VA-YEISHEV

37 Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan. 2 This, then, is the line of Jacob:

At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. 3 Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his

PROLOGUE TO THE JOSEPH STORY (37:1–36)

The story of Joseph and his brothers initiates the chain of events that leads to the descent to Egypt. It is the prelude to the drama of oppression and redemption that constitutes the central motif of biblical theology.

THE BEGINNING OF HOSTILITY (vv. 1–4)

1. Now Jacob was settled in the land In contrast to Esau, who had migrated. The specific reference is to the Hebron region (see v. 14).

where his father had sojourned That is, the land of Canaan. Only Isaac, of the three Patriarchs, had never left it.

2. This, then, is the line of Jacob Mention of Joseph and his brothers here is, in effect, an abbreviated genealogy, the full version of which was already listed in 35:22–26.

as a helper to the sons of He was an assistant to Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. The word translated as “to” (et) often means “with.” Here it has the meaning of “subordinate to.”

Bilhah and Zilpah The order of the wives is here reversed, because Joseph would have been closer to Bilhah, his late mother’s maid. The concubines, until now referred to as “maidservants” when mentioned together with Rachel and Leah, are here called “wives.” This may indicate a new status acquired after their mistresses had died, as Ramban suggests.

bad reports of them The content of the “reports” is not given. This is the first of several causes of simmering enmity between Joseph and his brothers.

3. Israel loved Joseph best Jacob’s favoritism is understandable, because Joseph was the

CHAPTER 37

The story of Joseph occupies the last four parashiyot of Genesis, the longest single narrative in the book. It is the story of a young man blessed by God with a special grace, so that no matter what misfortunes befall him, he is able to surmount them. But it is also a story of unintended consequences, of an effort to do harm that ended up doing good and of an apparent triumph that set the stage for the Israelites’ descent into slavery. “On the surface, the actors in the story make their own way in life. In fact, however, it transpires that it is Divine Providence that is carrying out, through mankind, its own predestined plan” [N. Leibowitz].

1. Jacob was settled Jacob thought he was going to settle down after all he had been through, but events would not permit him to [Rashi]. We often think that, once we reach a certain milestone, we will be able to settle down to a life free of challenges. But life never promised to be tranquil. The Sages see this “settling” (va-yeiśeḥ), as an effort to disengage from the problems of living. Zornberg comments, “The full tension of composure and decomposure, of order and disorder in the world is felt most acutely by the righteous, by those whose sense of beauty and desire for order exposes them to the shock of reality.” Esau, by contrast, “settles” in the land of Seir without incident (Gen. 36:8).

Joseph, the favored child, apparently felt closer to his father than to his siblings. A midrash suggests that the “bad reports” had to do with the sons of Leah mistreating the sons of the lower-caste wives [Gen. R. 84:7].
sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic. 4 And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

5 Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more.

6 He said to them, “Hear this dream which I have dreamed: 7 There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf.” 8 His son of his beloved wife Rachel, born after years of heartbreaking frustration. This partiality is the second cause of enmity between Joseph and his brothers.

Israel Throughout the narrative the two names of the patriarch are interchanged indiscriminately.

the child of his old age He was the last of the sons to be born in Paddan-aram.

an ornamented tunic Such a tunic was a mark of high social standing, as is known from Assyrian inscriptions. Egyptian tomb paintings show Semitic men and women wearing multicolored tunics draped over one shoulder and reaching below the knees. Syrian ambassadors dressed in elaborately designed long robes wrapped around the body and over the shoulders. Others interpret it as a sleeved garment, a tunic reaching the wrists and the ankles.

4. speak a friendly word They rebuffed every attempt by Joseph to be friendly.

JOSEPH’S DREAMS (vv. 5–11)

Everywhere in the ancient Near East dreams were recognized as a means of divine communication. It was assumed that dreams foretold events.

THE FIRST DREAM (vv. 5–8)

5. to his brothers He did not tell his father, who does not figure in the first dream.

7. stood up . . . bowed low A clear assertion of authority by Joseph and of submission on the part of his brothers.

3. child of his old age Benjamin was in fact younger, causing Rashi to understand these words [ben z’kunim] as “a child with the mature wisdom of an older person.” Or possibly, Joseph could be playful with children and mature in the company of adults [K’li Yakar].

Israel loved Joseph best “See the consequences of favoring one child over another. Because of those few ounces of wool [the ‘coat of many colors’ Jacob gave Joseph], our people were enslaved in Egypt” [BT Shab. 10b]. One would expect Jacob of all people, having suffered the consequences of parental favoritism, to avoid repeating his parents’ mistake. Perhaps it is easier for us to see a problem intellectually than to free ourselves of the tendency to imitate our parents.

5. Why does Joseph tell his brothers his dream, which will only inflame their jealousy? Because he was too young and naive to anticipate their reaction (Sforno; also Hirsch, who sees Joseph’s immaturity as the result of growing up without a mother)! Because he thought they would respect him more if they knew that his eminence was God’s will [Hizz’ kuni]? Or perhaps because he thought the dream was a message from God, and a prophet may not withhold God’s message, whatever the consequences for him personally [Vilna Gaon]. Zornberg sees the adolescent Joseph “behaving with the narcissism of youth, with a dangerous unawareness of the feelings of others.” Years later, the vicissitudes of life will have matured him to the point where he could look at a person’s face and ask, “Why do you appear downcast today?” [Gen. 40:7].
brothers answered, “Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?” And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.

9 He dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: And this time, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” 10 And when he told it to his father and brothers, his father berated him. “What,” he said to him, “is this dream you have dreamed? Are we to come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow low to you to the ground?” 11 So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind.

12 One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father’s flock at Shechem, 13 Israel said to Joseph, “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He

8. And they hated him  The phrase is repeated three times, suggesting an increasing hostility.

for his talk about his dreams  Some commentators believe that this refers to the boastful way he recounted them.

dreams  The plural either anticipates the second dream or implies a previous, unreported history of similar dreams.

