



## VAYEISHEV: WHO REALLY SOLD JOSEPH?

Welcome to the Aleph Beta Study Guide to Parshat Vayeishev!

### The Greatest Crime That Never Happened

Parshat Vayeishev includes one of the most astounding events in the entire Bible, the sale of Joseph at the hands of his brothers. We want to invite you to explore this sale through the eyes of Rashbam,<sup>1</sup> one of the medieval Biblical commentators.<sup>2</sup>

Rashbam actually argues – get ready for this – that the brothers never sold Joseph at all. We know, it flies in the face of what you *think* you know about the story. It makes you wonder, where is Rashbam coming up with this? Is he just trying to get the brothers off the hook? Isn't it plain in the Bible that they sold Joseph?

### An Open And Shut Case

The only way to resolve this is to take a look at the verses themselves. But first, let's remind ourselves of the context. Joseph was sent by his father to check up on his brothers. When the brothers see him approaching from afar, they hatch a plan to cast him into a pit. The action picks up below in verse 23:

#### Genesis 37:23-29

23 When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, 24 and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 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 And Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he rent his garments.

#### בראשית לז: כג-כט

כג וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר-בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחָיו; וַיִּפְשְׁטוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף אֶת-כְּתֹנֶתוֹ, אֶת-כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו. כד וַיִּקְחוּהוּ--וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ, הַבְּרֶה; וְהַבּוֹר רָק, אֵין בּו מַיִם. כה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ, לֶאֱכֹל-לֶחֶם, וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ, וְהִנֵּה אַרְחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד; וּגְמַלֵּיהֶם נִשְׂאִים, נִבְאֹת וְצָרִי וְלֹט--הַחֲלָמִים, לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם. כו וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹדָה, אֶל-אָחָיו: מִה-בְּצַע, כִּי נִהְרַג אֶת-אָחִינוּ, וְכִסִּינוּ, אֶת-דַּמּוֹ. כז לָכוּ וְנִמְכְּרוּ לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים, וַיִּדְנוּ אֶל-תְּהֵי-בו, כִּי-אָחִינוּ בְּשָׂרֵנוּ, הוּא; וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ, אָחָיו. כח וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אֲנָשִׁים מִדְּיָנִים סַחְרִים, וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִן-הַבּוֹר, וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים, בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף; וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף, מִצְרַיִם. כט וַיֵּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל-הַבּוֹר, וְהִנֵּה אֵין-יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר; וַיִּקְרַע, אֶת-בְּגָדָיו.

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, Rashi's grandson, whose commentary focuses on the *pshat*, simple meaning, of the verses.

<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, Rashbam's interpretation of this sale is unusual; many commentators adopt a different stance. Here is a sampling of those other opinions: Rashi (based on the Midrash) writes that the brothers pulled Joseph from the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites, who in turn sold him to the Midianites, who sold him to Egypt. (However, Genesis 39:1 challenges this.) Ibn Ezra understands, based on a verse in Judges 8:24, that the Midianites and the Ishmaelites are the same tribe. Ramban offers a brilliant harmonization. The brothers raised Joseph from the pit and sold him to Midianite merchants, who hired camels from the Ishmaelite caravans, who brought him to Egypt for the Midianites.



## INSTRUCTIONS

There are a lot of divrei Torah on the parsha. How is this different?

At Aleph Beta, we believe that the Torah is a guidebook that answers life's biggest questions, offering profound insights about how we should live our lives. Moreover, we believe that Jewish tradition has always recognized the right of all readers, in every generation, to look at the text themselves and try to decide what they think it means. That means you. That's why you are the most important author of this quest through the sources. We think that this guide offers a fun, stimulating and relevant path through the sources, but if you get wrapped up in a stimulating discussion and never make it past page 2, we'll consider that a success!

Is this guide for self-study or should I study it with others?

Either works! You can gather a small group of friends to explore it together, share it with a chevruta (learning partner), or go through it by yourself.

Do I need to prepare anything or can I just jump in?

Just jump in! Even if you're planning to use this for a group discussion, just open up to page 1 and get going. (If you read it in advance, it will spoil the fun!) The only thing you should do in advance is print out copies of the "Source Sheet" for the other participants, so everyone can follow along and engage with the sources.

