

Vayeishev

9th of 54 sedras; 9th of 12 in B'reishit

Written on 190 lines, ranks 28th

4 Parshiyot; 3 open, 1 closed

112 p'sukim - ranks 24th (8th)

tied with Matot; more words & letters than it, same line count

1558 words - ranks 24th (8th) tied with Vayakhel; fewer p'sukim & letters than it. Vayakhel is 20 lines longer

5972 letters - ranks 24th (8th) tied with D'varim; more p'sukim & words than it, but fewer lines

Only sedra tied with others in all 3 categories.

MITZVOT

No mitzvot are counted from Vayeishev. One of 17 sedras without mitzvot.

[P> X:Y (Z)] and [S> X:Y (Z)] indicate start of a parsha p'tucha or s'tuma. X:Y is Perek:Pasuk of the beginning of the parsha; (Z) is the number of p'sukim in the parsha.

Kohen - First Aliya

11 p'sukim - 37:1-11

[P> 37:1 (36)] Yaakov has spent years away from home and now has returned. The Torah indicates that it is through Yosef that Yaakov's legacy continues.

17 year old Yosef brings bad reports about his brothers to Yaakov. Yaakov loves Yosef above his brothers and gives him a special (striped, colorful) coat. As a result, the brothers hate Yosef and cannot talk civilly to him. Yosef's two dreams (and especially, his telling his brothers about them) increases their hatred and jealousy, and this alarms Yaakov.

SDT These are the TO-L'DOT of Yaakov: Yosef... Should not the Torah have started with Reuven? This comes to show us, says the Gemara, that Yosef should have been Yaakov's firstborn, but G-d's mercy for Leah put her before Rachel in giving birth.

SDT Talmud Yerushalmi wonders what Yosef reported about the brothers to Yaakov. R. Meir says, that they ate "limb from a living animal"; R. Yehuda says that they belittled the sons of Bilha and Zilpa and mistreated them; R. Shimon says that they cast their gaze upon the local women. R. Yehuda b. Pazi quotes the pasuk from Mishlei: "The scales and weighing stones of justice are HaShem's..." (the name-pasuk for Pinchas, by the way), meaning that a person is punished (or

rewarded) measure for measure - MIDA K'NEGED MIDA. (Sources explain that the brothers did not do these things; Yosef misinterpreted what he saw.) In Yosef's case, the slaughter of a goat was instrumental in his abduction and the deception of his father; he was belittled and enslaved; he was accused of immoral behavior with Potifar's wife.

The first dream was of his brother's sheaves of wheat bowing to his sheaf. Yosef's second dream, of the Sun, Moon, and stars bowing to him, added fuel to his brothers' hatred. Yaakov pointed out the absurdity of the dream, since Rachel, the Moon, had already died and would therefore not be bowing to Yosef.

Rashi says 2 different things:

(1) The dream was referring to Bilha who raised Yosef in Rachel's absence; and (2) even "true" dreams have an element of nonsense. These seem to be mutually exclusive statements - if the Moon represents Bilha, then the dream contained no nonsense. Yaakov seems to have purposely voiced the second option in order to diffuse some of the brothers' anger.

SDT Why did the scholars of Bavel dress up so grandly? - The Gemara in Shabbat asks. And it answers that they were not "Bnei Torah". External polish to compensate for internal lack. Says the Chatam Sofer, Yaakov gave Yosef a fancy coat so that the brothers would NOT be jealous of him, that they would view Yaakov's pampering of Yosef as a sign of Yosef's inferiority. Others

suggest that the brothers were supposed to realize that the special treatment of Yosef was because his mother had died, and they should be sympathetic, rather than jealous. (P.S. Sadly, this tactic most often fails.)

SDT The Gemara in Masechet Shabbat says, in the name of R' Chama b. Guriya in the name of Rav, that a person should never favor one child among his children, because it was a little bit of cloth that aroused jealousy of the brothers for Yosef and that it brought the whole family down to Egypt. Parents and grandparents (aunts and uncles too) have to be very careful not to cause jealousy among siblings to rear its ugly head. This does not necessarily mean identical presents and treatment, but it means thinking carefully and acting wisely.

Although Vayeishev is associated with Chanuka, there is an interesting connection between the sedra and Pesach. (And, since one stanza of Ma'oz Tzur is about our Egyptian experience, there is already a connection between Chanuka and Pesach.) K'TONET PASIM, the coat which Yaakov gave to Yosef, the coat that caused the brothers to be jealous of Yosef, is described differently in various sources. Rashi links the term PASIM to the colorful dyed wool known as KARPAS. Okay, there is a Pesach connection, but what's the point? The point is that KARPAS - in addition to many other symbolisms and thought-triggering reminders - reminds us of the coat which caused the jealousy which led to the sale of Yosef into Egypt which subsequently

brought Yaakov and the whole family down to Egypt and into oppression and slavery. On the night we celebrate our redemption from Egypt, we give more than a passing thought to that which brought us down to Egypt in the first place. This is a heavy, serious task for a tiny piece of celery which has already reminded us of so much.

