

Shiur L'Yom Chamishi¹

[Thursday's Study]

READINGS: ***Torah Vayashev:*** **Genesis 39:1-23**
 Haftarah: **Amos 2:13-16**
 B'rit Chadasha: **Acts 7:2-8**

How then could I engage in this ra'ah gadol ...?

[Genesis 39:9]

Today's Meditation is Psalm 35:11-16;

This Week's Amidah Prayer Focus is Petition #6, *B'racha* [Blessing]

V'Yosef hurad Mitzraymah vayiq'nei hu Potifar saris Paroh – Then Yosef was taken down to Egypt; and he was purchased by Potifar, an officer of Pharaoh ... *sar ha-tavachim* – the head of his guard detail. **Genesis 39:1.**

Yosef was in a deep state of denial – if not total shock. Had his own brothers really waylaid him? Had they really set an ambush, fallen upon him like wild animals, beaten him mercilessly, stripped him naked, and thrown him into a dark, smelly pit crawling with scorpions? Had they really then gathered round the pit and thrown date pits, dirt clods, and pieces of filthy garbage at him while mocking his exposed nakedness? Had they really mimicked his cries for help, laughed at his tears and pain, and joked about casting lots for his coat of many colors? Had they really compounded these outrages by haggling with Midyani and Yish'maeli traders over his value as a slave, finally agreeing to sell him to the most violent human trafficking cartel the raging nations had ever produced for a paltry twenty pieces of silver? Surely those things had not really happened. Surely all that was just a *sphinxian* nightmare. Surely if he could just shake himself hard enough to wake himself up this dystopian fantasy would fade away, he and his brothers could have a good laugh about it, and he and his father could ponder its possible range of meanings over pita pockets, figs, and coffee. Surely his brothers – who, after all, were all royal princes of the lineage of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov – were incapable of such treachery. But alas, the cuts and bruises on his torso told a different story. The shackles that now bound his hands and feet declared another reality. The lack of a garment to cover his nakedness and the profane shouting that he kept hearing in every foreign language known to man testified that the trauma he was hoping was just a dream was instead very, very real. He put his head down and wept. He prayed – asking the God of Avraham to send the Messiah character his father always loved to talk about to rescue him from this dreadful place, to deliver him from these lawless and loveless people, and to free him this macabre

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human-trafficking nightmare. Alas, it was to no avail. Messiah did not appear. Deliverance did not come. He was going to have to face this outrage alone – and he would have to do it in chains, unable to stop whatever was about to occur. He could cry, he could rage, or could suck it up and be stoic and silent – but he did not even speak the language of Egypt, and nothing that he could say, do, or hope could change what was about to happen to him. He has a date with destiny – but the pathway to that date and destiny is a long and winding road – a road that, in the short term, leads through a bustling Egyptian slave market. Take note, Beloved: a person may not like THE HOLY ONE’S PLAN, or willingly embrace the role in that PLAN for which he/she has been cast ... but *the show must go on*. The drama must unfold, exactly as it is written. So look yonder, now – a new character in the great drama of redemption is about to make an appearance, stage left. Ya’akov’s slave-master had been Laban; Yosef’s will be Potifar. Who is yours?

Introducing Potifar

Potifar, Pharaoh’s proud and efficient captain of the guard, had probably visited the slave market many times. Slave trade was booming in the ancient world in general and on the continent of Africa in particular. Egypt was a thriving epicenter of every form of vanity, vice, and folly known to fallen man - especially human-trafficking. Potifar was a man of substance, with many holdings to oversee - so he was always looking for another good hand or two at the slave market. Oh, he had tried a few times to hire local Egyptian boys to fill the positions that kept opening up; but they were too full of themselves, too ambitious, too preoccupied with personal agendas, and too addicted to culture and entertainment to do the kind of detailed, mundane, often physically demanding types of work that Potifar needed done. It was as if they felt that the world owed them something. So Potifar had opted to take his chances with the slave auction instead. Egypt’s markets always had plenty of candidates from which to choose. After all, Pharaoh’s armies captured hundreds of slaves every week, and the opportunistic Yishmaeli and Midyani cartels supplied hundreds more. Hapless souls plucked from all kinds of cultures, races, ethnicities, and religions could be had for a denarii a dozen. Potifar could always have his pick of Babylonian slaves, Assyrian slaves, Asian slaves, Caucasian slaves, Moabite slaves, Ammonite slaves, Kena’ani slaves, Philistine slaves, Ethiopian slaves, Nubian slaves, Cushite slaves, Sub-Saharan African slaves, and so on. All races, cultures, and skin colors were equal in the slave market – brown, black, tan, yellow, white, or red, it did not matter one whit. They were all hungry. They were all needy. They were all broken. They were all useful – or not - based upon two factors: how hard they would work, and how well they would follow orders. Unlike the Egyptian boys Potifar had previously tried to employ, the slaves knew that the world did not owe them anything whatsoever. They knew three things: work meant food, slacking off meant the whip, and

refusing a command, however unwise or unjust that command might be, meant sure and painful death. They did not insist on ‘rights’. They did not demand ‘free time’. They did not worry about things like ‘equal pay’, or anything remotely smacking of ‘quality of life’. They had no time for lofty, abstract ideas. They had no use for political, philosophical, ideological, or religious debates. They knew that they were nothing more than fungible goods to be bid on; commodities to be bought and sold; beasts of burden to be used up and thrown away. All they wanted was a place to sleep, a ragged cloth with which to cover their nakedness, a crust of bread or bowl of soup to eat, a cup of water to slake their thirst, and the chance to keep breathing at least one more day.