### About the Author

Most of the material within – although not the particular language contained in this guide - was first developed and taught by Rabbi David Fohrman, founder and CEO of Aleph Beta, and is presented in his video, "Parshat Vayeishev. Who Really Sold Joseph?" (available for viewing at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org)). This guide was written by Beth Lesch, edited by Rivky Stern, and arranged by Laura Schembre.

When you first read these verses, it's not obvious where Rashbam is coming from. Indeed, verses 26 and 27 seem to fly in the face of his argument. Notice Judah's suggestion to his brothers:

Genesis 37:26-27

מה-בצע, כי נהרג את-אחינו, וכסינו, את-דמו? לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים...

What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites...

And how do the brothers respond to Judah's proposal? They don't miss a beat:

Genesis 37:27

וישמעו אחיו

And his brothers agreed

If you had any doubt that the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, there's your evidence! It seems like an open and shut case, right?

## Searching For Ambiguity



### PONDER THIS

Take a second look back at the verses. This time, see if you can find any evidence to defend Rashbam's position that the brothers *didn't* sell Joseph.

Now that you've read it a second time, do things seem just a little bit less cut and dry? Take a look at verse 28:

Genesis 37:28

וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִדְּיָנִים סְחָרִים, וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִן-הַבּוֹר, וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים

When Midianite traders passed by, *they* pulled Joseph up out of the pit, and they sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the Ishmaelites

Who is the "they"? The truth is, the text doesn't say. It's ambiguous.

How might we figure it out? Well, in Hebrew, whenever we find a verb whose subject isn't defined, we look back to the last subject that was mentioned. What is the last subject that was mentioned?

It's the Midianite traders. Read the verse one more time: "When **Midianite traders** passed by, **they** pulled Joseph up out of the pit..." It sure sounds like "they" refers to the Midianite traders. Grammatically, that's the most straightforward way to read the text.

## Getting The Players Straight

Still not convinced? If you stick to the old story and insist that it's the brothers who did the selling, you're left with another complication: not who *sold* Joseph, but...who *bought* him. We'll show you what we mean. Close your eyes and imagine the scene. There's a wide expanse of desert and a hot beating sun. Joseph is in the pit, too deep down to lift himself out, wondering what will happen next. He's hurt and afraid. Will his brothers have mercy on him and rescue him? Meanwhile, his brothers are off on the side, setting up a picnic lunch.



### PONDER THIS

Is anyone else on the scene? Who are the other players, besides Joseph and his brothers?

If you look back at the verses, you'll see that there are not one but two other players: the **Ishmaelites** (mentioned in verses 27 and 28) and the **Midianites** (mentioned in verse 28). Two bands of merchants who just happen to be passing by the pit! What's going on here? Which one bought Joseph?



## PONDER THIS

Let's say you reject Rashbam's theory. You maintain that the brothers sold Joseph. Well, then, how do you imagine this scene? What did the Ishmaelites do? What did the Midianites do? Why does the Bible tell me about both of them?

If we look back at verse 28, we see that "they" (whoever *they* is) "sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver to the **Ishmaelites**, who brought Joseph to Egypt." So if the brothers did the selling, and the Ishmaelites did the buying, what are the Midianites doing there? They don't seem to have a role at all. Why do I need to know that the Midianites traders just happened to be passing by? I mean, it's not like the Bible tells me every time a group of Hittites filled up their water jugs at the local well, or a group of Jebusites settled in for an afternoon nap. The Bible isn't a history book, it's not interested in detailing the movements of every band of merchants in the ancient Near East. It's a *guidebook*, in which God conveys crucial messages about how we're meant to live our lives. The Torah wouldn't mention the Midianites unless they were actually crucial for us, reading this book thousands of years later. Therefore, isn't it plausible that the Midianites did the selling and the Ishmaelites did the buying?



