

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Vayeshev  
November 27, 2021 \*\*\* Kislev 23, 5782

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

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3202/jewish/Vayeshev-in-a-Nutshell.htm](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.

### Haftarah in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/1019527/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1019527/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah contains an allusion to the sale of Joseph by his brothers, an incident discussed in this week's Torah reading. Amos opens with a rebuke to the Jewish People. G-d had been patient with them notwithstanding their transgression of the three cardinal sins — sexual impropriety, idolatry and murder. Their fourth sin, however, crossed the line — the mistreatment of the innocent, widows, orphans and the poor.

G-d reminds the Jewish people how He lovingly took them out of Egypt and led them through the desert for forty years and settled them in the Holy Land. There, He bestowed the gift of prophecy on some and inspired others to become Nazirites. Yet the Jewish people did not respond appropriately, giving wine to the Nazirites and instructing the prophets not to prophesy. Amos then goes on to describe G-d's punishment for the errant behavior: "And the stout-hearted among the mighty shall flee naked on that day, says the L-rd."

The haftarah ends with an admonition from G-d, one that also recalls His eternal love for His people: "Hearken to this word which the Lord spoke about you, O children of Israel, concerning the

entire nation that I brought up from the land of Egypt. 'Only you did I love above all the families of the earth; therefore, I will visit upon you all your iniquities...' As opposed to other nations to whom G-d does not pay close attention, G-d's love for His nation causes Him to punish them for their misdeeds, to cleanse them and prod them back onto the path of the just.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Heroism of Tamar by The Rabbi Sacks (z"l) Legacy Trust  
<https://rabbisacks.org/the-heroism-of-tamar-vayeshev/>

This is a true story that took place in the 1970s. Rabbi Dr Nahum Rabinovitch, then Principal of Jews' College, the rabbinic training seminary in London where I was a student and teacher, was approached by an organisation that had been given an unusual opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue. A group of African Bishops wanted to understand more about Judaism. Would the Principal be willing to send his senior students to engage in such a dialogue, in a chateau in Switzerland?

To my surprise, he agreed. He told me that he was sceptical about Jewish-Christian dialogue in general because he believed that over the centuries the Church had been infected by an antisemitism that was very difficult to overcome. At that time, though, he felt that African Christians were different. They loved Tanach and its stories. They were, at least in principle, open to understanding Judaism on its own terms. He did not add – though I knew it was in his mind since he was one of the world's greatest experts on Maimonides – that the great twelfth-century Sage held an unusual attitude to dialogue. Maimonides believed that Islam was a genuinely monotheistic faith while Christianity – in those days – was not. Nonetheless, he held it was permitted to study Tanach with Christians but not Muslims, since Christians believed that Tanach

(what they called the Old Testament), was the word of God whereas Muslims believed that Jews had falsified the text.[1] So we went to Switzerland. It was an unusual group: the semichah class of Jews' College, together with the top class of the yeshiva in Montreux where the late Rabbi Yechiel Weinberg, author of Seridei Esh and one of the world's foremost halachists, had taught. For three days the Jewish group davened and bentsched with special intensity. We learned Talmud each day. For the rest of the time we had an unusual, even transformative, encounter with the African Bishops, ending with a chassidic-style tisch during which we shared with the Bishops our songs and stories and they taught us theirs. At three in the morning we finished by dancing together. We knew we were different, we knew that there were deep divides between our respective faiths, but we had become friends. Perhaps that is all we should seek. Friends don't have to agree in order to stay friends. And friendships can sometimes help heal the world.

On the morning after our arrival, an event had occurred that left a deep impression on me. The sponsoring body was a global, secular Jewish organisation, and to keep within their frame of reference the group had to include at least one non-orthodox Jew, a woman studying for the rabbinate. We, the semichah and yeshiva students, were davening the Shacharit service in one of the lounges in the chateau when the Reform woman entered, wearing tallit and tefillin, and sat herself down in the middle of the group.

This is something the students had not encountered before. What were they to do? There was no mechitzah. There was no way of separating themselves. How should they react to a woman wearing tallit and tefillin and praying in the midst of a group of davening men? They ran up to the Rav in a state of great agitation and asked what they should do. Without a moment's hesitation he quoted to them the saying of the Sages: A person should be willing to jump into a furnace of fire rather than shame another person in public. (See Brachot 43b, Ketubot 67b) With that he ordered them back to their seats, and the prayers continued.

