Issues in Vayeshev

# Joseph the Youth

## Rabbi Reuven Hammer

Vayeshev is the first of three biblical portions devoted to the saga of Joseph. His life story is told in greater detail than that of any other figure in Genesis, and it is a fascinating story, perhaps the fin­est novella in ancient Hebrew literature. Although it seems to be an “all’s well that ends well” story, there is more than a bit of tragedy here, especially in the subsequent portions, and the central elements of the tragedy are contained in this portion’s few introduc­tory verses.

There is no love lost between Joseph and his brothers—or, more accurately, his half-brothers. We see immediately why they detest Joseph: He is what we would today call “an informer.” Given the task of assisting his older siblings in tending sheep, he takes the opportunity to bring back evil reports of their conduct to their father. We are not told what Joseph said they did or even if Joseph reported the truth, but it does not matter. What did he expect would happen if he spied and told on his brothers? Did it never occur to him that there was any cause for concern? After all, he knew his father favored him, and that was all that mattered, or so he thought.

Later, when Joseph has dreams about his lording it over his brothers and parents, he does not hesitate to reveal these dreams to his brothers. Silence in both cases would have been the better part of discretion.

His father, Israel, is not without blame. A parent who openly favors one child over another is only asking for trouble, and in this case troubles came in myriads. Did Israel think that a coat of many colors wouldn’t be noticed or that his other sons wouldn’t resent such a lavish gift to this young lad who habitually acted as if he were their superior?

Here is some of what our sages had to say:

“At 17 years of age, Joseph tended the flocks as a young helper.” He was 17 years old and you call him “young”? Rather, “young” here means that he acted young and foolish! He would make-up his eyes, adorn his hair and walk on high heels.”

“What bad reports did he bring? Rabbi Meir says, ‘Your sons are under suspicion of eating a limb from a living animal….’ Rabbi Shimon says, ‘They are lusting after the native women.’ He was punished for these false reports.”

“Resh Lakish says in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, ‘A parent should not treat one child better than another, for it was the coat of many colors that caused Joseph’s brothers to hate him so.”

The Sages had no problem finding fault with the actions of biblical figures, even exalted ones. Whenever the Sages looked at Joseph’s and Jacob’s deeds and found them unacceptable, the Sages said so loudly and clearly.

In this case, verse 37:1 contained a word the Sages found puzzling. The Hebrew word na-ar is translated here as “young helper.” Usu­ally, the word simply means a “young person,” not a child, yet not quite an adult man. At times, however, it seems to connote an aide to someone else.

That seems to be the usage here. Since Joseph was much younger than his brothers, he was not assigned to them as an equal, but as an assistant. In this sense, the word is not pejorative but simply descriptive.

The Sages, however, did not see it that way. They defined na-ar by its more common meaning, “youngster,” and therefore found the text problematic, because at age 17, Joseph would be too old to be called a youngster. At 17, one is con­sidered to have outlived early youth.

Yet in Rabbinic times, being a na-ar sometimes had another mean­ing: acting childishly, foolishly, even in a ridiculous manner. (Later this evolved into the Yiddish word naar, “fool,” or “childish one.”) Therefore, the Sages said that this verse could only mean that although Joseph was already 17, he acted in a much less mature man­ner, outlandishly, as only a foolish child would. He painted his eyes, he curled his hair, he walked strangely. He called attention to himself in an unseemly manner—perhaps akin in our own time to how some teenagers dress and display body piercings to emphasize their rebel­liousness and independence. Perhaps the over-the-top coat Jacob gave him encouraged Joseph to adopt these somewhat repulsive practices.

The Sages also understood the expression “bad reports” to mean not simply that Joseph related the bad things his brothers had done but that the reports themselves were bad in being untrue and intended to cast aspersions on innocent people. For these reasons Joseph was punished.

Furthermore, the Sages concluded that Jacob had acted wrongly. He had violated one of the basic principles of good parenting: he did not treat his children equally. Jacob was therefore the cause of the hatred Joseph’s brothers felt for him that brought tragedy in its wake.

In sum, the Sages were very clear here that the events to come that caused Joseph and Jacob to suffer were largely the result of their own foolish actions.

