However, there may be a different reason for the emptiness of the pit. According to an apocryphal *aggada*, the sale of Yosef took place on Yom Kippur, on the tenth of the seventh month. Accordingly, the story took place in the autumn, after the end of the summer but the before the beginning of the rainy season. Therefore, the pit was empty of water:

And in the seventh year of this week, he sent Yosef to learn about the welfare of his brothers from his house to the land of Shechem, and he found them in the land of Dotan. And they dealt treacherously with him, and formed a plot against him to slay him, but changing their minds, they sold him to Yishmaelite merchants, and they brought him down into Egypt, and they sold him to Potifar, the eunuch of Pharaoh, the chief of the cooks, priest of the city of Elu. And the sons of Yaakov slaughtered a kid, and dipped the coat of Yosef in the blood, and sent (it) to Yaakov their father **on the tenth of the seventh month.** And he mourned all that night, for they had brought it to him in the evening, and he became feverish with mourning for his death, and he said: An evil beast has devoured Yosef; and all the members of his house mourned with him that day, and they were grieving and mourning with him all that day. (*Book of Jubilees* 34:10-13)[[1]](#footnote-1)

It seems that this is the source of the connection between the sale of Yosef and Yom Kippur, a connection that finds expression in the lamentation that is recited on Yom Kippur (in the context of the *selichot* at the end of the order of the Yom Kippur Temple service) over the deaths of the ten martyrs in retribution for the sale of Yosef. We have written extensively about this lamentation and its meaning in our study of *Parashat Vayishlach*,in a discussion concerning the site of Rachel's burial.

Commenting on the emptiness of the pit, *Chazal* added:

R. Natan bar Minyomi expounded in the name of R. Tanchum: Why is it written: "And the pit was empty, there was no water in it"? From the fact that it says: "and the pit was empty," do I not know that there was no water in it? What then is taught by: "there was no water in it"? There was no water, yet there were snakes and scorpions in it. (*Shabbat* 22a)

This idea is derived not only from the extraneous wording in the verse, as would appear at first glance. Reality proves, as R. Tanchum argues in the *midrash*, that dry hidden areas serve as nesting areas for snakes and the like. This pit, which had already been dry for some time, was used by snakes and scorpions, and Yosef was cast into it. The verses themselves support R. Tanchum, for regarding Israel's sojourning in the wilderness it says: "wherein were snakes, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where was no water" (*Devarim* 8:15), which implies that in a place where there is no water, there are snakes and scorpions.

Should you argue that the verse seems to be saying that the pit was a place of rescue, and not a place of danger, an answer can be brought from a verse in *Yirmeyahu*:

Then they took Yirmeyahu and cast him into the pit of Malkiyahu the king's son, which was in the court of the guard; and they let down Yirmeyahu with cords. And in the pit there was no water, but mire; and Yirmeyhau sank in the mire. (*Yirmeyahu* 38:6)

This indicates that there is something even worse than no water.

And yet, it is difficult to ignore the plain meaning of the text – that the pit was a place of rescue, and not a place of danger, and that thanks to Yosef's having been cast into the pit, as proposed by Reuven, Yosef remained alive. Even if snakes and scorpions nested in the pit, as argued by *Chazal*, Yosef could have fought them off for a limited time, until he was raised from the pit and sold to the Yishmaelites.

**II. Who Sold Yosef to the Yishmaelites?**

The common understanding, which rests on the words of the commentators including Rashi, is that the brothers raised Yosef from the pit and sold him to the Yishmaelites. This is consistent with Yehuda's advice that the brothers should sell him to the Yishmaelites, and also with what is stated when Yosef reveals himself to his brothers:

And he said: “I am Yosef your brother, whom you sold to Egypt. And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me here….” (*Bereishit* 45:4-5)

There are, however, certain difficulties with this understanding:

1) Reuven's role in what happened does not fit in well with the story. The Torah tells us that Reuven returned to the pit and saw that Yosef was not there. From where did he return? After all, he joined with his brothers regarding the idea of casting Yosef into the pit, and we did not hear that he left them. Moreover, when Reuven returns to his brothers, he says: "The child is not; and as for me, where shall I go" (*Bereishit* 37:20), and his words are left hanging. The brothers do not respond; they continue their pursuit of blurring the sale by slaughtering the goat hair and dipping Yosef's coat in its blood.

