

## WHY YOSEF IS COMPLETELY INNOCENT

### Chapter 37

**2)** *These are the generations of Yaakov. Yosef was seventeen years old. He would shepherd with his brothers among the sheep. He was a youth together with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. Yosef brought a bad report about them to their father.*

(ב) אֵלֶּה תִּלְדוֹת יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף בֶּן-שִׁבְעֵ-עָשָׂרָה שָׁנָה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת-אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן וְהוּא נֶעַר אֶת-בְּנֵי בִלְהָה וְאֶת-בְּנֵי זִלְפָּה נָשִׂי אָבִיו וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת-דְּבָרָם רָעָה אֶל-אָבִיהֶם.

**4)** *His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers and they hated him; they could not speak with him in a peaceful way."*

(ד) וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶחָיו כִּי-אֹהֵב אֱבִיהֶם מִכָּל-אֶחָיו וַיִּשְׁנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַּבֵּר לְשָׁלָם.

### Consider the following questions:

1. After saying in verse 2, *These are the generations of Yaakov*, why does the Torah mention only Yosef and not any of his other sons?
2. Why do we need to know that Yosef was seventeen, and that he was a shepherd **with** his brothers?
3. Why do we need to know that Yosef *was a youth together with the sons of Bilhah*? And why does it say, "*with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah*"? It should have simply said, "with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah."
4. Why does it say, "*his father's wives*"? Don't we already know that Bilhah and Zilpah were Yaakov's wives?
5. How is Yosef's bringing a *bad report* connected to the first part of the verse?
6. Why does it say (verse 2) בְּצֹאן, *among the sheep*? It should have said simply הַצֹּאן, *the sheep* — "Yosef would shepherd the sheep with his brothers."

It is necessary to correct a mistaken impression that might be formed when considering the actions of the brothers and their holy father, Yaakov. Many of the things described here seem, God forbid, to present them in a very bad light. How could Yosef HaTzaddik tell his father *lashon hara* about his brothers? How could Yaakov, the holy servant of God, accept the *lashon hara* without protest? How could the righteous brothers hate Yosef and be jealous of him to the point that they wanted to kill him and throw him into a pit of snakes and scorpions? How could they sell him as a slave to Arab merchants? Are these the actions of *tzaddikim*? A person without proper understanding might wrongly suspect that the brothers were not true servants of God, and conclude that they had turned out like the wicked offspring of Esav.

To correct this false impression, the Torah states, *These (אֵלֶּה) — Yosef and his brothers — are the generations of*

Yaakov, i.e., they are all righteous. The Torah was also careful not to write וְאֵלֶּה (**And** these, etc.), with a vav, as the word “and” would make it seem as if the brothers are linked to Esav’s offspring, who were enumerated in the immediately preceding passage at the end of the previous *parashah*.

Only Yosef was mentioned after the words *These are the generations of Yaakov* because the Torah is beginning here its justification of the behavior of Yaakov’s “generations” with Yosef — but as we shall see, it will also deal with the rest of the family. The Torah was not just singling out Yosef as the “generations of Yaakov.” **[This answers Question 1.]**

We can see in this passage how the Torah is careful to limit the blame of each person involved. Regarding Yosef, the Torah tells us that when he was seventeen years old, הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת-אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן, which may be translated: *he would shepherd his brothers when they were among the sheep*. When they were at home, their father Yaakov would guide his children; but when they were outside among the flock, Yosef’s natural wisdom and ability would come to the fore, and he would counsel them, despite his great youth. The Torah is telling us that although Yosef was just seventeen, he was mature and wise and was able to “shepherd” his brothers. In light of this, how could one suspect him of being a sinner who would go around spreading false reports about them? **[This answers Questions 2 and 6.]**

Someone might still claim that Yosef guided his brothers because he was arrogant and haughty, and not because of his superior wisdom and ability. Therefore, the Torah tells us that *he was a youth together with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives*. Being a youth together with these brothers means that he was happy to serve them and attend to their needs. He did not hold himself to be superior or treat them as the offspring of simple maidservants, but as full brothers — as “the sons of ... his father’s **wives**.” **[This answers Question 4.]** He related this way not only to “the sons of Bilhah,” who was the maidservant of his mother Rachel, but also to “the sons of Zilpah.” And this was true not only when all four of Bilhah and Zilpah’s children were together (when he might have honored Zilpah’s two children out of respect for Bilhah’s), but also when each pair of sons were by themselves. This is why the Torah repeats “the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah” rather than just saying “with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah.” From all this we see that Yosef was certainly not arrogant and haughty. **[This answers Question 3.]**

However, someone might still think that if Yosef was wise and not arrogant, then he is even more blameworthy for bringing a bad report about his brothers. To this the Torah answers, “This question should not trouble you too much. *Yosef brought a bad report to their father*” — i.e., **only** to their father, with the intention that Yaakov should examine their actions and guide them on the right path, as a father does for his sons. Yosef did not go about gossiping to strangers, in the manner of one who wishes to belittle a person and ruin his reputation. The Torah has thus provided some justification for Yosef’s actions. **[This answers Question 5.]**

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