

# Vayeshev

Wearing Nothing but a Crown

*There was an opportune day when he entered the house to do his work, no man of the household staff being there in the house. She caught hold of him by his garment saying, "Lie with me," but he left his garment in her hand and he fled and went outside.*

Bereishis 39:11–12

The Gemara<sup>1</sup> tells us, “R. Yochanan taught: Both Potiphar’s wife and Yosef were planning to sin with one another...and no member of the household staff was home. In such a big estate with such a large staff, why was there nobody home? It was taught in the academy of R. Yishmael that that day was a religious holiday and every person went to the house of worship. Claiming that she was sick, Mrs. Potiphar remained at home, thinking to herself, ‘There may be no better opportunity to be with Yosef.’ She grabbed him by his clothing. At that time, the image of Yosef’s father appeared to him in the window, and said to him, ‘Yosef, one day, your brothers’ names will be written on the Ephod [one of the garments worn by the high priest] and yours will be among them; do you want your name to be erased from there, and rather called a shepherd of prostitutes...?’ It was from there that Yosef drew the strength to avoid succumbing to sin.”

Yosef was saved by seeing his father in the window, and realizing that his impact on the future would be diminished if he did not live up to what was expected of him.

Dasan and Aviram were troublemakers, and they were running out of time on this Earth. But Moshe never gave up on them. “And Moshe sent, to call Dasan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, but they said, ‘We will not come up’” (Bamidbar 16:12). The simple reading of this verse is that Moshe wanted Dasan and Aviram, sons of Eliav, to appear before him, and they would not obey. But, in fact, there was much more going on here. R. Chaim Palagi<sup>2</sup> quotes the Baal Shem Tov, who explains this encounter in more depth. When trying to reach a sinner, to get him to rethink his path, the method that must be used is to connect with the good spark that is within him somewhere. In every person is a spark of holiness, truth and sincerity, which can get lost in the wicked. Connecting with that is the key to reaching that person on a real level. But there are some people who have so dirtied themselves that they can no longer find that spark. The solution for such people is to show them where they come from, and connect to the spark that existed in their parents. Moshe wanted nothing more than the best for his people, even his antagonists. So he decreed that no longer should Dasan and Aviram be

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1 Sotah 36b

2 *Tnuifab Chaim* to Korach 9, quoting the Baal Shem Tov. I was unable to find this recorded anywhere else from the Baal Shem Tov. In fact, this very same teaching is found in the *Ohev Yisrael* (R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apta, d. 1829) and is likely the source of this teaching.

referred to by their proper names, but rather as the sons of Eliav! “Moshe sent [the decree] to call [meaning to refer to] Dasan and Aviram [as] the sons of Eliav. But they said, ‘We will not come up.’” They would not go up, and look up to where they came from, and this was their downfall. A very great key to our greatness is knowing where we come from. We can reach great heights with that awareness.

About Adoniyahu, the rebellious son of King David, it says,<sup>3</sup> “And his father never upset him in his life, saying to him, ‘Why did you do that?’” R. Meir of Parmishlan<sup>4</sup> saw something more here than a lack of discipline. He explained that what the verse is telling us is that Adoniyahu was never stricken with guilt knowing that his father was King David. He never felt upset, and said to himself, “How could you have done that – your father is King David!” And that was his downfall!

“The crown of the elders are their grandchildren, and the glory of children are their fathers.”<sup>5</sup> And we also call our elders our “crowns.”<sup>6</sup> When a Sotah is disgraced, she is stripped of her clothing. The Mishnah<sup>7</sup> tells us that she even has to remove her gold jewelry. Now, asks the Gemara,<sup>8</sup> if she is already being so disgraced, would it not go without saying that she is to lose her jewelry? Do we really need a mishnah to spell this out explicitly for us? But the Gemara explains that we do, because it is even more embarrassing to be stripped naked and wearing only a pair of shoes, than it is to simply be stripped naked. We therefore need to be taught that we are not looking to make a Sotah look any more foolish than she already will. We see from this that it is more embarrassing to be naked when you are wearing a crown.<sup>9</sup> The achievements of our ancestors are our glory. They sit atop our head like a crown, and they make our nakedness much more embarrassing.

Unlike Adoniyahu, or Dasan and Aviram, we look to Yosef to remember that knowing who our father was created a great obligation. Could a son of his act like I act? We are spurred on to live lives that are more noble and great when we look to our parents. And so it is when we think of our children and our legacy. Yosef thought of how his impact on the future would be very small if he sinned. His name would be off of the Ephod, and any of his accomplishments would be ignored in light of his indiscretions. Children can be the crown of their grandparent. If his grandchildren know Torah, certainly that will encourage him to keep up his Torah study! And those children will look to him and realize that they are held to

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3 Melachim I, 1:6

4 Quoted in *Shem Mishmuel* (Shemos 677, and Behaaloscha 670). The same idea is also recorded in the name of the Vilna Gaon in *Der Toirah Kvall*, Warsaw 5698, and *Pardes Yosef* to Bechukosai.

5 Mishlei 17:6

6 Bereishis Rabbah 63:2: “Children are crowns for their parents, and parents are crowns for their children.” “The crown of our heads has fallen” (Eicha 5:16) is used to describe the death of great people. See *Sheloh*, “*Taanis*,” *drush Libesped Missas Hatzaddikim Vichurban Habayis*, regarding Gittin 7a.

7 Sotah 7a

8 Sotah 8b

9 See the amazing comments of R. Yitzchak Eliyahu Landau in his *Chiflayim Lisushiya* to Esther 1:11, *Mashal Umelitz* s.v. *lihavi* where he makes exactly this point about vashti being asked to come with a crown and nothing else.

different standard. Can a grandchild of my grandfather act this way?<sup>10</sup>

We strive to inculcate in our children a sense of right and wrong. We must be their shoes. For, to be naked and wearing a pair of shoes is very embarrassing. Korach, the cohort of Dasan and Aviram, spoke a great deal about his ancestry, as well as the descendants that he could foresee coming from him. He came from Yitzhar, and Kehos and Levi,<sup>11</sup> and he would father Shmuel!<sup>12</sup> So he felt that he deserved a great deal. What he did not realize is that while our ancestors and our descendants are our glory, and our crowns, they do not add much to us if we are naked on our own. It is only when we are dressed appropriately that the crown on our heads serves to make us more distinguished, and more beautiful.

Yosef saw his father in the window, and thus lived up to who he really was. We mention our ancestors in our prayers every day, and we never drop the *minbagim* (customs) of our fathers. For by seeing who our ancestors are in our windows, we, like Yosef, can then more easily behave as we are expected to.

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<sup>10</sup> See also the important comments of R. Moshe ben Yaakov Sofer given in his *selichos* address 5648, recorded in *Maharam Sofer* to Nitzavim s.v. *Atem nitzavim* p.188, 189.

<sup>11</sup> See Bamidbar Rabbah 18:2 and Rokeach to Korach 16:1.

<sup>12</sup> Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 703