

Vayeshev Study Sheet The Power of Clothing

The Coat of Many Colors

בראשית ל"ז:ב-ד

אָלָהּ | תִּלְדוֹת יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף בֶּן־שִׁבְע־עָשָׂר שָׁנָה הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת־אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן וְהוּא נָעַר אֶת־בְּנֵי (ב)
בְּלָהָה וְאֶת־בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה נְשֵׂי אָבִיו וַיְבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת־דִּבְתָּם רָעָה אֶל־אָבִיהֶם: (ג) וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת־יוֹסֵף
מִכָּל־בְּנָיו כִּי־בְרִזְקָנִים הוּא לוֹ וְעָשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים: (ד) וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶחָיו כִּי־אִתּוֹ אֶהָב אָבִיהֶם
מִכָּל־אֶחָיו וַיִּשְׁנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלָם:

Genesis 37:2-4

(2) This, then, is the line of Jacob: At 17 years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father. (3) Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an **ornamented tunic**. (4) And when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.

בראשית ל"ז:כ"ג-כ"ד

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר־בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו וַיִּפְשִׂטוּ אֶת־יוֹסֵף אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו: (כג)
וַיִּקְחוּהוּ וַיִּשְׁלְכוּ אֹתוֹ הַבְּוֹר וְהַבְּוֹר רָק אֵין בּוֹ מַיִם: (כד)

Genesis 37:23-24

(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.

בראשית ל"ז:ט"ל-ל"ג

וַיֵּשֶׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל־הַבְּוֹר וְהִנֵּה אִיר־יוֹסֵף בְּבוֹר וַיִּקְרַע אֶת־בְּגָדָיו: (ל) וַיֵּשֶׁב אֶל־אֶחָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הַיֶּלֶד (כט)
אֵינָנו וְאֲנִי אָנֹכִי אֲנִי־בָא: (לא) וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁחֲטוּ שְׂעִיר עִזִּים וַיִּטְבְּלוּ אֶת־הַכְּתֹנֶת בַּדָּם:
(לב) וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶת־כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים וַיְבִיאוּ אֶל־אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ זֹאת מְצָאנוּ הַכְּרִנָּה הַכְּתֹנֶת בְּנֶגֶד הוּא
אִם־לֹא: (לג) וַיִּכְרְהוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ כְּתֹנֶת בְּנֵי תִיָּה רָעָה אֲכָלְתָּהוּ טָרַף טָרַף יוֹסֵף:

Genesis 37:29-33

(29) When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, **he rent his clothes**. (30) Returning to his brothers, he said, "The boy is gone! Now, what am I to do?" (31) Then they took Joseph's tunic, slaughtered a kid, and dipped the **tunic** in the blood. (32) They had the ornamented **tunic** taken to their father, and they said, "We found this. Please examine it; is it **your son's tunic** or not?" (33) He recognized it, and said, "**My son's tunic!** A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!"

Commentary

רש"י על בראשית ל"ז:ג'ב'

פסים. לשון כלי מילת, כמו כרפס ותכלת, וכמו כתנת הפסים דתמר ואמנון, ומ"א ע"ש צרותיו, שגמכר לפוטיפר ולסוחרים ולישמעאלים ולמדינים:

Rashi on Genesis 37:3:2

פסים is a term for raiment of fine wool (Shabbat 10b). Similar is (Ester 1:6) כרפס "Fine linen and blue". The same garment *katonet pasim* is mentioned (2 Samuel 13:18) in the story of Amnon and Tamar and we may therefore gather that it was made of very fine material. There is a Midrashic statement that in the word **פסים** (*passim*) we may find an allusion to all his misfortunes: he was sold to Potiphar (פוטיפר), to the merchants (סוחרים), to the Ishmaelites (ישמעאלים), and to the Midianites (מדינים) (Genesis Rabbah 84:8).