There was only one ethnic group from which Pharaoh had never seen a person offered in the slave market heretofore. He had never before seen a Hebrew – a descendant of Avraham - on this pile of human refuse. That is probably why Yosef caught his eye. He did not know he was looking at a model of Messianic hope unto not only the Hebrew people, but unto all nations, tribes, families, households, and bloodlines of the human species. When Yosef was brought to the auction block, Potifar was moved to place a bid – and, for some reason he did not quite understand, he just kept bidding until the young Hebrew was declared his to take home. The kid looked young, strong, healthy, and sharp of wits – so what did he have to lose? Oh, Potifar! It is not what you have to lose, sir, that you should be thinking about – it is the great redemption drama all the people and nations of the world have to gain!

Let the Buyer Beware!

Welcome to *the marketplace!* Everybody goes there, sooner or later. All roads seem to lead to it, and there is no way a son or daughter of the Covenant can completely avoid it – but *caveat emptor – i.e. let the buyer beware!*

Welcome to the boulevard of a thousand dreams. Welcome to human civilization’s version of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. See the produce and the products, the foodstuff and the craftsmanship, the necessities and luxuries, the sublime and the common, the consumables and collectibles - everything one’s heart desires – right there at one’s disposal ... for the right price, of course! Coffees, teas, and spices; fabrics and garments; stocks and bonds; dreams and destinies – all sold for silver. Hear the vendors hawking their wares. Welcome to the place where anything that can be desired can be purchased, and where everything – and everyone - is for sale ... for the ‘right price’. Welcome to the place where both dreams and dreamers are packaged, merchandised, and offered for bid.

Like every *theater/entertainment venue*, every *gymnasium/sports arena*, every

forum of political, philosophical, or ideological expression or debate, every university, every marketplace a human being will ever enter should be recognized as a minefield of dark energy – and *a flash point* at which Kingdom Calling intersects with fleshly urge and appetite. Whether you call this place a *shuk* or a mall, a trading post or a strip center, a specialty shop or a supermarket, a café or a bistro, or an on-line store, the purpose of every marketplace is always the same: it where men are enticed to go to lose their *shalom*, where women are seduced to go to bargain away their virtue, and where children rush to sell their innocence to the hippest hawker and their future to the highest bidder. In the marketplace, you see, humankind’s oldest nemesis, the serpent, takes on thousand human faces and voices, and presents his old familiar poison - the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of *tov v’ra* - in an endless variety of seductive forms. In the marketplace, flesh and pseudo-intellect are given free rein to entice, seduce, and incite uprisings of lust, greed, pride, and envy out of unwitting – but often *all-too-willing* - victims. And that is just in the section of the marketplace where they hawk fruits, vegetables, fish, livestock, spices, clothing, novelties, trinkets, toys, and souvenirs. There is, for those with more pernicious tastes, an even more sinister section of the marketplace - the section where human traffickers strip their captives bare, put them on display, and auction them off like exotic cuts of meat.

***Welcome to the Cynical, Sinister World of Human Trafficking –
Mankind – and Every Culture and Ethnicity’s - Oldest Profession***

Human trafficking – *i.e.* the dark business of dehumanizing, targeting, trapping, breaking the spirit of, displaying in the slave market, selling, buying, and selfishly using one’s fellow human beings for one’s own pleasure or profit – has been around for a long, long time. It is a *messy business*, of course. First you have to decide to dehumanize, label as ‘fair game’, hunt, and isolate your victim. Then you have to deceive, entrap, and/or physically overpower the hapless soul. Then you have to drag the person off in chains, not thinking about the fact that this person is someone else’s whole world – their son or daughter, their spouse, their parent, and/or their closest friend and confidante. You have to swiftly and cruelly punish all resistance, taking care to break the will - but not disable the body, which is your money-maker - in the process. Then you must prepare your thoroughly dehumanized human trophy for display at public auction - the way a rancher dresses his cows or horses for a livestock show. The screaming, crying, and pleading of your victims cannot move you. The agony their families endure at their plight must not bother you. The mess made by their bodily functions must not embarrass you. The human misery that you cause must be written off as just so much ‘*cost of goods sold*’. Your eyes must see pieces of silver instead of human faces – fungible goods instead of people like you. Your ears must hear excited bids shouted at the next slave market instead of agonized screams. Your mind must

think in terms of ledger sheets instead of families, identities, dreams, or destinies. Yes, human trafficking is *messy business indeed*. Admittedly, it fills the sacks of those who engage in it with silver – but in the process it floods their souls – and all their relationships and interactions - with wave after wave of dark energy. We will see, before this study is over, how that works out for everyone concerned.

Next Stop on Yehudah's Odyssey of Emunah: Adullam!

Going from Ya'akov's camp at Hebron, where Hebrew blessings and excited conversations about the Will, Words, and Ways of the God of Avraham and Yitzchak had filled the air, to *Potifar's plantation*, where greed, lust, idolatry, and Egyptian government propaganda polluted the atmosphere, must have involved quite a culture shock for Yosef. But before we get too deep into that, let's compare Yosef's situation to that of Yehudah - Ya'akov's fourth son by Leah.

In the course of recent readings we also saw *Yehudah* make an early departure from his father's household. Yosef's departure was against his will; Yehudah's, though impacted by the waves of dark energy that flooded his soul by virtue of his engagement in human trafficking – *i.e.* selling his brother into slavery - looked to all concerned, including himself, as if it were totally voluntary. While Yosef was brought into a pagan household as a slave, Yehudah entered one by invitation. Welcome, one and all, to the 'Dark Side'.

