

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayeshev
December 13, 2025 *** 23 Kislev, 5786

Vayeshev in a Nutshell

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

The name of the Parshah, "Vayeshev," means "And he dwelt" and it is found in Genesis 37:1.

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: Amos 2:6 – 3:8](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1019527/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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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 haftorah 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

Refusing Comfort, Keeping Hope: Vayeshev

by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5767)

The deception has taken place. Joseph has been sold into slavery. His brothers dip his coat in blood. They bring it back to their father, saying: "We found this. Try to identify it. Is it your son's robe or not?" Jacob recognises it and replies, "It is my

son's robe. A wild beast must have eaten him! Joseph has been torn limb from limb!" We then read:

Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days. All his sons and daughters tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "I will go down to Sheol [to the grave] mourning for my son." His father wept for him.
Gen. 37:34–35

There are laws in Judaism about the limits of grief –shiva, sheloshim, a year. There is no such thing as a bereavement for which grief is endless. The Talmud says that God admonishes one who weeps beyond the appointed time, "You are not more compassionate than I." [1] And yet Jacob refuses to be comforted.

A Midrash gives a remarkable explanation. "One can be comforted for one who is dead, but not for one who is still living," it says. In other words, Jacob refused to be comforted because he had not yet given up hope that Joseph was still alive. That, tragically, is the fate of those who have lost members of their family (the parents of soldiers missing in action, for example) but have as yet no proof that they are dead. They cannot go through the normal stages of mourning because they cannot abandon the possibility that the missing person is still capable of being rescued. Their continuing anguish is a form of loyalty; to give up, to mourn, to be reconciled to loss is a kind of betrayal. In such cases, grief lacks closure. To refuse to be comforted is to refuse to give up hope.

Yet on what basis did Jacob continue to hope? Surely he had recognised Joseph's blood-stained coat – he said explicitly, "It is my son's robe. A wild beast must have eaten him! Joseph

has been torn limb from limb!” Do these words not mean that he had accepted that Joseph was dead?

The late David Daube made a suggestion that I find convincing.[2] The words the sons say to Jacob – haker na, literally “identify it please” – have a quasi-legal connotation. Daube relates this passage to another, with which it has close linguistic parallels:

If a man gives a donkey, an ox, a sheep, or any other animal to his neighbour for safekeeping, and it dies or is injured or is taken away while no one is looking, the issue between them will be settled by the taking of an oath before the Lord that the neighbour did not lay hands on the other person’s property...If it [the animal] was torn to pieces by a wild animal, he shall bring the remains as evidence and he will not be required to pay for the torn animal. Exodus 22:10–13

The issue at stake is the extent of responsibility borne by a guardian (shomer). If the animal is lost through negligence, the guardian is at fault and must make good the loss. If there is no negligence, merely force majeure, an unavoidable, unforeseeable accident, the guardian is exempt from blame. One such case is where the loss has been caused by a wild animal. The wording in the law – tarof yitaref, “torn to pieces” – exactly parallels Jacob’s judgment in the case of Joseph: tarof toraf Yosef, “Joseph has been torn to pieces/limb from limb.”

We know that some such law existed prior to the giving of the Torah. Jacob himself says to Laban, whose flocks and herds had been placed in his charge, “I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself” (Gen. 31:39). This implies that guardians even then were exempt from responsibility for the damage caused by wild animals. We also

know that an elder brother carried a similar responsibility for the fate of a younger brother placed in his charge, as, for example, when the two were alone together. That is the significance of Cain's denial when confronted by God as to the fate of Abel:

“Am I my brother's keeper [shomer]?” Gen. 4:9

We now understand a series of nuances in the encounter between Jacob and his sons upon their return without Joseph. Normally they would be held responsible for their younger brother's disappearance. To avoid this, as in the case of later biblical law, they “bring the remains as evidence.” If those remains show signs of an attack by a wild animal, they must – by virtue of the law then operative – be held innocent. Their request to Jacob, *haker na*, must be construed as a legal request, meaning, “Examine the evidence.” Jacob has no alternative but to do so, and by virtue of what he has seen, to acquit them. A judge, however, may be forced to acquit someone accused of a crime because the evidence is insufficient to justify a conviction, while still retaining lingering private doubts. So Jacob was forced to find his sons innocent, without necessarily trusting what they said. In fact, Jacob did not believe it, and his refusal to be comforted shows that he was unconvinced. He continued to hope that Joseph was still alive. That hope was eventually justified: Joseph was still alive, and father and son were ultimately reunited.

The refusal to be comforted sounded more than once in Jewish history. The prophet Jeremiah heard it in a later age:

This is what the Lord says:
“A voice is heard in Ramah,
Mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children

Refusing to be comforted,
Because her children are no more.”
This is what the Lord says:
“Restrain your voice from weeping,
And your eyes from tears,
For your work will be rewarded,” says the Lord.
“They will return from the land of the enemy.
So there is hope for your future,” declares the Lord,
“Your children will return to their own land.” Jeremiah
31:15–17

Why was Jeremiah sure that Jews would return? Because they refused to be comforted – meaning, they refused to give up hope.

So it was during the Babylonian exile, as articulated in one of the most paradigmatic expressions of the refusal to be comforted:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept,
As we remembered Zion...
How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a strange
land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
May my right hand forget [its skill],
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
If I do not remember you,
If I do not consider Jerusalem above my highest joy.
Psalms 137:1–6

It is said that Napoleon, passing a synagogue on the fast day of Tisha b'Av, heard the sounds of lamentation. “What are the Jews crying for?” he asked one of his officers. “For Jerusalem,” the soldier replied. “How long ago did they lose

it?” “More than 1,700 years ago.” “A people who can mourn for Jerusalem so long, will one day have it restored to them,” the emperor is reputed to have replied.

Jews are the people who refused to be comforted because they never gave up hope. Jacob did eventually see Joseph again. Rachel’s children did return to the land. Jerusalem is once again the Jewish home. All the evidence may suggest otherwise: it may seem to signify irretrievable loss, a decree of history that cannot be overturned, a fate that must be accepted.

Jews never believed the evidence because they had something else to set against it – a faith, a trust, an unbreakable hope that proved stronger than historical inevitability. It is not too much to say that Jewish survival was sustained in that hope. And that hope came from a simple – or perhaps not so simple – phrase in the life of Jacob. He refused to be comforted. And so – while we live in a world still scarred by violence, poverty and injustice – must we.

[1] Mo’ed Katan 27b. [2] David Daube, *Studies in Biblical Law*, Cambridge: University Press, 1947.

[From Pit to the Promise: Finding God's Presence in Parashat Vayeshev by Rabbi Scott “Shalom” Klein \(AJR 2024\)](https://ajr.edu/parashat-vayeishev-5786/)
<https://ajr.edu/parashat-vayeishev-5786/>

Parashat Vayeishev, which we read just before we kindle the lights of Chanukah, plunges us into one of the darkest family sagas in the Torah: the story of Joseph and his brothers. It is a portion filled with sibling rivalry, betrayal, favoritism, and descent—Joseph is thrown into a pit, sold into slavery, and eventually imprisoned. Jacob, in his grief, refuses all comfort.

Darkness seems to prevail.

Yet, amidst this unrelenting bleakness, the Torah offers a crucial counterpoint, a phrase repeated twice in the Parashah, like a quiet, enduring whisper of hope: “וַיְהִי ה' אִתּוֹ יוֹסֵף”— “And the Lord was with Joseph.” (Genesis 39:2, 39:21).

