

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayeshev
December 12, 2020 * 26 Kislev, 5781**
Shabbat Chanukah

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Vayeshev in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3202/jewish/Vayeshev-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Jacob settles in Hebron with his twelve sons. His favorite is seventeen-year-old Joseph, whose brothers are jealous of the preferential treatment he receives from his father, such as a precious many-colored coat that Jacob makes for Joseph. Joseph relates to his brothers two of his dreams which foretell that he is destined to rule over them, increasing their envy and hatred towards him.

Simeon and Levi plot to kill him, but Reuben suggests that they throw him into a pit instead, intending to come back later and save him. While Joseph is in the pit, Judah has him sold to a band of passing Ishmaelites. The brothers dip Joseph's special coat in the blood of a goat and show it to their father, leading him to believe that his most beloved son was devoured by a wild beast.

Judah marries and has three children. The eldest, Er, dies young and childless, and his wife, Tamar, is given in levirate marriage to the second son, Onan. Onan sins by spilling his seed, and he too meets an early death. Judah is reluctant to have his third son marry her. Determined to have a child from Judah's family, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces Judah himself. Judah hears that his daughter-in-law has become pregnant and orders her executed for harlotry, but when Tamar produces some personal effects he left with her as a pledge for payment, he publicly admits that he is the father. Tamar gives birth to twin sons, Peretz (an ancestor of King David) and Zerach.

Joseph is taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, the minister in charge of Pharaoh's slaughterhouses. G-d blesses everything he does, and soon he is made overseer of all his master's property. Potiphar's wife desires the handsome and charismatic lad; when Joseph rejects her advances, she tells her husband that the Hebrew slave tried to force himself on her, and has him thrown into prison. Joseph gains the trust and admiration of his jailers, who appoint him to a position of authority in the prison administration. In prison, Joseph meets Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker, both incarcerated for offending their royal master. Both have disturbing dreams, which Joseph interprets; in three days, he tells them, the butler will be released and the baker hanged. Joseph asks the butler to intercede on his behalf with Pharaoh. Joseph's predictions are fulfilled, but the butler forgets all about Joseph and does nothing for him.

Shabbat Chanukah Haftarah

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3553806/jewish/On-the-Haftarah-The-Daughters-of-Zion-the-Golden-Menorah-and-Joshua-the-High-Priest.htm

The haftarah, beginning from Zechariah 2:14, is often read twice during the year: Once the (first) Shabbat of Chanukah, and again on the week of Baahalotecha.

The obvious reason for reading this haftarah is because it speaks of a golden menorah and the High Priest. On Chanukah, we celebrate the miracle with the lights of the menorah and finding the oil with the unbroken seal of the High Priest, and

the portion of Behaalotecha begins with Aaron the High Priest being instructed with regards to lighting the menorah.

This haftarah is prophecy from Zachariah at the end of the Persian exile, just before we returned to Israel to build the Second Temple. But it clearly also refers to us, at the end of this final exile, soon to be building the third and last Temple. In this article, I will mostly discuss how it pertains to our time.

The haftarah begins, "Sing and rejoice daughter of Zion, behold I will come and dwell in your midst." The Jewish people here are called "daughter of Zion" and told to rejoice. The haftarah continues with two prophecies—first about Joshua the High Priest, and second about the golden menorah.

Food For Thought

The Power of Praise (Vayeshev 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l
<https://rabbisacks.org/vayeshev-5781/>

Reuben is the leader who might have been but never was. He was Jacob's firstborn. Jacob said of him on his deathbed, "Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honour, excelling in power." (Gen. 49:3) This is an impressive tribute, suggesting physical presence and commanding demeanour. More significantly, in his early years Reuben consistently appeared to be the most morally sensitive of Jacob's children. He was Leah's son, and keenly felt his mother's disappointment that she was not Jacob's favourite. Here is the first description of him as a child:

During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. (Gen. 30:14)

Mandrakes were thought to be an aphrodisiac. Reuben knew this and immediately thought of his mother. It was a touching gesture but it misfired because he presented them to Leah in the presence of Rachel and unintentionally caused an argument between them.

The next episode in which we see Reuben is far more troubling:

Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrat, that is, Bethlehem... While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went in and slept [vayishkav] with his father's concubine Bilhah ... (Gen. 35:19-22)

If understood literally this would amount to a major sin. Sleeping with your father's concubine was not only a sexual crime; it was an unforgivable act of treason and betrayal, as we discover later in Tanach when Absalom decides to rebel against his father David and replace him as king. Ahitophel gives him the following advice:

"Sleep with your father's concubines, whom he left to take care of the palace. Then all Israel will hear that you have made yourself obnoxious to your father, and the hands of everyone with you will be more resolute." (2 Samuel 16:21)

According to the Sages, the text about Reuben is not to be understood literally.[1] After Rachel died, Jacob had moved his bed to the tent of Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. This, felt Reuben, was an intolerable humiliation for his mother. It was hard for Leah to

endure the fact that Jacob loved her sister more. It would have been altogether unbearable for her to discover that he even preferred Rachel's handmaid. So Reuben moved Jacob's bed from Bilhah's tent to Leah's. The verb *vayishkav* should therefore be translated not as "slept with" but "changed the sleeping arrangement."