The Greater the Amounts of Dark Energy One Lets Into One's Soul The Darker One's Response Is to A Crucible of Exile

Avram, of course, had briefly experimented with the 'human trafficking' culture in the early days of his walk. See **Genesis 12:13-16** (in Egypt), and **Genesis 20:2** (in Gerar). Yitzchak dabbled in it once at Gerar. See **Genesis 26:6-7**. Ya'akov, took the 'dark energy' experiment a lot deeper during his sojourn in the house of Laban. Yesterday, we turned our attention to Yehudah. After his active participation in human trafficking, dark energy came rushing into his soul like an ocean at high tide. Like Ya'akov before him, Yehudah responded to an excursion into exile by letting his hormones go crazy. As Ya'akov became obsessed with one of Laban's daughters (Rachel), Yehudah panted after one of his host's daughters, Shua. As had happened with Ya'akov, the infatuation wound up costing Yehudah dearly. He, like his father, wound up spending decades as little more than another man's slave, tending his sheep, making him a fortune. Also like Ya'akov, in the course of his exile, Yehudah somehow wound up deviating from the '*bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, therefore I leave, cleave, and become one flesh*' way of the Holy One, and wound up conflicted by intimate relationships with multiple women. Like Ya'akov, he had to bury one of those women before returning to his father's house. And like Ya'akov, Yehudah wound up siring a stable of children with different

mothers.

Alas, yesterday we discovered that, despite these parallels, Yehudah sank far more deeply into the miry pools of dark energy than his father ever did. While Ya'akov definitely had issues while in Laban's lair, he never allowed himself to embrace the perverse worldview or the darkest elements of the self-obsessed lifestyle of the pagans around him. For the most part, Ya'akov remained steadfast in the Ways of the Holy One and fully engaged in his assigned task - while absolutely no one else around him was doing either. Ya'akov's exile experience had been much like that of his father Yitzchak's sojourn in Gerar. Ya'akov, like Yitzchak, had been content to live in exile for a season, but even while there he remained ever true to most of what he knew of his identity as a son of the Covenant. While on occasion he succumbed to his fleshly passions and thereby got manipulated into following the perverse customs of culture with which he found himself surrounded, he never voluntarily embraced the dark energy of the sensuous, materialistic, and self-obsessed ways of the pagans among whom he wound up living. Ya'akov's experience in Charan was thus prototypical of the kind of life-in-exile where a Hebrew at least keeps what he or she considers the 'basic elements' of Covenant Lifestyle in operation. Over the centuries that has grown to include what I call 'the big 10':

1. *continuing to pray to and keep an open conversation going with the Holy One, privately and where possible communally, with the other members of the Covenant community that were living in the place of exile;*

2. *embracing Torah as the essential life-instruction manual and well-lived life empowerment gift of the Creator for mankind, and therefore diligently studying, meditating upon, and walking in its object lessons and directives;*

3. *maintaining set apart status by personally avoiding things and behaviors that Torah labels either 'unclean' or 'common';*

4. *joyfully and faithfully anticipating, observing, and savoring all the special 'set apart' times specified in the Covenant to commune with and draw closer to the Holy One [i.e. Biblical Sabbaths and Festivals], as opposed to adopting the calendar of holidays, holy days, special times, and gift-giving, food-indulging celebrations that was prevalent in the culture of exile;*

5. *resisting and fleeing from the sensual/sexual temptations, sentimental associations, political causes, social compromises, and material temptations prevalent in the culture-of-exile, and refusing to intermarry with foreigners to the Covenants;*

6. *refusing to renounce the Holy One and His Covenants in order to accept the popular religions or philosophies of, or take advantage of the economic opportunities available to, the people in whose sphere of influence they are exiled;*

7. *raising children in the Torah and the best traditions of their fathers;*

8. *dressing modestly and wearing tzit-tzit as Torah directs;*
9. *benevolence to the poor, the widow, the fatherless and the foreigner;*

and

10. *longing deeply for an eventual return to the land of Promise – and therefore praying daily for the shalom of Yerushalayim, the coming of Maschiach, the regathering of the exiles, and the restoration of the Throne and Tabernacle of David.*

Yehudah's experience in exile with the Kena'ani, however, was much, much darker and more perilous. Yehudah took the prototypical *Hebrew-in-Exile Experience* to a dangerous new level. He reacted to the exile experience by becoming, for a long season of life, *the ultimate anti-Maccabee*. The Maccabees – the most famous of which would carry Yehudah's name – stood boldly against assimilation. Yehudah, son of Ya'akov and Leah, assimilated without so much as a whimper of protest.

In the heat of his particular exile crucible Yehudah apparently lost sight of the Great Avrahamic dream – the passionate quest for *a city that has foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God*. See **Hebrews 11:10**. Instead of clinging to the Presence and Promises of the Holy One, walking in the Wisdom of His Eternal Ways, and bringing Divine sparks of light into every environment, Yehudah wholeheartedly immersed himself in the culture of the place where he lived. He embraced its dark energy. He embraced its sensuality. He adopted the unclean worldview of the Kena'ani wholeheartedly. He embraced as part of his identity their materialistic, animal-natured, appetite- and urge-obsessed approach to life. He embraced their priorities. He embraced their ways and their behaviors as normative. He descended to their futile ways of thinking. His heart became foolishly darkened just like the hearts of the people with whom he associated. He wallowed in their uncleanness. In lust, he dishonored his own body, exchanged the truths of the Holy One for the lies of the serpent. He made himself, his will, his self-righteous opinions, and his pleasure the gods of his life – forsaking, by his actions, the God of Avraham, of Yitzchak, and of Ya'akov.

The Prophetic Time of Yehudah's Choice

But the Holy One did not forsake Yehudah. He never gave up on the prodigal. He constantly worked behind the scenes to bring Yehudah to a critical point of reawakening to his true identity, his true reason for being given the gift of life, and his true destiny. And thus, in Yehudah's case, his assimilation into darkness turned out to be merely a temporary descent for the sake of a much greater ascent – albeit with some serious collateral damage having been inflicted on others along the way. At the end of yesterday's aliyah we saw the Holy One arrange for Yehudah to finally have a moment of *inspired clarity* and *empowering surrender*. In that

moment Yehudah finally saw the depths of thought, speech, and behavior to which he had fallen since leaving his father's house. And, like the prodigal son in Yeshua's famous parable, when this stunning realization came, Yehudah responded appropriately. He came clean. He bid a firm goodbye to his Kena'ani cohorts and their ways. He made heartfelt *teshuvah*. He returned in humility not only to his father's house but also to his and his father's God. The *Prophetic Time of Yehudah's Choice* came, and Yehudah responded in the only way a true son or daughter of the Covenant could.