The first instance comes after Joseph is sold and finds himself in the house of Potiphar:

“The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did succeed in his hand.” (Genesis 39:2-3)

Later, after Joseph is falsely accused and thrown into a dungeon, the same reassurance appears:

“But the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer... The chief jailer did not look into anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because The Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made succeed.” (Genesis 39:21, 23)

The repetition of this phrase is profoundly instructive for our own lives, particularly when we, or those we serve, find ourselves in a “pit” of despair or challenge.

It is easy to see God’s hand when we achieve success, receive an honor, or experience a clear blessing. But Parashat Vayeishev teaches us that God is present not just in the palace of our triumphs, but in the pit of our failures, betrayals, and loneliness.

The great medieval commentator, Rashi, explains the phrase “The Lord was with Joseph” in the context of Potiphar’s house as meaning that Joseph’s piety and devotion to God were visible and apparent to the Egyptian master. Rashi suggests

that Joseph would constantly utter the name of God and even wear a divine name around his neck, demonstrating that his religious integrity was not abandoned upon being sold into slavery.

However, the 19th-century commentator Malbim offers a more nuanced reading. He suggests that this verse refers less to Joseph's outer actions and more to the Divine Providence that accompanied him, causing everything he touched to succeed, thereby compelling the Egyptian master to recognize that a special spiritual force was at work.

The true measure of Joseph's greatness—the reason he is so successful—is not that things went well for him, but that he never lost sight of God's presence even when everything was going wrong. He did not let the darkness of his surroundings extinguish the internal light of his faith.

This message always resonates with my Army service, reminding me that maintaining integrity and faith, even in the harshest environments, is the key to enduring success.

To those serving in uniform, Joseph's story reminds us that even when duty is difficult, the mission is unclear, or personal sacrifice is great, our commitment to integrity and service is sustained by a presence greater than ourselves. God is with the righteous, whether they stand on the parade field or feel lost in the field of battle.

To those working for Jewish community and engagement, the repeated blessing that God was with Joseph, making him succeed, assures us that the work of building community and extending kindness is inherently blessed. Even when faced with internal friction or external apathy, the small acts of hesed (kindness) we offer can be seen and prospered by God.

This Parashah, leading right into Chanukah, is a reminder that the greatest miracle is not merely the defeat of a powerful enemy or the burning of a small cruse of oil, but the enduring presence of the Divine in the darkest corners of human experience.

May we all strive to be like Joseph: to maintain our integrity, extend kindness, and recognize the quiet, powerful truth of “יְהוָה אִתָּנוּ” —The Lord is with us—in every pit, prison, and place of struggle. Shabbat Shalom. *(Rabbi Klein has a wealth of experience in Jewish education, community engagement, and nonprofit leadership. He is an active-duty Jewish chaplain in the United States Army, holds a doctorate in educational leadership, and has served in a number of Jewish community leadership roles.)*

[Judah and Tamar: Writing the Story: Vayeshev
by Judith Hauptman \(2018\)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/judah-and-tamar/>](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/judah-and-tamar/)

One of the most gripping stories in the entire Bible appears in this week’s parashah. Chapter 38, a self-contained unit, interrupts the ongoing Joseph saga to tell the story of Judah and Tamar.

The chapter opens with the somewhat strange statement that Judah leaves his brothers, meets up with Hirah the Adulamite, and there, in Adulam, finds himself a wife of Canaanite stock. He thereby violates God’s warning to the patriarchs to avoid Canaanite women (Gen. 24:3, 28:1). Judah’s wife bears him three sons. He marries off his first son, Er, to Tamar. No information is provided about her lineage. Er dies because he was “displeasing to the Lord” (v. 7).

Judah’s second son, Onan, marries Er’s widow Tamar, according to the rules of levirate marriage, which require a

family member, usually a brother, to produce an heir for the deceased. But Onan spills his seed. Since he knew that a child with Tamar would not be his, he decided not to sire a child. God kills him off, too. The third son, Shelah, is now in line to marry Tamar. It is not clear how old he is, but Judah tells Tamar she will have to wait for Shelah to grow up (v. 11).