שמואל ב י"ג:י"ט

ותלח תמר אפר על ראשה וכתנת הפסים אשר עליה קרעה ותשם ידה על ראשה ותלך (יט) הלך וצעקה:

II Samuel 13:19

(19) Tamar put dust on her head and rent the **ornamented tunic** she was wearing; she put her hands on her head, and walked away, screaming loudly as she went.

חזקוני, בראשית ל"ז:ג'ב'

פסים על שם מכירתו, למפרע. ד"א לשון פיוס כמו שטר פיוסים כתונת נאה כדי לפייסו.

Chizkuni, Genesis 37:3:2

פסים, a name that was to be given to this garment retroactively after Joseph had been sold. [Each letter of the word refers to a different master to whom Joseph had been sold, commencing with מ for the Midianites and ending with פ for Potiphar.] A different explanation sees in the word **פסים** as a "compensation," for being a half orphan, not having a mother anymore. Yaakov tried to compensate him by having a costly garment made for him.

(Note: פִּיֵס – to placate, to appease, to reconcile

פִּיֵס - fate, lot)

ספורנו על בראשית ל"ז:ג'א'

ועשה לו כתונת פסים לאות שיהיה הוא המנהיג בבית ובשדה. כענין והלבשתיו כתנתך: וכאמרם ז"ל (בבא קמא) בגדול אחי כי היכי דלשתמען מיליה

Sforno on Genesis 37:3:1

פסים, as a visible sign that Joseph was intended by him to become the leader of all the brothers both at home and in the field. The use of such distinctive clothing to symbolise someone's elevated stature is found also in Isaiah 22,21 *v'halavashtav katontach*, "I will dress him (Chilkiyah) in your tunic," where it signals that authority is transferred to the one wearing

the appropriate garments. (uniform). The Talmud Baba Kama 11 also confirms that authority is signalled by the attire worn by people possessing it.

The term used to describe the gift given to Joseph is *k'tonet pasim*. The first time the word *k'tonet* is used is at the dawn of history, to describe the first set of clothes which followed Adam and Eve's trespass and subsequent feeble attempt to cover themselves:

And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked

; and they sewed fig leaves together ... For Adam and for his wife the Lord God made coats of skins and clothed them. (Genesis 3:7,21)

וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתָנוּת עוֹר וַיְלַבְּשֵׁם:

In this context it is somewhat strange that specifically this term is used to describe the gift of Jacob to Joseph.

There is a tradition that these clothes were one and the same, handed down from Adam to Nimrod, to Esau, and finally used by Jacob to procure the blessing from his father. These were the clothes given to Joseph. If this is the case, we can appreciate the resulting enmity between Esau and Jacob, but Jacob's motivation in giving these clothes to Joseph seems obscure.

Rabbi Ari Kahan

Yehudah and Tamar

[בראשית ל"ח:י"ג-י"ח](#)

וַיֵּגַד לְתַמָּר לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה חָמִיךָ עָלָה תִמְנַתָּה לְגַז צֹאנֶיךָ: (יד) וַתִּסֹּר בְּגָדֶיךָ אֶלְמְנוּתָהּ מֵעֲלֶיהָ (יג) וַתִּכַּס בַּצֹּעֲרִים וַתַּעֲלֶה וַתִּשָּׁב בְּפֶתַח עֵינַיִם אֲשֶׁר עַל־דָּרֶךְ תִּמְנַתָּה כִּי רָאִתָּה כִּי־גָדְלָה שְׁלָהּ וְהָיָה לֹא־נִתְּנָה לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: (טו) וַיִּרְאֶה יְהוָה וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לְזוֹנָה כִּי כִסְתָהּ פְּנֵיהָ: (טז) וַיִּט אֵלֶיהָ אֶל־הַדָּרֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר הֲבֵנָה אֲבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי לֹא יָדַע כִּי כָלְתוּ הִוא וַתֹּאמֶר מַה־תַּתֵּן־לִי כִּי תָבוֹא אֵלַי: (יז) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֲשַׁלַּח גְּדֵי־עִזִּים מִרְהַצָּאן וַתֹּאמֶר אִם־תַּתֵּן עֲרֻבוֹן עַד שְׁלַחְךָ: (יח) וַיֹּאמֶר מָה הָעֲרֻבוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶן־לְךָ וַתֹּאמֶר חֲתָמְךָ וּפְתִילְךָ וּמִטְבֵּךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדְךָ וַיִּתֵּן־לָהּ וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ וַתְּהַר לּוֹ:

