

Silence Worth a Thousand Words
A Case Study in Torah, Literature, Art, and Psychology
 Rabbi Jonathan Ziring: jjziring@torontotorah.com

- Read the story of Yosef being sold by his brothers. How do you imagine the scene? Does anything seem to be missing. Then look at the artwork. What is present in those depictions that is lacking from this story. Where do they get it from?

1. Genesis 37:12-29

(יב) וילכו אחיו לרעות את צאן אביהם בשכם: (יג) ויאמר ישראל אל יוסף הלא אחיך רעים בשכם לכה ואשלחך אליהם ויאמר לו הנני: (יד) ויאמר לו לדנא ראה את שלום אחיך ואת שלום הצאן והשבני דבר וישלחהו מעמק חברון ויבא שכמה: (טו) וימצאהו איש והנה תעה בשדה וישאלהו האיש לאמר מה תבקש: (טז) ויאמר את אחי אנכי מבקש הגידה נא לי איפה הם רעים: (יז) ויאמר האיש נסעו מזה כי שמעתי אמרים גלכה דתינה וילך יוסף אחר אחיו וימצאם בדתן: (יח) ויראו אתו מרחק ובטרים יקרב אליהם ויתנבלו אתו להמיתו: (יט) ויאמרו איש אל אחיו הנה בעל החלמות הלזה בא: (כ) ועתה | לכו ונהרגהו ונשלכהו באחד הבורות ואמרנו חיה רעה אכלתהו ונראה מה יהיו חלמתי: (כא) וישמע ראובן ויצלהו מידם ויאמר לא נפנו נפש: (כב) ויאמר אלהם | ראובן אל תשפוך דם השליכו אתו אל הבור הזה אשר במדבר ויד אל תשחרבו למען הציל אתו מידם להשיבו אל אביו: (כג) ויהי כאשר בא יוסף אל אחיו ויפשיטו את יוסף את כתנתו הפסים אשר עליו: (כד) ויקחהו ושלכו אתו הברה והבור רק אין בו מים: (כה) וישבו לאכל לחם וישאו עיניהם ויראו והנה ארחת ישמעאלים באה מגלעד וגמליהם נשאים נכאת וצרי ולט הולכים להוריד מצרימה: (כו) ויאמר יהודה אל אחיו מה בצע כי נהרג את אחינו וכסינו את דמו: (כז) לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים וידנו אל תהיבו כי אחינו בשרנו הוא וישמעו אחיו: (כח) ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחלים וימשכו ויעלו את יוסף מן הבור וימכרו את יוסף לישמעאלים בעשרים כסף ויביאו את יוסף מצרימה: (כט) וישב ראובן אל הבור והנה איוסוף בבור ויקרע את בגדיו: ...

(12) One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father’s flock at Shechem, (13) Israel said to Joseph, “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “I am ready.” (14) And he said to him, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word.” So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem, (15) a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?” (16) He answered, “I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?” (17) The man said, “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.” So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan. (18) They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. (19) They said to one another, “Here comes that dreamer! (20) Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!” (21) But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” (22) And Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. (23) When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, (24) and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. (25) Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. (26) Then Judah said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? (27) Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. (28) When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. (29) When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes

2. Alhtorah.org



Joseph Sold into Slavery by His Brothers
 Donato Mascagni



Joseph Sold by His Brothers
 Providence Lithograph
 Company



Brothers Sell Joseph into Slavery
 Konstantin Flavitsky

3. Genesis 42:21-22

(כא) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו אֲבֵל־אֲשָׁמִים | אֲנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמְעָנוּ עִלְכֶן בְּאֵה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת: (כב) וַיַּעַן רְאוּבֵן אֲתֵם לֵאמֹר הֲלוֹא אָמַרְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם | לֹא מֵר אֶל-תַּחַטָּאֵנוּ בְּלֵד וְלֹא שָׁמְעַתֶּם וְגַם-דָּמּוּ הַיָּה גְדֹרֵשׁ:

(21) They said to one another, “Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us.” (22) Then Reuben spoke up and said to them, “Did I not tell you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy’? But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood.”

- *What new information was introduced in the above pesukim? Why was this information hidden?*
- *Why did Yosef plead and cry? See sources below*

4. Radak on Genesis 42:21:2

כי באמת היה מתחנן אליהם בהפשיטם אותו את כתנתו להשליכו לבור. על כן באה אלינו הצרה הזאת, למדנו בספור הזה כי כשתבא צרה לאדם ראוי לו לפשפש במעשיו ולבדוק מה היה המעשה הרע שעשה ויתחרט עליו ויתודה לפני האל, ויבקש ממנו כפרה: (2) In their turning a deaf ear to Joseph's pleas for mercy after he had been thrown into the pit. Joseph had started pleading already when they stripped him of the coloured coat his father had had made for him especially. The entire episode is described in detail by the Torah to teach the reader that if and when apparently undeserved troubles befall him, that he is to examine his past deeds to find out what sin, intentional or unintentional, could have caused G'd to bring this to his attention in such a manner so that he would repent his error. He is to exploit his troubles to ask G'd for forgiveness for his wrongdoing

5. Seichel Tov

שלא נמסור אותו בידי אכזרים, ולא שמענו לתחינתו.

That we should not give him to cruel people, and we did not listen to his pleas.

