

## Parshat Vayeshev- Torah From The Holy Land

### Torah: Women of the Wall and Joseph's Faith

Last week, a [bill](#) was submitted to the Knesset floor by 16 members of Knesset that would heavily fine or even imprison women wearing tallit or tefillin, reading Torah, or blowing the shofar at the Western Wall. This doubling down of the Ultra-Orthodox parties comes after they killed an agreement to raise the status of the egalitarian Kotel to that of the main Kotel, which was made between Prime Minister Netanyahu, members of Knesset, the Women of the Wall, and the Reform and Masorti (Conservative) movements in Israel, in addition to an [impressive coordinated response](#) on behalf of the Women of the Wall and the liberal movements two months ago. The continued stripping of the right of women to wear religious garb at the Kotel has [already done damage](#) to the Jewish American - Israeli relationship, and this bill will only further it. To quote the [words of Natan Sharansky](#), the chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, this bill, if passed, will have “grave consequences” for the relationship between Israel and Jews in the diaspora.

In this week's parasha, we read two incredibly similar accounts of the disrobing of Joseph. Joseph's “coat of many colors”, the first garment to be stripped, was given to him by his father. This haughty coat symbolized Joseph's ever increasing ego. It was given out of Jacob's great love for Joseph (over his brothers) and led to Joseph fantasizing (dreaming) about ruling over his brothers. While the dreams themselves may have been from God, the fact he feels the need to share them with his father and brothers further illustrates this building of ego. The increasing hatred of his brothers comes to a head when he is sent to check up on them. They strip Joseph of his cloak, ie. his dignity and ego, and throw him into a barren pit. Even in the lowest of lows, Joseph retains his faith in God. Shattered, he begins to rebuild his self image by placing the Divine at the center of his life, instead of his ego.

Joseph is sold down to Egypt, to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh, and God blesses Joseph in everything he does. Potiphar puts him in charge of his household, and they both prosper. Repeatedly, Potiphar's wife makes advances on Joseph, and every time he refuses. He knows what is right and wrong, and is adamant in his refusal. One day, when nobody is around, she succeeds in ripping his tunic off his body, and then accuses him of trying to sleep with her when he refuses her newest advance. Once again humiliated, he's thrown into prison. Yet again, his faith remains solid. Even in the prison, he prospers, and when two of Pharaoh's courtiers are thrown in jail with him, he responds to their request for him to interpret their dreams with “do not interpretations belong to God? Relate it to me, if you please” (Bereshit 40:8). Even in the darkness of the prison, Joseph gives credit to God for his interpretation abilities. Low and behold, the cupbearer remembers him after two years, and he is brought out to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, the rest being history. Joseph's ascension was not a linear one, but every time he was stripped naked and embarrassed, his faith remained strong, and this faith guided him in the darkest moments until he could come out and spread light.

Today, Joseph stands out as our prime teacher. No matter how many times people seek to disrobe women at the Wall (or anywhere) or liberal Jews in Israel of their Jewishness, we can look to Joseph for guidance. There are times when we let our ego get in the way, and this causes unnecessary hatred and hardship. In these moments, we need to take responsibility, and focus on recentering our own relationship and faith in the Divine. And there are times when, of no fault of our own, we are debased and thrown into the pit. Here too, our faith and religious vision must support and guide us. Like Joseph, we can and will

emerge victorious, but we need to come together now. Instead of distancing ourselves from Israel, let's proclaim our love for the Jewish state and our desire to make it a place where all Jews can come together and worship as they please.

## T'fillah: The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars (Psalm 148)

Joseph's second dream foretells of the sun, moon, and stars, representing his parents and brothers, all turning to bow down and worship him. In Psalm 148, one of the Hallelujah Psalms we say every morning, we see these same celestial symbols, this time all praising YHVH. For a moment, let's transport ourselves to the time of the return from the Babylonian exile, which followed the destruction of the first Temple. For years, the Jews had longed to return home and rebuild their Temple, and the time had finally come thanks to an edict from the Persian emperor Cyrus to return and rebuild the Temple. Making their way back, you could almost imagine the excitement they must have felt. Everything was falling into place, and the entire world seemed to be praising God. It's in this context in which the Psalm is believed to have been written.

It begins with the highest of the high, the celestial beings, the sun, moon, and stars, praising God. The descension of hierarchy continues to the skies, the ground, the birds and the creepy crawlies, and finally with all types of humans singing together in praise of YHVH. Throughout the Psalm, we invoke the image of God as King receiving praise from all that it created. It's a daily reminder that all the beauty and awe-inspiring things in the world all exist to praise their maker, including us.

Based upon this drash, last year I wrote a new melody for Psalm 148 designed to invoke this regal and joyous feeling. Take a [listen!](#)

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