[Genesis 38:13-18](#)

(13) And Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheep shearing.” (14) **She took off her widow’s garb**, covered her face with a **veil**, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance on the road to Timnah; she saw that Shelah was grown, yet she hadn’t been given to him as wife. (15) When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. (16) So he turned to her and said, “Let me sleep with you”—for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She asked: “What will you pay for sleeping with me?” (17) He replied, “I will send a kid from my flock.” But she said, “You must leave a pledge until you sent it.” (18) And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” She replied, “Your **seal and cord, and the staff** which you carry.” So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him.

[בראשית ל"ח:כ"ד-כ"ו](#)

וַיְהִי ׀ כַּמִּשְׁלֹשׁ חֳדָשִׁים וַיֵּגֵד לַיהוָה לְאִמּוֹ זָנְתָהּ תָמָר בְּלֶתֶךָ וְגַם הֵנָּה הָרָה לְזִנוּגִים וַיֹּאמֶר (כד) יְהוָה הוֹצִיאֹהָ וְתִשְׁרָף: (כה) הוּא מוֹצֵאת וְהִיא שְׁלָחָה אֶל־חַמְלִיָּה לְאִמּוֹ לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אָלְתָה לוֹ אֲנֹכִי הָרָה וְתֹאמֶר הַכֹּרֶן־נָא לְמִי הַחֲתָמָת וְהַפְּתִילִים וְהַמַּטֵּה הָאֵלֶּה: (כו) וַיִּכַּר יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי־עַל־כֵּן לֹא־נִתְּתִיָּה לְשָׁלָה בְנִי וְלֹא־יִסַּף עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ:

[Genesis 38:24-26](#)

(24) About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” (25) As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose **seal and cord and staff** are these?” (26) Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again.

Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife

[בראשית ל"ט:א-י"ח](#)

וַיְהִי כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה וַיָּבֵא הַבְּיָתָה לַעֲשׂוֹת מְלֹאכְתּוֹ וְאִין אִישׁ מֵאֲנָשֵׁי הַבְּיָתָה שָׁם בְּבֵית: (יב) (יא) וְתַתְּפֹשֶׁהוּ בְּבִגְדּוֹ לְאִמּוֹ שְׂכָבָה עִמִּי וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיִּנָּס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה: (יג) וַיְהִי כִּרְאוּתָהּ כִּי־עָזַב בְּגָדוֹ בְּיָדָהּ וַיִּנָּס הַחוּצָה: (יד) וַתִּקְרָא לְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵיתָהּ וַתֹּאמֶר לָהֶם לְאִמּוֹ רְאוּ הֵבִיא לָנוּ אִישׁ עֲבָרִי לְצַחֵק בָּנוּ בָּא אֵלַי לְשָׂכַב עִמִּי וְאֶקְרָא בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל: (טו) וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַעוּ כִּי־הִרִימֹתִי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב אֶצְלִי וַיִּנָּס וַיֵּצֵא הַחוּצָה: (טז) וַתִּנְחַן בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלָהּ עַד־כּוּא אֲדַנְיוֹ אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ: (יז) וַתִּדְבַּר אֵלָיו כַּדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאִמּוֹ בָּא־אֵלַי הָעֶבֶד הָעֲבָרִי אֲשֶׁר־הֵבֵאתָ לָנוּ לְצַחֵק בִּי: (יח) וַיְהִי כִּהִרְיָמִי קוֹלִי וְאֶקְרָא וַיַּעֲזֹב בְּגָדוֹ אֶצְלִי וַיִּנָּס הַחוּצָה:

[Genesis 39:11-18](#)

(11) One such day, [Joseph] came into [Potiphar's] house to do his work. None of the household being there inside, (12) [Potiphar's wife] caught hold of him by his garment and said, “Lie with me!” But he left his garment in her hand and got away and fled outside. (13) When she saw that he had left it in her hand and had fled outside, (14) she called out to her servants and said to them, “Look, [Potiphar] had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud. (15) And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and got away and fled outside.” (16) She kept his garment beside her, until

[Potiphar] came home. (17) Then she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; (18) but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside.”