## Arriving At A Conclusion

So where do we stand? When we began our study, Rashbam's reading seemed doomed. But now that we're looking at the evidence, the scales are shifting. When you take the grammatical ambiguity of the "they" and combine it with the confusion about the Ishmaelites and the Midianites, you can start to see how Rashbam reached his conclusion: that the Midianites sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites, who brought him to Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

*Which means that the brothers had no hand in it.* They saw the Ishmaelite traders in the distance, but they didn't notice that the Midianite traders were closer. The brothers never saw the Midianites coming. Maybe the Midianites were approaching from the opposite direction, or maybe there was a sand dune in the way. Whatever the case, the Midianites arrived at the pit first. They saw Joseph and had the same idea that the brothers did. It was the Midianites who grabbed Joseph, sold him to the Ishmaelites, and pocketed the profit.<sup>4</sup>



The brothers didn't do it, and they didn't know that it happened until it was too late. They were eating their lunch, minds occupied, waiting for the Ishmaelites to arrive so they could make their money. The brothers *planned* to sell Joseph, yes - but their plan never came to fruition, *because the Midianites beat them to it.*

<sup>3</sup> It's worth noting that Genesis 37:36 seems to present some problems for Rashbam's theory: והמדינים מכרו אתו אל-מצרים לפוטפר ("And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar...") - but we think there's a way to reconcile. How would you respond, if you were Rashbam? If you're interested in more, we recommend seeking out Rashbam's own comment on verse 36.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this explains another peculiarity in the verses: that Reuben returns to the pit and seems shocked to find that Joseph is gone: ותשוב ראוּבֵן אֶל-הַבּוֹר, והנה אין-יוסף בבור; ויִקְרַע, אֶת-בְּגָדָיו. "And Reuben returned to the pit, and behold, Joseph was not in the pit; so he rent his garments." If the brothers just lifted Joseph out of the pit, what do you mean, "Reuben returned to the pit"? Wasn't he already standing there with everyone else? And if he just participated with the brothers in drawing Joseph out of the pit, why was he so surprised that Joseph was gone? If you reject Rashbam's reading, you have to say that Reuben wandered off from the brothers - that they sold Joseph while Reuben was out of the picture - and that's a bit of a stretch, because there just isn't any other evidence in the text to suggest it.

## One Thing Leads To Another

We're able to see now that Rashbam wasn't coming out of nowhere. However much it butts up against what we *thought* we knew about this story, Rashbam's interpretation is rooted in the Biblical text itself.

### PONDER THIS

But we're left to ponder: What are the *implications* of Rashbam's reading? In other words, why does the Bible tell the story in this way, and what are we supposed to learn from it?

The Bible is painting a portrait for us of a group of people who intended to commit a crime... but they never actually did it, because their plan was interrupted. We can't say for sure, but it seems that the Bible is inviting us to *imagine* what would have happened if their crime *hadn't* been interrupted. What if these Midianite traders had come an hour later, or had taken a different route that day? After all, this moment at the pit is not an isolated crime. It has enormous ramifications. This crime determined the very course of Israelite history.

Think about it: after Joseph heads down to Egypt, he gets cozy with Pharaoh; before you know it, he's second in command of all of Egypt and his entire extended family is settled comfortably in Goshen. A generation later, the descendants of Jacob are enslaved to the new Pharaoh, an oppression which will persist for hundreds of years. You see, it's not hard to draw a line from the sale of Joseph to the enslavement of the entire nation in Egypt. The stakes here run high.

### PONDER THIS

So what do you think would have happened if the Midianites *never came*? How might the history of the children of Israel looked different?

You might be thinking: "It wouldn't have made *any difference* at all. If the Midianites didn't sell him, the brothers would have. Joseph still would have ended up in Egypt as a slave."

You may be right - but is it possible to somehow test that theory? **We think it is.**

Let's take a closer look at the verses which describe the brothers' plan, to try to get inside of their minds, to really understand what they were thinking. Then we'll be in a position to hazard a guess about what their *next step* would have been.



## LOOK INSIDE

Take a second look at the encounter between Joseph and his brothers at the pit. We've provided you with a lengthier excerpt below, so you can get a fuller sense of the picture here. As you read, ask yourself: What are the brothers planning to do to Joseph? Their plan changes over time. How many different plans can you find?

### Genesis 37:18-29

**18** They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. **19** They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! **20** Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams!" **21** But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let us not take his life." **22** And Reuben went on, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves"—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. **23** When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, **24** and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. **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.

