

# SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VAYESHEB/HANUKAH

Haftarah: Amos 2:6-3:8

DECEMBER 24, 2016 24 KISLEV 5777

Hanukah begins on Saturday night

Rosh Hodesh Tebet will be celebrated on Friday, December 30.

**DEDICATION: In memory of a good friend - Sol Betesh, 'A"H - Shaul ben Sarah**

**I knew Sol for most of my life. He was a gentleman always.**

**He served the community and was appreciated by all.**

**Our condolences to his wife Norma and his children, Elliot, Michael, Steven & Sheri Gindi.**

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## Editors Notes Spiritual Shoes

This week's portion of Vayesheb deals primarily with the sale of Joseph by his brothers. The verses tell us that after stripping Joseph and throwing him into the pit, "Midianite men, traders, passed by; they (the brothers) pulled and brought Yosef up from the pit and sold Yosef to the Yishmaelim for twenty pieces of silver; then they (the Midianites) brought Yosef to Mitzrayim." At our class this morning, we quote the Targum of R' Yonatan Ben Uziel which adds a strange and seemingly unimportant fact. "The brothers purchased sandals with the money". One has to wonder, why shoes? Was there a sale? Did all their shoes suddenly wear out at the same time? Was there some show plague that resulted due to the selling of Yosef?

The question grows when we look at the opening words of the Haftara. The entire idea of reading the Haftara really relates to this time of year. The rabbis explain that the practice to recite the haftarat was instituted during the Greek regime. Antiochus, the evil Greek ruler, forbid the public reading of the Torah. The rabbis then instituted the reading of a

corresponding passage from the prophets that shared a common theme with the portion. (Although there is often a challenge and debate as to what that commonality is). We continue to follow the practice although the edict obviously no longer exists.

Amos quotes Hashem: For three sins of Israel, I have looked away, but for four I will not pardon them, for their selling a Sadik - righteous man for money, and a poor man for shoes. Although Amos is referring to corrupt judges, we are quickly reminded of Joseph who is the Sadik and is sold for money and the poor man who is Joseph as his father before him, stripped of everything including his clothes and is the poor man sold as Yonatan Ben Uziel explains, for shoes.

Rabbi Pinchas Friedman explains, and quotes the Talmud, one should sell even the beams of his house, if necessary, to acquire shoes for his feet. Additionally, one of seven categories of people who are banished from heaven is: one who does not wear shoes. Again we ask, what's so important about shoes?

Coincidentally, on the subject of shoes, our son Moses will be running in the next Jerusalem Marathon for Charity. The charity being supported through his efforts and your donations is "Chasing Peace - Rodef Shalom" (We added a donation link below). <https://www.gofundme.com/moses-runs-for-chasing-peace>. Our daughter Mikhayla started Chasing Peace in memory of her grandfather, Jerry Werman. My father in law was not only a "shoemaker", but also a man of the world. He believed that all of us around the globe are connected and that it is the responsibility of each and every one of us to care and provide for each other. Chasing Peace, with this philosophy, strives to provide a pair of shoes to all of those in need, all around the world. Mikhayla who has since moved to Jerusalem and her friends working on Chasing Peace hope to be a light onto the nations and promote the love of Israel from the four corners of the globe by providing any child anywhere with a pair of shoes. I wonder if my children ever

asked, what's behind the spiritual side of a charity for shoes?

In our class this morning, we quoted the Rama of Pano who explains that in the aftermath of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, the earth was cursed. As a consequence of this curse, one must wear shoes to create a barrier between oneself and the cursed earth. We don't want to be infected by the earth. I find it interesting that the "Idiot's guide to Witchcraft" explains that a witch must ground herself with bare feet to the ground and feel one merging with the earth and its flow of energy. Another source calls for the witch to draw his life force from the earth. (Yogis – another form of avoda zara say a wise man breathes through his feet.) It is in fact this flow from the cursed earth which gives the witch her connection to the dark side. Ramban explains that the magicians in Egypt were unable to reproduce the plague of lice because the lice covered the ground and they were unable to connect to the ground and their source of power.