To me, one of the finest things about the way the people in the Torah are depicted is that none of them—absolutely none—is without fault. And the recognition of their imperfections is found in both the Torah and the explanations and legends the Sages created. If the Torah could relate the sins of Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and Joseph, it surely could relate them of anyone else. After all, no one in Judaism is without sin, and we do not believe that any human being is perfectly blameless.

That is why I was upset some years ago when attempts were made to force prominent authors in the Orthodox world to recall books they wrote that dared to portray biblical figures as less than perfect. An extremely well known authority in Israel had to withdraw some of his books, and another in Great Britain was compelled to rewrite some sections of his book due to the protests of extremist groups. If the Sages could say of Joseph that he acted foolishly and of Jacob that giving Joseph a coat of many colors was the cause of his son’s being sold, why can’t scholars today say similar things?

Some people are also inclined to castigate anyone who finds fault with their rabbinical leaders, leading to situations in which certain reli­gious authorities are perceived as perfect, placed on a pedestal above ordinary human beings, and become cult figures worshipped by their followers. This distortion of Jewish belief and Jewish tradition should be resisted at all costs.

We worship God alone, and not human beings, exalted and learned as they may be.

# Some of Rashi’s thoughts

## Steven Levy and Sarah Levy

Joseph’s behavior, as seen in Parashat Vayeshev ,had the predictable effect of poisoning his relationship with his broth­ers. Yet it would seem that Joseph’s brothers also bore responsibility for the deterioration of the relationship, given that “they could not speak a friendly word to him.” Nevertheless, Rashi finds something positive in their conduct: “they could not speak a friendly word to him: From what is stated to their discredit, we may learn something to their credit, that they did not say one thing with their mouth and think differently in their heart.”

In other words, says Rashi, the brothers exhibited integrity in their relationship with Joseph by letting him know exactly what they thought of him.

A hallmark of any authentic relationship is knowing where the parties stand with one another. This generally requires can­did communication. If one party feels aggrieved, it is difficult for the relationship to be restored to health unless this grievance is carefully communicated to the other party. While this may be a sensitive process fraught with risk, it may also be the best way to rebuild a damaged relationship.

**[Question: What do you think of what Rashi said?]**

Fraternal strife is a familiar theme in the book of Genesis. We see it in three successive generations of brothers: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. In this last case, after Jacob contributes to the fraternal animosity by singling out Joseph to receive a special garment, his brothers later strip him of the garment and use it as evidence to convince their father that Joseph is dead.

Identifying this tunic, Rashi explains how it might have contributed to the brothers’ attack on Joseph: “the ornamented tunic: This is an additional one that his fa­ther gave him in excess of what was given to his brothers.”

Rashi points out that even though their father gave clothing to his other sons, he showed favoritism toward Joseph by giving him an additional fine garment. This gift seems to have confirmed the brothers’ suspicion that their father loved Joseph most of all.

Even though it may be appropriate for parents to relate differently to each of their children, the children may never­theless regard this differential treatment as an expression of favoritism. It therefore falls on parents to exercise great care to avoid having even their legitimate behavior be mistaken for favoritism.

**[Question: Why do you think fraternal strife is such a repetitive theme in the book of Genesis? What might be the purpose of conveying so many similar, yet different, stories of sibling discord? Also, what advice might you offer parents to avoid contribut­ing to a perception of favoritism while also addressing the unique needs of each child?]**

Joseph’s brothers sold him to merchants bound for Egypt, and he was later imprisoned in Egypt. Later in the parashah, Joseph notices that two of his fellow prisoners—Pharaoh’s cup­bearer and baker-appear distressed.

When Joseph inquired why the two prisoners looked dis­traught, they responded that they wanted to have their dreams interpreted but could find no one to do this. Joseph volunteered to interpret their dreams, setting in motion a series of events that ended with him becoming the viceroy of Egypt. The starting point for all this was when Joseph noticed that something was amiss with his fellow prisoners. Had Joseph failed to observe the distress of his fellow prisoners and inquire about their welfare, he might have languished in prison indefinitely.

People tend to notice the things that are important to them.

For example, upon entering a house, a builder will instinctively take note of the quality of construction, while an interior deco­rator’s eye will naturally be drawn to the furnishings and finish. Joseph observed people, and as a result Jewish history has been irrevocably altered.