THE SECOND DREAM  (vv. 9–11)

9. another dream  In the literature of the ancient Near East there are descriptions of repeated dreams in which one symbol is successively substituted for another, although the basic meaning and theme remain the same. In the Joseph narratives, dreams come in pairs to demonstrate their seriousness.

the sun  This dream, with its celestial setting, presents Joseph’s innermost thoughts and aspirations in a clear and distinct manner, and includes his parents among those who are to be subservient to him.

stars  The symbolism is probably suggested by the repeated image comparing the Israelites to the stars of the heavens.

10. and brothers  For the second time, Joseph recounts his dream, this time in the presence of his father as well. On the second occasion, the brothers are ominously silent.

berated him  This was done publicly, in the hope of easing the tension and curbing Joseph’s sense of self-importance.

your mother  To reconcile this with the death of Rachel (35:19), some see this either as a dream distortion or as a reference to Joseph’s stepmother Bilhah.

to the ground  Joseph did not utter this phrase. Jacob, in adding it, echoes the manner in which he himself made obeisance to his brother Esau (33:3).

11. his brothers were wrought up  The repetition of the dream has validated its message. The brothers now look on Joseph with hatred.

THE SALE OF JOSEPH  (vv. 12–36)

12. his brothers  Joseph did not go with them, perhaps because he was exempt from labor.

at Shechem  Being pastoral nomads, the brothers move from one area to another to secure pasturage for their livestock. The region around Shechem has rich soil and an adequate water supply.

13. I will send you to them  The brothers had hidden their true feelings about Joseph. Otherwise, Jacob would not have sent him to them—and Joseph would not have gone so eagerly.
answered, "I am ready." 14 And he said to him, "Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

When he reached Shechem, 15 a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, "What are you looking for?" 16 He answered, "I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?"

The man said, "They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan." So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.

They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! 20 Come now, let us kill him and hide this embarrassing disclosure as well as for reasons of jealousy that they were moved to get rid of him.

We never hear of this man again. Yet if Joseph had not met him, he never would have found his brothers. He never would have been sold into slavery. The family would not have followed him into Egypt. There would have been no Exodus. The history of the world would have been so different! Could that man have known how his chance encounter changed history? Do we ever know the consequences of the little acts of thoughtfulness we perform?

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14. **bring me back word** Jacob is anxious about the well-being of his sons.

15. **valley of Hebron** A name found nowhere else. Hebron itself was located on a hill. The cave of Machpelah, in which Abraham was buried, was in a field outside the city and the text may be referring to that area.

**Hebron . . . Shechem** A distance of some 50 miles (80 km). The south–north watershed road that traversed the central hill country connected these two cities. It split into two at Shechem, one branch turning northwest to Dothan (v. 17).

**When he reached Shechem** A journey of about five days by foot.

15. **a man** The exchange between Joseph and the man is reported only in briefest outline. The stranger surely must have asked for the identity of the brothers, if only to be of help.

17. **Dothan** An ancient fortress town about 13 miles (21 km) northwest of Shechem, lying in a valley known for its rich pasture land.

18. **They saw him from afar** The mere glimpse of Joseph incites the murderous hatred of the brothers, who are now far away from their father's restraining presence.

20. **kill him** The verb translated as "kill" (ידר), which connotes ruthless violence, is the same verb used when Cain slays Abel.
throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!” 21But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, “Let us not take his life.” 22And Reuben went on, “Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves”—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. 23When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, 24and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from

one of the pits These were cisterns hewn out of rock intended for gathering and storing water in the rainy season. At times murderers may have slaughtered their victims near such pits, which varied in depth from 16 to 24 feet, to dispose of the corpses there.

21. when Reuben heard it Being the firstborn, he would surely bear the main share of blame for any misfortune that befell Joseph.

be tried to save him The Hebrew verb va-yatzilehu, “he saved him,” also can mean “he came to the rescue.”

Let us not That is, “We shall not” Reuben speaks with a decisiveness that tolerates no opposition. The use of the first person plural makes clear that this is to be their collective decision. Indeed, the brothers do not say another word.

22. Reuben went on He pauses for his words to take effect and then continues.

Shed no blood By using the Hebrew second person plural in addressing them, he dissociates himself from them and emphasizes his loathing for the idea.

out in the wilderness The abundant, uninhabited pasture land in the region of Dothan. The brothers believe that Joseph will die of hunger and exposure; Reuben thinks he can rescue him somehow without their noticing.

23. the ornamented tunic The explanatory comment is necessary in light of verse 33.

24. cast him into the pit The narrative tells us nothing here of Joseph’s reactions to their deeds, although it is clear from 42:21 that he pleaded to be released.

no water in it This is a necessary observation, because such pits were dug largely for water storage.

25. sat down to a meal They ate in callous indifference to their brother’s anguished pleas. Reuben, in the meantime, leaves (v. 29).

a caravan of Ishmaelites Apparently, they buy Joseph, take him down to Egypt (v. 28), and sell him to Potiphar (39:1). In verse 28, however, it is Midianite traders (or “Medianites”) who are said to have sold Joseph to Potiphar (v. 36). Rashi suggests that Joseph probably was traded several times. Some modern commentators explain the discrepancy as being the result of different traditions.

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21. Reuben’s relationship with Joseph may have been the most complicated of any of the brothers. As the eldest son, he would be held responsible for what happened. Moreover, Joseph, as the firstborn son of the favored wife, would be Reuben’s chief rival for family supremacy [Hirsch].