The moral of that moment never left me. The Rav, for the past 32 years head of the yeshiva in Maaleh Adumim, was and is one of the great halachists of our time.[2] He knew immediately how serious were the issues at stake: men and women praying together without a barrier between them, and the complex question about whether women may or may not wear a tallit and tefillin. The issue was anything but simple. But he knew also that halachah is a systematic way of turning the great ethical and spiritual truths into a tapestry of deeds, and that one must never lose the larger vision in an exclusive focus on the details. Had the students insisted that the woman pray elsewhere they would have caused her great embarrassment. Never, ever shame someone in public. That was the transcending imperative of the hour. That is the mark of a great-souled man. One of the great privileges of my life was to have been his student for over a decade.

The reason I tell this story here is that it is one of the powerful and unexpected lessons of our parsha. Judah, the brother who proposed selling Joseph into slavery (Gen. 37:26), had “gone down” to Canaan where he married a local Canaanite woman. (Gen. 38:1) The phrase “gone down” was rightly taken by the Sages as full of meaning.[3] Just as Joseph had been brought down to Egypt (Gen. 39:1) so Judah had been morally and spiritually brought down. Here was one of Jacob’s sons doing what the patriarchs insisted on not doing: marrying into the local population. It is a tale of sad decline.

He marries his firstborn son, Er, to a local woman, Tamar.[4] An obscure verse tells us that he sinned, and died. Judah then married his second son, Onan, to her, under a pre-Mosaic form of levirate marriage whereby a brother is bound to marry his sister-in-law if she has been widowed without children. Onan, reluctant to father a child that would be regarded as not his but his deceased brother’s, practised a form of coitus interruptus that to this day carries his name. For this, he too died. Having lost two of his sons, Judah was

unwilling to give his third son, Shelah, to Tamar in marriage. The result was that she was left as a “living widow,” bound to marry her brother-in-law whom Judah was withholding, but unable to marry anyone else.

After many years, seeing that her father-in-law (by this time a widower himself) was reluctant to marry her to Shelah, she decided on an audacious course of action. She removed her widow’s clothes, covered herself with a veil, and positioned herself at a point where Judah was likely to see her on his way to the sheep-shearing. Judah saw her, took her to be a prostitute, and engaged her services. As surety for the payment he had promised her, she insisted that he leave her his seal, cord and staff. Judah duly returned the next day with the payment, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. He asked the locals the whereabouts of the temple prostitute (the text at this point uses the word kedeshah, “cult prostitute,” rather than zonah, thus deepening Judah’s offence), but no one had seen such a person in the locality. Puzzled, Judah returned home.

Three months later he heard that Tamar was pregnant. He leapt to the only conclusion he could draw, namely that she had had a physical relationship with another man while bound in law to his son Shelah. She had committed adultery, for which the punishment was death. Tamar was brought out to face her sentence, and Judah instantly noticed that she was holding his staff and seal. She said, “I am pregnant by the person to whom these objects belong.” Judah realised what had happened and proclaimed, “She is more righteous than I” (Gen. 38:26).

This moment is a turning-point in history. Judah is the first person in the Torah explicitly to admit he was wrong.[5] We do not realise it yet, but this seems to be the moment at which he acquired the depth of character necessary for him to become the first real baal teshuvah. We see this years later, when he – the brother who proposed selling Joseph as a slave – becomes the man willing to spend the rest of his life in slavery so that his brother Benjamin can

go free. (Gen. 44:33) I have argued elsewhere that it is from here that we learn the principle that a penitent stands higher than even a perfectly righteous individual. (Brachot 34b) [6] Judah the penitent becomes the ancestor of Israel's Kings while Joseph the Righteous is only a viceroy, mishneh le-melech, second to the Pharaoh. Thus far Judah. But the real hero of the story was Tamar. She had taken an immense risk by becoming pregnant. Indeed she was almost killed for it. She had done so for a noble reason: to ensure that the name of her late husband was perpetuated. But she took no less care to avoid Judah being put to shame. Only he and she knew what had happened. Judah could acknowledge his error without loss of face. It was from this episode that the Sages derived the rule articulated by Rabbi Rabinovitch that morning in Switzerland: it is better to risk being thrown into a fiery furnace than to shame someone else in public.