**[Question: Have you ever inquired about someone else’s welfare and later seen that the inquiry made a difference in that per­son’s or your life? Do you believe it is possible to have a more positive im­pact on other people by being more observant of them?]**

# Election and Service: What Joseph Learned

## Rabbi Shai Held

Being singled out by God is an enormous privilege, but it also comes with heavy responsibilities.

Already as a teenager, Joseph earns the enmity of his brothers. In their eyes he is guilty of at least three crimes: informing on his brothers, is the first; telling them of his dreams is the second.

Then there is the easy-to-miss third offense: Why does Joseph, sent by his father to see how his brothers are faring, insist on wearing the tunic, the potent symbol of their hatred of him, when he goes out to see them? Bible scholar Joel Kaminsky writes that “Joseph, like many a child who has been given a toy that his siblings have not received, is flaunting his favored status in front of his brothers for his own ego gratification.” Thus, even if the brothers’ actions against Joseph are “clearly unjustifiable,” their hatred of him seems “readily understandable.”

Joseph is not just Jacob’s favorite; he is also God’s, as demonstrated by his beauty, his clear leadership qualities, his ability to have prophetic dreams, as well as his wisdom to interpret other people’s dreams and to dispense good advice. But at first he uses his gifts only for his own glory. The teenaged Joseph is spoiled and self-enamored.

Two chapters after his brothers sell him into slavery, we hear of Joseph’s remarkable ascent in the house of Potiphar. Potiphar’s wife, too, will soon take a liking to Joseph and attempt to seduce him, but before she engages him, the text stops to note that Joseph was “well built and handsome.” Why tell us this now, rather than when Joseph was first introduced?

Hewing to what seems to be the plain sense of the text, Nachmanides (the Ramban) and Rabbi David Kimchi (the Radak) suggest that this bit of information is a necessary prelude to what transpires between Joseph and Potiphar’s wife: He is attractive, and she is drawn to him. But Rashi, following some of the talmudic sages, sees a hint of something sinister in the timing of this observation: “As soon as Joseph found himself in the position of ruler, he began eating and drinking and curling his hair. Said the Blessed Holy One: ‘Your father is mourning and you are curling your hair?! I will incite the bear [i.e., Potiphar’s wife] against you!’“

Enticed by power and privilege, Joseph loses his way. The Torah tells us that one day Joseph “came into the house to do his work” while there was no one else at home. A skeptical talmudic sage wonders why Joseph, know­ing the intentions of Potiphar’s wife, would nevertheless allow himself to be alone with her? What the text means, he concludes, is that Joseph “went to satisfy his desires” (BT Sotah 36b). If this is correct, then it is only at the last moment that Joseph regains his bearings and pulls away from his seductress.

How did Joseph lose his way? The verses describing Joseph’s relation­ship with Potiphar emphasize repeatedly that Joseph’s extraordinary success is made possible only by God’s blessing. So blessed is Joseph that even an Egyptian courtier can see that God is with him. Yet it is the narrator and the courtier who invoke God and sense what really underlies Joseph’s success; Joseph, tellingly, makes no mention of God at all. The reader is thus left to wonder whether Joseph assumes that he attained this position on his own and that his charisma was for no greater purpose than to live a comfortable life.

But Joseph undergoes a profound transformation. Over time—and perhaps as a result of his great suffering—he realizes that his gifts come from God and are given to him so that he can be of use to oth­ers. When Pharaoh’s two servants are distraught as a result of their dreams, Joseph responds: “Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams].” When Pharaoh needs a similar service performed, he tells Joseph that he has heard “that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning.” But Joseph is careful to correct him, declaring, “Not I! God will see to Pharaoh’s welfare.” Again and again, as Kaminsky notes, Joseph mentions God in Pharaoh’s presence, as if to make sure that Pharaoh—and, perhaps he himself—remembers that God is the source of his talents and abilities.

This transformation reaches a climax when Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers in parashat Vayigash. They are afraid, but he reassures them: “It was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.” Now, after all these years, Joseph has come to understand that God singled him out not so that his brothers would bow down to him, but so that he could protect and care for them. Kaminsky writes: “The story of Joseph and his brothers affirms that God does indeed mysteriously favor some over others. Yet it also proclaims to both the elect and the non-elect that the divine favor bestowed in election is not to be used for self-aggrandizement. Rather, election reaches its fruition in a humble yet exalted divine service which benefits the elect and the non-elect alike.”