25. they sat down to a meal This detail not only conveys the callousness of the brothers but foreshadows the consequences of their action.
Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and
ladanum to be taken to Egypt. 26Then Judah
said to his brothers, “What do we gain by killing
our brother and covering up his blood? 27Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but
let us not do away with him ourselves. After all,
he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers
agreed. 28When Midianite traders passed by,
they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold
Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ish-
maelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.
29When Reuben returned to the pit and saw
that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his
clothes. 30Returning to his brothers, he said,
“The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?”
31Then they took Joseph’s tunic, slaughtered

from Gilead  The central mountainous re-
region east of the river Jordan.
camels  See Comment to 12:16.
gum  Gums and resins were vital to the econ-
omy of Egypt, where they constituted the ingre-
dients of perfumes, cosmetics, and medicines,
all of which were used in the worship of the
gods, in embalming the dead, as sanitizing and
deodorizing agents, as insect repellents, and for
cleansing the body.
26. killing  Leaving him to die in the pit
would be the same as killing him. It is also possi-
ble that in Reuben’s absence the idea of murder-
ning Joseph had been revived.
covering up his blood  In the language of the
Bible, the blood of a murder victim is said to
“cry out” for justice (see 4:10). Uncovered blood
was a constant reminder of a crime and an in-
citement to revenge.
27. flesh  This is a metaphor for kinship re-
lationship.

agreed  Literally, “heard.” The Hebrew verb
here may connote listening in stony silence as
well as willing assent.
twenty pieces of silver  The 20 shekels is the
average price of a male slave between 15 and 20
years of age (see Lev. 27:5).
to Egypt  They intended to sell him in the
slave market. There is pictorial evidence for the
presence of a brisk trade with Egypt in Asian
slaves.
29. be rent his clothes  This was a sign of
grief. Clearly, Reuben knows nothing about the
sale and believes Joseph to be dead.
30. to his brothers  They had left the scene
after the sale.
is gone  Or “is no more!”—perhaps meaning
that Joseph must be dead.
what am I to do?  An agonized cry. Literally,
“as for me, where can I go?”—to escape my
father’s grief.

Because they will sell Joseph into slavery, Isra-
elites and Egyptians will have food to eat during
the famine.
27. Though Judah saves Joseph’s life with
this suggestion, the Sages condemn him. One is
not to be praised merely for being less wicked
than one’s companions [BT Sanh. 6b].
30. Reuben despairing that despite his best
efforts, Joseph may have died. In fact, Reuben’s
suggestion [v. 22] saved his life. Often, we de-
spair that the good deeds we have done have
made no difference, when in fact they have
made a great difference (S’fat Emet).
31. Jacob, who had deceived his father with
goatskins and borrowed clothing (Gen. 27:15–
16), is deceived by his children with stolen
clothing and goat’s blood. Maimonides sug-
gests that the goat sent to destruction in the
a kid, and dipped the tunic in the blood. They had the ornamented tunic taken to their father, and they said, “We found this. Please examine it; is it your son’s tunic or not?” He recognized it, and said, “My son’s tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!”  

34 Jacob rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days. All his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, “No, I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol.” Thus his father bewailed him.

36 The Midianites, meanwhile, sold him in

32. ornamented That distinctive feature is what establishes for Jacob the identity of its owner.

and they said The brothers now use the explanation they originally had planned to use (Gen. 37:20).

is it your son’s tunic It is not the brothers who ask this, but those with whom they sent the tunic.

33. He recognized it Jacob becomes aware of the full horror of the situation only in stages. First he recognizes the tunic. Then its bloody and tattered condition leads him to infer that a wild beast had devoured his son. Then he has a vivid mental image of his beloved Joseph actually being torn to pieces.

Joseph was torn by a beast Jacob has been maneuvered into uttering the very words the brothers originally had planned to say (v. 20).

34. rent his clothes A symbol of grief. See Comment to verse 29.

sackcloth The wearing of sackcloth, a coarse material probably made of goat hair or camel hair, is another symbol of grief.

many days His inconsolable sorrow was no doubt intensified by feelings of guilt at having sent Joseph alone on such a long and perilous journey.

35. daughters Both his daughter Dinah and his daughters-in-law.

go down mourning That is, he never will cease to mourn until the day of his death.

Sheol This is the most frequently used term in biblical Hebrew for the abode of the spirits of the dead. The region was imagined as situated deep beneath the earth, enclosed with gates. It was a place of unrelieved gloom and silence; it received everyone, good and bad, great and small. All were equal there, and none who entered it could leave. There is no concept of “heaven” and “hell” in the Hebrew Bible.

36. the Midianites In 39:1, those who sell Joseph are called “Ishmaelites.”

Potiphar The name of Joseph’s master is almost identical with that of his future father-in-law, Poti-pherah (41:45). This latter name has been explained as the Egyptian Pa-di-pa-re, meaning “he whom Re (the sun god) has given.”

courtier The term translated as “courtier” (sarîs) means “the one at the head,” that is, a high officer of the realm.

chief steward The literal meaning of the word translated as “steward” (tabbâḥ) is either “cook” or “slaughterer” (i.e., executioner). The full title refers to persons attached to the services of nobles, princes, and kings.

wilderness on Yom Kippur is meant to be an atonement for the sin of hatred of one Israelite for another (Guide III:46).

35. he refused to be comforted Was this because he felt guilty for having sent Joseph on that doomed mission [Gen. R. 84:13]? Or was it because at some level he intuited that Joseph might still be alive [Gen. R. 84:21]? The Hebrew word translated as “to be comforted” (ḥîtnâhem) is reflexive, he refused to comfort himself.
Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward.

38 About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. 3 She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. 5 Once again she

JUDAH AND TAMAR (38:1–30)

The story of Joseph is interrupted by a narrative about Judah. Modern scholars point out that although the Joseph narratives describe the rise of Joseph, they also subtly register the ascendency of Judah, the fourth son, over Reuben, the firstborn. Two kingdoms resulted from God’s promises to Abraham (17:6) and to Jacob (35:11): Judah became the name of the southern kingdom, and the northern kingdom of Israel became known as Joseph (Zech. 10:6). This chapter alludes to the future Joseph–Judah polarity in the history of the people Israel (see 1 Chron. 5:1–2).

JUDAH’S MARRIAGE (vv. 1–5)

1. left his brothers The literal meaning of the word translated here as “left” (va-yeireh) is “went down from,” that is, from the hill country of Hebron (Gen. 37:12, 14).

Adullamite A man of the city of Adullam, which is in the northern sector of the Judean lowland, about 9 miles (14.4 km) northeast of modern Beit Guvrin.

