

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger... John 6:35

GENESIS 35-37

CHAPTER 35 - Jacob Journeys to Bethel

After the disastrous events at Shechem, Jacob returns to Bethel.

*"God said to Jacob, **"Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."***

"Nearly twenty-two years earlier, Jacob had vowed that Bethel would be the site of God's house. (Gen 28: 20-22) Now God commands him to return there, implying that he must fulfil the vow without delay. Because he had not done so earlier, he had been punished by the abduction of Dinah... Jacob's failure to carry out his vow caused him to forfeit the Divine aura of protection... As a result there was no miraculous intervention to protect Dinah from Shechem... But as soon as Jacob went to Beth-el and fulfilled his vow, God cast His fear upon all the cities, so that they were no longer a danger to Jacob."¹

DISCUSS this quotation Can we find relevance in this to apply to our faith journey?

See Psalm 76:11; Eccles.5:4-5; Deut. 23:21-23 regarding vows.

God tells Jacob to "dwell" at Bethel (House of God), but clearly Jacob doesn't do that in a literal sense. We might therefore understand it in a figurative sense, for example:

Psalm 27:4 *One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life ...*

Psalm 91 :1, 9 ¹*He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. ⁹ Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge, Even the Most High, your dwelling place . . .*

Gen 35:2 *And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. Then **let us arise and go up to Bethel;***

The language used in the verse is an unmistakable call to rise spiritually—"Who can ascend the hill of the Lord ...?" (Ps.24:3-6) This verse resonates with Moses' instructions to Israel when they came to Sinai after the Exodus (Ex. 19:14) We might be disturbed to read that they still had foreign gods in their possession, and also to read in verse 4 that, instead of destroying the idols, "Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem."

God Blesses and Renames Jacob

v.9-15 *Again God appeared to Jacob*—At the very site where God had appeared to Jacob when he left Haran, God now appears to him again. He blessed him and confirmed that his name will not always be called Jacob, but Israel shall be his name. Here God reveals Himself as *El Shaddai*, the All-sufficient God, and confirms again the Covenant given to Abraham and Isaac.

Birth of Benjamin / Death of Rachel

When Joseph was born Rachel said, "May the LORD add to me another son." Finally, she did give birth to another son, but it cost Rachel her life.

¹⁶*Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labour. ¹⁷ When she was in severe labour the midwife said to her, "Do not fear, for now you have another son."¹⁸ It came about as her*

¹ Chumash commentary, quoting Rashi.

soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.¹⁹ So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).

As Rachel breathed her last, she named her son *Ben-Oni*, which means the *son of my sorrow* (the word for sorrow and birth pangs are synonymous). But his father renamed him Benjamin, which means *son of my right hand*.

Jacob's love for Rachel was timeless. Many years afterwards, when he was preparing to bless his sons on his deathbed, he recalled that he had buried her with great sorrow (48:7). Rachel was buried on the road to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. For centuries, it lay on a deserted roadside, and Rachel's descendants would come there to pour out their hearts to her. Bethlehem has since expanded and her tomb is now located in the city of Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem.²

Jacob's sons now numbered twelve—his family is now complete. Benjamin goes on to play a very significant (but silent) role in the story of Joseph. Indeed, because of Rachel's words at the birth of Joseph, "May the LORD add to me another son," he must always be seen in conjunction with Joseph.

When we compare this birth to previous births mentioned, we notice some unique features that are worth discussing:

- We are given the exact location twice – approaching Ephrath.³
- Benjamin is the only son of Jacob to be born in the Promised Land.
- His double naming is significant. He was the only son named also by his father.
- Rachel (name meaning ewe-lamb) travailed and had hard labor.
- The bringing forth of life brought the death of Rachel.

As we have previously seen, the Lord has provided 'types' in the Torah to provide prophetic foreshadows of Israel's coming Messiah – both in His first and second coming. The intriguing details in this short story invite us to ask what the Lord might be showing us through it.⁴

Chapter 35 closes with the death of Isaac: *So Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, being old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.*

CHAPTER 37

Chapter 36 is taken up solely with the descendants of Esau—the focus now turns to Joseph. There is no clearer foreshadowing the Messiah in the Torah, than the life of Joseph. It is a story with an extraordinary amount of detail—every detail speaking of Yeshua—a story that continues to the very end of Genesis, where we read of the death of Joseph in the very last verse.

Read Genesis 37:1-11

- *Joseph was a shepherd* – In Torah, a person's occupation is also a statement concerning their character; the righteous are invariably characterized as being shepherds.
- *Gen. 37:3 Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age.* We are quickly made aware of the favoritism Jacob (Israel) has towards Joseph. It is interesting that the Torah mentions that it is "Israel", not "Jacob"⁵ that loved Joseph more than all his other children. This should make us hesitant to criticize him for favouring Joseph. Of course, we have seen the contrasting of two sons from the very beginning of Genesis—a

² There is controversy as to the actual site. Many believe it is actually north of Jerusalem.