At this point, however, the text does a strange thing. It says, "Reuben went in and slept with [or changed the sleeping arrangement of] his father's concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it ..." and then signals a paragraph break in the middle of the sentence. The sentence ends: "Jacob had twelve sons." This is very unusual indeed. What it suggests is an audible silence. Communication had completely broken down between Jacob and Reuben. If the Sages are correct in their interpretation, then this is one of the greatest tragedies in the whole of Genesis. Jacob clearly believed that Reuben had slept with his concubine Bilhah. He cursed him for it on his deathbed:

Unstable as water, you will not excel, for you went up onto your father's bed, onto my couch, and defiled it. (Gen. 49:4)

Yet according to the Sages, this did not happen. Had Jacob been willing to speak to Reuben he would have discovered the truth, but Jacob grew up in a family that lacked open, candid communication (as we saw a few weeks ago, during our discussion of parshat Toldot). Thus, for many years Reuben was suspected by his father of a sin he had not committed – all because he cared about the feelings of his mother.

Which brings us to the third episode in Reuben's life, the most tragic of all. Jacob favoured Joseph, son of his beloved Rachel, and the other brothers knew it. When he gave Joseph a visible sign of favouritism, the richly embroidered cloak, the brothers resented it yet more. When Joseph began to have dreams of the rest of the family bowing down to him, the brothers' animosity reached boiling point. When they were far from home, tending the flocks, and Joseph appeared in the distance, their hatred made them decide then and there to kill him. Reuben alone resisted:

When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him [Joseph] from their hands. "Let's not take his life," he said. "Don't shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him." Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. (Gen. 37:21-22)

Reuben's plan was simple. He persuaded the brothers not to kill Joseph but rather to let him die by leaving him to starve in a pit. He intended to return later, when the brothers had moved on, to rescue him. When he returned, however, Joseph was no longer there. He had been sold as a slave. Reuben was devastated.

Three times Reuben tried to help but despite his best intentions, his efforts failed. He was responsible for the one recorded quarrel between Leah and Rachel. His father wrongly suspected him of a major sin and cursed him on his deathbed. He failed to save Joseph. Reuben knew when things were not right, and tried to act to make changes for the better, but he somehow lacked the prudence, confidence or courage to achieve his desired outcome. He should have waited for Leah to be alone before giving

her the mandrakes. He should have remonstrated directly with his father about his sleeping arrangements. He should have physically taken Joseph safely back home. What happened to Reuben to make him lack confidence? The Torah gives a poignant and unmistakable hint. Listen to these verses describing the birth of Leah's (and Jacob's) first two children:

When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. (Gen. 29:32-33)

Both times, it was Leah, not Jacob, who named the child – and both names were a cry to Jacob to notice her and love her – if not for herself then at least because she has given him children. Jacob evidently did not notice.

Reuben became what he became because – so the text seems to imply – his father's attention was elsewhere; he did not care for either Leah or her sons (the text itself says, "the Lord saw that Leah was not loved"). Reuben knew this and felt intensely his mother's shame and his father's apparent indifference.

People need encouragement if they are to lead. It is fascinating to contrast the hesitant Reuben with the confident – even overconfident – Joseph, who was loved and favoured by his father. If we want our children to have the confidence to act when action is needed, then we have to empower, encourage and praise them.

There is a fascinating Mishnah in Ethics of the Fathers:

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five (pre-eminent) disciples, namely Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yose the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Netanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He used to recount their praise: Eliezer ben Hyrcanus – a plastered well that never loses a drop. Joshua ben Chananya – happy the one who gave him birth. Yose the Priest – a pious man. Shimon ben Netanel – a man who fears sin. Elazar ben Arach – an ever-flowing spring. (Mishnah Avot 2:10-11)

Why does the Mishnah, whose aim is to teach us lasting truths, give us this apparently trivial account of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's pupils and how he used to praise them? The answer, I believe, is that the Mishnah is telling us how to raise disciples, how to be a coach, mentor and guide: by using focused praise.

The Mishnah does not simply say that Yochanan ben Zakkai said good things about his students. It uses an unusual locution: "He used to count [moneh] their praise", meaning, his positive remarks were precise and accurately targeted. He told each of his disciples what their specific strength was.

Eliezer ben Hyrcanus had an outstanding memory. At a time when the Oral Law was not yet written down, he could recall the teachings of the tradition better than anyone else. Elazar ben Arach was creative, able to come up with an endless stream of fresh

interpretations. When we follow our particular passions and gifts, we contribute to the world what only we can give.

However, the fact that we may have an exceptional gift may also mean that we have conspicuous deficiencies. No one has all the strengths. Sufficient if we have one. But we must also know what we lack. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus became so fixated on the past that he resisted change even when it was decided on by the majority of his colleagues. Eventually he was excommunicated for failing to accept his colleagues' ruling (Baba Metzia 59b).

Elazar ben Arach's fate was even sadder. After the death of Yochanan ben Zakkai, he separated from his colleagues. They went to Yavneh; he went to Hamat (Emmaus). It was a pleasant place to live and it was where his wife's family lived. Apparently he was so confident of his intellectual gifts that he believed he could maintain his scholarship by himself. Eventually he forgot everything he had ever learned (Avot de-Rabbi Natan 14: 6). The man more gifted than his contemporaries eventually died while making almost no lasting contribution to the tradition.

There is a delicate balance between the neglect that leads to someone to lack the confidence to do the necessary deed, and the excessive praise or favoritism that creates overconfidence and the belief that you are better than others. That balance is necessary if we are to be the sunlight that helps others grow. [1] See Shabbat 55a-b

[Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Faith by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/josephs-amazing-technicolor-faith/?utm_source=mjl_maropost&utm_campaign=MJL&utm_medium=email)

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Throughout the ups and downs of his ever-changing life, this biblical hero never feels far from God. This week's Torah portion takes us into the "Joseph novella," which will continue through the rest of Genesis. As Joseph's story begins, he's tending sheep with his brothers and reporting on their behavior to their father Jacob. The Torah doesn't tell us what exactly Joseph related to Jacob, or whether it was true, though the commentators Rashi (11th-century France) and the Radak (12th-13th-century France) suggest that his brothers were behaving unethically and treating each other poorly. Joseph's brothers hate him. In part because their father made him a fancy tunic. Joseph, for his part, is willing to name their ugly behaviors. And then, in what could be attributed either to arrogance or to naivete, he tells them his dreams — for instance, the one where their sheaves of wheat bow down to his. So they throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery.