2) Years later, when the brothers stand before the Egyptian ruler, Reuven mentions the incident:

And Reuven answered them, saying: “Spoke I not to you, saying: Do not sin against the child; and you would not hear? Therefore also, behold, his blood is required.” (*Bereishit* 42:22)

Reuven speaks here of the blood of Yosef. Did he not know that Yosef had been sold into slavery and was not killed? Did the brothers manage to hide this from him all these years?

3) If the brothers raised Yosef out of the pit and sold him to the Yishmaelites, what was the role of the Midyanite merchants in the story? Although Ibn Ezra and the Rambam reconciled the plain meaning of the verses with respect to the relationship between the Yishmaelites and the Midyanites according to the above-mentioned explanation, our first questions still remain.

The Rashbam argues that the Midyanites pulled Yosef out of the pit and sold him to the Yishmaelites, as this is the plain meaning of the verse:

And there passed by Midyanites, merchantmen; and they drew and lifted up Yosef out of the pit, and sold Yosef to the Yishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they brought Yosef to Egypt. (*Bereishit* 37:28)

The Rashbam, in his usual manner, explained the matter in a very concise manner; we will try to weave the different parts of the story according to his understanding and in accordance with our imagination.

The brothers did not want to hear Yosef's cries from the pit while they were eating, so they distanced themselves from the place and the range in which they would hear him. Their behavior is somewhat reminiscent of that of Hagar when her son Yishmael was in distress (though she felt forced to act as she did by the circumstances that were beyond her control): "And she went and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bow-shot; for she said: Let me not look upon the death of the child" (*Bereishit* 21:16).

While eating, the brothers noticed from afar the caravan of Yishmaelites approaching them, and Yehuda proposed, while his mouth was still full of food, to sell Yosef to the Yishmaelites when they reached them. Reuven, Yehuda, and their brothers did not notice the group of Midyanite merchants, who were already closer to the pit, heard Yosef's cries, and took him with them.

When Reuven heard the suggestion of his brother Yehuda during the meal, he got up with some excuse and left the feasters, and he hurried off to the pit. He was closer to the pit than the Yishmaelite caravan, and he hoped to rescue Yosef from the pit and hide him somewhere safe in order to return him to his father. He rushed to the pit, but Yosef was not there, because the Midyanites had already removed him and went off on a different road. At a great distance from Dotan, the Midyanites (or Medanites) met the Yishmaelites and sold Yosef to them, and together with them brought Yosef to Egypt.

Reuven, who saw that the pit was empty, immediately returned to his brothers and told them that the child was gone, and thus their plan to sell him to the Yishmaelites would not materialize. Let us re-read these verses:

And he returned to his brothers and said: “The child is not; and as for me, where shall I go?” And they took Yosef's coat, and killed a he-goat, and dipped the coat in the blood. (*Bereishit* 37:30-31)

Reuven and his brothers, who, as mentioned, never saw the Midyanites, were frightened and thought that Yosef had indeed been eaten by a wild animal. They staged his tragic end with the goat's blood, so that Yaakov would not investigate Yosef's disappearance and uncover the brothers' guilt in the matter – that they had thrown him into the pit. Reuven and his brothers, like Yaakov, though that Yosef had indeed been killed, and they therefore did not go to look for him in Egypt even after they saw Yaakov in his great sorrow – until they met him in Egypt during the years of the famine.