2. Canaanite The wife herself is identified as a Canaanite in 1 Chron. 2:3. Simeon also had a Canaanite wife. In both cases, the foreign woman is absorbed into the Israelite tribe. Conscious of the later prohibition on intermarriage with Canaanites (Deut. 7:1, 3), traditional Jewish commentators have understood the word for “Canaanite” (kan ani) here in the sense of “merchant.”

daughter . . . Shua The daughter’s name is not recorded. She is called “Shua’s daughter” (bat-shua) in Gen. 38:12. In 1 Chron. 2:3 she is called “Bat-Shua the Canaanite woman.”

3. he named him In some manuscripts, as well as in the Samaritan version and in an Aramaic translation, the reading here is “she named”—that is, the mother named all three sons.

Er No interpretation is given for the names of Judah’s sons. Er probably was understood to mean “watchful, vigilant.”

4. Onan This possibly was understood to mean “vigorous.”

We can never truly comfort a mourner, even when we have known a similar loss. We can only surround the mourners with a sense of being cared about, in the hope that this will bring them to the point of comforting themselves (Hirsch).

CHAPTER 38

What is this story doing here, interrupting the Joseph narrative? There are thematic connections and there are parallels of language [e.g., “examine it/these,” hakker na, in 37:32 and 38:25]. Another connection is suggested by a midrash. It imagines God saying to Judah, “How could you have done such a thing to your father? Don’t you realize how a parent feels when a child dies? You will come to know that feeling” (Tanh.).

1. Judah left his brothers He left either out of feelings of guilt for what he had done with Joseph, or because his brothers blamed him (Tanh. B.).
bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

6Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. 7But Er, Judah’s first-born, was displeasing to the Lord, and the Lord took his life. 8Then Judah said to Onan, “Join with your brother’s wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother.” 9But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother’s wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. 10What he did was displeasing to the Lord, and He took his life also. 11Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Stay as a widow in your father’s

5. Shelah Perhaps this means “drawn out” (namely, out of the womb).

Chezib Elsewhere this city is called Achzib. It was situated in the territory of Judah, southwest of Adullam.

THE LEVIRATE OBLIGATION (vv. 6–11)

6. got a wife Judah, the father, selects a bride for his son, as was the custom in biblical times.

Tamar The word means “a palm tree.”

7. displeasing The text does not specify the sin.

8. Join with your brother’s wife The marriage of a man and his brother’s wife is forbidden by the Torah (see Lev. 18:16, 20:21). An exception is made only when a married brother dies without a son. According to Deut. 25:5, the brother of the deceased is obligated to take the widow as his wife. This institution is known in Hebrew as yibbum. In English it is called “levirate marriage” (from Latin levir, “a husband’s brother”).

provide offspring for your brother There was no requirement to name the son of such a union after the dead brother. The child, however, was considered to be the dead man’s heir.

9. would not count as his With the death of the firstborn, Onan stood to inherit one-half of his father’s estate, because his brother left no heir. Should he provide an heir to his brother, however, his own portion would be less.

let it go to waste Literally, “he let it spoil on the ground.” Apparently, there was no provision at that time for the kind of voluntary renunciation of the levirate duty that is permitted in Deut. (25:7–9).

10. What he did was displeasing Onan incurs the anger of God because he evades his obligation to his dead brother, not because of the manner in which he acts. The issue here is the levirate obligation, not birth control.

11. as a widow in your father’s house She was not free to remarry, but she could return to

7. displeasing to the Lord Early levels of the biblical narrative could understand the untimely death of a young person only as being caused by some sin on that person’s part. Otherwise, the world would make no sense. Later in the biblical period, and in the time of the Talmud, a more nuanced, less judgmental approach to misfortune emerges.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH

38:9 let it go to waste Jewish law permits various forms of contraception for medical and other reasons but prefers methods that do not destroy the generative seed (MT Forbidden Intercourse 21:18). Using gametes in infertility treatments does not constitute wasting them.
house until my son Shelah grows up”—for he thought, “He too might die like his brothers.” So Tamar went to live in her father’s house.

12 A long time afterward, Shua’s daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing.” 14 So she took off her widow’s garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. 15 When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. 16 So he turned aside to her by the road and said, “Here, let me sleep with you”—for he did not know that she was his

live with her parents while still subject to the authority of her father-in-law.

for he thought  Judah had no intention of marrying her to Shelah.

THE DECEPTION OF JUDAH  (vv. 12–26)

12. A long time afterward  About one year has elapsed.

died  The death of Judah’s wife is mentioned as an extenuating circumstance to account for his consorting with a harlot.

his period of mourning was over  Literally, “he was comforted.” The official mourning rites had ended.

went up  In contrast to “went down” (Gen. 38:1).

Timmnah  This is west of Beth-Shemesh.

sheepshearers  The shearing season was filled with joy and revelry.

14. her widow’s garb  This was the kind of clothing worn by a widow in mourning.

a veil  Tamar normally was not veiled. She simply wanted to conceal her identity, as is clear from verses 15 and 19.

Enaim  Probably the village Enam in the territory of Judah.

Shelah  Nothing more is reported of him here, but his clan is mentioned in Num. 26:20.

she had not been given  Apparently, Tamar has no claim against Shelah, only against Judah. The responsibility for the enforcement of the levirate obligation here, as in the Hittite and Assyrian laws, seems to have rested with the widow’s father-in-law. Deut. 25:5–10 modified the levirate institution by restricting responsibility to the brothers of the deceased.

Tamar was unafraid to assert herself in the face of social disapproval. Because of this, she is considered to be a heroine, like Ruth, and like Ruth she is worthy of being an ancestress of David.

15. she had covered her face  The narrator, conscious of the contradiction between the moral standards of a later age and the fact that the offspring of Judah’s venture with his daughter-in-law bore no stigma of illegitimacy, is care-

14. Tamar is another in the line of biblical women who long to be mothers and who are rewarded by becoming the mother of a special person [in this case, an ancestor of King David and the messianic line].
daughter-in-law. “What,” she asked, “will you pay for sleeping with me?” He replied, “I will send a kid from my flock.” But she said, “You must leave a pledge until you have sent it.”

