

פרשת

וישב

Parashat Vayeshev

Bereshit / Genesis 37:1-40:23, Amos 2:6-3:8,  
John 2:13-4:42

### What are You Looking For? (מה-תבקש)

In the Scriptures there is the phrase “*VeZot haTorah*” (וזאת התורה) “*This is the Torah*” which is a reference to Moshe having set God’s Law before the people Israel, which came “*directly from the mouth of God, through the hand of Moshe.*” These words emerge from *Devarim* / *Deuteronomy* 4:44 (מד וזאת התורה אשר-שם משה לפני בני ישראל:) and *Bamidbar* / *Numbers* 9:23 (כג על-פי יהוה יחנו ועל-פי יהוה יסעו) (את-משמרת יהוה שָׁמְרוּ על-פי יהוה בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה:), and are recited in the traditional Jewish synagogue service each time the Torah is raised to be returned to the Aron Kodesh (Holy Ark). This statement emphasizes the significance of the Law of God for His people, that these words were written by the hand of Moshe at the mouth of God. The Talmud, and the Aggadah (*Shemot Rabbah* 47:1 on *Shemot* / *Exodus* 34:27) speak of how the Torah was revealed, some say progressively throughout the wilderness journey (see *Rashi and Resh Lakish*), others say that it was all revealed in its entirety on Sinai (see *Nachmanides* / *Rambam*, see his preface to his Torah commentary). Many of the Jewish Bible commentators, however, seem to describe a more progressive process,

both with respect to the revelation of Torah and to the ultimate writing of the text of the Torah. The general consensus is however that Moses wrote all of the Torah, with the exception, perhaps, of the final eight verses as a result of his death. (see *Talmud Bavli Menachot 30a*). Due to the manner in which the Torah was transmitted (*“the Word of God given by the hand of Moshe”*), the rabbis believe every letter of the Hebrew bible was inspired by God Himself. As a result, even the most minor narratives in the Torah should be taken with great interest as instruction from the Lord above. While reading Parashat Vayetze, Joseph went looking for his brothers, we are told that he began his search at Shechem. The question is *“Why was this incident in the Torah mentioned at all?”* Does it really matter whether Joseph found his brothers in Shechem or Dothan or elsewhere? Why would a narrative as concise as the Masoretic Text take the time to recount Joseph’s false start in finding his brothers? This is the one aspect of Joseph’s life that I would like to discuss this week. *“Why would Joseph believe his brothers would take their flock near Shechem?”* and *“What is the significance of narrative about Shechem and the man that met him in the field?”* as we understand Shechem according to the rest of the Tanach? Note, Shechem is paralleled to sin in both the Torah and the Tanach. Was there sin in the heart of Joseph or his brothers? Was this why they drew near unto Shechem? Note also that if Joseph had not met the stranger he would have returned home, not been sold into slavery into Egypt, not become a ruler in Egypt, he would never have been able to provide salvation for all of Egypt or for his family during the famine in Israel, and his family would not have entered into four hundred years of slavery. It turns out this is a significant and pivotal point in the Torah narrative for the people of Israel. *“Is sin required for the Lord to work in miraculous ways?”* (i.e. in reference to Joseph looking towards Shechem and his brothers selling him into slavery, etc.) The point is, based upon the narrative in Parashat Vayeshev, the direction both Joseph and his brothers took in life led them towards Shechem, a place of immorality, idolatry, and sin. If Joseph and his brothers would have had a Torah-centric Judaism would they have been led astray into sin? Would Joseph have been found wandering about in the field in this way as we read he was? Let’s discuss this topic a little further.

In this week’s reading, we are looking at *Bereshit / Genesis 37:12-*

**Bereshit / Genesis 37:12-18**

37:12 Then his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem. 37:13 Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them.' And he said to him, 'I will go.' 37:14 Then he said to him, 'Go now and see about the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the flock, and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. 37:15 A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, 'What are you looking for?' 37:16 He said, 'I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are pasturing the flock. 37:17 Then the man said, 'They have moved from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. 37:18 When they saw him from a distance and before he came close to them, they plotted against him to put him to death. (NASB)