(And there is also a connection between the KOS PAR'O mentioned by the Wine Steward and the 4 cups of wine at the Seder.)

Levi - Second Aliya 11 p'sukim - 37:12-22

The brothers are tending sheep near Sh'chem. Yaakov sends Yosef to them. A stranger (some say, the angel Gavriel) helps him find them.

In the whole story of Yosef and his brothers, one can see that G-d has a plan which proceeds with the unknowing help of the brothers and other individuals. And yet, each person involved acts of his own free will, and is therefore accountable for his actions.

When the brothers see Yosef coming, they (some say, Shimon and Levi) suggest killing him. Reuven talks them out of it by suggesting that they not spill his blood, but throw him into a pit instead. The Torah testifies that Reuven really intended to save Yosef.

A point must be made about the concluding pasuk of this Aliya, which gives credit to Reuven for saving Yosef. Commentaries say that Reuven could

have talked the brothers out of the whole thing; instead, he suggested the snake- and scorpion-infested pit. And, Yosef wasn't saved. Nonetheless, Reuven is credited for his intention to save Yosef.

Rashi says that Reuven truly intended to come back and save Yosef - that's good - but his reason was that he, as oldest, would be blamed for anything that happened to Yosef - not a nice reason. Nonetheless, he gets the credit for the good deed he planned on doing - even though it wasn't accomplished AND even though his motives were not pure. This gives us something to think about. How much credit must there be for proper motives, and for actual success.

Shlishi - Third Aliya 14 p'sukim - 37:23-36

When Yosef arrives, the brothers remove his coat and throw him into a deep pit. The brothers sit to eat. (This is considered a sign of callousness towards their brother and what they have done.) When a Ishmaelite caravan approaches, Yehuda suggests that it would be wrong to kill Yosef (Reuven's intentions notwithstanding, the brothers expected Yosef to die in the pit); they should rather get rid of him by selling him into slavery. Through a series of transactions, Yosef ends up in Egypt as a slave to Potifar. When Reuven returns to the scene and discovers Yosef missing, he rends his garment and expresses his

distress to the others. The brothers slaughter a goat, smear Yosef's multi-colored, striped coat in its blood, and send it to Yaakov to identify.

SDT Commentaries point out that just as Yaakov had deceived his father with a goat and a garment (goat & coat), so too was he deceived with a goat and a garment. The dish prepared by Rivka for Yaakov to serve his father was made from goat-meat. Rivka dressed Yaakov in goat-skins and in Eisav's special garment (which some say was stolen/taken from Nimrod and that it was the original leather garment that G-d had made for Adam and Chava). The brothers took Yosef's special garment - the K'tonet Pasim - and smeared it with goat's blood. This is a stark example of "Mida k'neged mida" - measure for measure, as mentioned earlier.

Yaakov is inconsolable. (This is considered an indication that Yaakov subconsciously knew that Yosef was alive; one naturally accepts consolation for the dead after a time, but not for the missing - think about the families of Israel's missing soldiers; we cannot even imagine their anguish.)

Because of Yosef's story, Vayeishev is designated each year as SHABBAT SH'VUYEI V'NE'EDAREI TZAHA"L - the Shabbat for Israel's captives and missing.

SDT Rashi gives us another aspect of the "Measure for Measure" punishment of Yaakov. The pasuk says that he "mourned for his son MANY DAYS."

Rashi says that it was 22 years! Yosef was 17 when he was sold. He was 30 when he stood before Par'o. That's 13. Seven years of plenty and the first two years of famine before father and son were reunited. That makes 22 years that Yaakov was without Yosef. This, says Rashi, is the exact length of time that Yaakov was away from Yitzchak. It includes the 20 years with Lavan, a year and a half in Sukkot, and six months in Beit El before Yaakov returned to his father's house. Remember that Yaakov had various good excuses, nonetheless...

The measure for measure idea continues to the next generation. Baal HaTurim points out that just as Yehuda asked his father HAKEIR NA, recognize this garment as Yosef's, so too was he asked HAKEIR NA by his daughter-in-law Tamar. He was deceived exactly the way he deceived Yaakov. And there was a goat and garment in the Yehuda-Tamar story too. See further.

R'vi'i - Fourth Aliya 30 p'sukim - 38:1-30

[P> 38:1 (30)] Subsequently, Yehuda leaves home and befriends an Adullamite named CHIRA.

SDT Why is the story of Yosef interrupted to tell us about Yehuda's situation?

Rashi tells us that Yehuda was no longer looked up to by his brothers. After they saw the terrible effect on Yaakov of the Yosef business, they blamed Yehuda for not talking them

out of the whole idea. Hence the term "And Yehuda went down from his brothers" has a double meaning.