Commentary

[סוטה ל"ו ב:י"ג](#)

ותתפשהו בבגדו לאמר וגו' באותה שעה באתה דיוקנו של אביו ונראתה לו (בראשית לט, יב) בחלון אמר לו יוסף עתידין אחיך שיכתבו על אבני אפוד ואתה ביניהם רצונך שימחה שמך מביניהם ותקרא רועה זונות דכתיב (משלי כט, ג) ורועה זונות יאבד הון

[Sotah 36b:13](#)

The verse states: “**And she caught him by his garment, saying: Lie with me**” (Genesis 39:12). **At that moment his father’s image [deyokeno] came and appeared to him in the window. The image said to him: Joseph, the names of your brothers are destined to be written on the stones of the ephod, and you are to be included among them. Do you desire your name to be erased from among them, and to be called an associate [ro’eh] of promiscuous women? As it is written: “But he who keeps company with harlots wastes his riches”** (Proverbs 29:3), as he loses his honor, which is more valuable than wealth.

[רבנו בחיי, בראשית ל"ט:י"ב:א'](#)

ויעזוב בגדו אצלה. למד הכתוב מעלתו שלא רצה להתעצם עם אדונתו ולקחת בגדו ממנה אבל הניחו אצלה לכבודה.

[Rabbeinu Bahya, Bereshit 39:12:1](#)

. ויעזוב בגדו אצלה. “he left his garment with her.” This is another example of Joseph’s chastity; he did not want to struggle for his garment with her and thereby involve himself in physical contact with her. He respected her dignity in not demonstrating his superior male power.

The Meaning of Clothing

"To modern readers, the word 'garment' might include all manner of expendables, from neck-ties to pocket handkerchiefs to vests or jackets, and Joseph's abandoning his garment therefore has less significance for us than it should. However to a biblical Israelite, the range of possibilities was narrower, and the resultant shame that would have been Joseph's, as well as the financial loss (unless the garment could be recovered), far greater"

(*In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* [San Francisco: HarperCollinsPublishers], 1990, p. 97).

“Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.”

(Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*)

Clothing functions as a central motif in the story of “Joseph and His Brothers,” both as a marker of distinction and as the source of undoing. It bestows honor and privilege upon the favored son of Jacob but, when stripped of the garment, it induces shame and serves as a prop for deception (ch. 37). As a motif, a “garment” appears again—albeit a different one—in the House of Potiphar, where Joseph is stripped of it and framed for rape by the lustful wife of Potiphar (ch. 39).

In the first story of the torn tunic, one might have supposed that Joseph’s ornamented cloak would serve as a means of disclosure, of testimony. In fact, it facilitates a *mis*-recognition. The blood-stained garment acts as a false alibi, the cover-story for Joseph’s sale into slavery...

The Hebrew term referring to Joseph’s garment, *begged*, is generic for clothing, though a pun may well be intended, resonant with the verb *bagad* (meaning “to betray”). Clothing (*begged*) in the Joseph saga serves as betrayal (*begidah*), false testimony; the tunic and garment cover for heinous acts – the sale of Joseph into slavery and the married woman’s attempted seduction of the handsome Hebrew slave, whom she later frames with rape.

Just as Iago uses Desdemona’s handkerchief, in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, to rouse the Moor’s jealousy, the “green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on” (Act 3, sc. 3), instigating the tragic murder, the Joseph story makes use of the leitmotif of clothing to highlight the act of *mis*-recognition. Both acts of misconstruction hinge on clothing – respectively, a blood-stained tunic and a garment.

Rachel Adelman , *Primeval Coats*

Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society.

Mark Twain