יב וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶחָיו לְרֵעוֹת אֶת-צֹאן אֲבִיהֶם בְּשָׂכָם: יג וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא אֶחָיֶךָ רְעִים בְּשָׂכָם לָכֵה וְאֲשַׁלְּחֶיךָ אֲלֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הַנְּנִי: יד וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ-נָא רְאֵה אֶת-שְׁלוֹם אֶחָיֶךָ וְאֶת-שְׁלוֹם הַצֹּאן וְהַשְׁבִּנִי דָבָר וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ מֵעֵמֶק חֶבְרוֹן וַיָּבֹא שָׂכָמָה: טו וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר מַה-תְּבַקֵּשׁ: טז וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת-אֲחֵי אֲנֹכִי מִבְּקֶשׁ הַגִּידָה-נָא לִי אֵיפֹה הֵם רְעִים: יז וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נָסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמָרִים נִלְכָה דַתְּיָנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֵר אֶחָיו וַיִּמְצָאֵם בְּדֹתָן: יח וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ מֵרָחֹק וּבְטָרֵם יִקְרַב אֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּתְּנֻכְלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ:

While studying this week's Torah portion, we happen upon this pivotal verse in the history of Joseph and of Israel from *Bereshit / Genesis 37:15*, וַיִּמְצְאוּהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר מַה-

:שְׁבַע 37:15 *A man found him, and behold, he was wandering in the field; and the man asked him, 'What are you looking for?' (NASB)* Note how the Scriptures are written, a man “*finds*” Joseph wandering about as if lost in the field and asks him “*What are you looking for?*” (מָה-שְׁבַע) Surveying the rabbinic interpretations on these verses, coupled with the Scriptural references to this narrative throughout the Tanach, the following questions come to mind.

### Questions for the Study

1. What were Joseph’s intentions for going to search out what his brothers were doing?
2. Why do the rabbis believe this man who found Joseph (*Bereshit / Genesis 37:15*) was an angel?
3. What is the significance of this interpretation, this person being an angel, as opposed to being just a regular man.
4. Was it a supernatural event that this man knew where his brothers were?
5. In the question, “*What are You Looking For?*” (מָה-שְׁבַע) was this a spiritual question for Joseph? Or was this more related to the question “*what are you doing out here?*”

Back in Parashat Toldot, the Lord provided Isaac and Rebecca a prophetic expectation of two nations struggling together. The end of the prophecy states that Esau (the “*firstborn*” twin) will serve Isaac (the “*younger*” twin). According to the Scriptures, the indication why this was the case the rabbis say in *Sefer Hasidim (Yehudah ben Shmuel, aka HeHasid, 12th-13th century Germany)* “*And the elder shall serve the younger. Lest Jacob learn from Esau, God placed enmity in their hearts even before they were born, and the divide between them started at that time.*” The general conclusion in the rabbinic literature in

regards to the older serving the younger was so Jacob would not learn from his older brother. The reason was this would be problematic for Jacob to learn from his twin brother where Esau is related to sin and the lack of faith. Jacob remained in tents to hear the Word of the Lord from his parents and develop a deep faithfulness to the God of his fathers and to the covenant promises. In the case of Joseph, we learn that Joseph was very close to his father, and so we can assume that he was taught the ways of God according to his father Jacob. The question however is, *“what led him to walk in his brothers ways by following their path to a sinful and idolatrous place as he looked for his brothers?”* Did he know they frequented this place? Is this an example of Joseph learning from their ways?

Let’s read what the Rabbis have to say concerning this verse.

***Sforno on Bereshit / Genesis 37:15 Part 1***

*תועה בשדה, walking in every direction to find where they were tending the flocks.*

***Part 2***

*מה תבקש, what are you looking for seeing that you do not keep to the known paths?*

***Radak on Bereshit / Genesis 37:15 Part 1***

*וימצאהו איש, after arriving in Shechem and not finding any trace of his brothers, Joseph went in all directions to see if he could find them, and in the process he lost his way.*