There he meets and marries the daughter of Shu'a, who bears him three sons. He marries off his eldest, Er, to Tamar. When Er dies, the next brother Onan, marries his brother's widow, Yibum-style. The Torah tells us that Onan refused to have a child with Tamar, because that child would "belong" (so to speak) to Er. This, G-d took seriously (so to speak) and Onan also dies. Tamar is left to wait for the third son, Shela (for Yibum).

Some time later, Yehuda's wife dies. Yehuda travels to the area where Tamar lives. When she hears of his impending arrival and realizes that she has not been given to Shela yet, she disguises herself. Yehuda, thinking she is a prostitute, sleeps with her. She asks and receives three items as security to guarantee that he will send her payment (a goat). When it becomes known that Tamar is pregnant, Yehuda is summoned. Assuming that she has acted sinfully, he is prepared to have her punished. Tamar produces the three items and announces that she is pregnant by their owner.

Commentaries explain that prior to Matan Torah, any close relative could take the childless wife of the deceased; after the Torah was given, only a brother qualifies for YIBUM.

Yehuda recognizes that he is the guilty one, not Tamar, and he admits it. She

gives birth to twins (one extending his hand first, the other actually being born first). They are named Peretz (ancestor of King David) and Zerach.

Note the repeat of the confused first-born theme. It pervades the Book of B'reishit.

OBSERVATION: Yaakov deceives his father with a garment (Eisav's) and fans the jealousy of his son's against Yosef with the "coat of many colors". He is deceived (and devastated) by that same coat when the brothers bring it back to him all bloodied. Yehuda is "troubled" by his garment which he gave to Tamar as one of the three securities for his promise to pay her with goats. (P'tilim, says Rashi, refers to Yehuda's cloak.) Yosef, the victim (but not completely free of guilt in the matter) has his coat grabbed by Potifar's wife. Yosef leaves it in her hands as he runs from the house; the coat becomes the damning piece of evidence against him. Interesting, no?

Chamishi 5th Aliya 6 p'sukim - 39:1-6

[S> 39:1 (23)] In "meanwhile back at the ranch" style, the Torah returns us to the story of Yosef. Yosef serves in Potifar's house and brings success to his master. He is well-liked by all, and is given much responsibility. Then the Torah makes a point of telling us that Yosef was very handsome.

SDT The Midrash says that Yosef was aware of his looks and became too

comfortable in Potifar's house. Things were going well, he had good food and drink, and he began "curling his hair". G-d (so to speak) said to Yosef: Your father is in agony over your disappearance and supposed demise and you are enjoying yourself? I shall make things rough for you too.

SDT The portion of Yosef in Potifar's house is juxtaposed to the episode of Yehuda and Tamar, and is further linked because the parsha of Yosef is S'tuma, meaning it continues on the same line (in a Sefer Torah) as the previous parsha (Yehuda & Tamar) ends. The standard explanation is that the sale of Yosef caused Yehuda to lose the respect of his brothers. Rashi gives another, intriguing, explanation. He says that it is to equate Tamar and Potifar's wife - both of whom acted "for the sake of Heaven". Potifar's wife, says Rashi, saw via astrology that she was destined to have descendants who came from Yosef. She thought that she was the one to produce them and so she tried to seduce him. She was just a bit off; it was, in fact, her daughter As'nat who would bear Yosef's children. Close, but no cigar.

Shishi - Sixth Aliya 17 p'sukim - 39:7-23

Potifar's wife casts her eye upon Yosef. She repeatedly attempts to seduce him. His constant refusal angers her.

She grabs him on a day when no one else is in the house. Yosef flees, leaving

his coat behind. (This is the second time his coat has been left in the hands of others!) Potifar's wife denounces Yosef to all who will listen, and Potifar has no choice but to have Yosef tossed into prison.

[Speculation: Potifar likely believed that Yosef was innocent, which would explain why he didn't have Yosef killed, only jailed. There seems to be a source that says that As'nat - Potifar's daughter and Yosef's future wife - told her father that Yosef was innocent. Potifar apparently couldn't let him off scot-free - his wife would blow a gasket, but he spared his life.]

G-d "favors" Yosef in prison, and Yosef becomes well-liked and respected there too. Even in his troubled circumstances, Yosef is watched over favorably by G-d.

SDT Commentaries see the episode of Potifar's wife as an appropriate punishment for Yosef: (a) having been vain about his good looks, (b) having reported to his father that his brothers had been "lifting their eyes" to the local girls, and (c) experiencing libelous accusations against himself, as he had reported the "evil-doings" of his brothers to their father. Baal HaTurim adds that Yosef spent 10 years in prison corresponding to the 10 brothers he reported on.