In contrast when Moses approached the burning bush, Hashem told him to remove his shoes as the earth in that place unlike the world around was holy ground. In the same vein the place of the Bet HaMikdash and the Mishkan was on consecrated ground where the priests were commanded to be barefoot without any fear of a cursed earth. The brothers understood that the ground had been cursed due to the sin of Adam and Chava, but believed through the Avot, the forefathers; the sin of Adam was being repaired. Abraham began the process, but had impurities which were separated into Yishmael. Isaac continued the process, but had impurities which were separated into Esav. Finally they believed that Yaakov was the embodiment of the repair of Adam with twelve sons, all pure and whole. These were the 12 stones Jacob surrounded himself with which merged into one as he dreamt of the ladder and angels.

Evidently when the brothers sold Joseph, they truly believed that something went wrong and Joseph the first born of Rachel had similar impurities to those of Esav and Yishmael. They did not sell Joseph out of petty jealousy, but out of belief that he represented this dark side. This meant that the repair was still incomplete and that there was a continuing presence of the dark side. They faced the realization that the earth remained cursed and therefore they could not be barefoot. They needed shoes. On a spiritual level, those shoes would form a barrier between the cursed earth and man.

What they failed to realize that their act served to assist more than anyone else, the brother they sold. How?

Let us recall that when the brothers eventually arrive in Egypt and were confronted by the viceroy (their brother), they were accused of being spies who had come to examine the nakedness of the land. This term teaches us that Egypt of all the lands on earth was more inclined toward immorality and contamination.

We have learned that although the Jewish people spent 210 years in Egypt, we never fell victim to the Egyptian immorality (save the case of the rape of Shelomit Bat Dibrah). We are told that the women were protected in the merit of Sarah who guarded herself against that advances of Pharaoh. The men were protected in the merit of Joseph who resisted the wife of Potiphar. While Sarah came for but a short stay, Joseph foreshadowed the eventual arrival of the nation of Israel. Joseph through his act of self-control became the spiritual shoe that would protect the Jewish people later on. His brothers through their act formed the symbolic gesture, the physical act below which allows the spiritual reaction above.

Rabbi Pinchas Friedman suggests that, it is quite possible that at the moment the brothers purchased their shoes, they mistakenly believed that they were protecting themselves from their rebellious brother who they associated with Adam's sin and the curse of the land. Instead their act was a tribute to Yosef HaTzaddik, their brother Joseph, the "yesod olam," the foundation of the world. It was crucial that they perform a symbolic gesture before Joseph descended to Egypt to fulfill his sacred mission—to pave the way for him and so that they and their descendants could remain separated from the cursed immorality of the earth in Egypt. They in fact provided a protection for Joseph.

What a beautiful insight this gives us into the spiritual side of our shoes and a greater appreciation of what we were commanded at the first Passover meal. We were to eat the Pascal lamb girded with our belts and with shoes on our feet. The act was in appreciation that we remained pure for 210 years separated from the nakedness of the earth and the immorality of Egypt.

What a tremendous thought to hold onto each time we bend to put on our shoes and tie them. As our forefathers before us, may our shoes protect us from the curse of the earth, may we be a light on to the nations to fix and lift that curse and I guess we can look forward to the time when we may all be worthy of walking barefoot in the park or better yet on the grounds of the Third and Ultimate Bet HaMikdash, Bimhera Beyameynu, Amen!

Shabbat Shalom, David Bibi

**American Jews Will All Be Orthodox Soon  
Steven M. Cohen is Research Professor at  
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Policy Archive at Stanford University**

The overall American Jewish population size is stable and growing, but its character is shifting dramatically. The Orthodox population (Haredi, centrist, and modern) is exploding. The non-Orthodox are in sharp decline.

We can chart the rapid growth of the Orthodox by looking at their numbers in the Pew Research Center data over three generations, each encompassing 18 years of age. From old to young, we have the putative grandparents' generation (age 56-73), the parents (28-45) and the children (0-17).

Counting up all Orthodox Jews, we find 79,000 "grandparents," nearly 200,000 "parents," and over 340,000 children. In other words, over two generations, the Orthodox pretty much quadrupled in size.

What about the non-Orthodox — the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal and non-denominational Jews? For them, we find the reverse of the Orthodox pattern. The oldest generation comes to 1.48 million. For the middle generation, 1.1 million. And for Jewish children in non-Orthodox homes (including the partially Jewish and Jewish with no religion), we find just 920,000.

The growth of the Orthodox and the decline of the others means that the Orthodox "market share" has been soaring. Among the oldest generation, they're 5% of all Jews. Among the middle generation, they rise to 15%. And among children, the Orthodox are home to 27% of the total. Within two generations, the Orthodox fraction of the Jewish population has more than quintupled. And it continues to grow.

