

Osnat's Story

Mayim Rishonim - To conclude Sefer Bereishit, we would like to shed some light on a behind-the-scenes story that shadows the story of Yaakov's household in general, and Yosef in particular, through our own modern-day midrash, which expands the hints in the Torah and midrashic texts. The 12 chapter story that follows begins in Parashat Vayishlah, peaks in the subsequent parshiyot, culminating (but not really ending) in Parashat Vayehi at the end of Bereishit.

Introduction

Bereishit 34

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Yaakov, went out to visit the women of the region; When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force [...] On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Yaakov, Shimon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unaware, and killed all the males; They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away [...] All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their spoils.

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 38

Yaakov's daughter was a tent-dweller, who never went outside. What did Shechem son of Hamor do? He brought young girls to play and drum outside her tent; Dina went outside to see the girls playing, and he plundered her and lay with her, and she became pregnant with Osnat. The sons of Israel wanted to kill her, to prevent the people of the land from saying there was a brothel in the tents of Yaakov. What did Yaakov do? He brought a *Tzitz* (a priestly golden head plate) and on it, he wrote God's holy name, and he hung it on her neck and sent her off. And God is omniscient; the angel Michael brought her down to Egypt to Potiphar's house, since Osnat was a worthy wife for Yosef; and Potiphar's wife was barren and raised Osnat as her own. When Yosef went down to Egypt, he took Osnat as a wife, as it is written, "And he gave him Osnat, daughter of Poti-phera the Priest of On, to be his wife" (Gen. 41:45).

Chapter 1: A Distant, Difficult Childhood

I don't remember much from that distant time. Mother rarely left her tent; she spent most of the time huddled in her corner, alone. I would sometimes hear her gentle sobs. Few visited our tent, which was in a far corner of the camp, to bring us sparse food and water. I would sometimes go outside, like any other curious child, but no one ever wanted to play with me. Everyone would stare unpleasantly, and I would return to the safety of Mother's arms, and she would hug me tight and cry bitter tears. I vaguely remember one tall, handsome man who would sometimes come and ask what we're missing. He had a beautiful shiny multicolored coat.

Once, when I was 6 or 7, I stepped out of the tent when the camp was quiet. No one stared, and no one shooed me away. I walked around the camp and saw one large tent surrounded by three smaller tents, and lots of other tents at a greater distance. I saw lots of women and children, but they didn't even glance my way. When I returned, I asked Mother who lives in the big beautiful tents. Mother burst into tears, and said the large tent belonged to Father Yaakov, and the others to her brothers. This

was the first time I heard Mother speak about her family; when I pressed her, she explained: Yaakov is your grandfather, and my brothers are your uncles. So why do they stare at us like that? I asked; but what I had really wanted to ask, but did not dare, was: where is my father? I had the feeling that this would make matters worse for Mother. So I didn't ask.

Days and years passed. Mother Dina and I come and go, but no one speaks with us. One day, walking outside, I saw an old man, and he signaled that I should come to him. At first I was a little frightened, but when I approached I saw the sad look on his face. He called my name: Osnat, and tried to pat my head. When I returned to the tent, Mother said that was my grandfather, her father Yaakov. Why don't we ever go see him? Why doesn't he come visit us? I asked. Mother did not answer; but later I heard her weeping and whispering: And what about all the women they took from Shechem?

Chapter 2: The Expulsion

One morning, while it was still dark, Mother woke me up and rushed me to get dressed and pack a small bag. Where are we going? I asked, and hugged Mother tightly. Mother was silent, and started crying again. Grandfather Yaakov was already standing outside the tent, with another serious-looking man. Grandfather looked at Mother for a moment and said, I hope she's ready, and that you've explained it all to her? Mother responded: She's ready, but you have to explain yourself. Grandfather gently took my hand and said, let's go. I cried, Mother! And she cried, Osnat! But Grandfather and the man led me away quickly. I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye properly.

The camp was far behind us, as Grandfather and I rode one donkey, and the man rode the other. He kept a watchful eye on Grandfather. Where were we going in such a hurry? The sun started beating down upon our heads, as trees became sparse, giving way to brown and yellow terrain. Today I know we were walking south into the desert. Eventually, we stopped under a tree; Grandfather got off the donkey, and the man took me down roughly, like I was a package to unload. Grandfather took a beautiful golden pendant out of his pocket, engraved with letters I could not read. He hung it on my neck, and it looked like he was going to hug me, but the man looked at us both gravely, and Grandfather patted my head. For the second time in my life.