And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” She replied, “Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry.” So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow’s garb.

Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. He inquired of the people of that town, “Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?” But they said, “There has been no prostitute here.” So he returned to Judah and said, “I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute here.” Judah said, “Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her.”

About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” As she was being brought out, she

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17. a kid from my flock Judah carried nothing at that moment with which to pay for the woman’s services—a clear indication that he acted on impulse.

a pledge This is security to be held until the fulfillment of the obligation.

18. seal and cord Judah gave Tamar his cylinder seal, a small object made of a hard material and engraved with distinctive ornamentation. Its center was hollowed out and a cord passed through so that it could be worn around the neck. This highly personal object performed the function of a signature in modern society.

staff It must have had some distinguishing sign. Scepter heads, some incised with names, have been discovered over a wide area of the Near East.

20. the woman The relationship was so casual that he had not even bothered to find out her name.

24. Judah was told He had not seen her himself because she had returned to her father’s house (Gen. 38:11).

Bring her out To the city gate, where justice was administered. Judah, as head of the family, exercises his power of life and death here, even though Tamar lives with her parents.

let her be burned The tie between the childless widow and the levir exists automatically from the moment of widowhood. Thus a sexual relationship with anyone other than the levir would be adulterous, an offense punishable by the death penalty, according to Lev. 20:10 and Deut. 22:22.

25. Examine these Tamar, who has maintained her self-restraint until the last moment, confronts Judah with unimpeachable evidence.
sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?” 26Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again.

27When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! 28While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first. 29But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself” So he was named Perez. 30Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah.

Her tactic of indirect accusation results in a minimum of embarrassment and so elicits a noble response.

26. **he was not intimate with her again**

There is a distinction between this incident and the levirate law of Deut. 25:5. There, the widow becomes her brother-in-law’s wife. Here, it would appear that Tamar has only a clear right to conceive a child but no claim on marriage. Again, the present narrative reflects a much earlier society than that of Deuteronomy.

THE BIRTH OF THE TWINS (vv. 27–30)

27. **When the time came . . . twins** Unlike the case with Rebekah (as told in Gen. 25:24), twins apparently were not expected here.

28. **came out first** The narrative seems to echo a history of rivalry between the two clans (see 25:22–23).

29. **she said** That is, the midwife.

29. **breach** From the Hebrew peretz. Perez is the only name in this chapter for which an explanation is given, a fact that reflects the pre-eminence of the Perezite clan within the tribe of Judah. The birth of Perez is taken to be a historic turning point: 10 generations separate him from King David (see Ruth 4:18–22).

30. **he was named** Literally, “he called his name;” that is, Judah did, on the basis of the midwife’s words.

30. **Zerah** No interpretation of the name is given. The Hebrew stem means “brightness,” suggesting an allusion to the crimson thread. The Zerahites were a clan of Judah.
39 When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian, Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there. 2 The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he stayed in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 And when his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord lent success to everything he undertook, 4 he took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned. 5 And from the time

JOSEPH IN POTIPHAR’S HOUSEHOLD (39:1–23)

1. When Joseph  The narrator resumes the story of Joseph, returning to the events in the last verses of chapter 37.

a certain Egyptian  The national identity of Joseph’s master is repeated three times for emphasis (vv. 1, 2, 5), probably because the sale of Joseph into Egyptian slavery sets the stage for the enslavement and redemption of the Israelites. The prophecy to Abraham (15:13) is being fulfilled.

Potiphar  The name and titles of the master are here given to draw attention to the aristocratic nature of the household into which Joseph is sold, a detail essential to the development of the story.

2. The Lord was with Joseph  This crucial phrase appears four times in this chapter. It is intended to impart meaning to events that appear to be merely random. At the same time, it enables the reader to understand how the spoiled lad of 17, alone in a foreign land and in dire adversity, suddenly begins to mature and acquire great strength of character.

a successful man  The phrase expresses the idea that innate gifts of intelligence and skill cannot achieve fruition without divine support.

be stayed in the house  This is the first of four stages in the rise of Joseph; he is not sent to work in the fields.

3. when his master saw  Joseph’s competence in fulfilling his duties—not here specified—is visible proof to the master of divine support for his slave.

4. he took a liking  Literally, “Joseph found favor in his eyes.” He wins the esteem and confidence of his master—the second stage in his rise.

his personal attendant  This is the third stage.

in charge of his household  The fourth and final rung on the ladder of success. Joseph is now overseer of the entire estate, a function fre-
that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed his house for Joseph's sake, so that the blessing of the Lord was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside. He left all that he had in Joseph's hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome.

After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused. He said to his master's wife, "Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands." He wields no more for Joseph's high position to be accepted by him as normal and routine.

5. the Lord blessed God brought great prosperity to the master.
in the house and outside Literally, "in the house and in the field." The phrase is a figure of speech that combines two contrasting elements to express totality.

6. in Joseph's hands Joseph has now reached the pinnacle of his career as a servant.
the food that he ate Egyptians did not eat with strangers (43:32). Thus early commentators understood the phrase as a euphemism for "wife."

well built and handsome No other male is so described in Scripture. Its insertion here serves solely to introduce the next episode.

THE ATTEMPTED SEDUCTION (vv. 7–20)

7. After a time Sufficient time has elapsed to the enticements of Potiphar's wife when the image of his father appears before him and strengthens his resolve to say no [BT Sot. 36b]. Although Jacob had schemed and cheated when he was young, he never was guilty of sexual impropriety. The cantillation note for the word translated as "but he refused" [va-y'maen] is the rare note "shalshellet," which appears only four times in the Torah. It is a waver, back-and-forth note, suggesting indecision and ambivalence on Joseph's part.

6. Joseph was well built and handsome He inherited his good looks from his mother, Rachel, who is described in identical Hebrew terms in Gen. 29:17. The Midrash pictures Joseph as immersed in vanity and concerned with his appearance. This prompted God to say, "Your father is grieving and you comport yourself thus!" Immediately, his good looks get him into trouble and cause him to be cast into prison (Tanh.).