These trends mean diminished numbers of non-Orthodox who participate in Jewish life. One reason is that, among the non-Orthodox, the 28-45 year olds are fewer than the 56-73 year olds. Another factor is their lower Jewish participation rates.

The combined effect is astounding. Among non-Orthodox Jews aged 28-45, just 204,000 are congregants vs. 461,000 among those aged 56-73. For Jewish organization members: 130,000 vs. 252,000. Or take the number who say they're very emotionally attached to Israel: 198,000 vs. 466,000 among the older Jews. So it goes for measure after measure.

Woody Allen is credited with observing, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Jewish institutions outside Orthodoxy are struggling with declining numbers only in part because (as some critics claim) they deliver less meaning, are culturally out-of-step, or suffer from poor leadership. At least as important is the fact that they draw on fewer Jews who are available to "show up." Population contraction and fewer children explain the declines in non-Orthodox enrolments in both [day schools][http://avichai.org/knowledge\\_base/a-census-of-jewish-day-schools-in-the-united-states-2013-14-2014/](http://avichai.org/knowledge_base/a-census-of-jewish-day-schools-in-the-united-states-2013-14-2014/) and congregational schools.

In fact, non-Orthodox Jewish trend lines resemble the trend lines for American Catholics and Mainline Protestants. They're all marked by declining adherents and participation, as "no-religion" Americans have recently become the largest religious "denomination" in America.

**Summary of the Perasha  
Va'yesheb - The brothers sell Yosef**

- 1- Yosef gets the ketonet pasim. Hatred and jealousy for Yosef develops. Yosef has two dreams and tells his family.
- 2- Yosef goes to find his brothers in Shechem. The brothers plan to kill Yosef.
- 3- Yosef is thrown into a pit, then sold, and eventually ends up by Potifar
- 4- The story of Yehuda and Tamar
- 5- Yosef finds favor in the eyes of Potifar
- 6- Potifar's wife accuses Yosef of trying to be with her. Potifar puts Yosef in jail.
- 7- Yosef interprets the dreams of Sar Hamashkim and Sar Ha'ofim

**FROM THE RABBIS OF THE JERSEY SHORE**

**"And they stretched out their hands to our money." (Rambam – Hilchot Hanukah 3:1)**

The Rambam in his laws of Hanukah describes the diabolical decrees intended to eradicate our religion. The Rambam says they stretched out their hands to our money. Seemingly the Rambam is telling us that the Greeks took away our money. But this is not a decree of spiritual harm, it is a decree of material loss. If so, why did the Rambam use the unusual word "upashtu"? He should have said "ganvu" or "gazlu" indicating that they stole or robbed!

Rabbi Ephraim Shapiro explains that the choice of the word indicates an entirely new concept. The Yevanim did not take our money or our property.

They were perfectly comfortable in letting us keep our material wealth. However, the Greeks were determined to influence the way we spent our money, to infiltrate our perspective on possessions. The Yevanim did not want us to use our wealth to enhance our service of Hashem. They wanted us to view money not as a means to an end, but as an end in and of itself.

As we approach Hanukah, we must ask ourselves: Are we properly utilizing the possessions that Hashem has given us, or is the way we use our money validating the intentions of the Greeks?

Once there was an elderly woman in Meah Shearim. An American couple were returning from the Kotel on a Shabbat afternoon when it started to rain. They noticed an elderly woman on Rechov Chevra Shas motioning to them to come into her apartment to keep dry. Upon entering, the couple was appalled at her living conditions. Rain dripped through a crack in the ceiling and onto the dining room table. When they mentioned how badly they felt about her situation, she responded, "this is the rain of blessing."

They returned on Saturday night and attempted to give her some money that people had given them to give to charity before travelling. The woman kept refusing, insisting that she did not need any money. As the couple was about to leave, she reconsidered and told them, "I decided that I would like to take the money. For many years, I have been praying at sunrise each morning at the Kotel. When I am approached by many unfortunate women collecting sedakah, I have never had the opportunity to give them any money. I will, for the first time, be able to fulfill the misvah of giving charity.

This woman understood that the wealth with which a person is blessed should be utilized to bring him closer to Hashem. Have a bright Hanukah!  
Rabbi Reuven Semah

### **"Yosef came to them in the morning and saw that they were distressed." (Beresheet 40:6)**

When Yosef heard the dreams of Pharaoh's ministers and interpreted them correctly, he gained a name for himself as someone who had prophetic powers to understand dreams, and this led him to stand in front of Pharaoh to explain the monarch's dream. This ultimately got him elevated to power and he was able to save his father's family and Egypt from starvation.

