

Rembrandt and the Rabbis: Jacob, Joseph, Dina, and Judah

Parashat Vayeshev, Genesis, Chapters 34-38 | November 25, 2021

In 2015, the Technion Institute in Israel announced the creation of the Nano Bible: all of Hebrew Scripture inscribed on a microchip no larger than a grain of sugar. It is indeed extraordinary to etch out the entire Torah on a microscopic speck. But it is perhaps even more extraordinary for an artist in Amsterdam in the 17th century to etch out a tiny picture on a six-inch copper plate, and to produce thereby, in a single image, a key to so many stories in Genesis as well as a greater glimpse into the very vulnerability of the human soul.

This week, we focus largely on small etching by the legendary Dutch artist Rembrandt von Rijn of Jacob, Joseph, and his brothers. It is a tragic tale of violence and kidnapping, a terrible trauma spurred by Joseph's dreams, which he relates to his family. This is the moment that we see before us, but Rembrandt does much more than capture a single episode; he teaches us thereby that in order to truly understand the Joseph tale, we must first engage the biblical stories that occurred earlier. Rembrandt, in other words, seeks to give us in this small space a complete portrait not only artistically, but also psychologically, of the family of Jacob.

If we look at the image carefully, we will notice that Rembrandt is not able to include all of Joseph's brothers in the image, because other members of Jacob's family have also been included. Rembrandt has taken up space adding other figures in the picture, including the woman in the bed at the top part of the etching. This, of course, is Leah, Jacob's first wife, the mother of most of the men in the picture—but not the mother of Joseph, who was born to the beautiful Rachel, Jacob's first and only love. Why does Rembrandt doing put Leah here? The answer is that though Leah has seemingly nothing to do with the story of Joseph, she actually has *everything* to do with it, because the hatred of Joseph by his brothers stems from the fact that he is the son of their father's most beloved wife, and therefore he has Jacob's preferential love. Leah

was desperate for her husband's affection, but to no avail. In including not only Leah but also her bed, Rembrandt, clearly, intends to remind us of how Leah desperately bargained with her sister Rachel:

And Reuben went in the days of the wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes.

And she said to her, Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee tonight for thy son's mandrakes.

And Jacob came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, Thou must come in to me; for indeed I have hired thee tonight with my son's mandrakes. And he lay with her that night.
(Genesis 30:14-16)

Rembrandt this gives us Leah in her bed, and the man standing at her bedside is her aforementioned eldest son, Reuben. Yet, it remains Rachel who was loved. Suddenly, as Jacob enters the Land of Israel following his encounter with Esau, tragedy befalls his beloved. Rachel dies while giving birth to her second son, Benjamin, and now one might have thought that Jacob's love would be transferred to the wife that has borne him most of his children. But instead, it is refocused on Rachel's oldest child:

And his brethren saw that their father loved Joseph more than all his brothers, and they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. (Genesis 37:4)

Leah, then, is in Rembrandt's picture because at every moment in the saga of Joseph and his brothers she is always in the picture. It is her hurt that drives her children, her rejection at the hands of Jacob, and she is present, physically or not, in every moment in this tale.

The inclusion of Leah by the artist thus makes perfect sense. Who, however, is the young girl in the image sitting at Jacob's feet? This must be Jacob's only daughter, Dinah, who, we are informed by Scripture, was born to Leah. Why has the artist introduced her here? Rembrandt is hinting again that only once we know Dinah's story can we then turn to that of Joseph. For here too, in her terrible tale, we also find family fissures that will ultimately explode in the chapters yet to come.

And Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land.

And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her.
(Genesis 34:1-2)

Note that it is emphasized that Dinah is the daughter of Leah. After this assault upon her, Shechem proposes peace, and Jacob appears inclined to agree. Dinah's brothers take a different approach. After all the residents of Shechem's city circumcise themselves as a sign of a covenant with Jacob's family, we are informed:

And it came to pass on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took each man his sword, and came upon the city unresisted, and slew all the males.

And they slew Hamor and Shechem his son with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went out.

The sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. (Genesis 34:25-27)

It is important here to note how Simeon and Levi are described, "the sons of Jacob" and also "Dinah's brothers." What is meant here is that they are Dinah's *full* brothers, that they are also sons of Leah by Jacob, and that this is essential in understanding the anger that they then express. For when Jacob berates them, they are unapologetic:

And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, you have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Cannanites and Perizzites; and I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house.