8. The Sages imagine Joseph about to yield to his master's wife. She remains nameless.
cast her eyes upon With longing, lasciviously. There is irony here. The mistress of the house has become a slave to her lust for her husband's slave.

Lie with me There are no preliminaries, no words of love. Her demand reflects her awareness of Joseph's slave status.

8. he refused Sexual promiscuity was commonplace in all slave societies, and an ambitious person might have considered that the woman was presenting him with a chance to advance his personal interests.

He said to his master's wife Joseph explains his personal reasons for refusing her advances. First he points to the abuse of trust that would be involved, then to the violation of the husband's proprietary rights over his wife, then to the religious and moral nature of the offense.

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9. **you are his wife** The second of these reasons reflects pagan legal theory that adultery was largely a private injury, an affront and indignity to the husband.

**and sin before God** The third line of argument conforms to the Israelite concept of morality as having its source and sanction in divine will, not in social convention or utilitarian considerations.

10. **she coax** She does not reply to Joseph's arguments and attempts to wear down his resistance.

11. **into the house** Literally, “into the interior of the house.”

**to do his work** Early commentators have Joseph attending to his master's accounts.

**there inside** In that part of the house. Servants were present elsewhere (v. 14).

12. **she caught hold** Her pleas having failed to achieve their end, she resorts to physical aggression.

**garment** The loose-fitting outer garment of the well-to-do.

**got away and fled** Literally, “he fled (va-yatnos) and went out (va-yetzai) to the outside.” The first verb describes his abrupt withdrawal from the room; the second suggests the assumption of a normal gait, once outside, in order not to attract attention.

13. **When she saw** She must have been stricken with terror over the possibility of the truth getting out. Furious over having been refused, she was hungry for revenge.

14. **to her servants** Literally, “the people of her house,” who were in another part of the building.

**Look** She may have held up the coat for all to see.

**be had to bring** She is referring to her husband.

**a Hebrew** There is a clear derogatory intent here. In addressing her domestics, who are probably Egyptians, she appeals to their instinctive suspicion of foreigners, who were looked down on by the Egyptians.

**to dally** The Hebrew stem translated here as “dally” (דַּלְּלָה) can also mean “to mock us, insult us.”

**I screamed** The scream was regarded as evidence of resistance to attempted rape. Hence it was a sign of innocence. She knows that none of those to whom she speaks had been close enough to hear her (v. 11).

12. Once again, a distinctive garment gets Joseph into difficulty. Once again, as in Gen. 37:23, he is stripped of his garment and thrown into a pit.
15. with me The same phraseology as in the report to her husband (v. 18), but she avoids mentioning that the garment was left in her hand (vv. 12, 13).  

and fled outside See Comment to 39:12. Again she is cautious in her formulation, because someone might have seen Joseph leaving her room and walking normally.  

16. his master Not “her husband,” because it was in the capacity of slave master that she would confront him.  

17. Hebrew slave This time she emphasizes Joseph’s slave status.  

into our house She does not repeat to her husband the charge of attempted rape, an omission that probably saved Joseph from the executioner.  

20. But even while Here in prison Joseph is at the lowest point of his fortunes. According to Psalms (105:17–18), his feet were fettered and an iron collar was put around his neck.  

21. The chief jailer The jailer who is responsible to the chief steward.  

22. The chief jailer He assigns Joseph duties not here specified.

19. he was furious With Joseph? Or with his wife, whom he suspected of fabricating her story (Gen. R. 87:9)? If Potiphar believed his wife’s account, it seems strange that Joseph’s punishment was only imprisonment in a facility for high-ranking offenders.
were in that prison, and he was the one to carry out everything that was done there. The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the LORD was with him, and whatever he did the LORD made successful.

40 Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord the king of Egypt. 2Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, 3and put them in custody, in the house of the chief steward, in the same prison house where Joseph was confined. 4The chief steward assigned Joseph to them, and he attended them.

When they had been in custody for some time, 5both of them—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—dreamed in the same night, each his own dream and each dream with its own meaning. 6When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were distraught. 7He asked Pharaoh’s courtiers, who were with

JOSEPH IN PRISON (40:1–23)

1. Some time later  Joseph is now 28 years old; 11 years have gone by since his sale into slavery. There is no way of knowing how many of those years he spent in the service of Potiphar and how many in prison.

the cupbearer and the baker  The following verse identifies them as the chief officials of their professions in the royal household. The cupbearer, who is crucial to the narrative, is always mentioned first. Because he personally served wine to the king, he was an important official in the royal court. Ancient Egyptian documents attest to the wealth and power of such officials.

gave offense  The details, being irrelevant to the narrative, are ignored.

3. in custody  That is, in detention pending final disposition of their case.

4. The chief steward  Joseph’s own master, on whose estate the prison was situated.

for some time  The Hebrew word yamim may indicate either indefinite time or “a year.”

5. both of them  On the subject of dreams, see the Comment to Gen. 37:9. In this case, the two dreams are needed to establish Joseph’s reputation as an interpreter of dreams.

each dream with its own meaning  Literally, “each according to the interpretation of his dream.” The Hebrew can be taken to mean that the interpretation turned out to be appropriate to the content or that each dreamed as if his dream were a prediction.

6. distraught  The anxiety normally brought on by dreams is intensified for the prisoners by the uncertainty of their fate and because they are being denied access to a professional dream interpreter. The odd coincidence of the two officials having simultaneous dreams no doubt heightens their tension.
him in custody in his master’s house, saying, “Why do you appear downcast today?” 8 And they said to him, “We had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.” So Joseph said to them, “Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams].”

9 Then the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph. He said to him, “In my dream, there was a vine in front of me. 10 On the vine were three branches. It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms and its clusters ripened into grapes. 11 Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand.” 12 Joseph said to him, “This is its interpretation: The three branches are three days. 13 In three days Pharaoh will pardon you and restore you to your post; you will place Pharaoh’s cup in his hand, as was your custom formerly when you were his cupbearer. 14 But think of me when all is well with you again, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. 15 For in truth, I was kidnapped from the land of the Egyptians to Pharaoh’s house.