How are we to understand the claim of "whom you sold to Egypt" that Yosef raised against his brothers? It is possible that the decisive factor in the brothers' harassment of Yosef was their removal of his coat of many colors. It should be remembered that the *ketonet* in Scripture is not equivalent to a modern shirt, but was rather a robe that covered the entire body. When the brothers stripped Yosef of his *ketonet*, presumably he was wearing nothing else besides perhaps very short pants to cover his genitals, similar to modern underwear. When the Midyanites raised him from the pit, he was presumed to be a slave whose master had cast him into the pit as a punishment for some wrongdoing. Had Yosef been wearing his coat of many colors, the Midyanites would have thought that he was the son of a rich man, who had fallen into the pit or had been cast into it for some reason. They could have brought him to his father and demanded a sum much greater than the twenty silver shekels that they received for him from the Yishmaelites. Yaakov would have paid for Yosef more than what Avraham had paid for the Makhpela cave! But they found Yosef in his nakedness, in the garb of a slave[[2]](#footnote-2) and not in the clothes of a free man. Therefore, there was room to accuse the brothers of causing him to become a slave. Moreover, they too had wanted to act as the Midyanites had acted; they had simply failed in their scheme.

We are not in a position to decide between the great commentators on the question of who sold Yosef. Both interpretations are fitting and reasonable, both present difficulties, and it is left to the reader to choose in accordance with the inclination of his heart.

**III. The He-Goat – The Difference between the Sale of Yosef and the Binding of Yitzchak**

Despite the lack of similarity between the sale of Yitzchak and the binding of Yitzchak, it is difficult to ignore certain stylistic comparisons between the passages. We will mention the main points, without going into detail:

1) When God calls upon Avraham to offer his son, Avraham answers: "Here am I" (*Bereishit* 22:1). This is also the way that Yosef answers Yaakov in our *parasha* (37:13): "And Israel said to Yosef: ‘Do not your brothers feed the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them.’ And he said to him: ‘Here am I." So too, the sound of “*kakh na*,” "Take now," in God's command to Avraham is similar to the sound of “*lekh na*,” "Go now," in Yaakov's instructions to Yosef.

2) Avraham reached the mountain "and saw the place from afar off" (*Bereishit* 22:4). When Yosef reached his brothers: "And they saw him from afar off" (*Bereishit* 37:18).

3) The angel warns Avraham, who is about to slaughter Yitzchak: "Lay not your hand upon the lad" (*Bereishit* 22:12). Reuven warns his brother, who want to kill Yosef: "But lay no hand upon him" (*Bereishit* 37:22).

4) In the alternative solution to the death of the boy (Yitzchak or Yosef), Avraham sees the ram: "And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and beheld behind him a ram" (*Bereishit* 22:13), and the brothers see the caravan of Yishmaelites: "And they lifted up their eyes and looked, and, behold, a caravan of Yishmaelites" (*Bereishit* 37:25).

What is the meaning of these comparisons? After all, the *akeida* was a great *mitzva*, whereas the sale of Yosef was a severe sin! It seems that the content of the comparison is the ram; the ram’s blood, which was offered on the altar, was meant to substitute for the blood of Yitzchak, who was meant from the outset to be offered on the altar. In the case of Yosef, we find the blood of the he-goat, which indirectly substituted for the blood of Yosef when the brothers wished to kill him.

There is no comparison between the human actions in the two stories, that of Avraham on the one side and that of Yosef's brothers on the other. But there is an important comparison between the angel and Reuven, and a central comparison between the role of God in the two stories. God took upon Himself to save Yitzchak in exchange for the ram and to save Yosef in exchange for the he-goat. As we explained elsewhere in our discussion of the *akeida*, every offering, be it sheep or goat, comes to substitute with its blood for the person upon whom a decree of death had been pronounced.

1. The Book of Jubilees completely contradicts our Halakha, especially with regard to the determination of times, and it therefore has been attributed to sectarian groups who did not accept the authority of the Pharisaic Sages in the Second Temple period. Nevertheless, embedded in it are accepted principles and *aggadot*, and this possibly is one of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The etchings, reliefs and drawings from this period and from adjacent periods testify to the fact that free men wore garments that covered their entire bodies. Slaves were exposed and wore something similar to modern underwear. Compare *Yeshayahu* 20:3-4: "Like as My servant Yeshayahu has walked naked and barefoot to be for three years a sign and a wonder upon Egypt and upon Ethiopia, so shall the king of Ashur lead away the captives of Egypt, and the exiles of Ethiopia, young and old, naked and barefoot, and with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt." [↑](#footnote-ref-2)