It's an outsized reaction, but everything about Joseph's story is outsized. His brothers' hatred seems unreasonable and excessive. So do his frequent changes in circumstance: from shepherd boy to slaving caravan, from respected servant to innocent man wrongly accused. (And that's just this week. Next week as the saga continues, his changes in fortune are equally dramatic.) This is a biblical equivalent of *As the World Turns*, chronicling Joseph's many inversions.

The Joseph story is a paradigmatic example of what the Hasidic tradition calls “descent for the sake of ascent.” Joseph’s downfalls — both literal and figurative— are the springboard that enable him to rise. He descends into the pit, then into Egypt. (In Torah, one “descends” into Egypt and “rises” into Israel.) Then Potiphar’s wife falsely accuses him of rape, causing him to descend yet again, this time into Pharaoh’s dungeon.

At this point, Joseph could be forgiven for indulging in some self-pity. Nothing in his life has gone the way he presumably wanted. He’s gone from being hated by his siblings, to being sold into slavery, to being falsely imprisoned. But notably, the Torah tells us that even when Joseph is in this darkest of circumstance, God is with him.

Joseph’s relationship with divinity remains strong and clear. Indeed, he relies on that connection with the divine to interpret dreams for other prisoners.

What does it mean to say that God was with him? The Or HaChayyim (Chaim ibn Attar, born in Morocco, died 1743) teaches that the inspiration of Shechinah (the immanent, indwelling divine Presence) flows through a person proportionally to that person’s openness to presence within themselves. For the Or HaChayyim, “God was with him” means that Joseph opened himself to divine flow. He was so steeped in the sweetness of connection with God that he was protected from feeling the evil of his circumstance.

In next week’s Torah portion we’ll see how all of Joseph’s trials put him in exactly the right place to be able to save the nation, and his family, from famine. But this week’s portion ends with Joseph in jail, doing precisely as the psalmist urges at the end of Psalm 27: staying strong and keeping hope in God. The cupbearer to whom he offered counsel has forgotten him, abandoning him in the dungeon, but Joseph knows that God remembers and accompanies him, always.

As a rabbi and spiritual director, one of my core questions is, “Where is God for you in this?” Spiritual direction invites us to discern divinity in whatever’s unfolding. But Joseph doesn’t need to be prompted with that query. Joseph feels God with him even while being unfairly maligned and punished. And because his sense of God’s presence is so strong, his sense of self isn’t shaken. That’s the quality in Joseph to which I most aspire: his deep connection with God.

What Joseph’s story comes to teach me this year is the importance of cultivating the awareness that for him seems to come so naturally: awareness that I am seen, and cherished, and loved by what our nightly liturgy (in the Ahavat Olam prayer) calls an “unending love.” Even if circumstances seem bleak, even in the face of unethical behaviors from others, I can seek to find in every downturn an opportunity to lift my eyes up, and lift my heart up, to something beyond myself. As the psalmist writes (in Psalm 118, and Psalm 56, among other places), God is with me: I need not fear.

[Vayeshev 5781 by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt](https://mailchi.mp/tikun/haazinu5781-2578438?e=e0f2ca6c0d)

<https://mailchi.mp/tikun/haazinu5781-2578438?e=e0f2ca6c0d>

This portion is one of my absolute favourites. It charts the development of Joseph,

Jacob's second youngest son, from a seventeen-year-old 'youth', through slavery and prison in Egypt, until he is a moment away from taking responsibility for the welfare of the entire world. And it's quite some story. Innocence. Prophetic dreams. Jealousy. Slavery. An ancient Mrs. Robinson. Prison. And more dreams. It is one of the Torah's absolute classic stories. The more I think about it, the more I love it.

Over the years I've given at least three different reasons why I believe Joseph is the only person in the entire Bible to be given the accolade *hatzadik*, the righteous one. Joseph is my favourite character in the entire Old Testament and so I want to offer one more.

Let me set the scene for a moment. Joseph is a hormonal teenager; orphaned from his beloved mother at a young age; rejected and sold into slavery by his brothers; no relatives around him and very short on friends; cast adrift and isolated in a lonely and intimidating world – one would imagine that he was craving affection and love.

And into his life waltzes his Mrs Robinson. The Princess Diana of ancient Egypt.

Glamorous, gorgeous and dazzling. An older, experienced woman in a loveless marriage who falls head over heels for the irresistibly handsome young Joseph – the man in charge of her husband's household.

If ever there was an accident waiting to happen, this was it.

And yet, shockingly, unimaginably, he says no. When he has every reason in the world to say yes. So, day by day, she tries it on with him, alluring, seducing, enticing. Remember, he is a young, lonely, lost young man unloved and unsupported. It would have been so easy for him to take refuge in the arms of an older mother figure. In a final and desperate push for the finish line, she waits until he and she are alone in the house and physically grabs him, urging him to 'lie with me'. Mind-bogglingly, he says no once again, fleeing headlong before he changes his mind.

But here's the important bit. Why does he say no? Because it was wrong. That's right; it was wrong! No subjective reason, no personal benefit. It was simply wrong. And Joseph, the *tzaddik*, always did the right thing – no matter the consequences. After all, that's what a righteous person does – the right thing.

