



Clilei HaChodesh

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Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

In this issue Sarah Rudolph analyzes the nature of Joseph's coat, as well as the moral and theological effect of this gift. Dr. Jeffrey Lautman presents a close reading of King Achav's conflict with Navot, a passage which illustrates how depression can distort memory.

SHADES OF MEANING IN YOSEF'S COAT

Sarah Rudolph

When I teach the story of Yosef, I like to start by asking my students to tell me what they already know; almost invariably, the answers involve Yaakov giving Yosef a "coat of many colors" because he was the favorite son. This famous detail is offered in many translations of the Torah, Jewish and Christian alike; for instance, the King James Version, Jewish Publication Society, and others. However, if we look at the original Hebrew phrase, *ketonet passim*, and commentaries on it, we find that this translation is far from the only possible meaning.¹

Leaving aside the question of precisely what sort of garment a "*ketonet*" is (a coat, cloak, or tunic of some kind), let us consider some of the approaches to understanding the descriptive word, *passim*. What was special about this particular *ketonet*?

From what I have seen, the only major Jewish commentator to take the "many-colored" approach is Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160-1235, Provence). He explains that *passim* is the plural form of *pas*, "piece": Yaakov made Yosef a garment out of pieces of differently-colored fabric. Radak then addresses the significance of this garment to the story, here too representing the interpretation most of us have always learned: "The *ketonet* was beautiful, and this caused them to hate him..."²

While this is a nice, neat explanation that makes for good school projects, it raises some questions. One difficulty is that the meaning of "*pas*" is debatable; the very *pasuk* on which Radak bases his understanding of the word is subject to differing explanations.³ In fact, Bereishis Rabbah 84:8 offers no less than five

1. For one notable counter-example to the translations mentioned above, see the Artscroll Stone Tanach, which follows Rashi's explanation and says the gift was "a fine woolen tunic."
2. The text of Radak:
פסים מענין פס ידיו, והיתה הכתונת עשויה פס אחד מצבע אחד ופס אחד מצבע אחר, כמו כלי מילת שעשויים פסים פסים; והיתה הכתונת נאה וזה היה גורם לו שישנאו אותו מלבד שהיה מדבר עליהם רע אל אביהם.
3. See Daniel 5:5 and commentaries there, as well as Ibn Ezra on Bereishis 37:3 – and the passage from Bereishis Rabbah cited below.

different interpretations of the term “ketonet passim,” based on four distinct explanations of the word “pas.”⁴ I would like to examine two of these.

One interpretation translates “pas” as “palm of the hand”⁵ and explains that *ketonet passim* means a garment with remarkably long sleeves that “reached the palm of his hand.” This interpretation implies a deeper understanding of the significance of the garment. After all, who wears sleeves that reach the palms? Certainly not hard-working, simple folk, as anyone who has tried to wash dishes in long sleeves can attest. Rather, long sleeves are worn by royalty, by those free from menial labor. If we understand Yaakov’s gift this way, we can better understand the brothers’ resentment: perhaps they felt the gift was a status symbol, marking Yosef as a ruler over his brothers. This concern was reinforced by Yosef’s dreams and is stated explicitly in the brothers’ reaction to the first dream: “*hamaloch timloch aleinu...*” – “Will you surely rule over us?!” (37:8). And if we consider this explanation in light of views that the brothers knew they were *all* intended to be forebears of the “chosen” nation,⁶ then such a gift would have seemed inappropriate on a national / religious plane as well.

Both Radak’s translation as “piece” and Chazal’s translation as “palm” could be classified as *peshat*, straightforwardly textual explanations of a difficult phrase. Although the latter is found in a compilation referred to as “midrash,” both have their roots in the words of Tanach as understood in their immediate context, and certainly make sense on a normal human plane – hallmarks of *peshat* interpretation. The final explanation I would like to consider is the fourth in the midrash, and is very much not *peshat*:

פסים על שם צרות שהגיעוהו: פ"א פוטיפר; סמ"ך סוחרים; יו"ד ישמעאלים; מ"ם מדינים.

“Passim” – Named after the troubles that befell him: P – Potiphar; S – socharim [merchants]; I – Ishmaelites; M – Midianites.

According to this explanation, the reason we have trouble translating “*passim*” is that it is not actually a word; rather, it is an acronym. The end of *perek* 37 relates that Yosef was sold from one group to another, until he found himself in the hands of Potiphar in Egypt.⁷ According to this midrashic explanation, that series of sales was already hinted to in the very beginning of the story. Perhaps more shockingly, the hint is contained in the gift Yaakov gave to his most beloved son!

By explaining *passim* as an acronym, the midrash calls our attention to this unusual word and suggests the Torah chose it to hint at deeper concepts than simply a description of the physical item Yaakov gave Yosef.

The Maharal, in his *Gur Aryeh* commentary on Rashi (37:3), writes the following about this midrash:

בא לומר לך: בשביל שהיה מוסיף לו את כתונת הפסים... הביא לו צרות אלו... ובמלת "פסים" הוזכר פוטיפר ראשונה, מפני כי סוף המעשה הוא תחלת המחשבה, והשם יתברך רצה שירד למצרים, והוא העיקר; לכך הקדימו הכתוב.

It comes to tell you: Because [Yaakov] added the *ketonet passim* for Yosef [beyond what the brothers received]... **he brought these troubles upon him...** In the word “*passim*,” Potiphar is mentioned first [although he was actually the last to buy Yosef] because the end of the

4. Here is the full text of that passage in the midrash:

פסים שהיתה מגעת עד פס ידו, ד"א פסים שהיתה דקה וקלה ביותר ונטמנת בפס יד, פסים שהפיוסו עליה איזה מהם יוליכה לאביו ועלת ליהודה, פסים על שם צרות שהגיעוהו פ"א פוטיפר סמ"ך סוחרים יו"ד ישמעאלים מ"ם מדינים, ד"א פסים, רבי שמעון בן לקיש בשם רבי אלעזר בן עזריה (תהלים סו) לנו וראו מפעלות אלהים, וכתוב בתורה (שם תהלים ס"ו) הפך ים ליבשה, למה וישנאו אותו בשביל שיקרע הים לפניהם פסים פס ים.

5. Again, see Daniel 5:5, and Ibn Ezra.

6. For one instance of this concept in midrashic tradition, consider this passage from *Vayikra Rabbah* 36:

אברהם יצא ממנו ישמעאל וכל בני קטורה; יצחק יצא ממנו עשו וכל אלופי אדם; אבל יעקב, מטתו שלימה – כל בניו צדיקים. ה"ד (בראשית מב) "כלנו בני איש אחד נחננו"

This passage could indicate that the brothers’ words, “we are all sons of one man,” illustrate their awareness that they would **all** be part of the Jewish heritage – unlike some of the children of Avraham and Yitzchak.

7. An analysis of who sold Yosef, to whom, is beyond the scope of this essay. See *pesukim* 25-36, with Rashbam and others. See also *Gur Aryeh* on 37:3 regarding the relationship between the words “*socharim*” and “*Midyanim*,” as understood in this midrash.