Sh'VII Seventh Aliya 23 p'sukim - 40:1-23

[P> 40:1 (23)] The last portion of Vayeishev tells of the dreams of the Royal Wine Steward and the Royal Baker, both of whom had been imprisoned by Par'o for misdemeanors. Both dream on the same night and awake in morning very agitated. After Yosef interprets the wine steward's dream in a positive manner, the baker asks Yosef to interpret his dream as well. Yosef predicts death for him. Both dreams come true: the wine steward is restored to his position of honor and the baker is hanged. Yosef asks the wine steward to remember him to Par'o, but he forgets Yosef and his promise to him.

Rashi tells us that Yosef was to spend another two years in prison for relying on the Wine Steward to get him out of prison. This raises the question in our minds of the line between BITACHON, trust in G-d, and HISHTADLUS, effort a person expends to get himself out of a tough situation. Could it not have been viewed that G-d set up the whole dream situation with the Wine Steward and the Baker, so that Yosef would do exactly what he did, and the Wine Steward would then be in a position and willing state of mind to help Yosef and put in the good word to Par'o? Why is Yosef faulted for taking the opportunity to try to get out of prison via the Wine Steward, when one can claim that G-d had sent the Wine Steward to Yosef (so to speak) for exactly that purpose.

It is possible that the spiritual level of Yosef required different behavior than would be reasonable and proper for "the rest of us".

Or... it is possible that under the circumstances, namely that Yosef had just credited G-d repeatedly for his ability to interpret dreams, that the Wine Steward received the "wrong message" from Yosef when Yosef asks him to remember Yosef favorably. Maybe like: "Hey, your G-d can interpret dreams but can't even get you out of this dump without you asking me for a favor." Maybe there is a Chilul HaShem factor to consider here. The specific situation can sometimes dictate or indicate that a specific behavior is called for, even though in other circumstances, the opposite behavior would be appropriate and proper.

Haftara 19 p'sukim Amos 2:6-3:8

Amos was an early prophet (and a sheep farmer - whatever that is), shortly after the kingdom split into Israel and Judea. He lived in Tekoa, Judea, but prophesied mostly in the Kingdom of Israel, where he tried to warn the people of the tragic end they faced. Amos warns the people that their behavior is repugnant before G-d and that He has already destroyed some of the neighboring nations for their misdeeds. The first pasuk is the perfect connection to the sedra; mentioning the sale of Yosef by his brothers.

PROBING the PROPHETS

Sefer Amos, the third of the "minor" prophetic books that comprise Trei Asar, opens with a scathing criticism of those kingdoms that surround Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and goes on to focus on his real "target", the Israelite kingdom. And that reproach is the haftara we read this week. As we have pointed out in the past years, the connection to the parsha is rather obvious as the navi condemns Israel "al michram bakesef tzadik", for selling the innocent for monetary gain, decrying the widespread bribery that filled the land and perverted the judicial system. Our Rabbis saw in the prophet's words an allusion to the sale of Yosef of which we read in this parsha, especially as Chazal referred to him as Yosef "HaTzadik". But it is the closing words of the haftara that I find to be especially illuminating.

Like Moshe Rabbeinu and David HaMelech before him, the navi Amos was no more than a simple herdsman, a fact to which he himself attests: "...Hashem took me away from the sheep and He told me: 'Go prophesy to My people, Israel'" (7:15). Yet he predicts the horrible punishments that await the nation. He strongly censures the political leadership and confidently berates their religious guides. His strong language and terrifying message angers the people who remained blind to their misdeeds. They turn against this simple shepherd for daring to rebuke the leaders and guides of the Israelite Kingdom. In fact, the high priest who served the

golden calf in Bet-El, Amatziah, reports to the king (Yerov'am II) that Amos has rebelled against him and is raising support from the people. Amatziah even tells Amos to leave the country and return to HIS land, the Southern Kingdom of Yehuda.

In response to these accusations, the navi explains that he is merely G-d's instrument. He tells the people that the words he speaks are not his and the warnings he gives are also not his own. It is Hashem who will not punish unless He reveals His plans to His prophets. It was for this reason that he came to the nation and this reason why he continues to prophesy - despite the threats and the danger.

Amos closes his message by explaining why he cannot simply cease these prophecies and leave the people. It is not a matter of choice, he says, but of necessity. Delivering Hashem's words to the nation is no more than a natural reflex. "If an alarm sounds in the city - won't the people tremble?" he adds. In the same way, he concludes "Hashem E'lokim diber - mi lo yinavei"? If G-d speaks - who can desist from prophesying? One who receives a message from G-d feels the irresistible urge to share that message with his people.

How fortunate that, over the millennia, we have received so many messages from Hashem.

But the question that remains is: Will we listen?

Probing the Prophets, weekly insights into the Haftara, is written by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler, author of Bringing the Prophets to Life (Gefen Publ.)