Potiphar's wife was simply off limits. She had entered a holy vow of marriage with another man. To 'lie with her' was to assist her in dishonouring a sacred commitment that she had made to another human being. It was wrong, wrong, wrong with no mitigating shades of grey. And Joseph was simply unwilling to do that.

Maimonides tells us, in the tenth chapter of his *Laws of Repentance*, that a person should not serve God for personal benefit, nor because of fear of punishment. In such cases, he is serving himself, not God. Rather, he should 'do what's right because it's right'.

Personally, that is a central motto that I live by. Always try to do the right thing.

Much of the time it is fairly easy to do the right thing. But the truly righteous person does the right thing even when doing the wrong thing is so much easier. Even when he or she has a great deal to lose by doing the right thing. Even when he or she is lonely and lost and desperate. For a person who wants to be righteous, there is never an excuse for doing the wrong thing, never mitigating circumstances, never situations that make it

acceptable or even understandable. It doesn't matter how hard it is, doing the right thing is always the right thing to do and Joseph exemplified that during the most difficult test imaginable.

Who Is The Supporting Cast in the Story of Your Life by Rabbi Dan Moskowitz

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/who-supporting-cast-story-your-life>

I am a rabbi because of a game of catch I played at camp with a rabbi more than three times my age. I found love and happiness and my partner in life, because my best friend and my family helped me through a very difficult time. I survived the social pressure cooker of high school because my woodshop teacher took a personal interest in my well-being. I am alive today, I truly believe, because an anonymous man pulled me back from the curb as I was about to step into oncoming traffic in Manchester, England. (I was looking in the wrong direction for British traffic patterns.)

We have all sorts of names for these people in our lives. Some call them guardian angels, some call them heroes, and our tradition calls them sh'lichim, "messengers" or "emissaries" from God. I call them supporting actors. A rabbi, a friend, family, a teacher, and an anonymous man in the movie that is my life: these are the people who have enabled me to play a starring role! These are the people who, intentionally or not, gave the trajectory of my life a nudge at just the right moment and kept it on track, or steered it in a new and better direction. If awards were given to supporting actors in life as they are to movie actors, then they would each deserve an Oscar for the roles they played and for how their playing of their roles enabled me to play mine.

Who are the supporting actors in your life? Who are the people, past or present, who at critical crossroads in your life's journey gave you directions, held your hand, and walked a bit of the journey with you? Who are the people who, upon reflection, were it not for them everything would be different, and so much would not have been possible?

Consider for a moment the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors in this week's Torah portion, Vayeishev.

Here, we meet Joseph, son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac, great-grandson of Abraham, who, by all accounts, is a leading man in the story of the Jewish people. Joseph, in my estimation, is the second most pivotal person in Jewish history. The most pivotal one is a man whose name we don't know and the Torah doesn't record, but whose role as a supporting actor in one scene of Joseph's life changes the arc of Jewish history.

In this week's portion, Joseph goes out searching for his brothers who are supposed to be in the field tending the flock. He searches in all the usual places but can't find them. Along the way he meets a man whose name we never know: The Torah refers to him simply as ha-ish, "the man" who saw Joseph wandering in the field (Gen. 37:15). There is an allusion here to the nameless man or angel that Jacob, Joseph's father, wrestled with in the previous parashah, Vayishlach. We note that sometimes when the Torah

does not name a character, that character comes to play a pivotal role in the unfolding story.

Such is the case in this instance. The man sees that Joseph appears to be lost and approaches him. He asks: "What are you looking for?" Joseph responds, "I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me please where they are tending the flock?" (see Gen. 37:15-16).

The nameless man remembers seeing Joseph's brothers and overheard them talking about heading toward a place called Dothan. On the anonymous man's advice, Joseph seeks his brothers there and finds them. Shockingly, they are not happy to see him. They conspire against him, abuse him, threaten to kill him, and eventually sell him into slavery to a band of traveling nomads who are headed to Egypt. Through a series of events, Joseph, the boy who looked for his brothers in a field, becomes the chief advisor to Pharaoh and ascends to the second most powerful position in all of Egypt. Meanwhile, a famine occurs in the Land of Israel, and these same brothers are sent by the leader of the Israelites, their father Jacob, to find food. They travel to Egypt, and this time it is they who are surprised to find their brother, not only alive, but also in a position to help them. After a series of encounters, Joseph embraces them, asks after his father, and makes all the arrangements for the entire nation of Israel to immigrate to Egypt. His position and power save the Jewish people, and for many years they live well in Egypt and thrive.

Then a new Pharaoh comes to power and forces the Israelites into slavery. A prophet named Moses rises up from among them, and through plagues of frogs, lice, boils, and so on; the splitting of the Red Sea; and ultimately, the giving of the Torah; the people return to the Land of Israel. And that's pretty much the story of our people.

But what about this nameless man? Who or what was he?

The commentators offer a variety of answers. The 11th century scholar, Abraham ibn Ezra, reads the text of Genesis 37:15 with a p'shat, a "straight forward" interpretation and concludes this was a passerby. Rashi, on the other hand, delves further and concludes: "This [the man] was the angel Gabriel, as it says (Daniel 10:21) 'and the man Gabriel.'" (Rashi on Gen. 37:15). Rashi draws inference from the definite article that is used to identify "the" man.

Ramban explains that he was an ordinary man (a passerby) yet he was unwittingly fulfilling God's design. He was actually "sent" by God to guide Joseph, though he himself was not aware of the significance of his actions. In Hebrew the word malach means both "angel" and "messenger," because every malach, human or supernatural, is one of God's messengers activated to implement His will on earth (see Ramban on Gen. 37:15).

Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859), goes in a completely different direction:

"The angel taught Joseph that whenever one is straying in the ways of life, when one is downtrodden or downcast, one should speak to oneself and clarify for oneself what

one is really asking for / looking for / seeking, and what one really desires, so that one can return and first explain to oneself what one needs."

The Kotzker Rebbe seems to disagree with Ramban, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra, saying, it's not a passerby, God, or an angel that points the way. Rather, he says that the supporting actor in this unfolding mystery is Joseph's inner voice and that sometimes our inner voice can be our own supporting actor.

Whatever or whoever he was, were it not for ha-ish, the man Joseph met along the way, the man who told Joseph where to find his brothers, how different it all could have been.

We never know in the present tense which people or events will be the most instrumental and transformative in our lives, but in hindsight, nothing is clearer. Upon reflection, the pieces of the puzzle and the paths of our lives are perfectly clear, even if they may be filled with uncomfortable observations.

This week's parashah is a reminder to all of us to recognize the supporting actors who have guided us on our path and pointed us to our direction. It compels us to acknowledge, honor, and thank them — even to give them awards — for the important roles that they've played. For doing so teaches us something greater still: in recognizing the transformative influence of supporting actors in our lives we become keenly aware of how important we are in the lives of others. And we come to appreciate the capacity each of us has to help our friends, neighbors, even strangers achieve wholeness in life and find what they are seeking.

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[The Most Painful Parts of Joseph's Story Can Teach Us about Ourselves by Rabbi Mordechai Dolgin](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/most-painful-parts-josephs-story-can-teach-us-about-ourselves)

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The Story of Joseph is the longest single story in the Torah and one of the most famous narratives found in the entire Hebrew Bible. This text has inspired many traditional and modern commentaries and additional interpretations though contemporary culture. While these presentations offer the core story of Joseph and his brothers, they rarely address its darker reality: It is a cautionary tale about ignoring family matters and the disastrous results.

While much is made of Joseph's coat of many colours, it is a unique gift to the eleventh of 12 sons and one that reeks of favouritism. Favoritism has been a factor in nearly every generation in the Book of Genesis: Cain vs. Abel, Ishmael vs. Isaac, Esau vs. Jacob, and Leah vs. Rachel. Jacob endured the pain of such irresponsible behaviour, and yet,

as we see in Parashat Vayeishev, he repeats the mistake by which he himself was victimized.

Yes, Joseph is the central character of this story, but this tale is based on the rhythms and realities of Jacob's life. His name, Ya'akov, means "the one who follows the crooked path." Jacob rarely deals with matters directly; his passive nature was established as he stood before his visually challenged father in his brother's clothes at the direction of his mother. As we see in his relationship to his son, behaviour patterns are often difficult to break.

In the beginning of Vayeishev, we learn of Joseph's famous dreams and the powerful animosity that grew among his brothers – animosity that would be prevalent in any family under these circumstances. What was Jacob's response? "And his brothers envied him; but his father kept the matter in mind" (Genesis 37:11). His reaction was to guard the matter; or perhaps, more honestly, to save himself from the truth of the situation that he had allowed to grow. The truth does not wilt when we hide it in the dark; it remains. We cannot wish it away or keep ourselves or those we love insulated from harsh realities.

In a family or other intimate system, it is too easy to let painful realities grow. We often choose not to directly address difficult topics. However, while it may seem risky to address longstanding difficulties and animosities, the alternative may be far worse. Consider an often-ignored detail of Joseph's story: While his brothers considered ending Joseph's life with their own hands, they were not willing or able to do so. Instead, "they took him, and cast him into the pit – and the pit was empty, there was no water in it. And they sat down to eat bread..." (Genesis 37:24-25)

After the brothers threw Joseph into a hole in the wilderness with no water, leaving him to die, they sat down at the top of that natural prison and had lunch. Rabbi Ovadia Seforno indicates as much: "In their eyes, they did not see this as an obstacle or barrier to them having a full meal together." Their hatred of their brother had fashioned their character so deeply that they could not see that feasting while their brother starved and prepared to die was cruel.

According to Seforno, they convinced themselves that Joseph was a rodef, a pursuer, and Jewish law allows for protecting our own lives in self defense. However, when someone actively seeks to wound or kill us, we may strike that person down. Joseph's brothers seem to take advantage of this teaching; in their minds, their younger brother is a mortal threat, when in fact he was likely an annoyance, the product of unhealthy parenting behaviours and his own bad choices.

The p'shat (surface meaning) Torah commentator Malbim says it plainly: The brothers saw themselves as tzaddikim; everything they did was right and righteous simply because they did it. When Jacob was careless, selfish, and thoughtless in his parental actions, he planted the seeds of arrogance and hatred in his children. In Malbim's commentary, however, we also see the tonic for this illness: humility. If we wish to live in a healthier society and family, we must challenge ourselves to grow rather than

judge others. We need to see the beauty created in every human being, including those who are difficult for us, and embrace the growth needed in ourselves.

May the painful elements of the story of Joseph inspire us to look at our lives, and ourselves, anew.

CHANUKAH

To Light Another Light by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CandC-Chanukah-8.pdf>

THERE'S A fascinating argument in the Talmud which debates the following question: Can you take one Chanukah light to light another? Usually, of course, we take an extra light, the shamash, and use it to light all the candles. But suppose we don't have one. Can we light the first candle and then use it to light the others?

Two great Sages of the third century, Rav and Shmuel, disagreed. Rav said 'No'. Shmuel said 'Yes'. Normally we have a rule that when Rav and Shmuel disagree, the law follows Rav. There are only three exceptions, and this is one of them.

Why did Rav say you may not take one Chanukah candle to light the others?