### בראשית לז: יח-כט

**יח** וַיֵּרְאוּ אוֹתוֹ, מֵרְחֹק; וּבְטָרֵם יִקְרַב אֵלֵיהֶם, וַיִּתְנַבְּלוּ אוֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ. **יט** וַיֹּאמְרוּ, אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו: הִנֵּה, בָּעַל הַחֲלָמוֹת הַלְזָה--בָּא. **כ** וַעֲתָה לָכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ, וְנִשְׁלַכְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוֹת, וְאָמְרֵנּוּ, חַיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָהוּ; וְנִרְאָה, מִה-יְהִי חֲלֹמְתֵינוּ. **כא** וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן, וַיִּצְלָהוּ מֵיָדָם; וַיֹּאמֶר, לֹא נִכְנֹו נַפְשׁ. **כב** וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רְאוּבֵן, אֶל-תִּשְׁפְּכוּ-דָם--הַשְּׁלִיכוּ אוֹתוֹ אֶל-הַבּוֹר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְבָּר, וַיֵּד אֶל-תִּשְׁלַחוּ-בוֹ: לְמַעַן, הֲצִיל אוֹתוֹ מֵיָדָם, לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ, אֶל-אָבִיו. **כג** וַיְהִי, כֹּאֲשֶׁר-בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחָיו; וַיִּפְּשִׁטוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף אֶת-כִּתְנֹתָיו, אֶת-כִּתְנֵת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו. **כד** וַיִּקְהֹוּ--וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אוֹתוֹ, הַבְּרָה; וְהַבּוֹר רָק, אֵין בוֹ מַיִם. **כה** וַיִּשְׁבּוּ, לְאֶכָל-לֶחֶם, וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ, וְהִנֵּה אַרְחַת יִשְׁמַעְאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגְּלַעַד; וּגְמִלֵיהֶם נִשְׂאִים, נִכְאֹת וּצְרִי וְלֹט--הוֹלְכִים, לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרַיִם. **כו** וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה, אֶל-אָחָיו: מִה-בְּצַע, כִּי נַהַרְגָ אֶת-אָחִינוּ, וְכִסִּינוּ, אֶת-דַּמּוֹ. **כז** לָכוּ וְנִמְכְּרֵנוּ לְיִשְׁמַעְאֵלִים, וַיִּדְנוּ אֶל-תְּהִי-בוֹ, כִּי-אָחִינוּ בְּשָׂרֵנוּ, הוּא; וַיִּשְׁמַעוּ, אָחָיו. **כח** וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁים מִדְּזִנִּים סַחְרִים, וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִן-הַבּוֹר, וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמַעְאֵלִים, בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף; וַיְבִיאוּ אֶת-יוֹסֵף, מִצְרַיִם. **כט** וַיִּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל-הַבּוֹר, וְהִנֵּה אֵין-יוֹסֵף בְּבוֹר; וַיִּקְרַע, אֶת-בְּגָדָיו.

Alright, let's compare notes. It seems like the brothers actually consider **three** options:

- A. "Let's kill Joseph! We'll toss his corpse into a pit and say that he was eaten by a wild animal. We'll see what becomes of his dreams!" (verses 18-20)
- B. "Let's not get our hands dirty by murdering him. Better to just toss him into a pit where he'll eventually rot and die." (verses 21-25)
- C. "Let's not kill our own flesh and blood. What if we sell him instead? That way we'll be rid of him, and gain something from it." (verses 26-28)



### PONDER THIS

Why do you think the plans keep changing?



**Hint:** What's happening as the brothers' plan goes from A to B to C? What trend do you see here?

We see a couple of patterns at play:

1 First, these three plans seem to go from **most violent to least violent**, from:

a) killing Joseph with their own bare hands

to

b) indirectly killing him by leaving him in a pit to die

to

c) selling him into slavery

2 Second, as they progress from A to B to C, the brothers are becoming **less passionate and more calculating**. Indeed, that's what seems to lead Judah to ask:

Genesis 37:26-27

מה-בצע, כי נהרג את-אחינו, ובסינו, את-דמו? לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים...

What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites...

Judah's proposal - *Let's see if we can make some money here!* - smacks more of logic than anger.