Do you see that bush at the end of the stream? He asked. Go there. They will meet you there, and look after you. The pendant will keep you out of harm's way. Keep it safe. Before I could understand what was happening, Grandfather and the man got back on their donkeys and hurried away. Grandfather! I called – but they had already disappeared around the bend.

I can hardly remember what happened next. I dizzily walked toward the bush. No one was waiting for me there. I was all alone in the wilderness.¹

I walked on blindly; I do not know where I found the strength. With great difficulty I arrived at a tree with little shade, where I fell asleep. I slept and dreamt of being wrapped by something soft and white; I was carried up in the air above the desert. Once again I found myself under a tree, and fell asleep; and again, the soft whiteness wrapped me up and carried me in its arms. I am floating between heaven and earth, between dream and wakefulness, holding onto the pendant. Where am I?

Chapter 3: Potiphar's House

¹ According to Hadar Zekeinim, Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher, and Hizkuni, the bush was the *Sneh* (סנה) – the Burning Bush Moshe would later encounter in his journey, and the etymology of Osnat's name.

When I woke up, I found myself in a large courtyard filled with children wearing strange clothes, and hairstyles I had never seen. Everything looked so different. All around me people were shouting, "How much for this one? How old is he, how old is she? Where from? Is he healthy? What can she do? That's a high price for her." In the turmoil, a well-dressed woman suddenly took me by the hand and shouted, I'm taking this one. She pulled me forcefully, someone put me on a pretty carriage, and we drove off. All around us there were houses – not tents, but proper houses, with lots of people walking alongside streets filled with carriages like the one we were in. There was lots of noise, and yelling. This was my first time in a city, and the people were dressed differently, with ornamental headdresses and short skirts.

We finally arrived in a large beautiful house. I was taken off the carriage, and the woman handed me to another, who walked me through the house until we finally arrived in a room. She said, this is your room; I will be back soon to clean you up. I can't remember everything that followed. I slowly began to understand that I was purchased in the slave market, and that the woman was the Lady of the House. She told me I was now her daughter, and that was how I had to behave. At first it was hard; I kept thinking about Mother Dina and how worried she must be. But the days passed and I began to adjust. I was at an age of rapid change for girls, and the man in white who found me in the desert blurred my memory of Mother and Grandfather when he lifted me through the clouds. But their memory was preserved by the one tangible thing I held on to: the golden pendant. I never let it out of my sight, and never showed it to anyone, although I still couldn't read the inscription.

I gradually got to know the house and the people in it; I understood that I had arrived in a land called Egypt, and that the house belonged to an important man, who was a captain in the king's court. Now I was his daughter! There were no children to play with, but there were plenty of ever-changing servants, and the Lady of the House was constantly giving them orders. From whispers among the people of the house I understood that the Master and Lady of the house had no children, so they made me their daughter. I was reminded of my long-lost mother; but the memory of the tents in the camp had become distant and vague.

One day, sitting in the large beautiful garden, a new servant approached me. He was different than the other servants; he spoke quietly and politely. The others called him a "Hebrew." When I first saw him, he seemed vaguely familiar, but I could not place him. He would approach me with messages from the Lady, and I wondered whether he had become her personal servant.

One day he came and stood a little closer. I looked at him, and he looked at me, which was forbidden for servants. I hadn't noticed that my pendant was peeking from under my dress, shining in the bright sun. He looked at the pendant with wonder, and asked whether I knew what it said. I said I did not. I think he wanted to ask me where it was from, but quickly told me the Lady wished to see me, and hurried off. He stopped coming over; perhaps he wanted to hide the fact that we had crossed paths in the past. I later heard that he had become the master of the household servants, loved and admired by the Master and Lady; but other servants were sent to summon me instead of him. One day he disappeared, among a slew of bad rumors. I never believed they were true.

I can tell you all this because I was older, and could remember more. I hope you're not bored by my story – there's more to follow.

Chapter 4: Yosef

Ever since that handsome servant disappeared, I am not treated as well by the Lady, as though I am to blame for whatever it is that happened. Perhaps this has something to do with the inscription on

my locket, which he was trying to read.² But the Master liked me, and would sometimes take me to Pharaoh's great palace. Pharaoh even spoke with me once, and told the Master it was time for his daughter – that is, me – to marry.