Because, says the Talmud, ka mach-chish mitzvah. You will diminish the first candle.

Inevitably you will spill some of the wax or the oil. And Rav says: don't do anything that would diminish the light of the first.

But Shmuel disagrees, and the law follows Shmuel. Why?

The best way of answering that is to think of two Jews: both religious, both committed, both living Jewish lives. One says: I must not get involved with Jews who are less religious than me, because if I do, my own standards will fall. I'll keep less. My light will be diminished. That's the view of Rav.

The other says: No. When I use the flame of my faith to light a candle in someone else's life, my Jewishness is not diminished. It grows, because there is now more Jewish light in the world. When it comes to spiritual goods as opposed to material goods, the more I share, the more I have. If I share my knowledge, or faith, or love with others, I won't have less; I may even have more. That's the view of Shmuel, and that is how the law was eventually decided.

So share your Judaism with others. Take the flame of your faith and help set other souls on fire

The Light of War And The Light of Peace by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CandC-Chanukah-2.pdf>

THERE IS a law about Chanukah I find moving and profound. Rambam writes that 'the command of Chanukah lights is very precious. One who lacks the money to buy lights should sell something, or if necessary borrow money, so as to be able to fulfil the mitzvah.'

The question then arises: What if, on a Friday afternoon, you find yourself with only

one candle? Should you light it as a Shabbat candle or a Chanukah one? It can't be both. Logic suggests that you should light it as a Chanukah candle. After all, there is no law that you have to sell or borrow to light lights for Shabbat. Yet the law is, surprisingly, that when faced with such a choice, you light your only candle as a Shabbat light. Why?

Listen to Rambam: 'The Shabbat light takes priority because it symbolises shalom bayit, domestic peace. And great is peace because the entire Torah was given in order to make peace in the world.'

Consider: Chanukah commemorates one of the greatest military victories in Jewish history. Yet Jewish law rules that if we can only light one candle – the Shabbat light takes precedence, because in Judaism the greatest military victory takes second place to peace in the home.

Why did Judaism, alone among the civilisations of the ancient world, survive? Because it valued the home more than the battlefield, marriage more than military grandeur, and children more

than generals. Peace in the home mattered to our ancestors more than the greatest military victory.

So as we celebrate Chanukah, spare a thought for the real victory, which was not military but spiritual. Jews were the people who valued marriage, the home, and peace between husband and wife, above the highest glory on the battlefield. In Judaism, the light of peace takes precedence over the light of war.

[The First Clash of Civilizations by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CandC-Chanukah-4.pdf)

<https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CandC-Chanukah-4.pdf>

ONE OF the key phrases of our time is "the clash of civilisations". And Chanukah is about one of the first great clashes of civilisation, between the Greeks and Jews of antiquity, Athens and Jerusalem.

The ancient Greeks produced one of the most remarkable civilisations of all time: philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, historians like Herodotus and Thucydides, dramatists like Sophocles and Aeschylus. They produced art and architecture of a beauty that has never been surpassed. Yet in the 2nd century B.C.E they were defeated by the group of Jewish fighters known as the Maccabees, and from then on Greece as a world power went into rapid decline, while the tiny Jewish people survived every exile and persecution and are still alive and well today.

What was the key difference between the two groups? The Greeks, who did not believe in a single, loving God, gave the world the concept of tragedy: We strive, we struggle, at times we achieve greatness, but life has no ultimate purpose. The universe neither knows nor cares that we are here.

In stark contrast, Ancient Israel gave the world the idea of hope. We are here because God created us in love, and through love we discover the meaning and purpose of life. Tragic cultures eventually disintegrate and die. Lacking any sense of ultimate meaning,

they lose the moral beliefs and habits on which continuity depends. They sacrifice happiness for pleasure. They sell the future for the present. They lose the passion and energy that brought them greatness in the first place. That's what happened to Ancient Greece.

Judaism and its culture of hope survived, and the Chanukah lights are the ultimate symbol of that survival, of Judaism's refusal to abandon its values for the glamour and prestige of a secular culture, then or now.

A candle of hope may seem a small thing, but on it the very survival of a civilisation may depend.

The Third Miracle by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z'l

<https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CandC-Chanukah-6.pdf>

WE ALL know the miracles of Chanukah; the military victory of the Maccabees against the Greeks, and the miracle of the oil that should have lasted one day but kept the Menorah lights burning for eight. But there was a third miracle not many people know about. It took place several centuries later.

After the destruction of the Second Beit Hamikdash, many Rabbis were convinced that the festival of Chanukah should be abolished. After all, it celebrated the rededication of the Beit Hamikdash. And the Beit Hamikdash was no more. It had been destroyed by the Romans under Titus. Without a Beit Hamikdash, what was there left to celebrate? The Talmud tells us that in at least one town, Lod, Chanukah was abolished. Yet eventually the other view prevailed, which is why we continue to celebrate Chanukah to this day.

Why? Because although the Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, Jewish hope was not destroyed. We may have lost the building but we still have the story, and the memory, and the light. And what had happened once in the days of the Maccabees could happen again. And it was those words, *od lo avdah tikvatenu*, "our hope is not destroyed," words that became part of the song, *Hatikvah*, that inspired Jews to return to Israel and rebuild their ancient state.

So as you light the Chanukah candles remember this: The Jewish people kept hope alive, and hope kept the Jewish people alive. We are the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind.

Inside/Outside by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CandC-Chanukah-3.pdf>

THERE IS more than one command in Judaism to light lights. There are three. There are the Shabbat candles. There is the havdallah candle. And there are the Chanukah candles.