It is thus no coincidence that Tamar, a heroic non-Jewish woman, became the ancestor of David, Israel's greatest King. There are striking similarities between Tamar and the other heroic woman in David's ancestry, the Moabite woman we know as Ruth.

There is an ancient Jewish custom on Shabbat and festivals to cover the challot or matzah reciting Kiddush. The reason is so as not to put the bread to shame while it is being, as it were, passed over in favour of the wine. There are some very religious Jews who, unfortunately, will go to great lengths to avoid shaming an inanimate loaf of bread but have no compunction in putting their fellow Jews to shame if they regard them as less religious than they are. That is what happens when we remember the halachah but forget the underlying moral principle behind it.

Never put anyone to shame. That is what Tamar taught Judah and what a great Rabbi of our time taught those who were privileged to be his students.

[1] Maimonides, Teshuvot HaRambam, Blau Edition (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1960), no. 149.

[2] This essay was originally written by Rabbi Sacks in 2015. Rabbi Dr. Nachum Rabinovitch was Rabbi Sacks' Rav, his Rabbi, teacher, and mentor. He sadly passed away in 2020, a few months before Rabbi Sacks. To read more from Rabbi Sacks about Rabbi Rabinovitch, please see the Covenant & Conversation essay entitled "My Teacher: In Memoriam", written for Matot-Masei.

[3] According to midrashic tradition (Midrash Aggadah, Pesikta Zutreta, Sechel Tov et al.), Judah was "sent down" or excommunicated by his brothers for convincing them to sell Joseph, after the grief they saw their father suffer. See also Rashi ad loc.

[4] Targum Yonatan identifies her as the daughter of Noah's son Shem. Others identify her as a daughter of Abraham's contemporary Malkizedek. The truth is, though, that she appears in the narrative without lineage, a device often used by the Torah to emphasise that moral greatness can often be found among ordinary people. It has nothing to do with ancestry. See Alshich ad loc.

[5] The text here is full of verbal allusions. As we noted, Judah has "gone down" just as Joseph has been "brought down." Joseph is about to rise to political greatness. Judah will eventually rise to moral greatness. Tamar's deception of Judah is similar to Judah's deception of Jacob – both involve clothes: Joseph's blood-stained coat, Tamar's veil. Both reach their climax with the words haker na, "Please examine." Judah forces Jacob to believe a lie. Tamar forces Judah to recognise the truth.

[6] Jonathan Sacks, Covenant and Conversation Genesis: The Book of Beginnings, pp. 303-314.

## Sexual Ethics Part 2: Integrity by Rabbi Aviva Richman

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/sexual-ethics-part-2#source-11399>

In Parashat VaYeishev, Yosef repeatedly resists the advances of Potifar's wife. Midrash places a lot of weight on his sexual restraint, finding in it a powerful quality that had redemptive effects on the people of Israel generations later in Egypt, as they too maintained sexual boundaries. In the wake of modern and contemporary sexual revolutions, there has been pushback on a sexual ethic based on boundaries and "purity" in favor of a sexual ethic that focuses primarily on consent. Consent is critical, but sometimes too narrow a lens to understand the significance of sexuality in our lives. Upon closer look at Yosef's encounter with Potifar's wife, we find an approach to sexual ethics that intersects with fundamental questions of identity and purpose: who am I and what are the relationships that inform who I am? What are my commitments, and what do my sexual decisions look like in response to those commitments?

In a discussion of what caused Israel to be redeemed from Egypt, Vayikra Rabbah points to Sarah<sup>1</sup> and Yosef who “guarded themselves” from any sexual impropriety:

ויקרא רבה לב:ה

ר' הונא בשם ר' חייא בר אבא שרה ירדה למצרים וגדרה עצמה מן הערוה ונגדרו כל הנשים בזכותה.

יוסף ירד למצרים וגדר עצמו מן הערוה ונגדרו כל האנשים בזכותו.

Vayikra Rabbah 32:5

Rabbi Huna in the name of Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba: Sarah went down to Egypt and guarded herself from forbidden sex—so all the women [among the Exodus generation of Israelites] guarded themselves with her merit.

Yosef went down to Egypt and guarded himself from forbidden sex—so all the men guarded themselves with his merit.