The next verse reports that, after a long period of time, Judah's wife died. It then continues with the words, *vayinahem Yehudah*. The translators understand these words as saying that Judah was "comforted" following his wife's death, which is the standard interpretation of the Hebrew root N.H.M. But the word *vayinahem* almost certainly has two meanings in this context. The same grammatical form of this verb appears in many other places in the Bible (e.g., Gen. 6:6, Exod. 14:14) where it means "to regret." If so, the phrase *vayinahem Yehudah* in this chapter, very pertinently, also means that Judah regretted making a promise to Tamar to marry her off to Shelah. He clearly does not want to risk the life of his third and only living son. It is his inaction on this matter that triggers the rest of the story.

Judah joins his old friend Hirah the Adulamite, at Timnah, for a sheep shearing. It sounds as if he is looking for a new wife because, as the opening verse of the chapter stated, he found his first wife when "hanging out" with Hirah.

At this point the text reverts to Tamar, who had returned to her father's home. Verse 13 says that "it was reported to her that her father-in-law had gone up to Timnah for a sheep-shearing." Both traditional and modern commentators skip over this seemingly simple verse. I find that it calls out for interpretation. My question is not who told Tamar that her father-in-law had gone to a sheep-shearing, but rather why

people provided her with this information. The verse seems to suggest that there was general sympathy on the part of the local community for her plight. There she was, twice widowed, promised to the third son, but not permitted to perform levirate marriage with him even though he was now an adult. The townspeople, therefore, are likely to be suggesting to her that she take her fate into her own hands, that she clarify her ambiguous marital status. Note that they refer to Judah not by name but as her father-in-law, an ironic appellation since he clearly was not fulfilling his role of father-in-law for her.

The next verse (v. 14) relates that Tamar decided to play the prostitute. She predicted that her widowed father-in-law, when going to a sheep-shearing with his old friend, would likely choose to enhance his experience by visiting a prostitute. She also knew that once she bore a child with Judah as the father, her ties to his family would dissolve and she could then marry whomever she pleased (or perhaps remain with Judah).

By veiling herself, even though prostitutes in the ancient world did not usually do so, she is able to offer her services to Judah without his discovering her identity. After having sex with her, he promises to send her a kid in payment. She wisely asks him for collateral, knowing this would allow her later to expose him. He gives her his seal, cord, and staff.

Again, townspeople play a role. Judah sends a kid with Hirah to pay the “prostitute,” but the people tell Hirah that there was no prostitute at that location. Judah becomes worried about his own reputation.

Three months pass, which is exactly the time it takes for a pregnancy to begin to “show.” Just as the narrator reported earlier that Rebecca’s fetuses “struggled within her” (Gen. 25:22), which is a way of saying that pronounced fetal

movement is a sign of a twin pregnancy, here, too, the narrator's "three months" indicates knowledge of the details of pregnancy. Also true is that twin pregnancies, like those of Rebecca and Tamar (as will be reported in v. 27), "show" more than singleton pregnancies.

The people play a role a third time, announcing Tamar's pregnancy and casting aspersions on her for having played the harlot. As The Oxford Study Bible points out, her misdemeanor was not prostitution but adultery, since she had not yet dissolved her bond to Judah's family. Judah decrees that she be burnt at the stake. Tamar, in a very dramatic move, as she is being taken out to be executed, sends Judah back his seal, cord and staff. She says aloud, apparently to those gathered to watch the awful scene, "Whose staff and seal and cord are these?" Judah admits to being the father of the unborn child(ren) and acknowledges that Tamar is "right," meaning he should have married her off to his son Shelah. The verse (v. 26) goes on to say that Judah no longer slept with her. As also noted by The Oxford Study Bible, he may have eventually married her off to Shelah because Shelah names his first son Er (1 Chron. 4:21), thus implying that he had entered a levirate marriage with Tamar to produce an heir for his deceased, childless brother. Tamar gives birth to twins, a blessing in and of itself. The younger twin, Perez, is a progenitor of King David (Ruth 4:18–22). In this way the narrator endorses Tamar's shrewd strategy.