The difference between them is that Shabbat candles represent *shalom bayit*, peace in the home. They are lit indoors. They are, if you like, Judaism's inner light, the light of the sanctity of marriage and the holiness of home.

The Chanukah candles used to be lit outside — outside the front door. It was only fear of persecution that took the Chanukah candles back inside, and in recent times the Lubavitcher Rebbe introduced the custom of lighting giant chanukiyot in public places to bring back the original spirit of the day.

Chanukah candles are the light Judaism brings to the world when we are unafraid to announce our identity in public, live by our principles, and fight, if necessary, for our freedom.

As for the havdallah candle, which is always made up of several wicks woven together, it represents the fusion of the two, the inner light of Shabbat, joined to the outer light we make during the six days of the week when we go out into the world and live our faith in public.

When we live as Jews in private, filling our homes with the light of the Shechinah, when we live as Jews in public, bringing the light of hope to others, and when we live both together, then we bring light to the world.

There always were two ways to live in a world that is often dark and full of tears. We can curse the darkness or we can light a light, and as the Chassidim say, a little light drives out much darkness. May we all help light up the world.

Miracles of Today: Hanukkah by Shuly Rubin Schwartz

<http://www.jtsa.edu/miracles-of-today>

One of the things I love most about Jewish holiday observances is their evolution over time and space even as core rituals remain. Hanukkah exemplifies this phenomenon. Established by the Hasmoneans to commemorate the victory of the Maccabees over Antiochus, Hanukkah in the Talmud (composed several centuries after these events) focuses on celebrating the miracle of the Temple oil lasting for eight days. With few prescribed mitzvot associated with the holiday, Hanukkah has long been ripe for creative interpretation: theological, sociological, culinary, musical, and artistic. The Hanukkiah itself illustrates its generativity, for it has been hewn from the humblest potato or the most ornate, intricately designed sterling silver; it can take the form of a tiny travel jigsaw puzzle or an enormous outdoor display.

In North America, as we know, Hanukkah took on new meaning. Living as a small minority within a predominantly Christian society, Jews attached increasing importance to the Jewishly minor holiday of Hanukkah as a way to demonstrate their Jewishness during the pervasive Christmas season: special candles; eight days of gifts, often for adults as well as children; presents elaborately wrapped in blue, white, and silver—colors that came to be associated with Hanukkah in contrast to the red and green of Christmas; special songs, choral revues, and pageants; Hanukkah cookies, potato latkes, or jelly doughnuts (or all three); dreidls—both decorative and functional—for games of chance; and annual Hanukkah parties, for family and friends or community-wide. Adopting any or all these traditions served to bolster Jewish pride and signified Jewish identification.

This year because of the pandemic, Hanukkah feels ripe for reinterpretation yet again. Observing Hanukkah in more modest ways reminiscent of earlier eras, we'll light candles at home and skip large Hanukkah parties in favor of Zoom events. Given the economic challenges of the day, many will scale down our gift-giving. We'll enjoy harmonies in our heads and forego preparing elaborate special foods for the small number of people in our pods. In this moment, Hanukkah signifies the Jewish resilience that I cherish. Hanukkah holds within it both the seeds of a nourishing message for our moment and the example of our ancestors' adaptations. Just what we need always, but especially this year.

Gratitude for this dual perspective is compellingly captured by a one-letter addition to the second blessing that we recite when we light the Hanukkah candles, a formula also found in the opening of the text of the *al hanissim* prayer that we say on Hanukkah, Purim, and, in more recent Conservative siddurim, *Yom Ha'atzmaut* (Israel Independence Day). Rabbi Jules Harlow included the letter "vav" in *Siddur Sim Shalom* (1989) based on the ninth-century text of Rav Amram Gaon—the oldest prayerbook that we know of. Instead of expressing gratitude for miracles only at the time of the Maccabees, *bayamim hahem bazeman hazeh* ("in those days, at this season"), this text—by including the letter "vav"—changes the phrase's meaning to one that thanks God for miracles that occurred *bayamim ha-hem u-vazeman hazeh* ("in those days *and* in these times").

According to Rabbi Avram Reisner, this appears to have been the text that Maimonides used, and it was the version standard among the students of Rashi into the 14th century. But some rabbis objected because they felt that we should express thanks only for past miracles, not contemporary ones. Their objections apparently won out, and most prayer books today do not include that extra letter. But the sixteenth-century rabbi Mordecai Yoffe, known as the Levush for his work of practical Jewish law, *Levush Malkhut* (Royal Vestment), notes that:

There are those who are particular to say "in this time" without "and," [such that] our thanks will be regarding the miracles that [God] performed for our ancestors at the time, year and month like the one in which we stand right now. And the thanksgiving will be only on the miracle of Hanukkah or Purim. However, it appears to me that it is better to say it with the "and" in order to encompass all of the miracles, and to specify the specific miracle that is now akin to that which happened. (OH 682:2)

Surely, Rabbi Harlow had in mind the miracle of the founding of the State of Israel when he channeled the reasoning of the Levush to reinsert the "vav" in his twentieth-century prayer book. But in this pandemic Hanukkah, I'm focused on smaller miracles that we see around us even during this challenging time. For many of us, it's the rekindling of old friendships via Zoom, renewing our appreciation for the immense beauty of the natural world around us, and learning of the probability of an effective COVID-19 vaccine in the near future. For me, it's a healthy grandson, born during this pandemic. We celebrate these miracles this year and cherish our good fortune to be

heirs to a rich and nourishing tradition that can offer fresh meaning for every generation and provides opportunities to express gratitude for it.

And so, I will place special emphasis on the “vav” when I light the Hanukkah candles this year, to keep in mind all that we continue to be grateful for despite the many challenges that we face.

