

## To Settle or not to Settle, Photo Negatives, and Mamma Grizzlies

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As an orchestra conductor, I’ve been trained to find both large-scale structure and small-scale motives in musical scores. So it’s natural that I should look for both in Parashat “VaYeshev.” And the degree to which they exist is striking.

The parasha opens with a motive of contradiction, of opposition, of, if you will, the photo negative.

וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב, בְּאֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ, כְּנָעַ

“And *Jacob settled* in the land of his *father’s sojourns*, in the land of Canaan.” (*Genesis/Bereshit 37:1*)

So we have in the introductory sentence the juxtaposition of father and son—of Isaac and Jacob—and the contrast between the father’s traveling and the son’s settling. Will there be similar contrasts later in our weekly portion? Well, yes, because interestingly, while the story opens with Jacob, much of what ensues has to do with his son Joseph. So while “VaYeshev” opens by contrasting the sojourning father Isaac with the settled son Jacob, most of the parasha concerns itself with a settled Jacob-as-*father*, and even more so with a wandering *Joseph-as-son*.

But this isn’t the only photo negative. In fact, after the first four verses—let’s call them our introduction, since I love musical terminology—we have the rest, the main body, of the work. And in this main body, the first half is a reverse image of the second half. The first half of the story goes as follows:

- A. Joseph the Israelite has two dreams interpreted by his father and brothers
- B. Joseph ends up in a pit, courtesy of his Israelite brothers, and
- C. A possibly Israelite woman, Tamar, gets crafty and consorts with Joseph’s Israelite brother Judah.

In the second half of the story:

- A. An Egyptian woman, Potiphar’s wife, gets crafty and attempts to consort with Joseph

B. Joseph ends up in a pit at the hands of an Egyptian, namely Potiphar, and

C. Joseph interprets the dreams of two Egyptians.

The second half of the parasha is a photo negative of the first. Both halves involve the interpreting of two dreams, Joseph being sent into a pit, and a woman getting crafty in the relations department. But the order of events in the second half is a mirror image of the order of events in the first, and while the first half focuses on Israelites, Egyptians play major roles in Act Two. Quite a photo negative, if you will, and one that warms my artistic-analytic heart. Imagine my delight on discovering it!

Now, I have to be honest. I didn't notice this grand juxtaposition all at once. Before I noticed that Part A mirrors Part B, I caught onto the striking side-by-side placement of...well...the most grown-up parts of the story, the ones with the women chasing the men. Now, perhaps some women may think, "how typical of a guy." And perhaps some of my male brethren, inspired by the racy tales, will experience a sudden urge to increase their Torah study. But let's not be distracted by the lustier angels of our nature. I didn't zero in on this part of the parasha simply because I'm a man. I zeroed in on it because it's where the contrast of first half and second half is most obvious. Tamar and Mrs. Potiphar *are placed right next to each other in the story*, at the point where we transition from the first half in *Eretz Kna'an*, the Land to Canaan, to the second half in *Mitzrayim*, Egypt. Now, as a musician, I know that often the heart of a musical composition can be one of its most profound moments. So I naturally asked the question, what is so profound about these two rather risqué stories, that should cause them to be placed at the very heart of the narrative? Rather than take the traditional approach that the Tamar story is a brief commercial, after which we return to our regularly scheduled program on Joseph, could it be that Tamar *and* Potiphar's wife compose a single, coherent center point to the narrative?

When I mentioned to my wife Allyson the side-by-side placement of the two crafty women—the one traditionally viewed as a virtuous Jew and the other as a wanton Egyptian—Allyson's response was, "a woman will do whatever it takes for the sake of her family." Well, those of us who are teachers, and have dealt with a mama grizzly whose child we teach, know that this is true. It's all about the offspring. So, let us hypothesize that just as Tamar and Judah is not just a lurid boudoir tale, but also a family story, the sowing of the Davidic dynasty, so is Mrs. Potiphar and Joseph not just a lusty romance, but a serious saga about an Egyptian lady looking out for her family's future.

And let's ponder the possibility that Potiphar's wife isn't all bad, nor is Tamar wholly angelic.

I recognize that might be rather provocative, but while Jews tend to be the good guys in *Tana"ch* (Bible), they don't have a lock on virtue. Until his wife's attempted seduction of Joseph, Potiphar treats Joseph extremely well. And remember Joseph's 11 brothers throwing him in the pit and selling him into slavery? Not exactly nice Jewish boys. Torah teaches the existence of right and wrong, of good guys and bad guys, yet it also shows that people are three-dimensional. So let's keep that in mind as we look further at the two scheming women at the heart of the parasha.

Now, Tamar tricks Judah into consorting with her because her first two husbands, his elder sons, have died without giving her progeny, and she's apparently given up on marrying Judah's third son. So, she disguises herself as a harlot and seduces Judah. And it really seems that her only goal in doing so is to get a son by Judah. That's all—there's no indication that she's attracted to him, nor that she wants to marry him. After they've conceived, the Torah explicitly states (Chapter 38, Verse 26):

יִסְרָאֵל-עוֹד, לֹדַעְתָּהּ וְלֹא

“and he was not intimate with her anymore.” Between Tamar's trickery, Judah's weakness, the purely utilitarian nature of what should be a most profound encounter, and the fact that Tamar is, after all, consorting with her father-in-law, we're presented with something which doesn't feel loving, doesn't feel, frankly, holy, and which is, well, distasteful. And yet it's viewed as a great moment in Jewish history, the source from which will emerge the great King David!

Now, in the case of Potiphar's wife, we traditionally view this story as one of lust, nothing more. The Torah reminds us (39:6):

תֵּאֵר וְיִפֶּה מִרְאָה וְיִהְיֶה יוֹסֵף, יָפֶה -

“And Joseph was handsome of form and handsome of appearance.”

So, there you go. No wonder Potiphar's wife is attracted to Joseph. But we're also told that Joseph does an excellent job of running Potiphar's household—that everything he touches turns to gold, so to speak. Couldn't Potiphar's wife be thinking, “*that's* the guy who'll give me the son I've always wanted?” In next week's parasha, *Miketz*, we'll meet Osnat, who is given to Joseph as his wife, and is Potiphar's daughter, at least according to Rashi. That's the only mention of a child for Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar. What's more, Rashi mentions that Potiphar's interest in Joseph is, ahem, more than

that of master and servant. I mean, he really, *really* likes him. So perhaps Potiphar isn't interested in doing what it takes to give his wife an heir. But the woman wants a son! Plus—and again, this is according to Rashi—she's foreseen that she's going to have Israelite descendents. She just doesn't realize that they'll come from her daughter rather than her. So now the lady doesn't seem so shallow—this is about wanting good kids!

Tamar and Mrs. Potiphar aren't cardboard cutouts of good and evil; they are three-dimensional beings. Each juxtaposes qualities we admire with behavior that gives us pause. The women's personal contradictions mirror the contrast in the parasha's very first verse —to settle or not to settle, stable son and roving father. And the contradictions within Tamar and Potiphar's wife mirror the contrast between the photo positive in Canaan and photo negative in Egypt. Mamma grizzlies may be dangerous, but their family instinct is central to our existence, and it's fitting that they should sit squarely in the middle of Parashat "VaYeshev." Shabbat shalom.