The Torah points out that all this began because Yosef saw that the ministers were upset. It's a remarkable trait in a person to be able to see someone else's problem even though he himself is suffering. Yosef was imprisoned for many years thus far, and had much cause to become withdrawn into

himself and stop worrying about others. We see from here that Yosef was someone who noticed if others were suffering and was willing to get involved in order to help. This is the making of a leader and this is something we can learn from. Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukah.

Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

### **Sports**

Do you ever think about exercise and sports? If you do not, you might be accused of being un-American.

It's important to note that exercise and sports are not the same. The dictionary's definitions point out the differences.

Exercise (noun)

Regular or repeated use of a faculty or bodily organ. Bodily exertion for the sake of developing and maintaining physical fitness.

Sport (noun)

Physical activity engaged in for pleasure.

Mean, spirited jesting, mockery, derision.

As moral, ethical people, we have an obligation to take care of the precious gift Hashem has given each of us on loan – our bodies. A regular exercise program If you are out to "beat" the competition rather than build yourself up, you will be the loser of the game. (One Minute with Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda) All in a Day's Work

"The commandment of Hanukah lights extends until the passersby have vanished from the market" (Shabbat 21b). Why did the Gemara use an obscure way of measuring the time? Why not simply say "until a half hour after nightfall"?

The terminology concerning the halachah can be explained as a metaphor conveying an important insight:

It is common for people to work during the day to earn a livelihood. However, some unfortunately, are so engaged in materialism that they "moonlight" on another job and work nights to reach their financial goals. Often this pseudo-success is at the cost of their Torah learning, praying with a minyan, etc.

It was the goal of the Syrian-Greeks to cause the Jews to forget Torah and to cease the observance of Hashem's statutes.

The miracle with the flask of oil and the kindling of the Menorah emphasizes the importance of Torah study and misvah performance. The candles of the Menorah and the light it emanates represent Torah and misvot, as King Shelomo says "For the candle is a misvah and Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23). The Gemara (Megillah 16b) says that "orah" – "light" – means Torah. The pure oil miraculously found is also a hint to Torah, as the Gemara (Berachot 57a) says, "One who sees olive oil

in a dream can anticipate receiving the light of Torah.”

The halachah conveys the message that one can be said to have properly fulfilled the essence of Hanukah only when he comes to the realization that “tichleh regel min hashuk” – his “foot” should not be roaming around in the evening in the marketplace seeking opportunities for material gain; rather, after a day’s work his feet should be leading him in the direction of the shul and bet midrash to study Torah and pray with a minyan.

One should always remember that excessive involvement in business does not make one successful. Rather, Hashem is the One Who provides each of us with our “flask of oil,” and success can come miraculously without working tirelessly day and night. (Vedibarta Bam) Public Display

The Gemara (Shabbat 21b) says, “The requirement is to place the Hanukah light by the doorway of one’s house, from the outside.” Rashi writes that this is because of *pirsumei nisa* – to publicize the miracle. Why on Hanukah is *pirsumei nisa* emphasized as a prerequisite for proper fulfillment of the *misvah*?

The Syrian-Greeks endeavored to detach the Jews from Torah study. However, they did not suffice with this evil plan, but also demanded that the Jews write on the horn of an ox that they were denouncing their share in the G-d of Israel.

They made the strange request that the Jewish people use the horn of the ox because in those days it was customary to travel on wagons and chariots which were driven by oxen. The oxen would span the roads and go from place to place, and the horn is the most prominent and visible part of the ox. Therefore, they demanded that their denial of Hashem be written on the ox’s horn so that it would receive the widest publicity possible.