Joseph grows to the point of understanding that divine election is not an invitation to egotism and self-adoration. The haftarah for parashat Vayeshev makes clear, however, that Israel as a whole finds this a hard lesson to learn. Faced with the people’s smug self-satisfaction, the prophet Amos proclaims in God’s name: “You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth.” One can imagine Amos’s hearers nod­ding complacently, perhaps expecting to hear words of affirmation from their divine patron, but Amos upends their assumptions, thundering: “Therefore I will call you to account for all your iniquities.”

Amos’s word “therefore” no doubt jolts his listeners. The people may assume that as God’s elect they are immune to punishment and entitled to a bounty of privileges. But God is no patron; on the contrary with “great privilege” comes “great condemnation”: Israel’s great privilege of election by God and of relationship to him through the covenant exposes them to judgment rather than exempting them from it.

The Joseph story strongly emphasizes the connection between elec­tion and service, stressing that election carries with it a duty to help others. What is true of divine election is true of divine gifts more generally: God’s beneficence is intended, at least in part, to enable us to be beneficent ourselves; God gives so that we, too, may become givers.

To know our own gifts and abilities is not arrogance; it is self­-awareness. Arrogance is the illusion that we are the sole authors of our talents and that they are, therefore, our exclusive possession. Spiri­tual maturity, in contrast, is the understanding that we do not own our gifts. When we acknowledge how much has been done for us rather than achieved by us, we, like Joseph, grow ready to serve.

# Reuben: The “might-have-been”

## Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Reuben is the greatest “might-have-been” in the Torah. His story is of potential unfulfilled, virtue not quite realized, greatness so close yet unachieved. How so? What does his example teach us about what it takes to live an accomplished life?

There is an extraordinary moment in Vayeshev. The Torah freeze-frames a critical juncture in Reuben’s life, showing the diverging paths he faced when confronted with a moral challenge.

The background to the scene is the early years of Joseph. One day, as his brothers are tending the flocks far from home, Jacob sends Joseph to see how they are doing. On this encounter, the whole future of the children of Israel will depend. The brothers see Joseph from afar, and the sight of the coat of many colors enrages them. They realize that, alone with no one to see them, they can kill Joseph and concoct a tale that will be impossible to refute. Only Reuben protests.

It is at this point the Torah does something it does nowhere else. It makes a statement that, construed literally, is obviously false—indeed, the text goes on immediately to show that it was not quite so. The text states: “Reuben heard and saved him [Joseph] from their hands.” He did not. The discrepancy is so obvious that most translations simply do not translate the phrase literally. What Reuben actually did was to attempt to save him. The phrase “Reuben heard and saved him” tells us what might have been, not what actually was.

Reuben’s plan was simple. He told the brothers not to kill Joseph but to let him die:

“Let’s not take his life,” he said. “Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the desert, but don’t lay a hand on him.”

The text then—again unusually, for it is rare for the Torah to describe a person’s thoughts—explains Reuben’s intention: “[Reuben said this] in order to save him from their hand and take him back to his father.” Reuben had no intention of letting Joseph die. His plan was to persuade the brothers to leave him in the pit so that, when their attention was elsewhere, he could come back to it, lift Joseph out and take him home.

What happens next is obscure, though the outcome is clear. While Reuben was somewhere else, Joseph was taken from the pit and sold to a passing caravan of merchants who carry him to Egypt to be sold as a slave. The text itself makes it impossible to determine whether this was done by the other brothers at the suggestion of Judah, or by passing Midianites (Nechamah Leibowitz has a fine analysis of the various readings given by the commentators). Reuben, unaware of all this, returns to the pit to rescue Joseph but finds him gone. He is bereft. “When Reuben returned to the cistern and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. He went back to his brothers and said, ‘The boy is gone! And I, where can go?’”

Commenting on this episode, the midrash states:

If Reuben had only known that the Holy One, blessed be He, would write of him, “And Reuben heard and saved him from their hands,” he would have picked him up on his shoulders and carried him back to his father.

