

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : וישב

1. Yaakov settles in the land of Kenaan, the land of his father Yitzchok. His family is grown up, some are already married and settled nearby, others are still young. One of these, Yosef, the firstborn son of Rochel, has taken it upon himself always to be near to his father, to minister to his needs as only a son can, and to learn directly from Yaakov all the Torah knowledge that he has amassed. Yaakov loves Yosef very dearly — he is the son of his beloved wife Rochel — and because it is Yosef who is always with him, he gives to Yosef, as a sign of his affection, a special robe of fine wool — an idea he had seen in his brother Aysov, who also used to put on a special garment when he ministered to their father Yitzchok.
2. Yosef's brothers, however, see this robe as a symbol of an undeserved favouritism, and they are jealous of him and when Yosef tells his brothers of his dreams of rulership and superiority, the jealousy of the brothers increases. They believe that what he dreams of at night is only an echo of his own ambitious thoughts of the day. Yosef, however, knows that his dreams are a prophecy of future events and as such he is in duty bound to tell what he has been shown, for a prophet has to tell his prophecy, however unpopular it might make him.
3. *The brothers are divided in their allegiance to a leader-tribe: the sons of Leah have elected Yehuda as their leader and he is for them the symbol of the future Jewish king, whereas the sons of Bilhoh and Zilpoh initially recognize Yosef as their leader, but later, with some reluctance, they too recognize Yehuda as their leader-king. Yosef nevertheless cannot ignore his prophetic dreams and the brothers see in Yosef's aspirations to the leadership a personal challenge to the leader-king Yehuda. Furthermore, they are mindful of the future: they fear that in Yosef's divisive behaviour lie the seeds of a great split within the future Jewish Nation and they all conclude that this threat must be eliminated.*
4. *Furthermore, the brothers are worried that they are seeing history unhappily repeating itself, as follows: There was a tradition in the family of Avrohom which started with the promise of HaShem to Avrohom that a great people, the Chosen People of G-d, will descend from him, and that this nation will consist of Twelve Tribes. This obviously gave rise to some rivalry between Yishmoel and Yitzchok, the two principal sons of Avrohom. Yishmoel, fourteen years older than Yitzchok, asserted that his twelve sons, each one a prince in his own right and eventually the head of a fearsome clan, were the heads of the twelve tribes of this Chosen People. Later, of course, it became quite clear that, mighty and influential in the affairs of mankind though they might be, the lifestyle and conduct of the clans of Yishmoel were far from the ideals of G-dliness and righteousness and justice that were the life's mission of Avrohom. Yishmoel therefore made way for his brother Yitzchok and acknowledged that Yitzchok was better suited to be the one who would carry the mission of Avrohom to the whole world. Reluctantly, Yishmoel gave up on being the father of the Chosen People. When Yitzchok married Rivka, they had only the two sons, Aysov and his twin brother Yaakov. Yitzchok, of*

course, hoped that together they would both become unified and become the Chosen People (for why else should his two sons be twins?) but Rivka had been told prophetically that from the two sons would emerge two completely separate peoples, with very different value-systems and completely opposing life-styles. As they grew up, Yaakov saw himself as being the son through whom the mission of Avrohom would be accomplished whereas Aysov was so obviously not suited to that mission. (This was that earnest discussion between the two youngsters when Avrohom died, when Aysov allowed Yaakov to take upon himself the mission of Avrohom and when he, Aysov, gave up any aspirations to being a founding father of the Chosen People.) [See SIDRA OF THE WEEK: תולדות.] Now, at this point in the history of the family of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, the twelve sons of Yaakov were sure that their families were all together to become the long-awaited Twelve Tribes of the Chosen People of Avrohom. But then, when Yosef started to bring bad reports to their father Yaakov of what he perceived to be wrongdoing on their part, it appeared to them that Yosef was trying to make Yaakov exclude them from being part of the Chosen People of HaShem. Only Yosef, by himself, it seemed to them, would be the founding father of this People, with his eleven brothers all excluded in much the same way as their uncle Aysov and their great-uncle Yishmoel had been excluded. They felt that their destiny as the Chosen People of HaShem was at risk — because of what they saw as the self-importance of Yosef. For this reason, therefore, Yosef must be eliminated, his place being taken, perhaps, by one of their families being split into two Tribes (which, in fact, is exactly what happened with Yosef himself). Yosef, of course, had no such intention. Like his brothers, he looked forward confidently and seriously to being one of the founding fathers of the People of HaShem. But it was just because of his genuine concern that they should all be perfect for their mission to the world that he brought the faults that he perceived in his brothers to the attention of his father, that he should rebuke them and perfect them for their great future. Unfortunately, because of their deep resentment and hatred of Yosef, the brothers could not bring themselves to talk with Yosef and therefore could not ascertain his motives in his behaviour towards them. They saw only that here was someone, their brother Yosef, no less, who, it seemed, was intent that history should repeat itself for one more generation and that the Chosen People should be descended only from him, with all his brothers excluded. That was why they felt so strongly that they had to be rid of Yosef.