To counteract this, our Sages required that when we fulfill the *misvah* of lighting the Menorah, which commemorates the miracle Hashem did because of our allegiance to Him, it is to be done so as to attract the most public attention possible. (Vedibarta Bam)

**RABBI ELI MANSOUR**  
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**[MishnaBerura.com](http://MishnaBerura.com), [LearnTorah.com](http://LearnTorah.com)**  
**The Benefits of Misvot**

We read in Parashat Vayesheb the difficult story of Yosef and his brothers. The Torah describes the enmity that the brothers felt toward Yosef, and their decision to sell him as a slave. Among the many questions that have been asked regarding this incident is how God allowed Yosef to suffer harm

when, at his father’s behest, he traveled to Shechem to check on his brothers. Our Hachamim taught us a famous rule known as “Sheluheh Misva Enam Nizokim” – people do not suffer harm while involved in performing *Misvot*. When a person goes to do a *Misva*, Hashem grants him special protection from harm. The question thus arises, how could Yosef meet this tragic fate, of being thrown into a pit and then sold into slavery, when he was fulfilling the *Misva* of honoring parents? His father instructed him to visit his brothers, and he obediently complied. Why was he not granted God’s protection? What happened to the rule of “Sheluheh Misva Enam Nizokim”?

The Or Ha’haim (Rav Haim Ben-Attar, 1696-1743) suggested an answer that is very relevant to our lives. He explains that in truth, Yosef did not suffer harm as a result of this *Misva*. Although he was sold as a slave, this sequence of events ultimately turned out to be a great blessing. It was decreed that Am Yisrael would endure exile in a foreign land, and as a result of Yosef’s sale as a slave in Egypt, Beneh Yisrael moved to Egypt under the protection of the Egyptian government, as Yosef rose to the position of viceroy. And, because of Yosef, grain was stored in Egypt ahead of the years of drought, thus ensuring that Beneh Yisrael would be supported during this harsh period. Yosef himself tells his brothers later in Sefer Bereshit (50:20) that although they intended to cause him harm, Hashem worked it out for everyone’s benefit. Thus, Yosef’s experiences are entirely consistent with the principle of “Sheluheh Misva Enam Nizokim”. Although he suffered short-term harm, in the long-run, his *Misva* of obeying his father yielded enormous benefit for himself, his father and his brothers.

We know situations where, unfortunately, a person was struck by tragedy as a result of a *Misva*. Such incidents can pose an enormous challenge to one’s faith in the value of *Misvot*. The story of Yosef must remind us that *Misva* performance is always to our long-term benefit. We cannot always understand how, just as Yosef likely could not understand how his status as a slave in a foreign land would prove beneficial. But we must retain our faith under all circumstances that *Misvot* are beneficial. “Sheluheh Misva Enam Nizokim” – people involved in *Misvot* will always benefit from the *Misvot* they perform. Somehow, in the end, the *Misvot* will prove to have been to their benefit, even if in the short-term this benefit cannot be seen. We can draw inspiration and encouragement from the remarkable story of Yosef, bolstering our faith in the ultimate value of *Misvot*, even when we cannot immediately recognize this value.

**VICTOR BIBI  
SOD HAPARASHA**

**Will be distributed under a separate list  
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**Rabbi Wein**

Modern writers and commentators have found the biblical narratives of the book of Bereshith irresistible in their penchant for psychoanalyzing people described there in terms of modern understanding and current correctness. In so doing they do a great disservice to Jewish tradition and present a distorted picture of the message that the Bible is attempting to convey.

The narrative regarding Joseph and his brothers has engaged mankind for millennia. In it is represented all of the personality characteristics of nobility, self-justification, blindness and deception throughout history. The narrative stands by itself and needs no "deeper" exposition or analysis. It is what it is and that is how Jewish tradition has always viewed it.

The tendency to "understand" the characters of the people presented in the Torah narrative leads to all sorts of weird ideas that serve to undermine Jewish values and traditions instead of strengthening them. In all of the narratives that appear in this holy book the unseen hand of Heaven, so to speak, is present and active. And that part of the story is not subject to any psychological or personal analysis or perspective.

Rashi points this out in his opening comment to this week's Torah reading. The plan of Yaakov is to enjoy a leisurely retirement in his later stage of life but Heaven interferes as the story of Yosef and his brothers unfolds. No matter how you will analyze the motivations of the characters in this biblical narrative, we still will not know the entire story. It is always the inscrutable hand of Heaven that governs the story and mocks our pretensions.

One of the great differences between the traditional commentators and the more modern versions of this genre is this God factor. Midrash, Talmud and the great medieval and later commentators that created the framework for understanding the narrative of the Torah, also delved deeply into the personalities and motives of the people represented in the Torah narrative. However, they were always careful not only to include but also to emphasize that ultimately it was the will of Heaven that was guiding events towards Divine purposes.