This is a deeply puzzling comment. Did Reuben really need the endorsement of Heaven to do the right thing? Did he need God’s approval before rescuing his brother?. Yet, as we will see, it holds the essential clue about Reuben’s character. It tells us what stands between what might-have-been and what was.

Reuben is a person of good intentions. He cares. He thinks. He is not led by the crowd or by his darker instincts. He penetrates to the moral core of a situation. That is the first thing we notice about him. The second, however, is that somehow his interventions backfire. They fail to achieve their effect. Attempting to make things better, Reuben makes them worse. The Torah clearly wants us to reflect on Reuben’s character. To this end it paints a portrait of the young man, in a series of rapidly sketched yet revealing vignettes.

In the first, we see him in the fields during the wheat harvest. He finds some mandrakes. From the context it appears that mandrakes were believed to be both an aphrodisiac and a fertility drug (John Donne refers to this in a famous poem: “Get with child a mandrake root”). His first thought is to give them to his mother Leah. This tells us something about Reuben. He is not thinking about himself but about her. He knows she feels unloved, and identifies with her anguish with all the sensitivity of an eldest son. He hopes that, with the aid of the mandrakes, Leah will be able to win Jacob’s attention, perhaps even his love.

It is a strikingly mature and thoughtful act. Yet it has negative consequences. It provokes a bitter row between the two sisters, Leah and Rachel, the only time that angry words are reported between the two sisters. Reuben, seeking to help Leah, creates a scene in which her bitterness rises to the surface. That is scene one.

Scene two takes place when Rachel dies. An obscure incident takes place following Rachel’s death and burial which has tragic consequences. The biblical text is cryptic: “Reuben went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel heard of it….”

Read literally, this suggests that Reuben took his father’s place in Bilhah’s tent—an almost Oedipal act of displacement, as we discover later in the Bible when Avshalom does the same with his father David’s concubine. Rashi, following midrashic tradition, prefers a gentler explanation. When Rachel died, Jacob, who had slept in her tent, moved his bed to the tent of Bilhah, her handmaid. This, for Reuben, was an unbearable provocation. It was bad enough that Jacob preferred Rachel to her sister Leah, but intolerable that he should prefer her handmaid to his mother. He therefore removed Jacob’s bed from Bilhah’s tent to Leah’s.

Even according to this interpretation, however, it is clear that Jacob believed that his son had in fact usurped his place. He never forgot or forgave the incident, and on his deathbed he reminded Reuben of it: “Unstable as water, you will not be pre-eminent, for you went up onto your father’s bed, onto my couch, and defiled it.”

Earlier, at the time of the event itself, the text uses an unusual stylistic device. After the words, “And Israel heard of it,” the Masoretic text indicates a paragraph break in the middle of a sentence . The effect is to signal a silence, a complete breakdown in communication. Hence the pathos of the rabbinic interpretation of the passage, which certainly fits all we know about Reuben. He was not seeking to displace Jacob but rather to draw his attention to the hurt and distress of Leah. Yet Jacob says nothing, giving Reuben no opportunity to clear his name or explain why he did what he did. The result: a second tragedy.

Inevitably, we are drawn to the third scene, chronologically the first—Reuben’s birth, reported in a passage of great pathos: “When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben [‘see, a son’], for she said, ‘It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.’”

Leah hoped that his birth would make Jacob love her, but he does not.

We now have a rich, composite and penetrating portrait of Reuben—and we now know that the psychological key to his character is already given at his birth.

Jacob’s love for Rachel meant that he could not bestow equal favor on Leah. His longing for a child by Rachel meant there was something lacking in his relationship with Leah’s firstborn, Reuben. Had he loved less, there might have been no problem. He might have divided his attention more equally. But had he loved less, he would not have been Jacob.

The result, however, is that Reuben carries with him a lack of confidence, an uncertainty, that at critical moments robs him of his capacity to carry through a course of action that he knows to be right. He begins well but does not drive the deed to closure. Returning with the mandrakes he might have bided his time until Leah was alone. After Rachel’s death he might have spoken directly to his father instead of moving the beds. In the face of his brothers’ murderous intentions toward Joseph he might, as the midrash says, have simply carried him home. Instead he hesitated, choosing to put off the moment until the brothers were elsewhere. The result was tragedy. It is impossible not to recognize in Reuben a person of the highest ethical sensibilities. But though he had conscience, he lacked courage. He knew what was right, but lacked the resolve to do it boldly and decisively. In that hesitation, more was lost than Joseph. So too was Reuben’s chance to become the hero he might and should have been.

