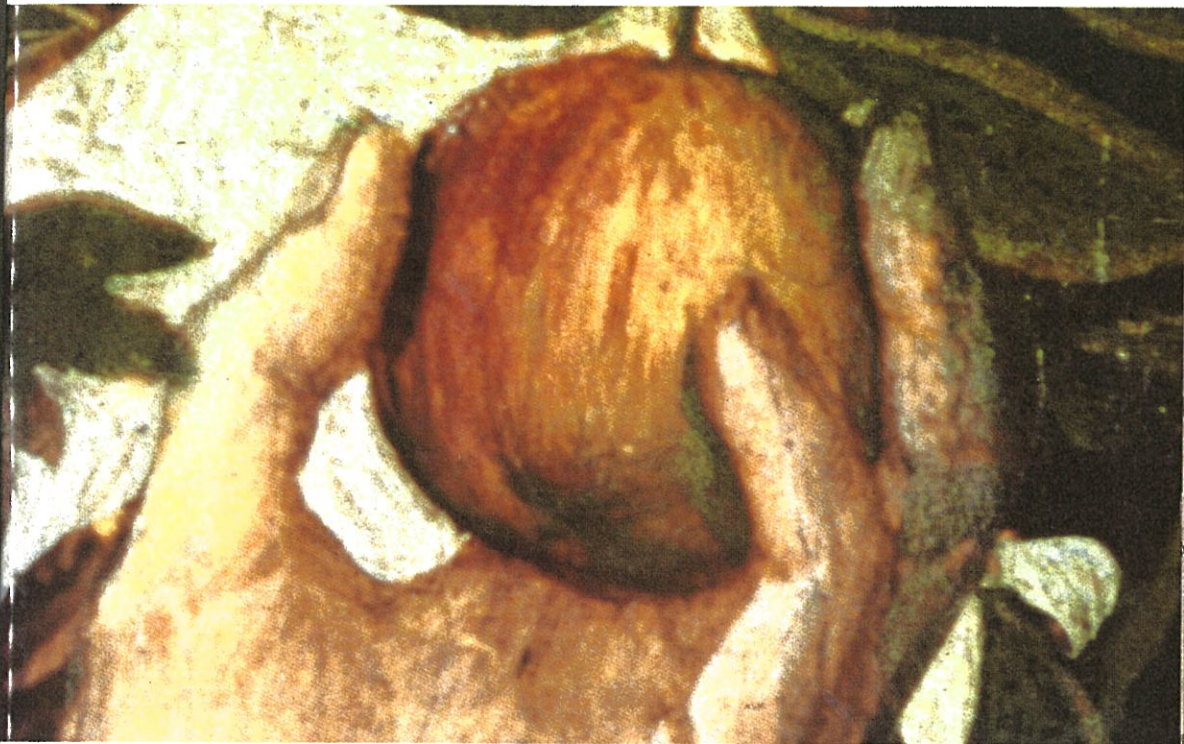


The Beginning of Desire



Reflections on Genesis



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been issued that he be forgotten from the heart, and not in reference to the living" (Rashi, 37:35).

Jacob, on some subconscious level, *knows* that Joseph is alive; while, consciously, he thinks him dead. That is why he cannot accept comfort for him. The point is obviously paradoxical: normally, one might imagine that a mourner who refuses to be comforted is overinvolved in the despair of death. The midrash shifts the reader's perspective: the willingness to be comforted becomes a mode of despair at the finality of death—it is a "decree" that allows the dead to recede from the heart of the living, a kind of treachery to the loyalty of memory. Conversely, the refusal to be comforted is a refusal to yield up the dead, to turn one's mind to other thoughts.³⁴

Jacob has every evidence for his reasonable view ("one thinks"—*savar*) that Joseph is dead. Not only the stained coat but a veritable conspiracy of silence, in which the midrash imagines God Himself to be involved, ensures that the truth is not revealed to him. Nevertheless, a "glimmer of inspiration" makes it impossible for him to accept the despair of his own rational mind:

"A savage beast devoured him": The Holy Spirit glimmered in him, showing him that Joseph would be attacked by Potiphar's wife [the "savage beast"!]. Why did God not reveal the truth to him? Because the brothers had placed a ban and a curse on anyone who would reveal this truth, and they had included God in their ban! Isaac knew that Joseph was alive, but he said, "How shall I reveal it, if God Himself does not want to reveal it?" (Rashi, 37:33)

Rashi delicately balances the question of perception and truth. The truth is that Joseph is alive; but Jacob does not know this on any conscious level³⁵—indeed, God does not *want* him to know it, in Isaac's words. Instead, he inhabits a field of perception, in which he "plausibly thinks" *savar*—that Joseph is dead, while experiencing "glimmers" of intuition—rationally, quite irreconcilable with his conscious opinion—about Potiphar's wife, and while finding it impossible to "give up" on Joseph.

There is, indeed, an active force to the verb, *va-yima'en*, "he refused." Something in Jacob stubbornly bars him from oblivion: he *will* remember Joseph, keep him alive-in-absence in his mind. Jacob is conscious of his limited perspective, as a human being. He is aware that he has a "blind spot," and allows for it; Joseph has disappeared, but Jacob knows that the

The Absence of the Imagination

plausible interpretation of the bloody coat is just that—an interpretation—a *sevara*, in the language of talmudic logic. The totality of the blank—not even a corpse to fill it—and the totality of the conspiracy of silence around him evoke glimmerings of intuition. If Joseph "is not" here, in Jacob's field of perception, perhaps he is elsewhere? If he is lost, perhaps he is to be sought, to be imagined as continuing, not ended?

In quoting this midrash about comfort and oblivion, Rashi is, I suggest, making a rare and audacious statement about the workings of the conscious mind. Like an aura beyond consciousness, there is an awareness of truth—Joseph is, in reality, not dead. Jacob has a certain access to this truth, though Rashi insists that God does not want it revealed to him. In the tension between the two kinds of knowledge—rational, perspectival knowledge and the awareness of the limitations of perspective—the *einenu* sense grows: a profound skepticism, finally summarized in Judah's report of his father's view: "The one has gone from me. . . . And I have not seen him since" (44:28).

Shever / Sever: the dialectical vision

A kind of twilight zone between despair and hope is evoked by the expressions of loss, of not-being, in the narrative. Radically ambiguous, *einenu* closes and opens avenues of speculation. Just this dialectical tension is the subject of a central midrash on the narrative:

"Jacob saw that there were food rations [*shever*] to be had in Egypt" (42:1); "Happy is he . . . whose hope [*sever*] is in the Lord his God" (Psalms 146:5). "Whatever He tears down cannot be rebuilt" (Job 12:14). When God destroyed the plan of the tribes, it was not rebuilt. "Whomever He imprisons cannot be set free"—these are the ten tribes, who traveled to and from Egypt, and did not know that Joseph was alive. But to Jacob it was revealed that Joseph was alive, as it is said, "Jacob saw that there was *shever* in Egypt." "There was *shever* [brokenness]"—that is the famine; "there was *sever* [hope]"—that is the plenty. "There was *shever* [brokenness]"—"Joseph was taken down to Egypt" (39:1); "there was *sever* [hope]"—"Joseph became the ruler" (42:6). "There was *shever* [brokenness]"—"They shall enslave and afflict them" (15:13); "there was *sever* [hope]"—"in the end they shall go free with great wealth" (15:14).³⁶

On this reading, Jacob "sees" much more than the fact that corn rations are to be had in Egypt. ("Heard" would be a more appropriate

verb to describe the arrival of such news in Canaan, as Jacob himself describes it in the next verse: "I hear that there are rations"). What he sees distinguishes him from his ten sons, who have no sense that Joseph is alive. Extraordinarily, the midrash affirms: "to Jacob it was revealed that Joseph was alive."

The revelation takes the form of a vision of *shever*—a Janus-headed concept, suggesting both brokenness and hope. The midrash gives three examples of Jacob's bifocal vision: the famine and the plenty; Joseph's kidnapping and his rise to power; God's promise of suffering and slavery in Egypt, on the one hand, and of triumphant redemption, on the other.