The Bible is not a psychodrama or rebuke of history and psychology. It is a book of fire and holiness and one has to be careful in handling it. But modern commentators – even those who are observant and scholarly – many times insert currently faddish values and interpretations into its eternal words. Keeping this in mind in dealing with the great narrative regarding Joseph and his brothers, one of the key narratives in the entire Torah, we should do so with caution and tradition.

To do otherwise, is a great disservice to the text of the story itself and to the value system that Jewish tradition has assigned to it. The dispute between Joseph and his brothers has heavenly and historic consequences and still hovers over Jewish life today. To treat it as a matter of sibling rivalry is a misunderstanding of the entire purpose of the Torah narrative

**Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks  
What is the Theme of the Stories of Genesis?**

One of the most fundamental questions about the Torah turns out to be one of the hardest to answer. What, from the call of God to Abraham in Genesis 12 to the death of Joseph in Genesis 50, is the basic religious principle being taught? What does the entire set of stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives, together with Jacob's sons and daughter, actually tell us? Abraham brought monotheism to a world that had forgotten it, but where do we see this in the actual text of the Torah itself?

Here is the problem. The first eleven chapters of Genesis teach us many fundamentals of faith: that God brought the universe into being and declared it good; that God made the human person in His image; that God gave us freedom and thus the ability to do not only good but also bad; that the good is rewarded, the bad punished and that we are morally responsible for our actions. Chapters 8 and 9 also tell us that God made a covenant with Noah and through him with all humanity.

It is equally easy to say what the rest of the Torah, from Exodus to Deuteronomy, teach us: that God rescued the Israelites from slavery, setting them on the road to freedom and the Promised Land; that God made a covenant with the people as a whole on Mount Sinai, with its 613 commands and its purpose, to establish Israel as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In short, Genesis 1-11 is about creation. Exodus to Deuteronomy is about revelation and redemption. But what are Genesis 12-50 about?

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all recognise God. But so do non-Jews like Malkizedek, Abraham's contemporary, described as "priest of God most high" (14:18). So even does the Pharaoh of Joseph's day, who says about him, 'Can there be another person who has God's spirit in him as this man does?' (41:38). God speaks to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but He does likewise to Avimelech king of Gerar (Gen. 20:3-7), and to Laban (31:24). So what is special about the patriarchs?

They seem to teach no new principle of faith. Other than childbirth and rescue from danger, God performs no world-transforming miracles through them. They deliver no prophecies to the people of their generation. Other than an ambiguous hint when the Torah says that Abraham took with him on his journey "the souls they had gathered" (12:5), which may refer to converts they had made, but may equally merely refer to their servants, they attracted no disciples. There is nothing explicit in the text that says they sought to persuade people of the truth of monotheism or that they did battle against idolatry. At most there is a story about how Rachel stole her father's teraphim (31:19) which may or may not have been idols.

To be sure, a persistent theme of the patriarchal stories is the two promises God made to each of them, [1] that they would have many descendants and [2] they would inherit the land of Canaan. But God also makes promises to Ishmael and Esau, and the Torah seems to go out of its way to tell us that these promises were fulfilled for them before they were fulfilled for the children of the covenant (see Gen. 25:12-18 for the account of Ishmael's children, and Gen. 36 for those of Esau). About Esau's children, for example, it says, "These are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites" (36:31).

So the question is real and puzzling. What was different about the patriarchs? What new did they bring to the world? What difference did monotheism make in their day?

There is an answer but it is an unexpected one. One theme appears no less than six (possibly even seven) times. Whenever a member of the covenantal family leaves his or her own space and enters the wider world of their contemporaries, they encounter a world of sexual free-for-all.

Three times, Abraham (Gen. 12 and 20) and Isaac (Gen. 26) are forced to leave home because of famine. Twice they go to Gerar. Once Abraham goes to Egypt. On all three occasions the husband fears

he will be killed so that the local ruler can take his wife into his harem. All three times they put forward the story that their wife is actually their sister. At worst this is a lie, at best a half-truth. In all three cases the local ruler (Pharaoh, Avimelech), protests at their behaviour when the truth becomes known. Clearly the fear of death was real or the patriarchs would not have been party to deception.

In the fourth case, Lot in Sodom (Gen. 19), the people cluster round Lot's house demanding that he bring out his two visitors so that they can be raped. Lot offers them his virgin daughters instead. Only swift action by the visitors – angels – who smite the people with blindness, saves Lot and his family from violence.