Wishing all of you a *hag urim sameah*—a joyous Hanukkah!

(Shuly Rubin Schwartz is Chancellor and Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History at JTS)

Recipes

Pure Potato Latkes by Nathaniel Wade and Adapted by Joan Nathan

<https://cooking.nytimes.com/recipes/1021682-pure-potato-latkes?fbclid=IwAR1Ki4zweWmyD5mXHwQ8dFj-dqf--hdWSxnWpl5yP69btXSZJkYsxjyRvc>

*Perfect for Hanukkah or any time of year, these latkes bring out the pure flavor of potato, because that is basically the only ingredient in them. Making latkes can be a last-minute nightmare, with overeager cooks putting too many patties in hot oil, thus taking longer to fry and resulting in a greasy mess. But these can be prepared in advance. This recipe, adapted from the chef Nathaniel Wade of the Outermost Inn on Martha’s Vineyard, starts with parbaked potatoes, which are cooled, grated, seasoned with just salt and pepper, pressed into patties and refrigerated, then fried just before serving. You can either serve them with crème fraîche or sour cream, smoked salmon and tiny flecks of chives, or **traditional brisket** and homemade applesauce. —Joan Nathan*

Ingredients:

4 Large Idaho or russet potatoes, washed and dried
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
Canola Oil for frying
8 ounces sliced smoked salmon (optional)
Creme fraiche or sour cream, for serving (optional)
Chopped fresh chives, for serving (optional)

Preparation:

- 1) Adjust the rack in the middle of the oven and heat to 350 degrees. Bake the potatoes directly on the rack for 30 minutes, then flip and bake for another 15 minutes until they are hot throughout but still raw in the middle. Remove and let cool for about 30 minutes.
- 2) Slice the potatoes in half widthwise. Holding the curved peel side with one hand, grate the flat, flesh side of each piece using the large holes of a box grater. The grating process should open them up like a jacket, leaving you with potato skins perfect for

frying later, if you'd like. (You could also use a food processor with a grating blade instead; just peel your potatoes beforehand.) Sprinkle the grated potatoes with 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Adjust the seasoning to taste.

3) Slice the potatoes in half widthwise. Holding the curved peel side with one hand, grate the flat, flesh side of each piece using the large holes of a box grater. The grating process should open them up like a jacket, leaving you with potato skins perfect for frying later, if you'd like. (You could also use a food processor with a grating blade instead; just peel your potatoes beforehand.) Sprinkle the grated potatoes with 1 teaspoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon pepper. Adjust the seasoning to taste.

4) Just before serving, heat a large, heavy skillet with about 1/4 inch of canola oil over medium-high. When it is hot, a shred of potato dropped into the oil should sizzle. Working in two batches, gently fry four latkes until crisp and deep golden, about 3 to 4 minutes per side. Transfer to paper towels or a paper bag to drain, and repeat with remaining latkes.

5) Serve hot, topped with a slice of smoked salmon, a dollop of crème fraîche or sour cream and a few sprinkles of chives, if you like.

Israeli Sufganiyot by Orly Ziv

<https://reformjudaism.org/reform-jewish-life/food-recipes/israeli-sufganiyot>

Probably the most famous Israeli Hanukkah food, sufganiyot are fried donuts. While they are commonly filled with jelly or other ingredients, this recipe makes easy drop donuts. The cheese in the dough gives them a particularly wonderful texture.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/4 cup self-rising flour
1 cup soft white cheese, like ricotta
2 eggs
2 tablespoons canola oil
1/4 cup sugar
Zest of 1/2 lemon (optional)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
Pinch of salt
Oil, for frying
Powdered sugar, for topping
Strawberry jam (optional, to serve on the side)

DIRECTIONS

1. In a large bowl, mix together the flour, cheese, eggs, canola oil, sugar, lemon zest,

- vanilla extract, and a pinch of salt. Let the mixture rest for about 30 minutes.
2. Pour oil into a small, deep pot so it comes up about 2 3/4 inches (7 cm). Heat the oil.
 3. Using a spoon, make small balls with the dough. Working in batches, drop them into the hot oil and fry until golden. Transfer to a wire rack or a paper-towel lined plate.
 4. Top with powdered sugar, and if you'd like, serve with strawberry jam.

TIPS FOR FRYING DOUGHNUTS

- Heat the oil to a temperature between 360°F and 375°F
- Allow time for the oil to get hot again between batches

Yahrtzeits

- *Steve Kissner remembers his father Abe Kissner on Saturday December 12th (Kislev 26)
- *Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's mother Sarah Primer on Monday December 14th (Kislev 28).
- *Stuart Sender remember his father Jack Sender on Monday December 14th (Kislev 28).
- *Harriet Hessdorf remembers her father Herbert Achtentuch (David Ben Zvi) on Tuesday December 15th (Kislev 29).
- *Harriett Hessdorf also remembers her mother Miriam Achtentuch (Miriam bat Zissel) on Wednesday evening December 16th (Tevet 2).

Weekday evening minyanim TUESDAY AND THURSDAY:

There will *NOT* be a minyan on Monday, December 14. Instead, we will have minyanim on *TUESDAY* and *THURSDAY*, December 15 and 17, beginning at 8:00, to enable Harriet Hessdorf to observe yahrzeits for both her parents, along with others who are in mourning or observing yahrzeits. Your presence allows mourners and those observing yahrzeits to say Kaddish. Please support your Kol Rina friends by attending.

Use the following Zoom link to attend:

<https://zoom.us/j/97663987468?pwd=NjFhaVZUZkpSZ3pxQWJjOU5UWFR4QT09>

Meeting ID: 976 6398 7468

Password: 080691