One day, something amazing happened. Pharaoh had a strange dream that no one could solve. The Egyptians believed in the power of dreams, and an unresolved dream is a bad sign. Someone was brought from the jail to the king's palace, a "Hebrew" from the Canaan tribes, and he was able to interpret the king's dream. Pharaoh was so impressed that he promoted the man to vizier, his second in command. According to Egyptian law, men who are part of the court must be married, and live in a large house with many servants. Then something extraordinary happened: I was called in and told that Pharaoh commanded me to become the wife of his new vizier. This may have been planned by my "father" who will also have benefitted from the match. I was told this was a great honor, and that my life would be changed forever. They had no idea how right they were.

Bereishit 41:55

Pharaoh gave Yosef the name Zaphenath-Paneah; and he gave him Osnat, daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, as his wife; and Yosef gained authority over the land of Egypt.

When I think about it today, the story is hard for me to believe. Initially we were both a little suspicious, but gradually I came to realize he was the handsome servant I had met in my Master's house. I had another vague, distant memory of him connected to my childhood in Canaan, but could not place it. There was clearly some hidden connection,³ and we both understood that we each had a lot of baggage; eventually it had to be unloaded, and that would be an enormous test for our relationship. We started talking; he went first.

Chapter 5: Yosef's Story

Before Yosef began, he asked: Do you still have the beautiful golden pendant I once saw you wearing? Yes, I answered. Please show it to me, he said. So for the first time, I showed another person the pendant. Do you know what these markings are? He asked, I have no idea, said I. This is ancient Hebrew writing, he explained, it says, *Sanctified to God's name*, and this here is the name of the God of the Hebrews. Whoever gave this to you wanted you to remember that you came from the land of the Hebrews. Where did you get this? He asked, and how did you end up here, in Egypt? I don't really remember, I said, I was a small child, and it's all a blur. Now tell me your story, Yosef. How did you get to Egypt?

Yosef began to tell me his story, adding a little bit each day. You know the story of Yosef and his brothers from the Torah – but it was all new to me, since I was sent away in Parashat Vayishlah. When Yosef finished telling me his story, he wanted to hear mine. I can't really remember how it began, I explained; That's okay, Yosef said, tell the story from the end to the beginning, and I will

² Midrash Tanhuma states that Yosef withheld the temptation of Potiphar's wife because "his father's image was revealed to him." Here Yosef saw the golden plate as a message from his father, in correlation with the midrashic position that Yosef married Potiphar's daughter in merit of avoiding the temptation of his wife: meeting with Osnat and the golden *tzitz* prevented Yosef from sin.

³ Pirquei DeRabbi Eliezer 36: "[...] After seven years, Yaakov had eleven sons and one daughter; and they were all born with their intended match [a twin girl], apart from Yosef, who was not born with his intended match, because his match was Osnat daughter of Dina."

help you; I am, after all, a master of dreams and riddles, named Zaphenath-Paneah by Pharaoh himself – one who can solve puzzles and decipher the unknown, but also one who keeps secrets. We make a good rhyming pair: Osnat and Zaphenat, Zaphenat who deciphers Osnat. I like the name Osnat, he added. It's mysterious: both Egyptian and Hebrew. Tell me your story, Osnat.

Chapter 6: Osnat tells her story, and Yosef deciphers and supplements

You already know my story, and can now conflate the two stories: mine and Yosef's. But to Yosef this was all new. I started sharing my story with him, from the end just as he requested; I slowly retrieved forgotten memories and clarified vague recalls. I was reminded of the white-bearded man who parted from me in the desert; Yosef explained that the pendant I was given was called a *Tzitz*. Suddenly I could also see Mother Dina's image before me. Yosef listened attentively, and explained and deciphered my memories – the camp you remember, he explained, is the camp of Yaakov's tribe; Yaakov is the son of Yitzhak and Rivka, who had returned from a long exile in Haran. The bearded man who sent you out into the desert and gave you the golden *tzitz* for protection was Grandfather Yaakov, my father. The "man" who saved you in the desert and brought you to Egypt, and made sure that you would be sold to Potiphar's wife is the angel Michael! And who were all the people in the camp, I asked. Those are your uncles, your mother's brothers. I am the brother who would sometimes visit you in your tent. Osnat, I am your uncle. I too was banished by my brothers.

I fainted.

How could this be? I whispered when I came to. How can this be true?

After that we lived as though in a dream. Our great love now had an added element of warmth in the loneliness: an uncle and niece with a similar fate; two exiled members of Yaakov's household who found one another in Egypt, and were now vizier to the king of Egypt and his wife. But I was still missing a small piece of the puzzle. I waited for the right time: Yosef was busy arranging the Egyptian economy, and often away from home. One evening, when he returned early from his hard work, but seemed calm, I thought this was the right moment to complete the puzzle.

