

Vayeishev - Tell the Truth

With help from the translation of Tur HaAroch found on sefaria.com

בראשית ל"ז:כ"ה-כ"ט

(כה) וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לֶאֱכָל־לֶחֶם וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיִּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה אַרְבַּת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וּגְמָלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נֹכָאת וַצְרִי וְלֹט הוֹלְכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרָיִם: (כו) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה אֶל־אֶחָיו מִה־כִּפְצֵעַ כִּי נִהְרַג אֶת־אֶחָיו וְכִסִּינוּ אֶת־דַּמּוֹ: (כז) לָכוּ וְנִמְכְּרֵנוּ לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים וַיְדַלְּנוּ אֶל־תְּהֵי־בּוֹ כִּי־אֶחָיו בְּשָׂרֵנוּ הוּא וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶחָיו: (כח) וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִדִּינָיִם סְחָרִים וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִן־הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף מִצְרָיִם: (כט) וַיֵּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל־הַבּוֹר וְהִנֵּה אִין־יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו:

Genesis 37:25-29

(25) Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm, and ladanum to be taken to Egypt. (26) Then Judah said to his brothers, "What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? (27) Come, 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. (28) When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. (29) When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he rent his clothes.

What do you notice that may be confusing?

Why does the text say first that the brothers saw Ishmaelites and then switch to Midianites?

Nachmanides¹ explains that when the brothers looked around they saw a group of people and camels in the distance whom they immediately identified as Ishmaelites, though they were still quite distant. They knew that these Ishmaelites were headed for Egypt as it was their custom to bring these various spices named in our verse to Egypt. This is why Yehudah said that seeing these people come from a distant land and are headed for a distant land, they could sell Joseph to them and this matter would never become known. When these people drew near, they realized that they were not the people whom they had thought them to be, but that they were merchants who traveled these regions all the time.... They sold Joseph to these merchants, who bought him to trade him off, just as they traded their other merchandise....

Rashi² claims that the Ishmaelites sold Joseph to the Midianites, who then sold him to the Egyptians.

¹ Nachmanides, or RAMBAN, (1194-1270) was a Sephardic Rabbi, philosopher, physician, Kabbalist, and biblical commentator.

² Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105) was a medieval French rabbi and author.

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Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra³ says in 37:28 that the Midianites were called Ishmaelites, (i.e., these two groups are really the same group) like it says in Shoftim 8:24 that the kings of Midian were Ishmaelites....

*Rash'bam*⁴ writes that the brothers did not sell Joseph at all, but they sat down to eat, and while they were eating they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites in the distance. They then decided that after they would have completed their meal they would sell Joseph to these Ishmaelites. Before being able to do so, the Midianites arrived on the scene (the brothers not being within earshot of Joseph's cries for mercy) and pulled Joseph out of the pit. They proceeded to sell him to the Ishmaelites....

Yet another view expressed by some commentators is that the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, but they were afraid of raising him from the pit as they themselves might be bitten by the snakes; they therefore waited until the Midianites had raised him from the pit, as the Midianites were snake charmers and could safely venture into the pit.... Joseph wound up being owned jointly by the Midianites and the Ishmaelites.

Some commentators say that the Ishmaelites sold Joseph to Potiphar who had accused them of having kidnapped him. The Midianites guaranteed to Potiphar that Joseph was theirs to sell, and had not been kidnapped. This is why the Torah attributes the actual sale to the Midianites who acted as guarantors for the validity of the sale. The Ishmaelites are also described as selling him, as 1) they had physical possession of him, and 2) they had paid 20 silver pieces for him to the brothers. The reason why so little money changed hands was that Joseph, because of his traumatic experience in the pit, no longer looked nearly as handsome as he had before his trauma.

Many commentators are trying to take the blame off of Joseph's brothers. What do you think? Did it work? Who do you think is to blame?

In the next two Torah portions, Miketz and Vayigash, we see that the brothers are pretty guilty and have extreme feelings of guilt. We are not necessarily sure if it is because they hated their brother, if it was because they sold him, if it was because they threw him in a pit, etc. Regardless, they know that they are in the wrong and no matter how much commentators try to explain it away, we must realize that this is the truth and that guilt can become overwhelming. We must strive to tell the truth always.

³ Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-c. 1167) was a biblical commentator and philosopher of the Middle Ages from Spain.

⁴ Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (c. 1085-c. 1158) was a leading French Tosafist (author of Tosafot, medieval commentaries on Talmud) and grandson of Rashi.