The relation of *shever* to *sever*, of brokenness to hope, is not, however, merely sequential. Jacob does not merely see an end to suffering and a new phase of prosperity. Indeed, the historical order of the plenty and the famine does not allow of such an optimistic reading: the midrash in fact reverses the order to adjust it to the conceptual scheme of brokenness and hope. What Jacob sees is a dialectical vision of *shever/sever*. When things fall apart, the opportunity for *sever* arises. Before such a crisis, in a condition of wholeness and security, hope is irrelevant. After it, some plausible reconstruction of the shards becomes essential.

This is *sever*, the word for hope (the midrash quotes the verse from Psalms, "Happy is he . . . whose hope [*sever*] is in the Lord his God") is intimately related to the idea of shattering, of crisis. It is also related to the notion of "thought," of "plausible opinion." *Sevara*, as we have noticed, is a plausible interpretation. It is the conventional talmudic expression for thinking: for speculation, ingenuity in constructing a pleasing hypothesis. Thinking is an act of trust; there are no guarantees that one is right in one's interpretation. *Savor* is often used, in fact, to describe a mistaken opinion (as we have just seen, Jacob *savar* that Joseph was dead). To think, then, is to respond with a kind of courage to the evidence, the surfaces of reality. To hope, likewise, is to dare to trust the more cheerful facets of a shattered condition.

What Jacob sees, then, is the necessary relation between disaster and hope. He sees the condition of the *bor*, of emptiness, disappearance, loss, as generating hopeful hypotheses. The fundamental polarity of disaster and hope is thus expressed in the single word *shever*, as the midrash refracts it. The two concepts are related by an inner dialectic; they are simultaneous.

This, the midrash affirms, is what is "revealed" to Jacob. He must act on the basis of hope, of a vision of life-in-death. He may turn out to be mistaken; but that is the nature of the *shever* world, into which Joseph has disappeared. "Not to have is the beginning of desire."³⁷

Rachel and her children: the battle against non-being

Jacob sees *einenu* as that condition of elusiveness, of not-being-there, that is characterized by Joseph and Benjamin, the sons of Rachel. It is a kind of genetic endowment; for Rachel, too, was a mistress of the *einenu* mode. "Give me children," she cried to Jacob, in her extremity, "or else I die!" (30:1). Literally, the text says: "and if *ayin* ["nothing"], I die!" Some commentators read this as the suicidal threat of a pampered wife.³⁸ But we can read it simply as Rachel confronting *ayin*, nothingness. If she has no children to fill her emptiness, Rachel cries, she is dead. This is no threat: it is an intimate existential description. "One who has no children is accounted as dead," Rashi comments. There is a psychological and emotional wasteland consciousness, to which Rachel is singularly sensitive.

Jacob responds with a strange anger to her plea. And *Akedat Yitzhak* offers a striking reading of the scene, setting Jacob up as philosophical opponent to Rachel's despair. The background is the two names that were given to Eve, to signify her two roles: Eve [*Hava*—"life-giver"] signifies her sexual, procreative function, while *ishba*—"woman"—signifies her intellectual, spiritual role, parallel to that of man. The first role is instrumental, which subordinates her to the procreation of life; the second is autonomous. A woman who cannot bear children still has what the commentator calls her greatest purpose in living—her moral and spiritual role, equivalent to a man's.

It is for this reason that Jacob is angry with Rachel: she has invested all her life energy in the procreative role, has surrendered to *ayin*, once that role seems denied to her. "Let not the eunuch say, 'I am a withered tree.'"³⁹ The pathos of Rachel's cry is understood but rejected. Poignant as is the sense of life denied in childlessness, the prophet Isaiah maintains that a vital identity—even a kind of immortality—is awarded to those people, men or women, eunuch or foreigner, who fulfill their destiny as moral and spiritual beings.

On this view, Jacob is angered by Rachel's despairing acceptance of *ayin*. She sees herself—mistakenly, according to *Akedat Yitzhak*—as hav-