8. there is no one  Here in prison.
Tell me “And perhaps God will reveal the meaning to me,” implies Joseph.

THE CUPBEARER’S DREAM (vv. 9–15)

9. The chief cupbearer told his dream The dream is recounted in a rapid series of scenes: the grape-growing season, the production process, the serving of the finished wine.

12. This is its interpretation Joseph deciphers the dream by a scheme of equivalences. The rapidity of the action suggests imminent fulfillment. The recurrence of the number three (three days, three branches, three stages of growth, three actions performed) and the fact that both “Pharaoh” and his “cup” are mentioned three times, all indicate specifically three days.

13. pardon you Literally, “lift up your head,” that is, you will regain your dignity and honor.

14. this place The word translated here as “place” (bayit) means “house.” Here it is short for beit ha-sofar, “prison,” or “the house of my master” (v. 7, 41:10). The professional diviner and dream interpreter expected to be paid for his services. Joseph, therefore, feels free to request a personal favor instead.

15. kidnapped Joseph is referring to the events in 37:28,36, stating in effect that it was the Midianites, not his brothers, who drew him up from the pit. He may have put it this way,
Hebrews; nor have I done anything here that they should have put me in the dungeon.”

16 When the chief baker saw how favorably he had interpreted, he said to Joseph, “In my dream, similarly, there were three openwork baskets on my head. 17 In the uppermost basket were all kinds of food for Pharaoh that a baker prepares; and the birds were eating it out of the basket above my head." 18 Joseph answered, “This is its interpretation: The three baskets are three days. 19 In three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale you upon a pole; and the birds will pick off your flesh.”

20 On the third day—his birthday—Pharaoh made a banquet for all his officials, and he singled out his chief cupbearer and his chief though, because he was ashamed to tell others that his own brothers had sold him into slavery.

land of the Hebrews That is, the land in which the Hebrews sojourn, either Canaan or the Hebron area in which they were concentrated and were buried.

nor have I done anything Joseph assures the cupbearer that he would be intervening on behalf of an innocent man.

dungeon The word bor means “pit,” another term for “prison,” deriving from the subterranean nature of the place of detention (see 38:24).

THE BAKER’S DREAM (vv. 16–19)

16. openwork The Hebrew term for this (bori) has been explained as “a hole” or “white.” Here it describes either the baskets—"perforated,” “wickerwork”—or their contents, “white bread.”

on my head Repeated in verse 17 and of special significance for the interpretation.

17. uppermost basket The contents of only this basket are described because it was the one accessible to the birds.

all kinds The dream reflects Egyptian foods. No less than 57 varieties of bread and 38 different types of cake are known from hieroglyphic texts.

birds The baker has neither the strength nor the presence of mind to drive them away—an ominous detail.

18. This is its interpretation Joseph notes that, unlike the cupbearer, the baker in his dream does not prepare the delicacies himself; nor does he personally serve Pharaoh. In fact, the food does not even reach Pharaoh, for it is eaten by the birds.

19. will lift off your head The idiom “to raise the head” (רש פנים) has the meaning of “call to account” or “bring to justice.”

impale you Impaling, not hanging, was a widely used mode of execution in the ancient Near East.

pick off your flesh The ancient Egyptians paid special attention to the preservation of the body after death. Hence, the punishment foretold here is particularly loathsome.

FULFILLMENT AND DISAPPOINTMENT (vv. 20–23)

baker from among his officials. 21He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand; 22but the chief baker he impaled—just as Joseph had interpreted to them.

23Yet the chief cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him.

22. just as Joseph had interpreted  The narration uses the very words of Joseph to indicate the precision with which his predictions were fulfilled.

23. did not think of Joseph; he forgot him  The negative–positive wording is idiomatic and simply means “he completely forgot him.”

23. The chief cupbearer finds himself so busy dealing with important and demanding people that he forgets his anonymous prison- mate until the circumstances of the next chapter lead him to remember. Perhaps because the chief cupbearer believed that he was innocent and deserved to be released, he minimized his obligation to Joseph.
This haftarah elaborates on the wrongs of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II (784–748 B.C.E.) and calls the people to account for their deeds. The prophet Amos thunders against the transgressions of Israel, denouncing their economic greed and their desecrations. The nation will pay the penalty.

The haftarah opens with a strong indictment of the northern kingdom of Israel for its transgressions. The passages that precede the haftarah indict six surrounding nations (Amos 1:3–2:3) as well as the southern kingdom of Judah (2:4–5). In the case of the nations and Judah, God will send a devouring fire against transgressors. The indictment against the northern kingdom of Israel emphasizes that punishment on the day of doom is inescapable (2:14–16), with no mention of fire. Also distinctive is the fact that the indictment against foreigners is for breach of international commitments, not for transgressions of divine law—as is the case with Judah and Israel.

The opening list of Israel’s crimes focuses on their unethical nature, particularly their expression of corruption and greed. Hence the references to matters such as reclining (at altars) on garments taken in pledge, and drinking (in the temple of the Lord) wine bought with money from imposed fines do not describe religious transgressions per se. There is nothing inherently wrong with lying on garments or drinking wine in the environs of a shrine (presumably during pilgrimages and family sacrifices). It is rather the people’s utter disregard of how they attained these objects that raises the prophet’s ire. Amos is against oppression, first and foremost; but he is also against all types of blind formalism, in the realms of civil law and cultic behavior.

God’s arraignment of the nation’s faithlessness is juxtaposed to acts of divine beneficence in the wilderness (Amos 2:9–10). Later prophets, like Jeremiah, also refer to divine guidance and favor in the past as a counterpoint to the nation’s failure to reciprocate with loyalty (cf. Jer. 2:4–8, 9–12). Amos specifically refers to the Exodus (in 3:1) as a prelude to a demand of accountability: “You alone have I singled out (ydati) / Of all the families of the earth— / That is why I will call you to account / For all your iniquities” (3:2). The implications of the verb yadati suggest that Israel’s singular status goes beyond the deliverance from Egypt. The verb yadati means literally “I have known.” It was used as a technical term for recognition of partners in ancient Near Eastern treaties. This suggests that God alludes here to the covenantal chooseness of Israel. It was because of this relationship, then, not only because of the Exodus, that the people are held liable for their iniquities.