The role played by the townspeople in this episode, like that of a Greek chorus, is significant. They, and not the male characters, move the story along. They tell Tamar that Judah was on his way to a sheep-shearing, suggesting it is time for her to act; they inform Hirah that there was no prostitute at Ena'im, thus making Judah fearful of losing face; they report to

Judah that Tamar is pregnant by harlotry, leading him mistakenly to decree to execute her. Moreover, Judah is characterized in this chapter as evasive and hot-headed, whereas Tamar is shown to be clever, levelheaded, and resolute. Given the role played by the “chorus,” the narrator’s knowledge of pregnancy details, the fact that Tamar is portrayed in more positive terms than Judah, that she uses a sex act to right the wrong done to her by him, and that he publicly acknowledges his error of judgment, it seems likely to me that this story’s narrator is female.

As we read the Torah, and as we observe the events of our own lives, it is worth our while to ask who is really creating the narrative. We may find that, aside from the famed protagonists and antagonists, the voices of less prominent people can be just as critical in driving the stories that shape our world.

(Judith Hauptman is the E. Billi Ivry Professor Emerita of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture at JTS)

[Vayeshev, Yosef's Brothers, and Gaza by Rabbi Amelia Wolf](https://truah.org/resources/vayeshev-yosefs-brothers-and-gaza/)
<https://truah.org/resources/vayeshev-yosefs-brothers-and-gaza/>

(This d’var Torah was given by Rabbi Amelia Wolf on Saturday, December 9, 2023, at Congregation Etz Hayim in Arlington, VA.)

After Yosef’s brothers cast Yosef down into the pit, they were hungry. The Torah tells us they sat down for a meal. A picnic at the edge of the pit.

The commentators tell us that in their own eyes, they were acting righteously. They say that they were good, righteous people in general, and had they any inkling of the wrongs they

were committing as their brother languished in the earth, they would have fasted, not feasted.

They didn't know. They didn't know.

The commentators teach that the brothers were really and truly afraid of Yosef. This brilliant, favored younger son of the favored younger wife.

These brothers were the sons of the unloved, and sons of concubines, and from birth they could not have competed. These brothers had been neglected by their father their whole lives, and here was Yosef, who had no issue proclaiming to them all that one day, each and every one of his brothers would bow down before him.

Recognize his authority. Submit to it.

The commentator Sforno takes it a step further. He says that these brothers were acting according to their own sense of self-preservation because they thought Yosef might hurt or even kill them.

Now in the parshah, the brothers had been off far away from home to pasture their sheep, and Yosef struggled to find them, eventually relying on the help of a stranger.

And Eliyahu Munk, a contemporary translator and commentator, writes that the true reason they were so far away was because they were peacemakers. They distanced themselves from their brother lest it come to a fight, and when Yosef sought them out anyhow, even when they had signaled clearly that they did not feel safe with him, they assumed the worst, fended him off.

Understandably. Tragically.

And so they cast him into the pit.

In this parshah, Yosef is silent.

In fact, it is not until next week that we will hear from his brothers. It's only in the face of their own possible punishment and imprisonment, as Binyamin, their youngest brother, is ripped away from them by "the viceroy in Egypt," that they reflect upon mistakes made:

אָנֹכֶּה רְאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ

This is because we saw Yosef's distress, but we did not hear him pleading with us.

These brothers were righteous people. In order to sit and eat at the lip of the pit, they had to first look away from his pain; they had to first plug their ears so that his screams did not reach them.

They had to reason with themselves, actively convince themselves that they were in the right. They had to distract themselves, think about other things. Think about their own wounded pasts, their own trauma, the humiliation their mothers had felt when neglected by their father, the humiliation they themselves had felt in the face of beautiful clothing gifted only to their brother.

Their fear that their brother would rise up against them. And not only that, but their fear that their father and his household would not stop him.