Can I ask you a question? I approached. It seems clear why you ended up in Egypt. There was always tension between you and your brothers; perhaps there was a little fault on your part for sharing your dreams, but ultimately your brothers did a terrible thing, selling you off to Egypt without your father's knowledge. But why was I sent away? Why did Grandfather want me gone? I can't remember doing anything wrong!

Yosef was silent. I'd never seen him so stone faced and white. Tell me Yosef, tell me! No, no! I can't remember, said he. But Yosef knows everything! The riddle solver, the decipherer of dreams! I know that you know something, Zaphenath-Paneah. Finally, Yosef could no longer contain himself, and said: Osnat, my darling Osnat, what I have to tell you is difficult to hear. I need you to be strong and know that my love for you is stronger than it has been for any person; even for my mother Rachel, who I loved with all my heart, and miss dearly. Tell me, Yosef. I am strong; I am listening.

When your mother was about your age, a terrible thing happened. Yosef's eyes were teary; his voice was strained. I also started crying, feeling the weight of what was about to come. But at the same time, his tears gave me strength. Go on, Yosef. I am strong. I want to finally know the truth.

Your mother, Dina, was taken by a rich and well-respected man from Shechem, where we stopped on our way from Haran, on our way to a new life in Canaan. This man fell in love with your mother, who was very beautiful, just like you; but he thought he could take her forcefully and lie with her. My older brothers were furious at him and the town that enabled him, and they woke up one morning

and killed every man in the town. I was still a young boy, but I saw what they had done, especially Shimon and Levy – the two eldest after Reuven, the firstborn, and I told my father, Yaakov, what I had seen, which made my brothers hate me even then, I think. And then, Osnat, when we thought it was all over – we discovered that your mother, Dina, was pregnant with Shechem's child. With you. I felt like I was going to faint; but Yosef was by my side. He held me tight, and didn't let me fall. Now I know why I did not have a father!

Yosef, is that it? Is there more?

What more could you possibly want to know, Osnat?

You know exactly what I want to know. Why was I banished from Yaakov's house?

Osnat, you did nothing wrong. Our zealous brothers did not hesitate to take the Shechem women after slaughtering all the men of the town; but still, they saw in you a reminder of what Shechem had done to your mother, and they wanted you out; as though your removal would remove the 'stain' you represent from the family, and restore the family 'honor.' But what about Grandfather Yaakov? I asked. How could he let them banish me, and separate me from my mother? I don't know the answer to that question, Yosef said softly. I guess even then he was weaker than his sons, and one of them accompanied him to make sure he banished you. They did not ask Father's permission or advice on slaughtering the city of Shechem either. But he did give you the golden *tzitz* that he had made for my mother Rachel, and it was that pendant that united us.

What's the story of the *tzitz*? I asked.

That's enough for one day, said Yosef. The story of Rachel's *tzitz* will have to wait for another time.⁴

Chapter 7: Yosef and Osnat Build their Future

For several days, we hardly spoke; we felt closer and closer, but could not find the words. What more can one say after revealing such stories? But one evening, when Yosef came home tired from another long day of travels to gather grain around Egypt, I mustered up the strength to say: Yosef, my darling Zaphenath-Paneah. What is it? Said he. We will create a wonderful family together, said I; we will not allow our past to break us. We were united by a sanctified *tzitz*, and our children will grow up in a warm and loving home, with both parents. We will choose life! Yosef nodded his head and hugged me meaningfully. He said, What would I do in Egypt without a great soul like yours here with me? I am so lucky to have you by my side.

Bereishit 41:50-52

Before the years of famine came, Yosef had two sons, whom Osnat, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him. Yosef named the firstborn Menashe, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The second he named Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

⁴ See Midrash Tamhuma, Vayetze, 12; there, Rachel found a golden head plate, a *tzitz* with magical powers. Yaakov had ordered his family to give him all idolatrous items brought from Haran, and he buried these "under the oak near Shechem" (Gen. 35:4). These presumably included the Teraphim and the head plate brought by Rachel. The suggestion here is that Yaakov replaced the idolatrous head plate he had taken from Rachel with another golden head plate engraved with God's name, which he later gave to Osnat to protect her when she was sent away.

Children are named by father and mother interchangeably. Look it up, and you will see that I am right – by Leah, for example, even Hava. Although the Torah will tell you that Yosef named our two boys, I promise you the sentiments expressed in their names were shared by us both. I felt, just like Yosef, that "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house," and that "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes." With Yosef I was given a new life, with new hope, and new resolve to leave a difficult past behind me. We promised ourselves that Menashe and Ephraim would have loving parents, who will also teach them to love and respect one another.