How about you, Dear Reader? How intimately and affectionately have you been interacting with and relating to the culture in which you find yourself living? Is the prevailing worldview of that culture influencing your thoughts, attitudes, priorities, speech, and behaviors? Have the materialism, sensuality, self-obsession, and foreign religions/paganisms/secularisms that dominate the culture around you infiltrated your way of thinking, relating to people, and living? Has the way of foreigners to the Covenant captured your heart? Have the sentimentality and blatant sensuality of pagan celebrations seduced you? Have the lies that pervade and control the minds and wills of strangers to the Covenant imprisoned your soul? Has the 'way we do things around here' of the area in which you live induced you to lock the Covenant-faithful son or daughter you are created and called to be away in a dark closet, underfed, wallowing in filth, and condemned to die a slow, painful death?

All who forsake the Holy One, turn their back on the Covenant, and reject the Ways of *mishpat, tzedekah v'shalom*, are eventually put to a *Yehudah's choice*. Perhaps the *prophetic time of Yehudah's choice* for you is today. Set the captive son or daughter of the Covenant in you free this instant! Release the prisoner within; let him or her burst forth like a calf released from the stall! The Father is calling. The Unseen Shepherd is leading. Your destiny awaits.

Compare Yehudah's Experience to A Season of Exile Completed the Holy One's Way

In today's aliyah we leave Yehudah and Tamar with a prayer that the Holy One will put their fractured lives back together. While they try to sort through the debris of their respective pasts without the pressure of the microscope of Torah watching their every move. We will zoom back off to the land of the pyramids - to *Mitzrayim* [Egypt] – to check in on young Yosef as he goes about the process of settling into his new life as a slave.

The Divine writer has arranged the narrative of *Vayashev* in this manner to provide us the opportunity to directly contrast the very different approaches taken by

Yehudah and by Yosef to the influences of *foreign culture*. We saw Yehudah adopt *the way of assimilation* - blending in with the pagan society around him, and starting to think, speak, behave, and react just like the pagans with whom he socialized. ‘*When in Rome, do as the Romans do*’, as the saying goes.

In today’s aliyah we see Yosef outside the covenant family’s *shtetl* as well. Far away from his father’s household, he will, as did Yehudah, quickly find himself surrounded by pagan people, pagan culture, and pagan society. The question that presents itself to us as we see Yosef immersed in a world that he did not choose is this: will Yosef assimilate into pagan society, and become just like the pagans, as did his older half-brother Yehudah? Or will Yosef take a different approach to the temptations of secular society? Put another way the question is “In a world which neither acknowledges the Holy One as God nor accepts the Holy One’s ways as guideposts for behavior, will young Yosef surrender to the ways of the pagans with whom he lives, or will he choose to walk with the Holy One and remain true to the Divine calling upon his life?” We will see, Dear Reader.

Welcome to Mitzrayim – the Land of Mysteries, Unheard-of Opportunities, and Intoxicating Distractions

In the Hebrew text Egypt is referred to by the name ‘*Mitzrayim*’. The Hebrew name for the country of the Pharaohs and the Nile means ‘*continually narrowing straights*’. If you want to get a vivid picture of what that name implies just picture *the violent contractions of the human womb and birth canal that occur when a pregnant woman is in labor*. There is a set time to enter the birth canal; and there is also a set time to leave it. And while there is indeed a way out the process of exiting is *totally beyond the control of mother or child*, cannot be rushed, and *is not only uncomfortable but potentially traumatic*.

Egypt was destined to be to the Hebrew nation what a surrogate mother’s womb is to a baby. The prophetic picture was first drawn back during the lifetime of Avraham when our beloved patriarch took Sarah to Egypt, she was taken into Pharaoh’s harem. When that happened, the Holy One shut up the wombs of the women of Egypt until Pharaoh let Sarah go. With Yosef’s arrival in *Mitzrayim* the process would start all over again. Just as Sarah upon her arrival in *Mitzrayim* was taken into Pharaoh’s service, so will it be with Yosef. And as in the Holy One’s good time Sarah emerged not only with her virtue intact but with the prospect of a new and more fruitful life so will it be with Yisrael.

Dealing With Pagan Society – the Holy One’s Way

Today’s aliyah shows how Yosef became caught up in and had to learn quickly to deal with the constraints of *Mitzrayim*. Here is how *the second Mitzrayim narrative*

of Torah begins:

V'Yosef hurad Mitzraymah

And Yosef was brought down to Mitzrayim [Egypt]

V'yiq'neihu Potifar saris Par'oh

Potifar, an officer of Pharaoh's,

sar ha-tabachim ish Mitzri

the captain of the guard, an Egyptian dignitary,

miyad ha-Yishmei'elim asher horiduhu shamah

bought him from the hand of the Yishme'elim that had brought him down there.

[Genesis 39:1]

Yosef was not stuck in some lonely prison cell where he had nothing to do but meditate on his father's covenant with the Holy One day and night. He was not put to work in some field where he could focus on the beauty and wonder of Creation and thereby connect with the Creator. He was instead *plunged into the heart of the depraved culture of Egypt*. 24 hours every day, 7 days every week, and 365 days every solar year Yosef had to deal with the foreign culture of his new owner - with every one of the *perversions of the mind and lusts of the flesh* appurtenant thereto. He was thrust headlong into a situation in which he was *virtually overwhelmed* with the affairs of Egyptian life. Because his Hebrew garments were all back in Eretz Kena'an Yosef had to wear *Egyptian garments* or none at all. Even the language he had to speak in order to communicate with other human beings was not his own.