If Reuben had only known—says the midrash. If only he had known that the Torah would write of him, “And Reuben heard and saved him from their hands”—meaning that his intention was known and valued by God as if it were the deed. Knowing this, he might have found the courage to carry it through into action. But Reuben could not know. He had not read the story. None of us can read the story of our life—we can only live it. The result is that we live in and with uncertainty. Doubt can lead to delay until the moment is lost. In a moment of arrested intention, Reuben lost his chance of changing history.

Reuben could not read his story, but we can. If there is a single verse in Tanach that stands as a commentary on his life. it is the inexpressibly poignant line from [Psalm 27](https://www.sefaria.org/Psalms.27?lang=he-en&utm_source=sef_linker): “Though my father and mother may forsake me, the Lord will receive me.” Jacob, being human, loved some, not others. God, not being human, loves each of us, and that is our greatest source of strength. God heeds those not heard. He loves those whom others do not love. Reuben, still a young man, did not yet know this. But we, reading his story and the rest of Tanach, do.

We are here for a reason, conceived in love, brought into being by the One who brought the universe into being, who knows our innermost thoughts, values our good intentions, and has more faith in us than we have in ourselves. That, if only we meditate on it, gives us the strength to turn intention into deed, lifting us from the person we might have been into the person we become.

# Tamar and Judah: Why is this story here?

## W. Gunther Plaut

The story of Tamar interrupts the story of Joseph at a point of rising suspense. The inser­tion of such an interlude was a literary device often found in antiquity, especially in Greece, and was designed to make the listener (or reader) eager to get on with the main story. But here an additional element is included. While until now Reuben filled the role that tradition assigned to the first-born son, the fourth-born now emerges as the spokesperson for his broth­ers. This episode, introduced without explana­tion, puts Judah into the center. He will become the ultimate bearer of his people’s fate, for from him the Davidic line will be established.

The tale also has overtones of a crucial episode in the life of Jacob, Judah’s father. Jacob deceived his own father in order to obtain his blessing, and Tamar deceives Judah to obtain a son; a kid is involved in both cases, and a brother (Esau in one case, and the deceased Er in the other) is cheated of his due.

Why was the Tamar story included in the Jacob-Joseph cycle, and why was it preserved with such careful attention to detail?

Perhaps the intriguing nature of the incident played a role, but the major reason doesn’t lie in historical, literary, or dramatic factors. The chief figures are Tamar and Judah, and Judah is the ultimate preserver of the House of Israel. From the union of the tribal progenitor and his daughter-in-law, Peretz is born, and from him will descend the person and the House of David. The Tamar tale thus became an important part of the David saga, just as the Book of Ruth did in later days. We are told that Ruth and Boaz would be forebears of the king and that Boaz traced his line to Peretz, son of Tamar and Judah.

Both accounts together emphasize that King David stemmed from a strange and non­indigenous line: Tamar and Ruth weren’t Is­raelites, both were widows, and both claimed a son by dint of the levirate tradition. David thus arises out of the most unlikely configurations. After tragedy had marred their lives, it appeared that Tamar and Ruth would remain childless, but God’s wisdom turned fate to its own design. The Judah-Tamar interlude, therefore, is an important link in the main theme: to show the steady, though not always readily visible, guiding hand of the Eternal, who never forgets the descendants of Jacob and their destiny.

In this story, Tamar is God’s unlikely tool. She is a Canaanite, a daughter of the very people against whom Abraham had warned and whom the people of Israel would later displace. Tamar is treated with respect; her desperate deed draws no condemnation from the Torah. What she did fulfilled the requirements of Hebrew law and, in addition, appeared to serve divine purposes.

The tale of Judah is artfully interwoven into the Joseph story. In God’s plan, primogeniture is clearly inapplicable, and the very language employed emphasizes that Judah’s ultimate choice by God took place only after he (like Jacob) had passed through the cycle of the deceiver being deceived himself.