You may think this story ends with a fairytale happily ever after for the prince and princess of Egypt; but another story is about to begin.

Chapter 8: The past re-emerges

The years of famine Yosef had predicted began. His power and greatness were only enhanced by this; he was now not only ruler of all of Egypt, but lord over all the neighboring lands that came to Egypt for grain. Pharaoh consulted Yosef constantly on all matters; I hardly saw him or spoke with him, and when he was home, he devoted all his time to our two boys, Ephraim and Menashe.

One day, Yosef returned home visibly upset. Before I was able to ask what was wrong, he said: You would not believe what happened today! Among all the people who came for grain, I saw ten strong men, Canaanites. And do you know who they were? Yes, I said softly. Your brothers; my uncles. Yes! Said Yosef. What should I do with them? What do you mean? I asked. We have a score to settle, said he, for both of us. Am I supposed to just forgive and forget? Well, said I, knowing you, you have already decided what to do. You are a wise woman, said Yosef, and right as usual.

When I asked about their families, he continued, they said they were in fact twelve brothers; but one was "gone," while the youngest remained with his father in Canaan. What did they mean by "gone," he said furiously. Did he get up one day and leave? And the youngest brother who stayed behind – that's my brother Binyamin, who I miss with all my heart. I told them they were all under arrest while one may return to bring this "younger brother" – only then will I release them and provide them with the grain for which they have come. But I ask you, Osnat, what do you say? They have hurt you more than me! A small innocent girl who never harmed a soul. They cared about family honor, and what the other nations will say about the House of Yaakov more than protecting you. What do you say Osnat? How do you feel about them?

Look, Yosef, I said, after thinking long and hard. I think you're right. Even your father, my grandfather Yaakov, was in the wrong in his dealing with both our situations. But what is it that we want to achieve? Do we want revenge? Forgiveness? To open old wounds, or mend and heal? Look at our sweet boys, Menashe and Ephraim. Don't you want them to know their cousins? Think about it; don't make a hasty decision. You are the king, and you can take the time to think. Think about your family back in Canaan waiting for food.

I don't know where the inspiration of good will came from, but I felt like it might be the golden *tzitz* that has always accompanied me, and the angel Michael who has always watched over me; together they have guided me toward the desire to live and restore, forgive and embrace.⁵

Bereishit 42:18-24

⁵ The High Priest's golden *tzitz* contains the power of *tikkun* (reparation) and atonement; it atones for improper procedures within the Temple, including inadvertent impurity. See [And you shall make a tzitz of pure gold](#) in Parashat Tetzave

On the third day Yosef said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they agreed to do so [...] He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Shimon and had him bound before their eyes.

The following day, Yosef told me that he decided to keep Shimon under arrest, and release the other brothers back to Canaan. I understood this to be a moment of compassion. Yosef, I said, can I make a strange request? I would like to meet Shimon while the other brothers are in Canaan, before they return. Why? Asked Yosef; you know he is a violent man – he pushed me into the pit, and along with Levy, killed all the men in Shechem! Yes, I know, said I; but I also heard that you allowed him to bathe and put on clean clothing after he was separated from his brothers, and you have given him food and drink, did you not?⁶ I know you want to hear news of your father; well I want to hear about my mother. Your mother is no longer around, and I never had a father. After all we've been through I am not afraid of anything. I want to meet with Shimon.

I felt like this time I pushed a little too far; but I also felt that I was moving toward something. Once again I felt the guidance of the *tzitz* and the angel Michael. Ultimately, Yosef reluctantly agreed to let me meet Shimon, but added: Please dress like a regular Egyptian woman, so that you will not be recognized as my wife.

Chapter 9: Osnat meets Shimon

I did as Yosef asked, and prepared for my meeting with Shimon. Yosef came up with a convincing explanation for my visit to the prison. I dressed up as one of the maids, and brought Shimon his dinner. On my way I reminded myself that I know nothing of him, except that he was with the Canaanite convoy that came for grain, and that Yosef put him in jail. This is the story that was circulating in the city. When I came to collect his dish, I took a moment to look at him. At first he was surprised and returned a gruff, suspicious look. But then I looked again, and said, I am not Egyptian. I could tell, he responded, where are you from? I saw he had softened a little, so I said, I am from Canaan, and I was sold into slavery as a young child. I am looking for a relation in Canaan. They say you are from Canaan. I know it's not a small country, but perhaps you've heard of my family. I was careful not to disclose what I knew. What do you remember from your childhood? He asked, and I could hear that he was softening further. I said, I remember being sent from the camp as a child of eight or nine, but I don't know why. Do you remember your mother? He asked. I don't remember much, I said, but I do know her name. I repeat it to myself every day: Dina.