5. When Yaakov sends Yosef to find out how the brothers are faring in the dangerous locality of Shechem, where they are grazing the sheep, the brothers take the opportunity to be rid of the threat of Yosef and eventually he is sold to a passing caravan of traders which is going down to Egypt. The brothers lead Yaakov to believe that Yosef has been devoured by a wild animal, and he goes into inconsolable mourning.
6. *Strange though it may seem, the brothers were never condemned for their action. According to their thinking — and they were great people, the people whom HaShem had chosen to be the founding fathers of the Jewish Nation — they were right in their selling Yosef. Unbeknown to them, however, the whole episode was part of the plan of HaShem that Yaakov and his family should go down to Egypt, in fulfilment of the promise made to Avrohom at the Covenant of the Pieces. Yaakov and all his family eventually joined Yosef, who was then Viceroy of Egypt, and the apprehension and deep anxiety of the foretold Exile was much softened by the honourable way in which*

the Children of Israel became “strangers in a strange land.” For if the going down to Egypt had not been achieved through this chain of events, it was decreed that, “Yaakov and his sons would have been dragged down to Egypt in chains of iron.”

7. When the brothers see their father’s unrelievable grief, they are ill-disposed towards Yehuda, for the suggestion to sell Yosef was his. Yehuda moves away from the family and strikes up a partnership with Chirroh the Adulamite and he marries the daughter of a local merchant.
8. Time passes. Ayr, the firstborn son of Yehuda, marries the righteous Tamar, but he is wicked in the eyes of HaShem and he is killed by HaShem. As required by the law of levirate marriage (“יבום”) Tamar marries Ayr’s brother Onan, but he too is guilty of the same sin and HaShem kills him, too. Unaware that his sons were to blame for their own untimely deaths, Yehuda is understandably reluctant to let Shayloh, his third son, marry Tamar, and she is told to go back to her father’s house, ostensibly to wait until Shayloh is older. As the years pass, the righteous Tamar understands that she will not be allowed to marry Shayloh and Yehuda himself is afraid of marrying her, too. After all, her two previous husbands died so suddenly when in the prime of life. But she tricks Yehuda into himself living with her and thus fulfil the law of the Levirate Marriage. *(When this law of the Levirate Marriage was later given to the Jewish People as one of the Mitzvos in the Torah, it was stipulated that if a man dies childless, that man’s father is no longer allowed to marry the widow, but the Mitzvah devolves only upon any of the brothers.)* When it becomes known that Tamar is pregnant although she is not married to Shayloh, she is almost put to death for what appears to be her adultery, for until the widow is released from the levirate marriage bond (through *הליצה*) she is considered as betrothed to her late husband’s brother (or, before the giving of the Torah, father). Yehuda confesses that Tamar was forced to resort to her trick because of his reluctance that she should marry Shayloh. Their guiltlessness of any actual wrongdoing is established, and there are born to them twin sons, Peretz and Zerach.
9. Meantime, Yosef has changed hands a number of times. The usual slave traders are hesitant to buy this lad of such obvious high birth for fear of reprisals when his family, whoever that should turn out to be, finds out that he has passed through their hands. But eventually Yosef is bought from the Yishmaelite merchants by Potifar, the Lord High Executioner — and Lord Master Butcher — of the King of Egypt. Yosef’s nobility, his deep religiousness and his high integrity are recognized by his new master, who puts him in charge of his entire household. While he is there, the wife of Potifar, misguided by her passions, tries to tempt Yosef to sin, but he remains true to HaShem and loyal to his Egyptian master, despite the temptations put in his way. When her plans are thwarted, Potifar’s wife falsely accuses Yosef of treachery and he is thrown into jail.
10. HaShem has blessed Yosef with great charm and the Master of the Dungeons, recognizing in Yosef his great nobility of spirit, bestows upon Yosef preferential treatment and eventually he is put in charge of all the prisoners.
11. Some time after this, a scandal at the Court of the King diverts the attention of Egyptian society. The Chief Cup-bearer and the Chief Baker of Par’o the king of Egypt both offend their royal master. They are imprisoned together with Yosef for many years and he is given special responsibilities to attend to these high prisoners. During this

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time, Yosef learns from these high officials, who had been so close to the king himself, all there is to know of the royal household of Par'o and its protocols and he learns, too, all about the government of the country and about its laws and customs.

12. Some time later these two high officials are greatly disturbed by vivid dreams. Seeing their distraught faces and concerned for them, Yosef asks what troubles them. They tell him and Yosef explains that it is G-d Who gives meaning to dreams and he offers to interpret the dreams that trouble them so much. Yosef informs them that the Chief Baker can indeed expect the worst and within three days he was executed, just as Yosef had foretold from his dream. By contrast, the Chief Cup-bearer is told by Yosef of his imminent release and that he will be reinstated in his previous high position. Yosef asks the Chief Cup-bearer to remember him when he is freed and reinstated in his old post and bring Yosef's case before Par'o, for he has been imprisoned for no offence. But when he is released from prison three days later, the Chief Cup-bearer does not remember Yosef. He puts all thought of Yosef out of his mind and forgets all about him.
13. And so Yosef remains in prison. His family back in Kenaan doesn't know whether or not he is alive at all, and if so, where. His father Yaakov grieves for him, and his mind cannot be set at rest. Yosef is incarcerated in prison in a foreign country and in that whole land there is no-one to care about him or to plead his cause. Yet Yosef places his trust in HaShem for he knows that when the time is right, HaShem will deliver him from the depths of the Egyptian dungeon.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of וישב please go to HAFTORAS.