³ Ephrath means *place of fruitfulness*. Its masc. form is *Ephraim*. It is another name for Bethlehem. (see Micah 5:2)

⁴ This insight is worth reading: http://www.theopenscroll.com/beyond_veil/josephandbenjamin_1.htm

⁵ The name "Jacob" is still used for matters of the flesh, whilst "Israel" will be used for matters reflecting his spiritual role.

favouritism that will finally be unveiled as representing the unique love Father God has for his Son. (Mt. 3:17; 17:5)

- *Also he made him a tunic of many colours* – This was a special long-sleeved garment worn by the children of kings. (11 Sam.13:18) Jacob had thereby openly elevated Joseph to the status of the ‘firstborn’. *But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.*
- Joseph dreamed: When Joseph reiterated to his family the dream he had, the brothers hated him even more, responding: *“Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?” He dreamed again and His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.* (Like Mary, he ‘pondered these things in his heart’) On a purely literal level we might judge Joseph’s sharing of his dreams as naively foolish and prideful, but of course this will be integral to the outworking of the story

Q. What general themes are laid down in these first eleven verses?

Q. How does this introduction already speak clearly of Messiah?

The Plot against Joseph

13-14 *And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” And he said to him, “Here I am.” (Hineni) Then he said to him, “Please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me.” So he sent him out of the Valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem.*

Hebron was a town in the mountains of Judah— the highest city in the Land of Israel. The Hebrew word for ‘valley’ comes from a root meaning “deep”, “profound”. The text therefore implies that he was sent to follow a profound plan. I have no doubt that this is a shadow of the time when our Heavenly Father sent his beloved Son to ‘see if it was well with his brothers and well with the flocks.’

Read and Discuss Genesis 37:15-36 noting the clues to the Messianic fulfilment which it ultimately points to. Matt. 21:33 The Parable of the wicked Tenants is particularly relevant here. These are just a few of the interesting points to take note of:

- v.15 “A certain man” – Who is this?
- The brothers were not at Shechem, but at Dothan, meaning ‘two wells’.
- v.18 *...they saw him afar off, ... and they conspired against him to kill him.*
- v.20 *“We shall see what will become of his dreams!”*
- v.21 *But Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands... (we will discuss this verse later)*
- v.23 They stripped Joseph of his coat – see Mt. 27:28
- v.24 Joseph was cast into a pit with no water – symbolic of death
- v.25 *“They sat down to eat a meal.”* (Jesus was crucified before the Passover meal was eaten.⁶)
- v.26 So Judah said to his brothers, *“What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ... let us sell him... for he is our brother and our flesh.”* In the Gospels, we find Judas (Matt. 26:14), acting out this same role as he betrays Jesus—the son of Joseph—into the hands of the conspiring religious leaders for thirty pieces of silver. The name Judah is pronounced Judas in Greek, thus his name has come down to us as “Judas” not “Judah”.
- v.31 *So they took Joseph’s tunic, killed a kid of the goats, and dipped the tunic in the blood, and presented it to their father saying “Examine the evidence”, thus ‘proving’ to their father that his beloved son was dead.* (This is a particularly interesting verse with profound links – some threads to follow would be: Rev. 19:13; Gen 27:16 (see previous study); the role of the two goats at Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement.)

Gen 37:34-35 *And he recognized it and said, “It is my son’s tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces.” Then Jacob (not Israel) tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to*

⁶ It is likely that the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples was according to the Essene calendar.

be comforted, and he said, "For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning." Thus his father wept for him.

Paradoxically, it is the brothers' intent to eliminate their brother that actually brings about the fulfilment of Joseph's dreams.

Our focus is drawn to two brothers in particular—Judah and Reuben. Before we close this chapter, we will spend some time focusing on Reuben. Reuben was the oldest son, being Leah's firstborn, which makes him responsible for the youngest son. It is also very likely that, in the light of His father's favouritism of Joseph, topped off by Joseph's dreams of supremacy, that he was afraid of losing his firstborn status.

Reuben has been in focus a couple of times previously: We might recall that it was Reuben that found the mandrakes so that his mother, Leah, the unloved one, would regain her fertility—but he ended up giving them to Rachel. We've also seen an offence by Reuben against his father after Rachel's death, when he lay with his father's concubine, Bilhah. (Gen 35:22). Now, we read:

Gen 37:21-22 But Reuben heard it, and he delivered him out of their hands, and said, "Let us not kill him." And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood, but cast him into this pit which is in the wilderness, and do not lay a hand on him"—that he might deliver him out of their hands, and bring him back to his father.

It seems that Reuben has good intentions, but lacked the courage to carry them through, or perhaps he allowed underlying pain⁷ to decide the outcome. It appears that he was missing in action when Joseph was sold to the passing Ishmaelites⁸: *Then Reuben returned to the pit, and indeed Joseph was not in the pit; and he tore his clothes. And he returned to his brothers and said, "The lad is no more; and I, where shall I go?"*

Jacob's deathbed words regarding Reuben are enlightening—what might have been...but wasn't:

*Reuben, you are my firstborn,
My might and the beginning of my strength,
The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power.
Unstable as water, you shall not excel,
Because you went up to your father's bed;
Then you defiled it—He went up to my couch. Gen 49:4*

In James 1:8 we read, "The double-minded man is unstable in all his ways". This seems to typify Reuben.

A thought provoking word from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks to conclude:

"Reuben could have been the hero of the story, and he would have been remembered very differently... None of us can read the story of our lives – we can only live it. The result is that we live in and with uncertainty. Doubt can lead to delay until the moment is lost. In an instant of arrested intention, Reuben lost his chance of changing history... If there is a single verse in Tanakh that stands as a commentary on his life it is the inexpressibly poignant line from Psalm 27:10: "Though my father and mother may forsake me, the Lord will receive me." Jacob, being human loved some, not others. God, *not* being human, loves each of us, and that is our greatest source of strength God heeds those not heard. He loves those whom others do not love. Reuben, still a young man, did not yet know this. But we, reading this story and the rest of Tanakh, do."⁹

⁷ We might ask if he carried the same wound as his father – did he crave his father's love and favour? Reuben grew up knowing that his mother was least loved (even unloved). She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now."

⁸ ...or Midianites – some believe these tribes were synonymous. Midianites were descendants of Abraham through Keturah and of course, Ishmaelites were descendants of Ishmael.

⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation*, p252