A roaring silence ensued.

Do you have any other childhood memories? Shimon finally asked.

Yes, said I, and I pulled out the golden head plate to show him.

You're Osnat! He choked.

And who are you? I asked, and what do you know of my mother?

⁶ Midrash Aggadah, Miketz 42:24: "And he took Shimon from them: Why did he take Shimon from the rest of them? Yosef said, if I leave these two together, perhaps they will do what they did in Shechem; therefore he separated them, 'and he locked them up before their eyes' – indeed, he had him bound before their eyes, but once they left, he would feed him and let him drink, and bathe him and clothe him."

She is well, said Shimon, or at least, she was when I left home to come here. But I wanted to know more. Who are you? How do you know she is alive? What else can you tell me about her? Do you know her? Shimon bowed his head in silence. Answer me!

Finally, he whispered: I am Shimon; Dina is in my tent now. I took her as my wife. She is part of my family.

Bereishit Rabbati Parashat Vayigash

R. Huna said: When Shimon and Levi took their sister Dina from the house of Shechem, she did not want to leave. She said, And as for me, where will I take my shame? Until her brother Shimon vowed that he will take her as his wife; then she agreed to leave.⁷

I didn't have to speak anymore. Shimon spoke; he was embarrassed and explained that he was unable to realize his promise to Dina because the other brothers objected. He said, Just because I am one of the older brothers does not mean I can do as I see fit; we are a stubborn, opinionated family. The family is very concerned with its own honor; but after you were banished, the jealousy softened, and I decided to keep my promise to your mother.

When I heard this I felt as though I was struck by lightning. I was so happy to hear about my mother's redemption, but the thought of my exile being the cause for that redemption was hard to swallow. Shimon must have sensed that and stopped talking.

How is my mother now? I asked, after I calmed down a little. Not so great, Shimon responded. She is filled with guilt for allowing them to banish you. I promised her I would do everything I can to find you. I questioned Levy for a long time – he was the man who went with our father to send you off into the desert. I went on several expeditions to the Negev based on the information he gave, but found nothing. Was that the reason you came to Egypt? I asked. No, Shimon said, sighing. We came for grain. But we also came for another reason, to atone for another terrible sin. Tragically, we learned nothing after what we did to you, and we hurt another member of our family, our brother. We banished him too, and now we are paying the price for both sins.⁸

Bereishit 42:21

They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us."⁹

⁷ This is a contradiction to Pirquei DeRabbi Eliezer above, which is the foundation for this story; but it is our attempt to integrate both midrashic ideas into one story. See also Bereishit Rabbah 82:8; 84:21.

⁸ See the midrash ideas on Bereishit 42:3: "And Yosef's ten brothers went to buy grain in Egypt," which emphasize the words 'Yosef's brothers' and states that the brothers regretted selling Yosef and went to Egypt not only for grain, but to find their lost brother.

⁹ See [But we are guilty for our brother](#) in Parashat Miketz, where we cited Midrash Sekhel Tov, that explains that "They said to each other – this is Shimon, who spoke to Levy, and by this he was forgiven for what he had said initially, as it is written: 'And they said to each other, here comes that dreamer, and now let us go and kill him' (Gen. 37:19-20). Based on this midrash, Shimon was the first brother to regret selling Yosef, and take the blame. Here we propose linking the regret with his compassion for Dina, and with the midrash in Pirquei DeRabbi Eliezer above.

What happened to your other brother? I asked, pretending I did not know, and thinking I may actually have news to bring Yosef. I can't say any more right now, we will have to stop here, said Shimon. The fact that God brought about this meeting and I finally found you will have to be enough. I promise when I get out of here that we will spare no expense in getting you back.

Shimon was right about one thing: we had spoken long enough. Soon the guards would begin to suspect something is amiss. I left him with one more thing: I hope you find your lost brother, just as you have found me. Perhaps there was a reason for the famine that brought you all the way to Egypt, I said, and hurried away.