The people of Israel gained great merit because Sarah and Yosef actively “guarded” their sexuality when they were under attack, by Pharaoh and Potifar’s wife, respectively. We learn of Sarah’s proactive stance in a midrashic tradition that has her speak up to Pharaoh, explicitly telling him that she was married so that he would not touch her.<sup>2</sup> Sarah’s conviction is quite remarkable, as she defies Avraham’s instruction “say you are my sister” so that he wouldn’t be killed (Genesis 12:13). What stands behind Sarah’s integrity in speaking up to Pharaoh?

As we discussed in Parashat Lekh Lekha, Sarai could have totally despaired when she was in Pharaoh’s house. She might have reasonably thought that Avraham would go on in his journey for divine blessing while she was out of the story forever. But she refuses to follow that line of thinking. She speaks up to Pharaoh saying that she is married, and she speaks up to God, with a poignant prayer.<sup>3</sup> Maintaining her sexual integrity in this moment is intertwined with maintaining her sense of connection to her own story, and the unfolding story of divine promise she so strongly

wants to be part of. Her choices around her sexuality are deeply embedded in her unwavering belief that her life and relationships matter, with other people and with God. This strong sense of integrity plants a redemptive seed that goes on to inform the sexual ethics of the people of Israel in Egypt years later.

Similarly, midrash suggests that Yosef's sexual ethics is tied to his broader sense of self, family, and purpose. Yosef's approach to sexuality goes through a journey in this parashah, through the lens of midrash, characterized by different ways he is described as a "shepherd" (רועה). In the beginning of the parashah, Yosef's relationship to his physical attractiveness creates divisiveness between himself and his brothers. Some midrashim describe him as spending a lot of time grooming himself,<sup>4</sup> and he is certainly attached to his magnificent cloak. He also reports to his father on his brothers' transgressions of sexual norms (עריות).<sup>5</sup> In this divisive phase, he is described as "a shepherd of his brothers / רועה את אחיו" (Genesis 37:2) When he faces Potifar's wife, midrash stresses that internally he didn't possess the sexual integrity to resist her advances. The only reason he didn't submit was because an image of his father appeared to him:

תלמוד בבלי סוטה לו

באותה שעה באתה דיוקנו של אביו ונראתה לו בחלון אמר לו יוסף עתידין אחיך שיכתבו על אבני אפוד ואתה ביניהם רצונך שימחה שמך מביניהם ותקרא רועה... זונות דכתיב "ורעה זונות יאבד הון" משלי כט:ג)

Talmud Bavli Sotah 36b

At that moment, an image of his father came and appeared to him in the window. He said to him: Yosef, in the future your brothers will be written on the stones of the ephod and you will be among them. Do you want your name to be wiped out from among them and be called "a companion to harlots / רועה זונות"?! As it is written, "A companion to harlots loses wealth" (Proverbs 29:3).

What prevented Yosef from giving in to Potifar's wife was "an image of his father" that "appeared to him in the window." At face value, this is about being put into line by a scary parent who warns him he is at risk of being "a companion to harlots." But think about the significance of seeing his father's face in the broader context of the story. Not only does Yosef think he was sold by his brothers, or worse, that they wanted to kill him—but he also has no reason not to think that his father was in on the plot! After all, it was his father who sent him looking for his brothers in the first place (Genesis 37:13). He has no reason to think he is part of his family anymore. Seeing his father's face, Yosef is startled back into his sense of relationship with his family, and this is what stops him from engaging with Potifar's wife. Ya'akov tells Yosef that he will be listed among the rest of his brothers on the breastplate of the high priest's garb. The prooftext from Proverbs suggests that the motivation here is entirely about material honor (הון), but there is something more fundamental than the allure of precious stones. Ya'akov is reassuring Yosef that he has a place in the family and its arc—news that must come as a total shock to Yosef.

We see from this midrash that, had Yosef submitted to Potifar's wife, it would have been an expression of alienation from his story and identity. Unmoored from his family and sense of place in a larger arc and set of commitments, he was on the verge of approaching sexuality as an expression of apathy and dissociation. Instead, he regains his connection to his family, and their ultimate purpose as progenitors of a people in relationship with God, symbolized by the stones on the breastplate. This vision is what stands behind his expression of sexual integrity, giving him the strength to resist Potifar's wife.

