

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Restoring a Commentary Maligned

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Ze'enuh U-Re'enuh: A Critical Translation into English, Studia Judaica 96.
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The *Ze'enuh U-Re'enuh* was first published about 1610 and has since been reprinted 275 times. Despite this great popularity, this edition is the first complete annotated critical translation of this classic to be published. Since the end of the nineteenth century, conventional wisdom has held that the *Ze'enuh U-Re'enuh* was a Yiddish translation of the humash written for women and ignorant men who could not understand the text in Hebrew.

This misleading characterization was perpetuated by three groups, each with its own agenda: modernizing Jews who argued for a Judaism conducted in a modern language, Wissenschaft scholars who disdained anything that smacked of the popular, and finally anti-religious Yiddish speaking secularists. *Ze'enuh U-Re'enuh* was the symbol of all that was, at turns, old, unlearned or religious. Hence the image of the book as a tome that one's Yiddish-speaking grandmother in the "old country" read on Shabbat afternoon.

The reality is markedly different. The *Ze'enuh U-Re'enuh* is a sophisticated Yiddish commentary on the Jewish liturgical Bible, which is composed of the humash, the haftarot, and the megillot, that are read in the synagogue as part of the religious calendar. The author, a learned scholar, wove together a commentary that is based on the whole rabbinic tradition: Talmud, Midrash, and medieval commentaries including Rashi, Ramban, Bahya ben Asher, Hizkuni, Toledot Yizhak, and Radak. He chose those comments that he found most informative and combined them into a clear and understandable narrative.

The importance of the work is alluded to in a commentary on the Shulhan Arukh stating that those who follow the tradition of reviewing the weekly Torah portion twice and the Targum, the translation into Aramaic, once, may substitute the Targum with *Ze'enuh U-Re'enuh*—a status usually only conferred on the preeminent biblical commentary of Rashi (Ta"Z on OH 265. 2).



Vayeshev 5778

וישב תשע"ח



Yosef: A Light in the Darkness

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Parashat Vayeshev takes us deep into the pain and alienation of being human, of yearning from a low place of darkness and suffering. And yet the narrative also conveys the power of hope—a longing for God and redemption, for spiritual and moral healing in our human relationships.

This week's parashah crystallizes the dysfunctional family dynamics that are evident throughout the book of Genesis—the fraught father-son relationships, the painful intergenerational wounds of favoritism, the anger and resentment between siblings, and, deep down, the simple desire to be loved. Although we may cringe at the violence of the brothers toward Yosef, the narrative of Vayeshev also opens our hearts to the pain these sons felt at their father's rejection—his greatest love reserved for Yosef: **וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת יוֹסֵף מִכָּל בְּנָיו** ("Yisrael [i.e., Ya'akov] loved Yosef most of all his sons") (Gen. 37:3).

The wound of this rejection, the longing to be loved, is further represented by the motif of the garment, the *begeh*, in its various forms—most powerfully perhaps in the *ketonet pasim*, the coat of colors that Yosef wears. That is the site of the brothers' grief-inducing dissimulation as they present their favored brother's blood-stained cloak to their father, tricking him into the conclusion that his son has been killed and devoured by a wild animal: **וַיֹּאמֶר כְּתָנִית בְּנֵי יוֹסֵף** ("He [Ya'akov] said: 'It is my son's cloak; a wild animal has eaten him! Yosef has been torn apart!'") (37:33). The garment is the instrument of deception (*begidah*) elsewhere in the parashah as well—in the veil of Tamar (which she uses to disguise herself in seducing Yehudah, 38:14–19), in the clothing of Yosef in the lying hands of Potiphar's wife, left behind in his flight from her advances (39:11–18). *Begeh* and *begidah*, garment and deception.

In symmetry, the garments of both Ya'akov and Reuven are highlighted in the dramatic expression of grief, the tearing of clothing as a gesture of mourning. In the case of Reuven, we may also observe the portrayal of compassion—he returns to the pit, planning to rescue his brother who, alas, has already been sold by the others into slavery: **וַיֵּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל הַבּוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו וַיְהִי אֵין יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר וַיִּרְעַף יוֹסֵף אֶת הַבְּגָדִים** (“Reuven returned to the pit, and behold Yosef was not in the pit, and he ripped his garments”) (Gen. 37:29). Reuven’s return, **וַיֵּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן**, communicates the ideal of compassion; metaphorically, we may read it as the need to enter the place of the empty pit in the world, to lift up those among us who may have fallen into the dark places of suffering and hopelessness.