Chapter 10: Back to Yosef, and the reunion with Binyamin

I left the meeting with Shimon shaken: Mother was alive, and in a large tent, as part of the family! I was excited to hear that Shimon connected my story with Yosef's, and that the brothers were looking for us both. I hope I did not divulge any information on my current status and my relationship with Yosef. I felt the *tzitz* that had connected me with my past was working toward connecting the family. While I had my own thoughts about where all this was leading, Yosef was no less opinionated and stubborn than any of his brothers, and second only to the king. I spent the whole way home thinking how I would tell him what happened in my meeting with Shimon.

When I got back to the palace, Yosef was not back yet, and I had time to relax and think. What more do I have to hide from him? I would tell him everything: that Mother, his sister Dina, is alive; that Shimon married her, and that they were searching for us both. I told him everything, and explained again that I thought it was time for reconciliation. But I would not pressure Yosef; he would make his own decision, although only a reconciliation would allow me to see my mother once again, and for him to see his father again. I think my feminine intuition could see where this was all going. I did not understand that Yosef was driven by another great power called brotherly love. Yosef wanted Binyamin!

But this is a story that is best told in the Torah. Yosef successfully got his brothers to bring Binyamin to him, even knowing how much that would upset Yaakov. But Binyamin was all he had wanted – and when Yosef wants something, nothing will stand in his way. And they brought him. You should have seen the enormous excitement in his eyes when he saw Binyamin but decided this was neither the time nor place to reveal himself to his brothers and put an end to his alienation.

Bereishit 43:29-31

Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, "Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!" With that, Yosef hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there; Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, "Serve the meal."

Now this is my Yosef: opinionated but attentive, stubborn but emotional, meticulous but spontaneous. What a feast those siblings had! Yosef gave the grandest gifts to his brother, showing favor to Binyamin above all without hesitation.¹⁰ Was he trying to tell his brothers something? Was he

¹⁰ Bereishit 43:44: "Portions were taken to them from Yosef's table, but Binyamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him."

signaling something to Binyamin? I sat there beside Yosef looking at his beautiful brother Binyamin, who looks so much like my husband. He reminded me of the first time I saw Yosef, back in Potiphar's house! I too sent Binyamin a portion, and Ephraim and Menashe followed suit.¹¹ And they had no idea this man was their uncle, and that his children were his cousins! Yosef, who sees everything, noticed how I stared at Binyamin, and saw that I had sent him a portion. Do you know where Binyamin gets his good looks and charm from? Yosef whispered to me; from our mother, Rachel. The *tzitz* you wear on your neck was made for her by my father, Yaakov. I wanted to tell Yosef: perhaps this is a moment of forgiveness for the *tzitz*; perhaps it shall bring reconciliation and peace to the house of Yaakov! You sit here drinking, while Yaakov is tormented in Canaan, consumed with regret and worry. I suddenly felt a great deal of compassion for Grandfather Yaakov; but I was silent. I allowed my feminine instincts to act quietly, behind the scenes, and was sure of their guidance. And once again, Yosef had another plan. He wanted his brother Binyamin.

The following morning everything was reversed. Great events had taken place in the palace, and everyone was whispering with excitement. My nurse-servant told me: those Canaanites graciously hosted by Yosef stole his silver cup! How could they do such a thing? From the window of my room, overlooking the great courtyard, I saw them walking with their heads bowed, surrounded by the Egyptian guard. Binyamin walked at the end of the line beside one of the older brothers, perhaps the oldest and tallest. Binyamin, I whispered. All around us the crowds shouted: Canaanite thieves! Canaanite thieves! The convoy disappeared into one of the rooms in the palace.

The morning passed in strained silence. I didn't see Yosef that day. And in the afternoon ... once again excited whispers could be heard. Did you hear? Did you hear what happened?

Chapter 11: Yosef's Reunion with his brothers and father

Bereishit 45-55

Then Yehuda stepped up to him and said, "O my lord, let your servant please speak a word in my lord's ears, and do not be angry with your servant; for you are like Pharaoh himself [...] Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. [...] Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."

Then Yosef could no longer contain himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Yosef made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so startled were they at his presence. Then Yosef said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Yosef, whom you sold into

¹¹ Sechel Tov, Bereishit 43:34, Miketz, lists five portions given to Binyamin: "Binyamin was given five portions: one from his brother, and an extra one added by Yosef, one from Osnat, one from Menashe, and one from Ephraim." See also Bereishit Rabbati.

Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.¹²

Some parts of my story are best told in Parashat Miketz and the beginning of Vayigash – there is no better version of what happened in the palace than the biblical narrative. Once everything ended well, I decided not to pester Yosef with too many questions to fill in the blanks: what exactly had he intended to do with his brothers? Was he really going to keep Binyamin and send the rest of his brothers away? What about his father? Or perhaps he had decided that he had tested them long enough, and it was time for reconciliation? These are questions for the ages.¹³ I am certain that the *tzitz* played a role here as well; not only in a mystical, mysterious sense, but the simple human desire to see the family reunited that I transferred to Yosef. Perhaps I played some small part in this reconciliation. This is a thought that brings me true joy.

But what about Grandfather Yaakov, and Mother Dina? You are probably wondering whether Yosef called me after he revealed himself to his brothers, to present me, his wife, and their long-lost niece? Or did he save this as another surprise for a different time?

Bereishit 45: 9; 45:29-30

Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Yosef, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay [...] Yosef made ready his chariot and went up to meet his father Israel in Goshen. He presented himself to him, fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while; Israel said to Yosef, "I can die now, having seen for myself that you are still alive."

The drama continues! Yosef met with his father, and it's hard to tell which of them cried harder.¹⁴ I was not there, and you're probably wondering what happened when I met Grandfather Yaakov? Or Mother Dina? And perhaps with my brothers/uncles?

Chapter 12: Closure?

Bereishit 47: 11-12

Yosef settled his father and his brothers, and granted them a holding in the land of Egypt, in the best part of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had instructed. And Yosef provided his father, his brothers, and all his father’s household with food, according to the number of their dependents [...] Yakov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years; so the days of Yaakov, the years of his life, were one hundred forty-seven years.

Pesiqta Zutrata, Bereishit 47:28

¹² This is unequivocally one of the most dramatic descriptions in biblical narrative and world literature. See [And Yosef could not contain himself](#) in Parashat Vayigash.

¹³ Nahmanides followed by other commentators posed the famous question, "Why did he not write to his father once to let him know, and to comfort him" throughout all his long years in Egypt, especially after rising to power. See in Parashat Vayigash, [Why did Yosef not send for his father?](#)

¹⁴ See [Yaakov and Yosef's Reunion](#) in Parashat Vayigash.

The seventeen years in Egypt were good years for Yaakov Avinu, as it is written, "And Yaakov lived in Egypt for seventeen years," that is, he lived peacefully, surrounded by his sons, and his grandchildren multiplying before his eyes, his heart is happy, without a demon or harmful spirit, and his son Yosef is king of the land, supporting and feeding him.

The story seems to have ended with a joyous reunion for the family, living happily ever after in Egypt. But I'm sure some difficult questions have crossed your mind: how did Yosef's reconciliation with his brothers affect me? How was my reunion with Mother Dina? Did Grandfather Yaakov meet me when he came to Egypt? What did we discuss?

These are secrets I don't intend to reveal. If the Torah and midrash chose to keep silent about the end of my story, there must be a reason for me to keep silent as well.¹⁵ You can fill in the end of the story, creating your own midrash if you wish. But I will share one more thing with you.

Bereishit 48: 1, 5, 20, 22

After this Yosef was told, "Your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim [...] Therefore your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Menashe shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are [...] So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, 'God make you like Ephraim and like Menashe.'" [...] I now give to you one portion more than to your brothers, the portion that I took from the hand of the Emorites with my sword and with my bow."

I was there. I stood to one side; Yaakov could not see me. But I heard his words, even though his voice was weak and frail. I heard that he considered Menashe and Ephraim to be like his other sons. I understood that Yosef was being treated as a firstborn. I also heard him mention the death of his beloved wife Rachel, with a heart wrenching sigh: "And as for me, when I came from Padan Aram, Rachel died at my side." I held her pendant, now mine, in my hand. I heard how at the end of his days, once again Yaakov replaced youngest for eldest: Ephraim for Menashe. Was he trying to tell us something? Something about educating one's children, and coming to terms with differences – a hard-earned lesson he was forced to learn twice in his own life?

But above all, I heard the name "Shechem," and was shaken to my core. He said Shechem! The city in which Mother Dina's difficult journey had begun, and my own life's journey, and that of the entire family! This was the city he was bequeathing to my sons, Yosef's sons? What was he trying to say? To this day I can feel he somehow knew I was there, and that this promise was intended for me. This was the first and last time he spoke to me since the day he had sent me off into the desert.

חזק חזק ונתחזק

Shabbat Shalom!

Mehalkei Hamayim

¹⁵ See [The Untold Story](#) in Parashat Vayigash, where we wondered whether the three parties – Yaakov, the brothers, and Yosef – ever discussed the events from the time Yosef was sold to this point. According to the Torah text and midrashim, it seems such a conversation never took place.