6. Ramban on Genesis 42:21

(א) אשר ראינו צרת נפשו בהתחננו אלינו חשבו להם האכזריות לעונש גדול יותר מן המכירה כי היה אחיהם בשרם מתחנן ומתנפל לפניהם ולא ירחמו והכתוב לא סיפר זה שם או מפני שהדבר ידוע בטבע כי יתחנן אדם לאחיו בבואו לידם להרע לו וישביעם בחיי אביהם ויעשה כל אשר יוכל להציל נפשו ממות או שירצה הכתוב לקצר בסורהם או מדרך הכתובים שמקצרים במקום אחד ומאריכים בו במקום אחר We saw his distress when he pleaded to him. He consider the cruelty worthy of punishment more than the sale, for their brother, their flesh was pleading them and fallen before them, and they had no mercy. The Torah did not tell of this there either because 1) It is known by nature that a person would plea with brothers when it has come to their hands to harm him, and he would adjure them by their father's life and do all he can to save himself from death. 2) The Torah wanted to minimize their disgrace. 3) It is the way of Torah to be short in one place and lengthier elsewhere.

7. Nechama Leibowitz (on Ramban's Second Answer)

The narrative of the sale of Joseph is careful not to lay the blame for what happened either on Joseph or on his brethren in any one sided manner. Both sides were equally culpable and the Torah does not cover up their evildoing. Joseph was a talebearer, boastful in his retailing of his dream to his father and his brothers hated and envied him for it. If the Torah had dwelt, on this occasion, on Joseph's pleas for mercy and the brother's stony-heartedness it would have upset the balance and undermined the impartiality of the narrative, weighting the odds against them and painting them in too black a light. On this occasion the text therefore did not enlarge on their misconduct. Later on however the allusion to Joseph's pleas for mercy only serves to underline their remorse rather than their cruelty.

8. <http://www.beinghuman.org/article/halo-effect>

The halo effect is a bias in which our overall impression of a person (a figurative halo) colors our judgment of that person's character. The research into the halo effect shows that a person's positive qualities, physical appearance, and general attractiveness affects how we judge their character—the better they look and behave, the better a person we judge them to be...This effect isn't just limited to the halo of saintliness, either; other researchers have found a sort of devil-horns effect in which a general negative impression of a person makes us judge their character negatively.

9. Meir Weiss (quoted in Nechama Leibowitz's studies pg 464)

The recalling of this long buried episode here, at this juncture represents the awakening of the brother's conscience. Joseph's heartrending pleas for mercy more than they emanate from the pit, now well up from the depths of their own

hearts. This constitutes the underlying intention of the narrative in citing this detail here. It is meant to reveal what is going on in the consciousness of the brothers at that moment, indicating their remorse."

10. Rabbi Alex Israel

This observation demonstrates an important emphasis within our story. It is now, at this moment, that the brothers "hear" Joseph's cries for the first time. This is the moment that those cries sink in. This is the moment that they penetrate beyond the cold hard outer surface of indifference. The Torah reports Joseph's impassioned pleas here, because it is at this moment, and not before, that the message is received. Now they are sorry. At the time, they were deaf, distant.

We might suggest that this observation connects with the textual highlighting of the phrase, "vayaker - vayinaker". What does one recognize and what does one choose to ignore? When is one deaf and when does the sound penetrate? The whole notion of recognition is as much psychological as it is related to the senses. We decide what to hear, what to be sensitive to, who to be good to and who to hate. The brothers' discussion here talks of the Joseph incident as if it were yesterday. In fact twenty-two years have passed. But their experience of incarceration in an Egyptian jail, with the looming thoughts of family members not returning home, with the false accusations and the feelings of vulnerability, has brought to the surface renewed realisations, fresh thinking, recognitions and perceptions.

11. The Best That has been Thought and Said by R. Lichtenstein about the Role of Literature in Religious Life, Rabbi Jeffery Saks (Tradition 47:4)

R. Lichtenstein enumerates three reasons that literary analysis of Tanakh remains a matter of "spiritual import." First, "aesthetic experience per se, properly channeled, is spiritually desired. It serves to sharpen our perception, to expand our horizons, to refine our sensibility and deepen our humanity – to make us richer and more harmonious individuals." Second, the appreciation of the aesthetic component of Tanakh is in and of itself significant insofar as "it is beauty as divine revelation, as a reflection of the form in which the Ribbono shel Olam chose to manifest His will to man." With regard to cosmic beauty we acknowledge as a matter of course that the "message of divine glory told by the heavens is largely communicated by awe inspiring beauty... Ought we, then, to dismiss with respect to Scripture what we so readily acknowledge with regard to nature?" Finally, literary "power and beauty are not merely frosting on the cake of the pasuk's meaning. They are – in the more imaginative and emotional passages, certainly – of the very fabric of that meaning... Readiness to open our sensibilities to the power and beauty of kitvei ha-kodesh is the first step in enriching our literary experience of them. In order to maximize our response to them, we should, secondly, learn to read them critically" [1962: 21-23].

12. ibid

While frequently declaring that literature and the humanities are clearly not the only, exclusive path to attain the types of sensitivities needed in a fully developed religious personality, he documents his "painful discoveries" that "many of these [desired] elements are sadly lacking among the contempters of culture on the right." By way of example he recalls the hespedim delivered at the 1962 funeral for the Lakewood Rosh Yeshiva, R. Aharon Kotler. The only person who gave "insight into the fire which animated that giant was Irving Bunim, a layman. When one's psychological sensitivity is lacking, the result is that much of Torah – whole parashiyot and personalities in Chumash – are simply misread... with a marvelous tradition of midrashim often distorted beyond recognition" [1985: 230]. This is the need to enhance the understanding of man – that is, the type of self-reflection we may hope for as men about ourselves and others.