But they said, shall he deal with our sister as with a harlot? (Genesis 34:30-31)

Here, the brothers' words are noteworthy, and tell us that the source of their pain is about Dinah, but not only Dinah: "*Shall our sister be made a harlot?*" they say, not, "*shall your daughter be made a harlot?*" Their anger toward Jacob is acute. Why, they are saying, were you not acting on behalf of our sister, daughter of our mother who still lives? Why are you so focused on the wife you loved who is now dead? "Are we," they are implicitly asking, "not also your children?" Why are you acting as if *our* sister is not *your* daughter?

Dinah's story, then, is profoundly connected to that of Joseph, for she is an acute symbol of the emotional pain the brothers are experiencing in the face of their mother's rejection. Dinah, in Rembrandt's image, is harbinger of the rage that Jacob's preference for Rachel and her progeny will provoke. Rembrandt places Dinah in this scene because she is a potent symbol of the violence that has exploded before and is about to explode again.

Thus, in this very small etching, Rembrandt gives us a powerful picture of apparent domesticity that is actually an emotional tinderbox about to combust. This occurs when Joseph, the favored son, tells his family his vision, which seems to them to be a dream of domination:

For behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo my sheaf arose

and stood upright, and behold your sheaves came and bowed down to mine...

And he dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren, and said, Behold I have again dreamed a dream; and behold, the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed down to me.

And he told it to his father, and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him, and said to him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brothers indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee to the earth?

And his brothers envied him; but his father kept the matter in mind. (Genesis: 37:7-11)

Their hatred leads them to contemplate murder, and Joseph is kidnapped and placed in a pit. It is because of Judah that Joseph ultimately escapes death:

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore;

And they took him and cast him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.

Then Judah said to his brothers, What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?

Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh. And his brothers heeded him.

Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit,

and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt. (Genesis 37:23-28)

This, then, is Judah—the man for whom Judaism is named—as we first find him in the Bible. The statement is remarkable in its cowardice. Judah saves his brother’s life and references their relationship, but he does it not fully in the name of justice, but also, perhaps, in pursuit of profit. It is an exercise not purely in morality but also utility. The brothers then lie to their father, informing Israel that Joseph had been killed by an animal:

Then they took Joseph’s robe, and killed a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood;

And they sent the long robe with sleeves and brought it to their father, and said, This we have found; recognize whether it is your son’s robe or not.

And he recognized it, and said, It is my son’s robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.

Then Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. (Genesis 37:31-34)

We are thus presented with Joseph in exile, and his brothers, all partners in crime, left with a bereaved and inconsolable father.

Looking back now we realize that all of Genesis has been marked by familial infighting and sibling separation: Cain and Abel, Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Judah and Joseph. When the family of Abraham begins to form into a people, when the sons of Jacob, emerge as the *B’nei Yisrael*—the Twelve Tribes of Israel, they do so as a family that seems riven by discord, jealously, and hate. In understanding this, we must remember that the tales of Genesis are not only about individuals; these characters are also ancestors and archetypes of nations and tribes that are yet to be. This is important to keep in mind as we learn more about the man who suggested selling Joseph, the man from whom our name as “Jews” today is derived, the man

named Judah.

All of a sudden, the text appears to pause abruptly from telling Joseph's tale and focuses on this other brother:

It was at that time that Judah went down from his brothers, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.

There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her.

And she conceived and bore a son; and he called his name Er.

Again she conceived and bore a son; and she called his name Onan;

Yet again she bore a son; and called his name Shelah... (Genesis 38:1-5)

Judah, we are informed, left his brothers—"went down from" them—and wedded a woman, a Canaanite, separated himself from his family, and seemingly founded a new one. Coming immediately and jarringly after the tale of Joseph's kidnapping, the small sentence that he "went down" from his brothers is striking; its intent is obvious. Why he wished to leave is his brothers is unclear, though we can attempt to guess. Perhaps burdened by the guilt of what he himself had done, he was desperate to escape the daily familial reminder of his crime. Whatever his motivations, the text makes clear that Judah no longer wished to be associated with his family. He seemingly starts a new life and a new identity.