Note the significance of Sforno’s commentary in Part 2, that Joseph did not seek to keep *“known paths,”* but was choosing a wayward form of searching. This illustrates for us the issue of going in all directions, which is sort of the way in which sin leads us in our lives if we allow sin to do so, Paul writes that we do the things we do not want to do. (*Romans 7:15*) The Apostle Paul describes this as not understanding what he does, being out of control, and not being able to do the things he wants to do (Walk in the spirit) as opposed to doing the things he does not want to do (Walking in the flesh). Radak describes what Jo-

seph is doing as looking in all directions and getting lost. This type of wayward walking may be paralleled to sin's effect upon the heart of a man. *Tehillim / Psalms 106* describes the wicked as sinking down in their sin. The rabbis in the Talmud (*Talmud Bavli Chagigah 16b*) for example expound upon the concept of sin and forgiveness. Rabbi Yehudah speaks of a friend and putting trust in a friend as opposed to trusting in the Lord God of Israel, and parallel this to the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination) that says, '*Sinning is ok because the Holy One Blessed be He, will forgive.*' The description of the Yetzer Hara in this sense is that a man may perceive the Tetzer Hara to be a friend. However, the Yetzer Hara only leads a man to sin and destruction. The Yetzer Hara is connected to the heart of a man, and the heart of man is said to be filled with all sorts of evil. (*Matthew 15:19, Mark 7:21, Romans 1:29*) The rabbis continue saying that the soul of a man testifies against him. This may be how the Targum translation views the leanness of the soul (see the study on *Tehillim / Psalms 106* at [www.matsati.com](http://www.matsati.com)). There are some men who are very shallow in their faith, and such people make their requests known, and test the Lord God as a result, leaning upon unbelief and doubt when the Lord does not answer prayer within the time-line of their own making. The rabbis say that this is synonymous to sending leanness into the soul (*Tehillim / Psalms 106:15*) according to the Targum translation. The rabbis conclude that two angels accompany each man, and these angels will testify against him as well. In addition, they say that a man's limbs will also testify against him. This speaks of our actions, what we say we believe by faith, and how we put our faith into action. Do your actions bear testimony of your faith?

According to the historical narrative in the Torah, the people sinned greatly (read *Tehillim / Psalms 106:19-43*). The significant passage in these sequence of verses is *Tehillim / Psalms 106:43*, מִגַּם פְּעָמִים רַבּוֹת, 106:43 *Many times He would deliver them; They, however, were rebellious in their counsel, And so sank down in their iniquity. (NASB)* Note how through all of these things listed in the Psalm, the basic conclusion is that they sank down, they were brought low in their iniquity (מִגַּם זְמַנִּין סְגִיעִין יִפְצִי אִינוֹן וְהִינוֹן) (יסרבון ליה במלכתהון ואתמכיאו בחוביהון). This speaks to the danger of practicing sin in our lives, that sin will bring us lower and to places we do not want go, and if practiced long enough will cause our faith to



waver. The MT states that they provoked Him in their counsel (וְהִמְּוָהוּ בְעֵצָתָם). This is an interesting way to describe the people, how they provoked Him with their counsel. What does it mean to provoke with counsel? Could this also be related to the approach Joseph took in searching for his brothers in a world of sin and idolatry? We may gain some information on this from the Mishnah according to *Pirkei Avot 6 Part 1*.

### ***Mishnah Pirkei Avot 6 Part 1***

*The Rabbis taught in the language (style) of the Mishnah: Rabbi Meir says: Anyone who involves himself in Torah for its own sake merits many things, and moreover the entire world is worthwhile for his sake; He is called “friend,” “beloved,” “lover of the Omnipresent,” “lover of [all] creatures,” “delighter of the Omnipresent,” “delighter of [all] creatures.” He is clothed in humility and reverence, and it prepares him to be righteous, devout, upright and trustworthy, and it distances him from sin, and draws him near to merit. We enjoy from him counsel and comprehension, understanding and strength, as it is said (Proverbs 8:14): “Mine is counsel and comprehension, I am understanding, mine is strength.” It gives him kingship and dominion, and [the ability to] investigate in judgment, and the secrets of the Torah are revealed to him, and he becomes like an ever-strengthening spring, and like a river that does not stop. He is modest and long-tempered, and forgives insult to him; And it enlarges him and raises him above all [that God] made.*

The rabbis speak of studying the Torah and the merits of doing so. Such a person is a “friend,” “beloved,” “lover of the Omnipresent,” “lover of [all] creatures,” “delighter of the Omnipresent,” “delighter of [all] creatures.” “He is clothed in humility and reverence, and it prepares him to be righteous, devout, upright and trustworthy, and it distances him from sin.” Studying, taking hold of, and applying God’s Word to one’s life does all of these things. Note the number of signifi-



cant statements made in the second half of the paragraph.