All told, as the account advances from Plan A to Plan B to Plan C, it looks like the brothers are beginning to cool off, ever so slightly, that they're gaining some control over their tempers. They are thinking, and rethinking, and rethinking again their original murderous proposal.

## An Educated Guess



### PONDER THIS

How can we explain this progression? *What* is causing the brothers to rethink their plans over and over again? Is there some factor which is influencing their thinking?

### The biggest influence on the brothers' decision-making process seems to be nothing more than the simple passage of time.

Take a look back at the verses, this time with an eye towards the clock. In verse 18, when the brothers first articulate Plan A, they've only just noticed Joseph approaching from afar. By the time he actually catches up to them in verse 23, they've already moved onto Plan B. And by the time Judah proposes Plan C, they've had the chance to sit down to a meal, to fill their stomachs and ponder their actions. As the seconds and minutes steadily tick by, the brothers give the scenario more thought; their voice of conscience rings a bit louder, and their impulse to kill Joseph grows less and less severe. As much as the brothers are creating these plans, time is a partner in writing the script.



### PONDER THIS

We're now in a position to return to our outstanding question: what *would have* happened had the Midianite traders not gotten there when they did? If the brothers had had more time to think about it, what might Plan D have looked like?

There's no way to know for certain, but if we follow the clues in the text, then we have good reason to suggest that the pattern would have continued. Just as Plan A was tempered by Plan B, and Plan B was softened even more by Plan C, Plan C would have been replaced by a more compassionate Plan D. Plan D might have looked something like this:

"Hey guys, let's haul Joseph out of the pit. We've shown him who's boss; he won't mess with us again."



It's enough to make you wonder: Could this whole ordeal have been averted? Could we have skipped over that whole slavery in Egypt part of our history and gone straight to Sinai? Sadly, we'll never know – because the brothers *were* interrupted; the Midianites *did* show up.

## The Timeless Lesson

As fascinating as it is to play this game - to imagine what might have happened if things were different - we haven't fully addressed the question at the heart of the whole matter. *What meaning are we meant to take away from this?* Finding the textual anomalies is the easy part. Figuring out what timeless lesson the Bible is trying to teach us - that's the hard part. At such moments, the Bible seems to be almost silent, inviting us to do the work, to piece together speculation and introspection to arrive at an answer.



### PONDER THIS

Why do you think the Torah goes into detail about these three different plans? "Let's do this!" "Nah, let's do this!" "Ooh, how about this?" What's the life lesson here?

**We want to suggest the following:** If we had asked you, before you read this guide, "What's the lesson of the sale of Joseph?", what would you have said? *Don't sell your brother into slavery.* Right? But did you *really* need the Bible to tell you that? You sort of already knew that, didn't you? As lessons go, it's pretty one-dimensional. It's not like we've ever contemplated selling a loved one, but then remembered, "Oh wait, the Bible says that I shouldn't do that... never mind."

The Bible is in the business of changing the way that we live our lives... and the lesson here is something much more nuanced. It has to do with what happens when angry people get together and start to play off one another. It's about how situations can escalate too quickly. It's about how we can rapidly lose control of the consequences of our actions. By recording Plans A, B and C, the evolution between them and the final, fateful interception by the Midianites, the Bible shows us the complexity of *how sin happens* - and warns us of the frightful consequences if and when our actions spiral out of our hands. We'd like to think that we have free will - that the actions that we take reflect our careful and deliberate choices. But it's possible to set a chain of events into motion that we are then powerless to reverse.

If the brothers had had just a little more time, Joseph might never have been sold down to Egypt. The brothers might have changed their minds and not gone through with the sale. But they ran out of time, and it did happen. Those are the inescapable consequences of their actions. Yes, the Midianites are the ones who actually sold Joseph, *but the brothers created the conditions* that allowed him to be sold. The brothers might not have been convicted in a human court, but on some deep level, they bear culpability for what happened.

Time can be your friend, especially when you are about to do something impetuous. But you don't always get the luxury of time. When that happens, you're left with the bitter consequences of your actions. That, to us, is the really chilling lesson of Rashbam. When passions run high, we need to find a way to build in *time*, to give ourselves a chance to cool down before taking action. Because we won't always get to take it back.