For Yosef, this is also a moment of transition into leadership. Conjuring the scene where he is stripped of his coat, he leaves behind his own garment in Potifar's wife's hand when he sees his father and hears his message. He abandons his cloak, and the self-centeredness and divisiveness it represents. He understands that

his true inheritance is a garment that interweaves all of the brothers into one: the breastplate with their names. This clarity of self, belonging, and purpose undergirds the strength of conviction he is able to muster in this challenging moment. He can now be described as “a shepherd of Israel / רועה ישראל” (Psalm 80:2).<sup>6</sup> We have seen multiple stories of a sexual encounter that reflect the potential for dissociation from one’s self and dignity—Sarah and Pharoah, Dinah and Shekhem, Yosef and Potifar’s wife. The theological underpinnings of a sexual ethic in these narratives is more complex than a concern with boundaries and purity. Within the context of these figures’ broader narratives, we see that sexual expression is tied to a broader sense of ourselves and our commitments. These narratives challenge us to practice a sexual ethic rooted in integrity and conviction about who we are, and our commitment to living with dignity and purpose in our relationship with God and others.

**Shabbat Shalom.** 1 It is clearly quite complicated, upsetting, and potentially harmful to bring up the possibility of sexual choice and agency in a context of clear power imbalance and force. Acknowledging these potential pitfalls, I believe it is still powerful that the midrash amplifies Sarah's agency and voice. 2 Although there is nothing per se in the plain text of Genesis about this, see Bereshit Rabbah 41:2: “אמר ר' לוי כל אותו הלילה היה המלאך עומד ומגלב בידו, אין אמרת ליה מחי מחי, אין אמרת ליה שבוק / Rabbi Levi said: That whole night there was an angel standing with a whip in his hand. If she said to him “strike” he would strike. If she said to him “Leave off” he would leave off. Why all of this? Because she said, “I am a married woman” and he did not stop.” 3 See my essay on Parashat Lekh Lekha, “Unlikely Origins of Prayer,” for more on this prayer, available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/unlikely-origins-prayer>. 4 See what is collected by Rashi on Genesis 37:2, s.v. “and he was a youth / הוא נער.” 5 Rashi on Genesis 37:2, s.v. “their bad report / את דבתם רעה.” 6 Sotah 36b: “ונעשה רועה שנאמר רועה ישראל האזינה נהג כצאן יוסף.”

[From Podcast to Parasha by Shuly Rubin Schwartz](http://www.jtsa.edu/torah/from-podcast-to-parashah/)  
<http://www.jtsa.edu/torah/from-podcast-to-parashah/>

Many of us have become podcast connoisseurs during the pandemic. For me, the interview format has proven most appealing,

and within that genre, *The Axe Files* stands out. Why? Like many interviewers, David Axelrod speaks to authors, politicians, thought leaders, and public figures. What sets his questioning apart is his ability to elicit the background story of his guests: Where were their grandparents from? Where did they grow up? What was their family life like? What challenges did they face in their early lives? And how did this impact the people they have become?

Axelrod-type questions reverberated in my mind as I reviewed this week's parashah, with its focus on Joseph's early life. We learn that Jacob loved Joseph best and adorned him with a special tunic; we study the dreams Joseph shared with his brothers. We learn about the growing hatred Joseph's brothers felt for him, and the disastrous consequences of their festering fury.

But we don't get to interview Joseph and probe the impact of his childhood on him; we need to tease out those clues with limited data. In the preceding parashah, Rachel dies giving birth to Joseph's brother Benjamin. Joseph grew up as a motherless child. Perhaps giving him an ornamental garment was Jacob's awkward way of overcompensating for this void. But this special treatment made Joseph ripe for bullying. The next verse tells us that it bred the animosity of his brothers, who hated him so much that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

After the dreams Joseph shared, ones that further exacerbated his brothers' hatred, Jacob sent Joseph to his brothers who were pasturing their flock at Shechem. Was Jacob clumsily trying to improve brotherly ties? Was he blind to their growing hatred, unwittingly sending Joseph into the arms of those who wished him dead?