Because they were less loved. Because they were uncared for.

So they did not see, and they did not hear, and they were able to eat at the lip of the pit as their brother begged for help.

And as I studied this text, as I felt myself drawn over and over to this verse, not even a verse but a segment of it, וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל - וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכֹל, they sat down to a meal that comes right after the

description of the pit itself: **וְהַבּוֹר לֵק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם**. The pit was empty, there was not even water in it!

It compelled me to ask, whose suffering are we ignoring? Who has no water when we sit down to eat? Whose cries do we shut our ears to because we find ourselves too threatened by them to answer their call?

Again, these brothers are not evil. They must have been doing good in other places; they must have had people they took care of, there must have been cries of distress that they did answer.

But the Torah doesn't tell us about those stories. The Torah is focused on their response to their brother in the pit.

More and more, I begin to believe that we are as defined by those calls for help we do not answer as by those calls that we do.

And I do not say this to diminish ourselves. Any self-flagellation is between ourselves and our therapists; I do not believe in shame as a tool that leads to the improvement of anyone's behavior, at least not a shame that is externally imposed.

What I do believe is that over and over and over we have the chance to stand up from our meals at the pit and look down and address Yosef down below and answer the question from the very first parshah from the Torah, the question I asked that first Shabbat after October 7:

I am my brother's keeper.

And I must especially be my brother's keeper when my brother scares me, I must especially be my sister's keeper when I think she may be my enemy, I must especially be my sibling's keeper when they, like Yosef, represent a ruthless challenge to

everything I should by rights be able to peacefully claim for myself.

It is because it is much harder for me to be the keeper of a Palestinian child in the rubble in Gaza than it is for me to be the keeper of an Israeli Jewish child who has been kidnapped to Gaza that I must hold them both in my heart.

That I must see them both as my responsibility.

It is because the world demands that I choose between them that I say I will not. We all have multi-chambered hearts, which means in all of our hearts there is room to hold and advocate for our traumatized and our injured and our dead and our violated Israeli siblings, even as there is still room to hold and advocate for the thousands of civilians and children killed in response to our own family tragedy.

There are so many horrors in this world, and we in this community cannot starve ourselves by refusing to break bread as our siblings cry out from the pit, but we can and must listen to them.

We are good people. We are complicated people.

We are Reuven, who spoke up against his brothers but ultimately failed to stop them. We are Shimon and Levi, cursed by their father for the violence they committed, massacring an entire city to avenge their sister's violation.

We are Yehuda, Judah, the man for whom we are named as Jews, who sought to mitigate harm by selling his brother as a slave rather than killing him, the man who learned from his mistakes and who will, just next week, put his own life on the line to save another favored brother.

We are Dan and Naftali and Gad and Asher and Yissachar and Zevulun, collectively acting, collectively eating, collectively

protecting ourselves, collectively harming others. Who knew what any of them were thinking? None of them spoke up.

And sometimes we are Yosef, in the pit ourselves, crying out to a humanity who will not listen.

We are good people. We are complicated people.

And we do not have to wait until next week's parshah for a moment, years and years after this one to say, ֹ.

אָנֶשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ

We saw the suffering of their bodies, but we did not heed their pleading.

In fact, we can listen right now, from the edge of the pit. In fact, we can set down our food and lower a rope. In fact, we can say, I am your keeper. And in fact, in doing so, we might make room for them to turn out to be ours.

(Rabbi Amelia Wolf is the rabbi of Congregation Etz Hayim in Arlington, VA, and a former T'ruah Israel Fellow.)

Yarhtzeits

Russett Feldman and Nikki Pusin remember their father Max Nathaniel Pusin on Saturday December 13th

Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's mother Sarah Primer on Thursday December 18th

Stuart Sender remembers his father Jack Sender on Thursday December 18th

Harriet Hessdorf remembers her father Herbert Achtentuch on Friday December 19th