Please note that Yosef had *no Torah scroll, no prayer book, no tallit, and no tefillin*. He had no rabbi, no study partner, no *yeshivah*, and no *Sabbath fellowship*. He had no 'youth group', synagogue, or 'church'. He had absolutely no human being with whom to observe the special days at which he had seen his father draw close to and meet with the Holy One. He only had the Holy One Himself – and the dreams the Holy One had inspired in him. But Torah tells us:

Vayehi Adonai et-Yosef vayehi ish matzliach

The Holy One was with Yosef, and he was a prosperous man

vayehi b'veit adonav ha-Mitzri

while he was in the house of his master the Mitzrian.

In *Mitzrayim* not even Yosef's *time* was his own. Moreover, as incredible as it may seem Yosef did not ever even have a single God-encounter² in any way comparable to those experienced by Avraham, by Yitzchak or by his father Ya'akov from which to draw strength. Indeed Yosef's *neshamah* [God-breathed soul] was all that he had to remind him who he was, what covenant he had with the

² At least a God-encounter referenced by the Torah.

Creator of Heaven and Earth, and what his purpose in life was. And for this young man, that was *all he needed*. Why was this so? Was it because Yosef had a ‘strong’ personality? No, Dear Reader. Yosef was able to maintain his integrity despite immersion in the world of pagan culture for one reason, and one reason alone: because he *yielded his will to the covenant-keeping power of the Holy One*. He just learned to let the Words of the Holy One inspire him, energize him, motivate him, and carry him along with the power of their flowing movement. He simply decided to go with the surging current of Divine Will, Word, and Strategic Plan instead of resisting those things and doing whatever seemed ‘right’ or ‘fair’ in his own eyes.

In and of himself, Yosef was no stronger of personality than his kinsman Yehudah. Yosef just *chose to yield to the Holy One, exchange his weakness for the Holy One’s strength, and draw on that strength* a whole lot sooner than his half-brother did. Both the brothers eventually found the place of *empowering surrender*. For a child of the Covenant, all roads in life eventually end at that place. Yehudah only got there after much struggle with stubbornness and his sin. Yosef was forced to go there early by the persecution of his brothers, all of whom were stronger than he.

A Look Around Yosef’s First Stop in the Land of Mitzrayim

Permit me now to introduce you to Yosef’s new place of residence – the *house of Potifar*. This place is of course not anything like “home” – and yet it is going to turn out to be for Yosef a *pleasant enough sort of prison* – at least for a little while. Mitzrayim is a land of *pleasant distractions*. It is a country of *conscience-numbing diversions, which developed a culture of dead men walking*.

The head of house in Yosef’s first place of service of this ‘dead-men walking’ culture is a man named *Potifar*. He is the captain of Pharaoh’s palace guard. Potifar, too, is a dead man walking. He is nothing like “Father Ya’akov”, but he is a *decent-enough man* as Egyptians go. And for some reason this man *took a genuine liking* to Yosef. He liked him so much, in fact, that he encouraged the young Hebrew not only in his work but also in the process of maturation from a dreamy-eyed boy to a productive member of society. Here is how Torah describes Potifar and Yosef’s relationship:

Vayar adonav ki Adonai ito v’chol asher-hu oseh

His master saw that the Holy One was with him,

Adonai matzliach b’yado

and that the Holy One made all that he did prosper in his hand.

Vayimtza Yosef chen b'eynav

Yosef found favor in his [Potifar’s] sight.

v’yesharet oto v’yafkidiehu al-beito

He ministered to him, and he made him overseer over his house,

v'chol-yesh-lo natan b'yado
and all that he had he put into his hand.
[Genesis 39:3-4]

The food was mostly vegetables, with a little fish from the Nile - but it was 'clean'. The work was honest labor. The skills he was developing were transferable. For the first time in his life, Yosef did not have a single jealous brother to contend with. Perhaps this new life in Egypt was not going to be all that bad. But then the *lady of the house* came calling, and everything changed.

Introducing the Lady of the House: The Inimitable 'Mrs. P.'

In our reading today we will see that Yosef was not only looked upon with favor by his new master Potifar but was also admired - for very different reasons - by the lovely, charming, and demanding Mrs. Potifar. Dark energy in a culture does not merely generate greed, you see; it also generates lust. And if a culture's male population embraces human trafficking as an acceptable vehicle for making profit; well, no one should be too surprised if its women embrace human trafficking as an acceptable vehicle for feeling in control, bawdy entertainment, and sensual pleasure. Enter *Mrs. P.*, stage left. Torah tells us:

Vatisa eishet-adonav et-eyneiha el-Yosef v'tomer
his master's wife cast her eyes on Yosef. And she said:

shichvah imi

'Lie with [i.e. pour yourself into, and mix your seed and essence with] me,'
[Genesis 39:7]

Of course, Mrs. P. almost certainly said this in Egyptian, not Hebrew. The Writer of Torah has politely spared us, as much as possible, of the coarseness of her dark energy culture's gutter talk. The Hebrew phrasing suggests doing the reproductive act WITH – Hebrew 'im' - a human. The dark energy cultures of the world make it clear – in their minds, the release of sexual energy/desire is not something one does WITH another, but is something one does TO another. It is not intimacy - it is conquest. It is not communion - it is victimization. It is not love - it is abuse. It is not beautiful – it is selfish – indeed toxically narcissistic - through and through. It is not becoming one with someone else; it is just taking what you want, for your own selfish pleasure, at someone else's expense. Shaul of Tarsus will later refer to this as 'defrauding' a brother - see I Thessalonians 4:3-6:

***Now this is the will of God, your sanctification:
that you should abstain from fornication;
that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,
not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God;
that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter***