There is a glaring silence from Joseph: after agreeing to visit his brothers, as per his father's request, we don't hear from Joseph again until he refuses Potiphar's wife's sexual overture. Yet how terrified and despairing Joseph must have felt in the pit and then with the Ishmaelites and Midianites! He was isolated from everything he knew, left only with the painful certainty that his

brothers preferred him dead. Rather than seeing Joseph as a spoiled, immature child with delusions of grandiosity, I see a lonely child who had experienced numerous adverse experiences. Given his vulnerable state of mind, one would expect Joseph to choose the behavior most likely to ensure his survival; thus in the situation with Potiphar's wife, he would accept her overture. Some commentators go so far as to cast Joseph as the instigator in the story. Noting the Bible's mention of Joseph's good looks (39:6), they conclude that he came into the house (39:11) looking for a rendezvous. Rashi, citing Midrash Tanchuma (Vayeshev 8), imagines that as Joseph became comfortable in Potiphar's house, he began to eat, drink, and curl his hair, prompting God to unleash a seductress against him as punishment.

In Joseph's refusal—against all odds—we see the beginnings of his emerging autonomy. Some commentators note the rare cantillation *shalsholet* that accompanies the word “refused”, **יִשְׁרָאֵל** (39:8). Rabbeinu Bahya (Bahya ben Asher, 13–14th century Spain) believes that this cantillation offers a window into Joseph's intentions, “for from the cantillations in the Torah, we learn what isn't written, like people's body language through which we can discern their heart's intention.”

The zigzag look and sound of the cantillation depicts the mental gymnastics that Joseph went through to resist the damaging patterns of his past and chart a new, healthier future. While Joseph didn't have the benefit of a good therapist, God served as the catalyst for his change of heart. The Torah tells us that Joseph came to understand that such behavior was immoral and a sin against God (39.10).

Insight into Joseph's past makes this action and indeed all his adult achievements remarkable, for Joseph displayed the resilience not only to survive a painful childhood but also to assume a role that would ensure the survival of the Egyptians, and, ultimately, of the Jewish people. We can only imagine that when Joseph's brothers appeared before him in Egypt, the pain and hurt that had been

buried for so long resurfaced. Not surprisingly, Joseph initially spoke harshly to them (42:7). But Joseph ultimately engaged lovingly and generously with the brothers who had betrayed him. And by saving their lives, he ensured that God's promises to his father could someday be fulfilled.

We rarely know the pain that people around us carry. The Joseph story teaches us that if we are to draw lessons and inspiration from others, we must attune ourselves to the many factors—both apparent and hidden—that made them who they are. Only through understanding others' humanity can we truly appreciate their stories of growth and draw upon them as catalysts for our own.

### [Chanukah in Hindsight by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/chanukah-in-hindsight/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/chanukah-in-hindsight/>

History itself has a history. Our perspectives shift over time, and some moments may only seem meaningful in retrospect. We don't always understand the real significance of an event until many decades later or sometimes even centuries. A classic example of this is the history of Chanukah.

At one level, the Chanukah story is very simple. From the days of Alexander the Great of Macedon, Israel was under the dominion of the Alexandrian Empire of the Greeks. This meant that in the third century BCE, it was under the control of the Ptolemies who were based in Egypt and Alexandria. Then, during the second century BCE, Israel came under the domain of the Seleucids who were based in Syria.

The Seleucid leader, Antiochus IV, who modestly called himself Epiphanes, meaning "God made manifest", decided to force the pace of Hellenisation on the Jews of the land of Israel. Among other things, he forbade the public practice of Judaism, erected a statue of Zeus in the Temple, and offered swine before it as a sacrifice, in a desecration of Jewish values that Jews of the time called the Abomination of Desolation.

An elderly Priest called Mattityahu, and his sons and their supporters known to history as the Maccabees, rose in revolt. Over the next three years they scored a momentous victory over the Seleucids, reconquering Jerusalem and bringing it back under Jewish sovereignty. They cleansed the Temple and rededicated it, lighting the great Menorah, the candelabrum that stood in the Temple, for a celebration lasting eight days.

That is the story of Chanukah as captured in history in the first and second books of Maccabees. But that is not how the story was ultimately told within the Jewish tradition, as it was ruled that the two books of Maccabees, and others under the same title, should be called Sefarim Chitzoni'im, apocryphal works, and kept out of the Bible. The Chanukah story that is told instead is a very different one, with a powerful message.

The Talmud tells us that in the first century, in the last days of the Second Temple, a Rabbi called Yehoshua Ben Gamla, established a network of schools throughout Israel. The result of this was that from the age of six, every child in the country received a publicly-funded universal education. This was the first education system of its kind anywhere in the world, and also a clear indication of the now familiarly Jewish commitment to education and to ensuring our children are literate in their heritage. According to the Talmud, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Gamla's memory is blessed, because without his intervention the Torah would have been forgotten in Israel. Without him, there would have been no survival of Judaism and ultimately no Jews.

What Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Gamla and the other Sages understood, and what was not understood at the time of Chanukah itself, was that the real battle against the Greeks was not a military one, but a cultural one. At the time, the Greeks were the world's greatest in many fields. They were unparalleled in their advances in art, in architecture, in literature, in drama, in philosophy. Even today, their achievements have never been surpassed. But Jews nonetheless believed, and surely history has borne this out, that

there is within Judaism, within ancient Israel and still within its heritage to today, something special. Something worth fighting for. Judaism, with its emphasis on the sanctification of life, and the belief that every human being was created in God's image, held eternal truths that we could not abandon. This was the unique distinction between the culture of the Greeks and the world of Torah and Judaism. As a result, Jews have always known that the real battle is not necessarily fought on the physical battlefield with physical weapons, but rather in the hearts and minds of future generations.

So Judaism, and the Jewish people, became a faith and a nation no longer focusing on its military heroes, but on its spiritual ones. It became a civilisation rooted in texts, and in teachers, and in houses of study. We became the people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools, and whose passion was learning and the life of the mind. The end result was that Judaism did survive and thrive throughout the centuries, whereas Ancient Greece, the Greece of Athens, the Greece of Alexander the Great, declined. In fact, it was only a short time after the events of the Chanukah story that Greece began its decline, and Rome rose to take its place.

That is the message of Chanukah, and to articulate our story, we focus in a rather beautiful and symbolic way on just one tiny detail of the original chain of events: That one cruse of pure, undefiled oil was found by the Maccabees among the wreckage and defilements of the Temple, just enough to light the Menorah until more oil could be sourced.

One of the most interesting aspects of this shifting perspective from the original way of telling the story to the current way is reflected in the name of the festival itself. Chanukah, from the word chanuch, means re-dedication. That is what the Maccabees did to the Temple. They rededicated it, as described in the books of Maccabees. Yet over time, Chanukah became connected to the word chinuch, a word meaning education. What we re-dedicated was not a physical building – the Temple – but living embodiments

of Judaism, namely our children, our students, the people to whom we teach and hand on our heritage and values.

From being the festival of a military victory, Chanukah became the festival of a spiritual and civilisational one.

I believe this history of our history has a message for us all. It teaches us this fundamental truth, as relevant to our lives today as ever before: To defend a country physically you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education, you need educators, and you need schools. Those are the things that kept the Jewish spirit alive and the Menorah of Jewish values burning throughout the centuries in an everlasting light. Often what seems at the time to be the headline news, the military victory, is, in the hindsight of history, secondary to the cultural victory of handing your values on to the next generation.

If we do that, we will ensure that our children, and theirs, light up the world.

Chanukah Sameach!

### Yahrtzeits

Russett Feldman and Nikki Pusin remember their father, Max Nathaniel Pusin on Saturday November 27th (Kislev 23)

\*\*\*\*\*

### Coming Up at Kol Rina

#### **Hanukkah party at Kol Rina**

*Let's have a party, we'll all dance a hora . . . .* Dig out your Hanukkiah and your dreidels: Kol Rina will be putting on a fun Hanukkah party on Sunday, December 5, featuring a live performance by Sharon Litwinoff. The in-person party will be from

3:30 to 5:30; livestreaming via Zoom will commence at 4:00. The party will also kick off our year of celebrating Kol Rina's 10th year. Put it on your calendar and watch this space for further details!

## **Next installment of our lecture series by Dr. Ruth Calderon will take place December 12**

Dr. Ruth Calderon, Israel's leading secular scholar of Talmudic narrative, will teach her second lesson via Zoom from Israel on Sunday, December 12 at 1:30 PM. The series, entitled ***Holiness Seen and Unseen: Three Talmudic Tales***, is presented by the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, in cooperation with Congregation Beth Shalom of Bloomington, Indiana and Temple Beth Shalom of Livingston, New Jersey. This is an outstanding opportunity to hear a strikingly original thinker, provided **free of charge** and **open to all**.

To receive the Zoom link, please register on Eventbrite using the following link:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/holiness-seen-and-unseen-3-talmudic-tales-dr-ruth-calderon-3-part-series-tickets-199398896467>