- *We enjoy from him counsel and comprehension, understanding and strength, as it is said (Proverbs 8:14): “Mine is counsel and comprehension, I am understanding, mine is strength.”*
- *It gives him kingship and dominion,*
- *[The ability to] investigate in judgment, and the secrets of the Torah are revealed to him,*
- *He becomes like an ever-strengthening spring, and like a river that does not stop.*
- *He is modest and long-tempered, and forgives insult to him;*
- *It enlarges him and raises him above all [that God] made.*

The word of God is able to give wisdom, and by taking counsel in God’s Word, we learn how to seek the counsel of the Lord God in heaven, and how not to seek His counsel. The provocation of the people in the wilderness in their counsel to the Lord may be related to their refusal to listen and obey. They did not have their hearts set on living to please the Lord, to seek His righteousness, justice, and truth according to His words. Even though we fall short, we are called to seek these things in our lives, and this is pleasing in the Lord’s eyes. Remember that falling short in our abilities to obey God’s word is no excuse to neglect the mitzvot (commandments). Throughout the Scriptures we are called to strive for the righteousness of God because He is righteous, and because of who we are in Christ (the Messiah). These things should cause us to consider the direction we are walking in. Are you constantly wandering about, do you have a wondering eye (pornography), or a covetous heart (money)?



The rabbis continue in their commentary on the meaning of the man who found Joseph wandering in the field, saying the following:

***Daat Zkenim on Bereshit / Genesis 37:15 Part 1***

*וימצאהו איש והנה תעה בשדה, “a man found him while he was lost in the field;” this (the three letters in the word תעה) is where the Angel Gavriel gave Joseph a hint of three exiles the Jewish people would endure. ת=400 years of exile in Egypt; ע=70 years of exile in Babylon; ה=5, till the end of the exile commonly known as the Roman exile, till the coming of the Messiah. [The author attributes this to his father of blessed memory. Ed.] He adds that he had heard something along the same lines in the name of Rabbi Binyamin Gozel, but from Genesis 32:5 using the letters of word עתה as the hint.*

Daat Zkenim describes this event as providing a future expectation of the end of the exile of God’s people and the coming of the Messiah. Note how exile, bondage in slavery, bondage in sin, idolatry, adultery, all of these things are connected to a people who are bound up in sin in their lives. The Lord sent His Messiah in order to set us free from these things.

Haamek Davar commentary has the following to say concerning the wandering of Joseph in the field.

***Haamek Davar on Bereshit / Genesis 37:15 Part 2***

*וימצאהו איש. אם נחשוב שהיה איש מוזר ליוסף אינו מובן מה שאמר אליו My brothers. And from where would he know who he [Joseph] was and who his brothers were? And furthermore, what is this question “tell me please where they are pasturing”? From where would he know? Rather, [it must be] one of the two these possibilities: Either he was a well-known man to them in his importance, or, he recognized him as an angel or prophet that knew everything to do with his brothers.*

*And in truth, the Torah should have said “and he [Joseph] found a man”, for it was Joseph that was wandering alone searching and found the man, not the man who was walking on his way. Rather, the text comes to teach that the man was a messenger from Heaven, to encounter Joseph and bring him to such, and the man went and found him in that place.*

Haamek Davar speaks about the man whom Joseph spoke to in the field. Either the man was an angel of God, or he was in some way aware of where his brothers were located, possibly suggesting this man was a prophet. The conclusion is that this man was a messenger from heaven sent to put Joseph back on the straight and narrow path, the well known path, the path of God, of righteousness, justice, and truth.

***Shney Luchot HaBrit, Chayei Sara, Torah Ohr 77***

*We have other examples when such an angel is referred to by the Torah as אִישׁ, and our sages have defined such an אִישׁ as מַלְאָךְ, an angel. One such example is Genesis 37:15 Rashi, quoting Midrash Tanchuma, says that this was the angel Gabriel.*

The general consensus was that this man was an angel of God, some say he was the angel Gabriel. The point is do you seek the good counsel from good friends, or do you practice sin and seek those who have wickedness placed at the forefront of their lives? Note that these questions about Joseph and the interpretation of his waywardness indicated by beginning his search for his brothers at shechem is not outside of the interpretations of others according to the Tanach. Note what the prophet Hosea says concerning Ephraim which may be paralleled to Joseph his father.