In the fifth case (Gen. 34), Shechem, a local prince, rapes and abducts Dina when she "went out to visit some of the local girls." He holds her hostage, causing Shimon and Levi to practise deception and bloodshed in the course of rescuing her.

Then comes a marginal case (Gen. 38), the story of Judah and Tamar, more complex than the others and not part of the overall pattern. Finally there is the sixth episode, in this week's parsha, when Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph. Failing, she accuses him of rape and has him imprisoned.

In other words, there is a continuing theme in Genesis 12-50, a contrast between the people of the Abrahamic covenant and their neighbours, but it is not about idolatry, but rather about adultery, promiscuity, sexual license, seduction, rape and sexually motivated violence.

The patriarchal narrative is surprisingly close to the view of Freud, that eros is one of the two primal drives governing human behaviour (the other is thanatos, the death instinct), and the view of at least one evolutionary psychologist (David Buss, in his books *The Evolution of Desire* and *The Murderer Next Door*) that sex is the main cause of violence amongst humans.

This gives us an entirely new way of thinking about Abrahamic faith. *Eemunah*, the Hebrew word normally translated as faith, does not mean what it is taken to mean in English: a body of dogma, a set of principles, or a cluster of beliefs often held on non-rational grounds. *Eemunah* means faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, honouring your commitments, doing what you said you would do and acting in such a way as to inspire trust. It has to do with relationships, first and foremost with marriage.

Sex belongs, for the Torah, within the context of marriage, and it is marriage that comes closest to the deep resonances of the biblical idea of covenant. A covenant is a mutual act of commitment in which two persons, honouring their differences, each respecting the dignity of the other, come together in a bond of love to join their destinies and chart a future together. When the prophets want to speak of the covenantal relationship between God and His people, they constantly use the metaphor of marriage.

The God of Abraham is the God of love and trust who does not impose His will by force or violence, but speaks gently to us, inviting an answering response of love and trust. Genesis' argument against idolatry – all the more impressive for being told obliquely, through a series of stories and vignettes – is that it leads to a world in which the combination of unchecked sexual desire, the absence of a code of moral self-restraint, and the worship of power, leads eventually to violence and abuse.

That domestic violence and abuse still exist today, even among religious Jews, is a disgrace and source of shame. Against this stands the testimony of Genesis that faithfulness to God means and demands faithfulness to our marriage partners. Faith – whether between us and God or between us and our fellow humans – means love, loyalty and the circumcision of desire.

What the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs tell us is that faith is not proto- or pseudo-science, an explanation of why the natural universe is as it is. It is the language of relationships and the choreography of love. It is about the importance of the moral bond, in particular as it affects our most intimate relations. Sexuality matters to Judaism, not because it is puritanical but because it represents the love that brings new life into the world.

When a society loses faith, eventually it loses the very idea of a sexual ethic, and the result in the long term is violence and the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful. Women suffer. Children suffer. There is a breakdown of trust where it matters most. So it was in the days of the patriarchs. Sadly, so it is today. Judaism, by contrast, is the sanctification of relationship, the love between husband and wife which is as close as we will ever get to understanding God's love for us.

**AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL  
“And the pit was empty, no water was in it”  
(37:24)**

The comment of the Talmud (Shabbat 22A) is that “there was no water in the pit, but snakes and scorpions were there.”

The Torah makes a point of telling us that the pit was empty and it didn't have water in it. If it was empty then why is it necessary to say further that the pit was devoid of water? Rashi explains that the Torah is thereby informing us that the pit did not hold water however it did contain snakes and scorpions.

“I passed by the field of a lazy man and by the vineyard of a man lacking heart/discipline. And behold it was all grown over with thistles, its surface was covered with thorns. And its stone fence was broken down.

Then I examined and applied my heart/mind. I looked and learned a lesson (mussar).” (Mishle 24:30)

When we pass by the ‘lazy man's field’ we would expect to see a desolate field since the owner didn't put any work into it. Shelomo Hamelech enlightens us to the fact that the active result of this laziness is the growth of thistles and thorns as well as stones all appearing in this field.

The field is our mind, our most prized and holy possession. If we neglect introducing good ideas, Torah thoughts into our mind, the result will not be an empty field. When the mind is kept in a vacuum it will draw thorns and stones by its nature.

Therefore, when the pit is empty, it is not empty! The pit (mind) is filled with snakes and scorpions.

Shabbat Shalom From your friends at Yeshiva Gedolah Bet Yisrael Founded by R' Avigdor Miller ZT'L