Even though Yosef did not grow up hearing the coarse street slang of pagans, from the look in Mrs. P's eyes and the tone of her voice he understood exactly what it

was that she wanted. She had no interest in conversation. She was not seeking companionship. She didn't want romance. She didn't want to build a relationship. She did not feel - or want to feel - the slightest twinge of love or affection for him. She did not even see him as a human being. He was not – and would never be – that to her. He was just fresh meat. He was just a tasty, exotic treat that her husband had served to her on a silver platter. He was just a tool to be used and thrown away - no muss, no fuss, no commitment. He probably was not the first one she had used thusly; nor, most likely, would he be the last. She, too, was a human trafficker, you see – and she understood the ramifications of human trafficking very well. She knew that while this slave was in her house he was hers to do with as she pleased. She knew that she, as the mistress of the house, had all the power in this situation, with none of the responsibility. To her, Yosef, or whatever he called himself, was just another beautiful face and form. To her, he was just another strong, young, muscular body. She had seen how skilled this young man was at pleasing her husband - now it was time for him to please her as well. Dark energy has that kind of effect on people. It is never personal – it's always just business, or entertainment, or power, or pleasure.

This, Too, is A Test

Potifar's wife's brazen propositioning of Yosef provides the first real test of the young man's mettle not as a *dutiful slave who knows his place*, but as a son of the Covenant who knows His Mission. But it must have also had a deeply personal side to him on many levels. Remember, one deep-seated wound in his life was the loss of his mother, Rachel, during his childhood. He wound up being raised by a woman who was not his mother, Leah, and a couple of handmaids. He lived Cinderella's story before it even was Cinderella's story. One might therefore expect that the first temptation Yosef might have to deal with in his new life would be the *attentions, affections, adoring gazes, and flattery* of a matronly figure. That is just the way the serpent – and the cultures of the serpent – work. They find an area of woundedness and weakness, and look for a way to exploit and manipulate it. Enter Potifar's wife, state left. The admiration and the compliments of Potifar's wife will be a significant test as to *how the young man will handle attention, flattery, pride and with ego*. But even more than this the temptation to surrender to Mrs. Potifar's sweet seduction is a test of *whether Yosef's relationship with the Holy One is real* - or just for outward appearances and utilitarian purposes.

We will find out today where this young man's deepest loyalties truly lie. We will find out just what *really matters* to him. We will find out if he has recovered from *the rejection he suffered at the hands of his brothers and the emotional wounds their hatred – as well as his mother's untimely death - inflicted on him*. We will discover if he can handle the *exploding hormones of youth*. We will find out how

he is going to respond to *the with-ness and blessing of God on his life*. And we will discover what voice – among all the *competing voices* in the marketplace of possibilities – he is going to listen to [Hebrew *sh'ma*], and heed.

The Road Less Traveled

There is something *remarkable* about Yosef. *Flattery does not move him*. Neither *appeals to his ego* nor *hormones crying out for romance* can shake his resolve. He *fears the God of his father Ya'akov, his grandfather Yitzchak, and his great-grandfather Avraham*, much more than he fears Potifar – and much more than he desires Potifar's wife. As a result we will see Yosef stripped of a garment for the second time in this parsha. And we will again see him falsely accused, and wrongly accosted and put in bonds, for a crime he did not – *would not* in a million years - commit. And we will have to acknowledge - unpleasant as it all seems - that *all of this was part of the Holy One's glorious plan of redemption for His people*.

Garments to Cover the Naked

Part of the morning prayer recited by those who follow the traditions of the ancient Hebrews is a phrase that is translated into English as:

*Blessed is the One Who ...
... provides garments to cover the naked, brings freedom to the captive,
and lifts up the fallen by His strong right hand.*

These words certainly can be said to relate and apply to many persons in Scripture - and even in our acquaintance - but surely they relate to no one any more literally than Yosef. The man who was stripped of his garment by his brothers and sold into slavery naked, finds himself clothed, stripped again, and clothed again. He has been a captive in a cistern, in a caravan, in Potifar's house, and, beginning in today's aliyah, in a prison *for enemies of the State*. In each case the strong hand of the Holy One has caught Yosef even as he was falling, accomplished Yosef's redemption, assured his sanctification, and delivered his blessing.

Such a God is worthy to be revered more than earthly rulers, more than employers, and more than executioners. And when the strong right Hand of such a God is upon us ... well, let's just say that the beauty of Potifar's wife *pales by comparison*. Hence the heart of today's aliyah is found in verse 9, where Yosef rejects the amorous advances of Potifar's wife by saying:

v'eych e'eseh ha-ra'ah ha-g'dolah hazot

"How ... could I do such a wicked thing

v'chatati l'Elohim

and sin against the Holy One?"

The word our English Bibles translate as “sin” in this verse is *chata*.³ This word means to *stray from the path of blessing*, to *go a wrong way*, to *incur guilt*, and to *forfeit (or exchange) something pure and good for something impure and lethal*, and to *miss the mark or goal of life*. If we could truly understand and internalize the nature of this concept we would be far less susceptible to temptations, in whatever form. We do not merely “fall victim” to temptations, Beloved - we are *actors* exercising free will, not victims. We are not *overcome with passions and desires*. We simply come to a “fork” in the road, and consciously choose which path we will take - and what we will *value* and what we will not.

We do not merely “fall into sin”. To leave the pathway the Holy One has marked out for us we have to *consciously decide to turn our backs on God and run away from Him*. And Yosef – unlike his half-brother Yehudah in yesterday’s aliyah - was not prepared to take that kind of plunge.

The Fateful Day of Ultimate Testing

On a particular day near the time of the Winter Solstice [specifically, on December 25], a day the ancient Egyptians called “*Nital*”, the Egyptian people used to make a huge outdoor celebration in honor of the forces of darkness. According to Hebrew *midrash* it was on this day - when Potifar’s wife [who was not, according to the *midrash*, an Egyptian] knew all the men would be out participating in pagan rites, and that the house would therefore be totally empty except for her and Yosef - that Mrs. Potifar decided to make her boldest move yet on the handsome young Hebrew.