Judah's wife bears him three sons, and the first marries a woman named Tamar. Judah's eldest son, we are informed, led an evil life—further evidence, perhaps, that Judah had ceased to raise his family in the tradition of Abraham—and so the Almighty brought about the eldest son's demise, leaving Tamar a widow. Biblical society at that time practiced an institution known as levirate marriage, in which one married his brother's widow in order to produce children as a commemoration and continuation of one's dead kin. Thus, Judah's second

son, Onan, is instructed to marry Tamar:

Then Judah said to Onan, Go in to your brother's wife, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother. (Genesis 38:8)

But Onan had little interest in brotherly loyalty and love, and ensured that Tamar would have no children by him. We ought not to be surprised by Onan's actions; after all, he had been provided with no model of brotherly loyalty. He had been born and raised by a father, Judah, who had himself abandoned his brothers. The Almighty, angry at Onan's actions, brought about his death as well, leaving Judah's final son, Shelah, designated for Tamar. Judah, unwilling to assume that it was he himself was responsible for this state of affairs, blamed Tamar and told his daughter-in-law to wait until his youngest grew older, though he had no intention of actually marrying her to Shelah.

In his book *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Leon Kass points out that the tale of Tamar provides further evidence that Judah had not yet learned the lesson of his misdeeds in the Joseph story, and that he has now sought to sever all family connections from his past. Reflecting on this tale and on levirate marriage, Kass puts it this way:

If we are willing to set aside, for the moment, our current sensibilities, we may be able to discover, and even appreciate the principles that inform this ancient custom. For, details aside, the practice of levirate marriage seeks to uphold what is centrally important in marriage altogether. The heart of marriage, especially but not only biblically speaking, is not primarily a matter of the heart; rather, it is primarily about procreation and, even more, about transmission of a way of life. Husband and wife, whether they know it or not, are incipiently father and mother, parents of children for whose moral and spiritual education they bear a sacred obligation. In levirate marriage, all these crucial principles are defended.

A man serves, literally, as his brother's keeper: he refuses to allow his brother to die without a trace. Also, he refuses to nullify his sister-in-law's marriage, vindicating her claim to motherly fulfillment within her marriage. Taking seriously the commandment "Be fruitful and multiply," levirate marriage elevates the importance of progeny above personal gratification, and hence, the importance of lineage and community above the individual.

It is precisely the values of familial roots, and continuity, that Judah rejects. Tamar, therefore, is a widow abandoned, unable to marry another, waiting for Shelah, and denied the opportunity to bear children. She ultimately takes action, pretending to be a prostitute, and seducing Judah, whose own wife has died. The conversation between her and Judah at this time is critical to understanding what later occurs in the story. Tamar, in the guise of a prostitute, demands of Judah an *eravon*, a pledge, ensuring his ultimate payment:

When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot, for she had covered her face.

He went over to her at the roadside, and said, Come, let me come in to you, for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, What will you give me, that you may come in to me?

He answered, I will send you a kid from the flock. And she said, Will you give me a pledge, till you send it?

He said, What pledge shall I give you? She replied, Your signet, and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand. So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. (Genesis 38:15-18)

This act results in a pregnancy. The society in which she lives assumes that the pregnancy indicated that Tamar has had relations with a non-family member—a violation of the obligation of levirate marriage—an

act, in that particular age, that was considered akin to adultery. Judah's reaction is instantaneous, and brutal: "*Take her out that she may be burnt!*" And we may imagine that Judah feels at this moment more than moral indignation. Tamar's death would allow Shelah to marry whomever he wished and would free Judah of his promise to his daughter-in-law. Tamar is then brought before the regional court in order to be executed. It is at this point that Tamar produces the collateral that she has been given:

As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, saying, By the man to whom these belong, I am with child; and she said, Recognize, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff. (Genesis 38:25)

At this point, Judah has two choices. He can easily feign ignorance, claiming no knowledge of the objects Tamar had produced. Tamar, and her unborn child, would be killed, and the story of Judah's embarrassing encounter with a roadside prostitute would die with her. But this is not the course Judah takes. As Kass notes, Tamar uses the exact words that stabbed most deeply and sharply at Judah's conscience. For these, as many have noted, were the exact words that he and his brothers had used in presenting the blood-soaked colorful coat to their father. "*Recognize this, please!*" And so it is easy to imagine all the associations that emerged in his mind with Tamar's plaintive appeal. Do you not recognize, Judah, that you have repeated your sin? Do you not recognize that you have once again ignored the bonds of brotherhood, rejected all fealty to family? Judah takes the difficult, but righteous, path:

Then Judah acknowledged them and said, She is more righteous than I; inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah... (Genesis 38:26)

Judah's painful confession saves Tamar, and the story concludes with the birth of Tamar's twins. The Bible then abruptly brings us back to Joseph, to his tale in Egypt. We are able, at this point, to decipher that Judah's decision before the court is not only the correct one, but is also the manifestation of an extraordinary change

within himself. For as the tale continues, the brothers will come before Joseph in Egypt, and he, Judah, will be among them. Indeed, Judah will ultimately lead them. He seems to have returned to his family following the Tamar episode. He has rejoined his brethren. As we shall soon see, the man who suggested selling his brother will ultimately follow the Tamar story by embodying the familial loyalty that he has now learned, illustrating an astonishing, penitent brotherly love that help to heal the rift with Joseph.

Judah's ultimate evolution contains a lesson for the future of Judaism. As Michael Wyschogrod has stressed, Judaism is a faith founded on familial identity; or, to put it another way, God, in bringing the faith later to be known as Judaism into world, chose to do it by choosing Abraham to start a faithful family, rather than an international movement. Every Jew is meant to come to the conclusion that Judah ultimately achieved: that we are always bound by brotherhood to the other children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In that sense, no matter what tribe from which we derive, we are all Judah, we are all Jews.

Fascinatingly, it is not only Jews who identified with Judah's legacy of failing and then repenting. If we return to Rembrandt's print, we realize, as art historians note, that we are able to identify at least two of Joseph's brothers in the image.

The most prominent, standing next to his mother's bed is, as we mentioned, presumably the oldest, Reuben. The other significantly placed brother in this scene stands in the center, and he is holding a staff. This must be the other main character in Joseph's story: Judah.

That Rembrandt has given this character a staff is meant to remind us of the reference to the staff of Judah in his encounter with Tamar. But Rembrandt's depiction of Judah is also, in a sense, a depiction of someone else. Right before creating this etching this etching, Rembrandt painted a self-portrait of himself and his wife Saskia, known today as *The Prodigal Son in a Brothel*. As scholars have noted, when we compare the image of Rembrandt in the self-portrait with that of the man holding the staff in the etching, we see that they are

basically the same; and if I am correct about the identity of this man in the Joseph print, Rembrandt has chosen to merge his identity with that of Judah. When we look upon Judah in the Joseph etching, then, we are meant to be seeing simultaneously Judah, son of Jacob, but also Rembrandt van Rijn.

Rembrandt identifies here with Judah because he too realizes that Judah will emerge as the paradigmatic penitent and the familial hero of the story. This will unfold in the chapters to come. But for now, we may close by reflecting in wonder on the enormity of the artistic and exegetical genius packed into a print, one which reveals the profoundly painful experience of so many members of this family.

The art historian E. H. Gombrich once described Rembrandt's uniqueness by reflecting that:

We have seen other portraits by great masters which are memorable for the way they sum up a person's character and role. But even the greatest of them may remind us of characters in fiction or actors on the stage. They are convincing and impressive, but we sense that they can only represent one side of a complex human being. Not even the Mona Lisa can always have smiled. But in Rembrandt's great portraits, we feel face to face with real people, we sense their warmth, their need for sympathy and also their loneliness and their suffering. Those keen and steady eyes that we know so well from Rembrandt's self-portraits must have been able to look straight into the human heart.

The hearts of Jacob's family members have been laid bare by Rembrandt von Rijn. And Rembrandt is teaching us that in Judah's heart we can sense inspiring surprises yet to come.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik, drawing on Rembrandt and Leon Kass, offers an interpretation of Judah's interior growth. How are we to interpret the actions of Joseph, the other main character in the story? What might his dreams, his visions tell us about his relationship with God and his approach to the world?
 2. Judah's ultimate devotion to his family only develops after having made a series of grave mistakes and repenting of them. How might this impact our understanding of the fact that today we are known as Jews, Yehudim, bearers of Judah's name?
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