The rhetorical touch is deft. The image of the lion’s roar is found at the beginning of Amos as well as at the beginning of this rhetorical chain (3:4). As his opening word to the people, breaking the silence of their complacency, Amos proclaimed that “the Lord roars from Zion” and that “the pastures of the shepherds shall languish” (1:2).

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

Amos mentions the crime of both “father and son” going “to the same girl” (2:6–7). Readers of the parashah will call to mind Judah, who had intercourse with his son’s wife Tamar (Gen. 38).

Verbal congruity also links the sale of Joseph by his brothers in the parashah with Amos’s condemnation of unjust practices in the haftarah. In the former, the sons of Jacob “sold (va-yimk’ru) Joseph for twenty pieces of silver (kesef) to the Ishmaelites” (Gen. 37:28). According to the latter, the unjust “have sold [mikra] for silver [baksef] / Those whose cause was just [tsaddik, an
innocent person], / And the needy for a pair of sandals” (Amos 2:6). These similarities suggest that Amos not only rebuked his contemporaries for their immoral practices but also alluded to the grave sin of their ancestors in patriarchal times.

Rabbinic interpretations of the sale of Joseph led to a midrash known as Eilleh Ezk’rah (These I Recall). In its view, 10 sages whom the Roman occupation put to death were an atonement for the long-ago crime of the 10 brothers who sold Joseph into slavery. A poetic version of this midrash is included in the Musaf service of Yom Kippur. According to that text, the Roman governor tells the scholars about their ancestors “who sold their brother . . . for a pair of sandals” and condemns them to death as vicarious punishment, complying with Exod. 21:16 (“He who kidnaps a man . . . shall be put to death”). The divine words in Amos, declaring that the punishment for selling a tzaddik would not be revoked, may have contributed to the notion that the ancient crime of the brothers needed atonement. According to one midrashic tradition, although the penalty was paid by the 10 martyrs of old, the sin is required “in every generation” and “is still pending.”

2

Thus said the LORD:  
For three transgressions of Israel,  
For four, I will not revoke it:  
Because they have sold for silver  
Those whose cause was just,  
And the needy for a pair of sandals.  
7[Ah,] you who trample the heads of the poor  
Into the dust of the ground,  
And make the humble walk a twisted course!  
Father and son go to the same girl,  
And thereby profane My holy name.  
8They take in pledge, on garments taken in pledge, and make the humble walk a twisted course

Amos 2:6–7. For three transgressions . . .

For four The graded sequence in these two verses constitutes a rhetorical pattern that is preceded by seven other examples in Amos 1:3–2:5. This structuring device, with a pattern of three elements climaxed by a fourth element also appears in the oracles of Balaam (Num. 23–24), the temptations of Samson (Judg. 16:6–20), and the disasters of Job (Job 1:14–19).

sold for silver Either the bribery of judges (Ibn Ezra) or the sale of persons into debt bondage on false charges.

And the needy for a pair of sandals This clause is linked to the preceding clause stylistically. Once more the charge seems to be some type of corruption.

And make the humble walk a twisted course

Rashi understands the phrase to mean that the weak turn from their path to a twisted one out of fear.

profane My holy name Hebrew: hallel et shem kodshi. In the later speeches of Ezekiel (20:39; 36:20–22) and in the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26; see 20:3, 22:2,32), this expression refers to cultic offenses that desecrate God’s name; whereas in Amos, the expression appears in the context of moral perversions. In classical rabbinic sources, the desecration of God’s name (hilul ha-shem) has a larger sense—the result of disgracing the Jewish religion through acts of immorality and falsehood.

8. garments taken in pledge This prohibi-
And drink in the House of their God
Wine bought with fines they imposed.

9 Yet I
Destroyed the Amorite before them,
Whose stature was like the cedar’s
And who was stout as the oak,
Destroying his boughs above
And his trunk below!

10 And I
Brought you up from the land of Egypt
And led you through the wilderness forty years,
To possess the land of the Amorite!

11 And I raised up prophets from among your sons
And nazirites from among your young men.
Is that not so, O people of Israel?
   —says the Lord.

12 But you made the nazirites drink wine
And ordered the prophets not to prophesy.

13 Ah, I will slow your movements
As a wagon is slowed
When it is full of cut grain.

14 Flight shall fail the swift,
The strong shall find no strength,
And the warrior shall not save his life.

15 The bowman shall not hold his ground,
And the fleet-footed shall not escape,
Nor the horseman save his life.

16 Even the most stouthearted warrior

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Shall run away unarmed that day—declares the Lord.

Hear this word, O people of Israel,
That the Lord has spoken concerning you,
Concerning the whole family that I brought up from the land of Egypt:
2You alone have I singled out
Of all the families of the earth—
That is why I will call you to account
For all your iniquities.

3Can two walk together Without having met?
4Does a lion roar in the forest When he has no prey?
Does a great beast let out a cry from its den Without having made a capture?
5Does a bird drop on the ground—in a trap—
With no snare there?
Does a trap spring up from the ground Unless it has caught something?
6When a ram’s horn is sounded in a town, Do the people not take alarm?
Can misfortune come to a town If the Lord has not caused it?
7Indeed, my Lord God does nothing Without having revealed His purpose To His servants the prophets.
8A lion has roared, Who can but fear? My Lord God has spoken, Who can but prophesy?

Amos 3:3–8. This unit legitimates Amos’s prophetic word. He will speak because he must. His final words, “Who can but prophesy?” (mi lo yinnavei), contrast sharply with the earlier charge that the people “ordered earlier prophets not to prophesy” (lo tinnaynu). The unit thus also functions to distinguish Amos from earlier prophets. He will not be silenced.