***Hosea 6:1-10***

*6:1 ‘Come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. 6:2 ‘He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may live before*

*Him. 6:3 'So let us know, let us press on to know the Lord. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; And He will come to us like the rain, Like the spring rain watering the earth.' 6:4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For your loyalty is like a morning cloud And like the dew which goes away early. 6:5 Therefore I have hewn them in pieces by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth; And the judgments on you are like the light that goes forth. 6:6 For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. 6:7 But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me. 6:8 Gilead is a city of wrongdoers, Tracked with bloody footprints. 6:9 And as raiders wait for a man, So a band of priests murder on the way to Shechem; Surely they have committed crime. 6:10 In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; Ephraim's harlotry is there, Israel has defiled itself. (NASB)*

### ***Hosea 7:8-16***

*7:8 Ephraim mixes himself with the nations; Ephraim has become a cake not turned. 7:9 Strangers devour his strength, Yet he does not know it; Gray hairs also are sprinkled on him, Yet he does not know it. 7:10 Though the pride of Israel testifies against him, Yet they have not returned to the Lord their God, Nor have they sought Him, for all this. 7:11 So Ephraim has become like a silly dove, without sense; They call to Egypt, they go to Assyria. 7:12 When they go, I will spread My net over them; I will bring them down like the birds of the sky. I will chastise them in accordance with the proclamation to their assembly. 7:13 Woe to them, for they have strayed from Me! Destruction is theirs, for they have rebelled against Me! I would redeem them, but they speak lies against Me. 7:14 And they do not cry to Me from their heart When they wail on their beds; For the*

*sake of grain and new wine they assemble themselves, They turn away from Me. 7:15 Although I trained and strengthened their arms, Yet they devise evil against Me. 7:16 They turn, but not upward, They are like a deceitful bow; Their princes will fall by the sword Because of the insolence of their tongue. This will be their derision in the land of Egypt. (NASB)*

These Scriptures cause us to consider the direction we are walking in our lives! Reading through these verses from Hosea, “*what are the key elements of the interaction?*” The key elements are the Lord God looking for a people who are striving for righteousness, justice, and truth in their lives. For example, the kinds of friends that we keep? Take for example the comments by Rabbi Yitzhaq:

***Rabbi Yitzhaq Eiziq Yehudah Yehiel Safrin of Komarno Part 2***

*When two sit together – because that is the way it is when two [sage tzaddiqim] sit together, each one craves to hear a new word from the mouth of his friend. And through this [craving] their friend is aroused and his heart opens up to him like a fountain to create new words of Torah. And so it is for his companion. Therefore it says ‘words of Torah between them’ – for it is between the two of them that words of Torah, reverence and instruction are newly created . . . the Shekhinah – Divine Presence – is between them, as it says . . . engaged each other in conversation – it does not say ‘spoke,’ but, rather, ‘engaged each other in conversation,’ for each one speaks through the arousal of his companion, because were there no arousal, each one would sit and, in love and devequt (mystical communion), unite with the Blessed Name. But, nonetheless, it is the will and pleasure of the Blessed Name for one [who is a tzaddiq] to come from pure contemplation down to speech, desisting from mystical unifications and communion.*

Rabbi Yitzhaq speaks of two men sitting together, where one craves for the words of the other. This is an important concept in relation to the type of friends we keep, and the type of conversations that we crave for. Note when speaking together about God's Word, it is said that the shekhinah (glory) of God dwells in the midst of these friends. If you keep counsel with unrighteous men, whose presence do you think dwells in the midst? The Evil One (HaSatan)? According to the Apostle Paul in *Galatians 5:19* *Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 5:20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 5:21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (NASB)* These are the things that glorify unrighteousness and the evil one. We however are called as God's people, *"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."* (*1 Peter 2:9*) Our purpose is to bring praises to the name of the Lord God of Israel by the way we live and by the way He has worked in our lives, to save us from our sins, and simply for the fact of His mercy. The Lord is worthy, and we are able to declare these things because He has chosen us to declare such things. We are called to repentance, and to turn from our evil ways. Do you long for righteousness, holiness, justice and truth? Joseph's life suggests the Lord God of Israel had a lot of work to do in his life, to humble him by years of wrongful imprisonment ultimately for the purpose of raising him up to save many people. Seek the Lord and His righteousness, "is this what you are looking for?"  
(מדה-תב קש)