Genesis 37:18-29

בראשית לז: יח-כט

18 They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams!" 21 But when Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, "Let us not take his life." 22 And Reuben went on, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves"—intending to save him from them and restore him to his father. 23 When Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing, 24 and took him and cast him into the pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 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.

יח ויראו אותו מרחוק; ובטרם יקרב אליהם, ויתנבלו אותו להמיתו. יט ויאמרו, איש אל-אחיו: הנה, בעל החלמות הלזה--בא. כ ועתה לכו ונהרגהו, ונשליכהו באחד הבורות, ואמרנו, חיה רעה אכלתהו; ונראה, מה-יהיו חלמותיו. כא וישמע ראובן, ויצלהו מידם; ויאמר, לא נכנו נפש. כב ויאמר אלהם ראובן, אל-תשפכו-דם--השליכו אתו אל-הבור הזו אשר במדבר, ויד אל-תשליכו-בו: למען, הציל אתו מידם, להשיבו אל-אביו. כג ויהי, באשר-בא יוסף אל-אחיו; ויפשיטו את-יוסף את-כתנתו, את-כתנת הפסים אשר עליו. כד ויקחהו--וישליכו אתו, הברה; והבור רק, אין בו מים. כה וישבו, לאכל-לחם, וישאו עיניהם ויראו, והנה ארחת ישמעאלים באה מגלעד; וגמליהם נשאים, נכאת וצרי ולט--הולכים, להוריד מצרימה. כו ויאמר יהודה, אל-אחיו: מה-בצע, כי נהרג את-אחינו, וכסינו את-דמו. כז לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים, ונדנו אל-תהי-בו, כי-אחינו בשרנו, הוא; וישמעו, אחיו. כח ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים, וימשכו ויעלו את-יוסף מן-הבור, וימכרו את-יוסף לישמעאלים, בעשרים כסף; ויביאו את-יוסף, מצרימה. כט וישב ראובן אל-הבור, והנה אין-יוסף בבור; ויקרע, את-בגדיו.



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## Rashbam on Genesis 37:28

## רשב"ם על בראשית לז:כח

**When the Midianite traders passed by** - While the brothers had been sitting down to consume their meal, having distanced themselves somewhat from the pit into which they had thrown Joseph in order not to be guilty of "eating while spilling blood," they were waiting for the Ishmaelites whom they had seen in the distance, to arrive. During this period the Midianites, coming from a different direction had passed there, saw Joseph in the pit, pulled him up, and proceeded to sell him to the Ishmaelites. One may assume that the brothers had no knowledge of this. Even though the Torah appears to attribute the sale of Joseph to the Ishmaelites to the brothers, (based on Joseph accusing them of having sold him to Egypt, 45,4) we would have to say that because of their having been instrumental in bringing about that sale they are considered as if having assisted in that sale. This appears to me the deeper meaning of the plain meaning of the text both here and in chapter 45. The line describing the Midianites passing that way is described as something totally coincidental, having nothing to do with what the brothers had planned to do with Joseph. Even if the Torah says: "And they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites," this sounds as if the brothers did the selling. It is also possible that the brothers noting the Midianites suddenly materialising out of nowhere, instructed them to pull Joseph out of the pit after which they themselves sold him to the Ishmaelites.

**ויעברו אנשים מדינים** - ובתוך שהיו יושבים לאכול לחם ורחוקים היו קצת מן הבור לבלתי אכול על הדם וממתינים היו לישמעאלים שראו וקודם שבאו הישמעאלים עברו אנשים מדינים אחרים דרך שם וראוהו בבור ומשכוהו ומכרוהו המדיינים לישמעאלים. ויש לומר: שהאחים לא ידעו ואף על פי שכתוב אשר מכרתם אותי מצרימה. יש לומר: שהגרמת מעשיהם סייעה במכירתו. זה נראה לי לפי עומק דרך פשוטו של מקרא. כי ויעברו אנשים מדינים משמע ע"י מקרה והם מכרוהו לישמעאלים. ואף אם באתה לומר וימכרו את יוסף לישמעאלים כי אחיו מכרוהו, אם כן צריך לומר שהם ציוו למדינים סוחרים למושכו מן הבור, ואח"כ מכרוהו לישמעאלים.