Vayehi k'hayom hazeh vayavo ha-baytah la'asot melachto

One particular day, [Joseph] came to the house to do his work

v'eyn ish me'anshei ha-bayit sham b'bayit

None of the household staff was inside.

Vatitpeseihu bevigdo

[The woman] then grabbed [Yosef] by his cloak.

l'emor shichvah imi

“Lie with [i.e. pour yourself into, and mix your seed and essence with] me!” she said.

There it was. Yosef had to think fast. What could he do? What would be the ‘*Way of the Holy One*’ under these circumstances? What, in this situation, would *asah-ing tzedek u'mishpat* as his father and his father’s father had taught him to do, look like? Here is how Torah describes Yosef’s interpretation:

v'ya'azov big'do b'yadah v'yanas

He ran away from her, leaving his cloak in her hand,

³ Chata’ is *chet, tav, alef*. Strong's Hebrew word #2398, it is pronounced *khaw-taw'*.

vayeitze ha-chutzah

and he fled outside.

[Genesis 39:12]

Yosef ran. He fled. ‘Not exactly a ‘faith’ response’, you snicker? ‘Not a very ‘macho’ thing to do’, you say? Oh really? If you believe those things about Yosef’s flight from the embrace of Potifar’s wife then you have no idea what the covenant of the Holy One with Yosef’s great-grandfather Avraham was all about. Think seriously for a moment about Yosef’s options in that moment – and the consequences of each. Go back and read the advice of Sh’lomo in Proverbs 5:1-14. Then go back and re-read the stories of Yehudah and *bat-Shuah* and of Yehudah’s indiscretion with Tamar from yesterday’s aliyah.

Just where do you think yielding to Mrs. Potifar’s advances would have ultimately landed Yosef? How far do you think hanging around and trying to engage the excited Mrs. Potifar in a theological discussion about the proper application and implications of Genesis 2:24, or convincing her she should ‘back off’ and cleave only to Potifar, would have gotten the young Hebrew? To run, to flee, was not only the wisest course Yosef could have followed, but actually was the course that took a whole lot more *faith* and *chutzpah* than anything else Yosef could have done in that given circumstance. Think back to Adam and Chava in the Garden. A whole lot more running, and a whole lot less staying and engaging in conversation with the Serpent, could have made a *world* of difference, no? Good move, Yosef.

You can forget many things in life, Dear Reader. But never, never, forget the following three things that Yosef taught us about how to deal with the Mrs. Potifars of this world. He taught us that when they *flatter us*, we should be on our guard. He taught us that when they *feign affection for us*, we should ignore it. And he taught us that *when they reach for us to pull us down to their level*, we should *run as far away from them as we can get and as fast as our feet can fly*. This is the only way we can preserve our integrity.

Alas there will be some rather unpleasant consequences even for this. A scorned woman always exacts her revenge. It did not bode well for Yosef when Potifar’s wife pulled off Yosef’s garment as he fled her advances.

Vatikra l’anshei veitah vatomer lahem l’emor

And then she called her household servants, and said

rei’u hevi lanu ish Ivri l’tzachek banu ba elay l’sh’kav imi

Look here, this Hebrew slave mocked my authority and tried to lay with me!

Based upon the testimony of his wife and the damning evidence she held in her hand Torah tells us that Potifar had no choice but to have Yosef arrested and thrown into a dungeon where enemies of the state of Egypt were imprisoned.

Genesis 39:20. Do not get me wrong – a foreign country’s prison is not exactly a place anyone in his right mind would choose to go on his own accord. But considering *who Yosef is*, where he has just been, and *what all has happened to him thus far in his life*, suffice it to say that there are in this world – and in the next – far, far worse places Yosef could have landed than this particular Egyptian prison. For Torah tells us:

Vayehi Adonai et-Yosef vayet elav chased

The Holy One was with Yosef, and He showed him kindness,

vayiten chino b'eynei sar beit-ha-sohar

And he gave him favor in the eyes of the warden of the prison.

Vayiten sar beit-ha-sohar b'yad-Yosef

Soon, the warden had placed in the hand of Yosef

et kol-ha-asirim asher b'veit ha-sohar

all the prisoners that were kept in the dungeon.

v'et kol-asher osim sham hu hayah oseh

And [Yosef] took care of everything that had to be done.

Eyn sar beit-ha-sohar ro'eh et-kol-me'umah b'yado b'asher

The warden did not have to look after anything that was under [Joseph's] care.

Adonai ito v'asher-hu oseh Adonai matzliach

And the Holy One was with [Yosef], and He granted him success in all he did.

[Genesis 39:21-23]

For a child of the Holy One even what the world intends as a punishment can become a springboard to a new and greater opportunity. In the Holy One’s economy one who is faithful in small things, it seems, really does find himself not only blessed for his trouble, but also afforded greater and greater kingdom privileges and entrusted with larger and larger kingdom responsibilities. And so as we conclude today’s study the questions hanging in the air have less to do with Yosef and more to do with *us*. The questions that hang in the air are [1] *To what ‘prison’ have you been assigned?* and [2] *What are you going to do while you are here with whatever opportunities of service you have been provided?*

Many times in life you cannot control where you are planted. But you can always control how much you grow personally – and how much you glorify the name of the Holy One - while you are there. Quit *complaining about your circumstances*. They may well be unpleasant or even disastrous; but complaining is not going to help. Quit *whining over who did what to hurt you*. Others you have met in your life journey may have treated you badly indeed, deceiving you, taking advantage of you, oppressing you, manipulating you, falsely accusing you, attacking you, physically injuring you, abandoning you, even molesting you. But whining about it just prolongs and expands the agony. Quit *beating yourself up over your own*

mistakes, failures, missed signs, squandered opportunities, and blown chances. You may have played the prodigal indeed – but that does not by any means have to be the end of the story.