Yosef’s absence both underscores Reuven’s despair at his failed attempt to save his brother, and, at a more figurative level of meaning, may be said to symbolize the parched and empty sense of spiritual alienation—the thirst felt in the absence of the living waters of Divinity. Yosef’s name is thus read creatively as an allusion to the overflow of divine abundance (*hosafah/Yosef*); the surplus of Divine Presence and vitality is the “Yosef-dimension” of existence, whereas the pit empty of water represents a state of being in which the life-giving energies of God are absent—leaving the human being in a disoriented condition of extreme spiritual thirst. As it was said a few verses earlier, when Yosef was first cast into the pit: **וְהַבּוֹר רֵק אֵין בוֹ מַיִם** (“The pit was empty, it contained no water”) (v. 24).

If Vayeshev teaches us profound lessons about the fragility of love, about family, deception, and vulnerability, it also may be read (as it has been by generations of spiritual masters) as wisdom about the soul’s yearning for Divine Presence, about the intersecting threads of hardship, struggle, and the devotional quest. The figure of Yosef may be understood as a paradigm for the cry of prayer, the wail from the depths of suffering, of being lost in the world; Yosef represents the struggle to rise from the sunken place of despair, the dark place of *Mitzrayim* (Egypt)—both as a struggle through adversity, but also as the life-process of redeeming hidden divine light from even the most coarse and constraining elements of materiality and mundane existence. The pit into which Yosef is cast by his jealous brothers is akin in this reading to the painful and narrow place of Egypt, the *metzarim* of Mitzrayim. **וַיַּעֲלֵנִי מִבּוֹר שָׂאוֹן** (“He lifted me out of the miry pit”), sings the Psalmist (Ps. 40:3). It is that same hope

expressed in this Psalm (“**קִוִּיָּה קִוִּיָּה קִוִּיָּה** [“I put my hope in YHVH”] [v. 2]) that is embodied in the figure of Yosef.

According to Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, a late eighteenth-century Hasidic master, this was the reason the Torah speaks about Yosef’s descent into Egypt. It is to teach us that in creating the world, God placed a luminous divine spark—a portion of the transcendent Divine essence, **חֵלק א-א**, **לְוִהִי מִמַּעַל**, into the darkness of matter, into the seemingly profane realms of ordinary existence. Here too we observe a play on the name of Yosef: an extra abundance of light is drawn from the darkness of materiality, and the figure of Yosef represents an addition, *tosefet* (*Yosef/hosafah/tosefet*)—an extra measure of divine light that may bring the promise of redemption, illuminating the eyes and opening the heart to God. The primordial light was hidden within the darkness so that we too might find our way back to Divinity even when we feel we are in the darkest of places. Like the traces of a pathway out of the woods, the fragments of divine light may lead us from the forest of darkness—that we are lost, and yet may be found once again.

Thus are the lessons of Vayeshev and Hanukkah intertwined: in these, the darkest hours of the year, the flames are lit to remind us of the wonder and beauty that is still possible, the hope that may warm us even on the coldest and most bleak of winter nights—of the divine **נִסִּים וּנְפִלְאוֹת**, the miracles and wonders that may yet lie hidden. It is a time of **הַתְּחַדְּשׁוּת**, of renewal, of not letting our spiritual vitality become stale and uninspired. Let us instead strive to be always like Yosef, the youth (**נֶעֱר**), which the late nineteenth-century *Sefat Emet* reads as representing the energy of **הַתְּעוֹרְרוּת**, awakening—an interpretive play on the similar sounds of these two Hebrew words.

In all the passing moments that have the potential to fall into the pit of routine, boredom, and superficiality, may we be blessed with the sparkle of childhood wonder, with an awareness of Creation renewed. Spirit of the world, open our hearts to hope and to gratitude for our many blessings; fill us with the passion to be ever-awake to the sacred mystery and sublime gift of this all-too-fleeting human life.

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