All the focus needs to be directed to the Holy One and His Glorious Redemptive Plan for you and for the world. As soon as and to the extent you can redirect your focus there, healing and dramatic deliverance can occur. Until you redirect your focus there, however, matters will just get worse – for you and everyone around you - with every episode of rehashing, complaining, moaning, and self-deprecation. Learn from our ancestor Yosef. Be faithful and diligent in whatever you put your hand to. Do something — any little thing within your power — to *help someone else less fortunate than you.* And then just watch and see what wonderful things the Holy One will do *in, through,* and *for* you.

Questions for Today's Study

1. The secret to Yosef's defiant refusal to “sin” with Potifar's wife is actually found in verse 10. It is hidden in the English translations. In the Hebrew, it says he *would not sh'ma* Potifar's wife. Why? Because He was *sh'ma*-ing the Voice of God. His sheep *sh'ma* His Voice; the voice of another they will not *sh'ma*. Follow the Voice, Beloved!

[A] Torah records that, in the midst of his slavery, the Holy One was “with” Yosef. What do you think this means?

[B] List all the different things that occurred, according to verses 2-5, because the Holy One was “with” Yosef.

[C] When Potifar's wife desired Yosef, what was Yosef's response?

[D] When Yosef explained why he could not do what Potifar's wife wanted, against whom did Yosef say what she wanted would be a sin?

[E] In Strong's and Gesenius, look up the words translated as “wickedness” and “sin” [KJV] in verse 9. Write the Hebrew words and their meanings.

2. After Potifar's wife made her false accusations concerning Yosef, he was put in a prison, where, according to the Hebrew sages, he would remain for twelve years.

*Yosef's master took him, and put him into the prison,
the place where the king's prisoners were bound, and he was there in custody.
But the Holy One was with Yosef, and showed covenant faithfulness to him,
and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.*

*The keeper of the prison committed all the prisoners who were in the prison to Yosef's hand.
Whatever they did there, he was the doer of it.*

*The keeper of the prison didn't look after anything that was under his hand,
because the Holy One was with him; and that which he did, the Holy One made it prosper.*

[A] According to verse 21 the Holy One was also “with” Yosef in this

prison. List the effects of the abiding of the Holy One's manifest presence with Yosef in this prison.

[B] How does the punishment of Yosef for the sin of Potifar's wife point to Messiah? Explain.

3. In today's Haftarah the Holy One, through his prophet Amos, warns Israel of the consequences of the sins listed in verses 6-9 AND the adding to those sins by giving wine to the Nazirites sent to them by the Holy One and by commanding the prophets sent by the Holy One to them not to prophesy.

*Behold, I will crush you in your place, as a cart crushes that is full of grain.
Flight will perish from the swift; and the strong won't strengthen his force;
neither will the mighty deliver himself;
neither will he who handles the bow stand; and he who is swift of foot will not escape.
Neither will he who rides the horse deliver himself; and he who is courageous
among the mighty will flee away naked in that day," says the Holy One.*

[A] Why do you think the Israelites who had committed the sins listed in verses 6-9 would give wine to Nazirites?

[B] Why do you think the Israelites who had committed the sins listed in verses 6-9 would tell prophetic people not to speak their visions and words?

[C] List the things that the Holy One says will happen to Israel on the day He judges Israel for the sins of verses 6-12.

[D] What does the Holy One say a truly courageous man will do prior to the day of Judgment for such sins?

[E] Can you see a connection between verse 16 and what Yosef did in today's Torah aliyah? Explain.

4. In today's reading from the apostolic Scriptures Stefanos [Stephen], as part of his response to his accusers, gets his turn to testify. His testimony is not in his own defense. He neither mentions the charges against him nor argues his innocence. He *ignores the charges against him altogether* and instead gives a "defense" of the Holy One, blessed be His Name! Here is how our Bibles record the beginning of his speech:

*He said, "Brothers and fathers, listen [Hebrew, sh'ma!].
The God of glory appeared to our father Avraham, when he was in Aram-Naharayim,
before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Get out of your land,
and from your relatives, and come into a land that I will show you.'
Then he came out of the land of the Kasdim, and lived in Haran.
From there, when his father was dead, God moved him into this land, where you are now living.
He gave him no inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on.
He promised that he would give it to him for a possession,
and to his seed after him, when he still had no child.
God spoke in this way: that his seed would live as aliens in a strange land,
and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years.*

***'I will judge the nation to which they will be in bondage,' said God,
'and after that will they come out, and serve me in this place.'***

He gave him the covenant of circumcision.

So Avraham became the father of Yitzchak, and circumcised him the eighth day.

Yitzchak became the father of Ya`akov, and Ya`akov became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

[A] What was the “text” for Stephen’s sermon to the Sanhedrin?

[B] How does Stephen describe the Holy One in verse 2?

[C] According to verse 7, for what purpose were the descendants of Avraham brought to *Ha-Eretz Yisrael* [the land of Israel]?

*May the Holy One be “with” you this day as He was with Yosef;
may the Holy One speak through you this day as He spoke through Amos;
and may the Holy One be vindicated in you this day as He was vindicated in Stephen.*

The Rabbi’s Son

Meditation for Today’s Study

Psalm 35:11-16

Unrighteous witnesses rise up.

They ask me about things that I don't know about.

They reward me evil for good, to the bereaving of my soul.

But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth.

I afflicted my soul with fasting.

My prayer returned into my own bosom.

I behaved myself as though it had been my friend or my brother.

I bowed down mourning, as one who mourns his mother.

But in my adversity, they rejoiced, and gathered themselves together.

The attackers gathered themselves together against me, and I didn't know it.

They tore at me, and didn't cease.

Like the profane mockers in feasts, they gnashed their teeth at me.