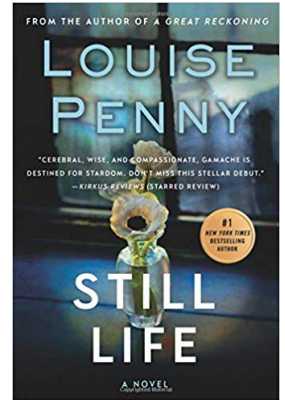


## It's All About Perspective

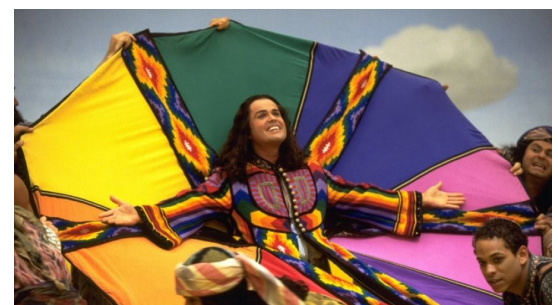
I recently picked up a mystery novel, looking for a relaxing read. In the book, there's a minor character who I find intriguing. A detective in training, this character has been assigned her first murder case, and she is determined to show her skills. The perspective of the text goes back and forth between her and the other characters in the story. When the story is centered on her, we see her determination to do her best and to make a good impression.



When the narrative is told from the perspective of the chief investigator, however, we see a different story. The trainee, so eager to prove that she knows what she's talking about, fails to listen to the suspects and to the more experienced investigators around her. We see someone who is so defensive, she fails to notice when the facts don't meet her expectations. In other words, we see someone who is so stuck in her own head, that she can't truly see, and therefore understand, the people around her. She assumes that she is always right, which leads her to miss the negative impact of her actions and her assumptions.

In *Parashat Va-yeishev*, 17 year old Joseph, too, is unable to see beyond his own concerns and his own experience of the world.

He tattles on his older brothers, proudly flaunts the beautiful coat which is a mark of his father's favoritism,



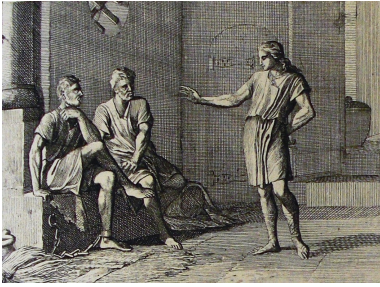
and incessantly talks about his prophetic-seeming dreams in which his entire family is



subservient to him. His behavior is rewarded by his father, who dotes on him, so despite his father's warning to tone it down, he has no reason to pay attention to anything except himself, or to care about the feelings of any of the people he regularly offends.

Joseph isn't the only one to fall short on the empathy scale in our *parashah*. His brothers, hurt and angered by their father's favoritism and by Joseph's insensitive behavior, show Joseph even less consideration than he shows them. They throw him in a pit, and then, leaving him to die, sit down to eat lunch. Subsequently, they sell Joseph as a slave to a caravan which just happened to be coming by. They, like Joseph, are very much concerned with how events impact themselves, and have trouble identifying with the feelings of others. Joseph was insensitive to them, and they were cruel back.

However, this isn't just a story of a downward vicious spiral of destruction caused by individuals who care only about themselves. Because the story isn't over yet. And over the course of the story, we see at least some of our characters grow and change, learning to take other people's feelings into account.



Joseph's change comes after many years of hardship and loss. After he is sold into slavery, he eventually ends up in prison, where he interprets dreams for two servants of Pharaoh. As he does so, he is careful not to take credit. "Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams]." You could call him selfless-- except for the part where, after he interprets the dreams, he asks Pharaoh's cup-bearer to remember him, and to put an end to his imprisonment. Joseph's full proof of change comes years later, when he is second in command of all of Egypt, and he forgives his brothers for what they did to him, and attributes his success in life not to his own cleverness, but to God. "וַעֲתָה לֹא־אֲתָם שְׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים וְיִשְׁלַחַנִי: It was not you who sent me here, but God; and God has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt. In other words, at the moment that Joseph is being treated as royalty, he has finally realized that he is not, in fact, the center of the universe. After experiencing first-hand the result of a self-centered worldview when his brothers' resentment changes his life forever, he comes to an appreciation of the importance of that which is outside himself. The cause of Joseph's change is the subject of much conjecture, but there's another person in today's *parashah* who experiences incredible development during the Joseph narrative, whose journey is somewhat more transparent. I am talking about Joseph's brother Judah, יהודה after whom the Jewish people, יהודים, are named.

Judah, the brother who after agreeing to murder Joseph, realizes that he can make a profit out of getting rid of his brother and comes up with the cold-hearted idea of selling Joseph into slavery, is the same brother who, years later, will passionately and selflessly defend his brother Benjamin,



causing Joseph to break down and reveal himself to his brothers. So what changed? How did Judah come so far in his personal development? When did he learn to care for others?

Let's start at the moment of the crime. Judah, angry and hurt, impulsively collaborates with his brothers to throw him in a pit, ostensibly for the purpose of murdering him. Did he really feel no qualms, no remorse? The 19th century commentator Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, known as Ha'amek Davar, isn't so sure. After their act of violence, the brothers sit down to eat, but Ha'amek Davar points out that they almost immediately look up and see a caravan approaching. The general practice at that time and place would have been to sit on the ground to eat. But if the brothers had been on the ground, he suggests, they wouldn't have been able to see far away. And yet, when they saw the approaching caravan of Yishmaelites approaching, they had time to discuss and make a plan. They clearly saw the caravan from far off. Therefore, concludes He'amek Davar, the brothers were clearly standing up. They sat down to eat, but were troubled enough by their actions that they were unable to eat in peace, and so they stood for the duration of their meal. Now, this might not be much comfort to Joseph.

Regardless of his brothers' guilt, he almost died! I'm pretty sure that for a person who was nearly killed and then sold into slavery, knowing that his tormentors felt bad about it doesn't make much of a difference. In fact, it might make things worse! If the brothers really felt bad about their actions, they shouldn't have done it in the first place!

Nevertheless, Ha'amek Davar states clearly that the brothers' guilt is a positive thing. The Torah, he says, is complementing the brothers. At least they knew they had done something wrong! Someone who acts with impunity, not able to recognize when they are behaving reprehensibly, that person is truly reprehensible. But a person with a conscience, however faint-- at least they have a chance at becoming better.

Feeling guilty, of course, isn't enough. So what got Judah from the point of being an aggressive, near-murdering bully, into being a selfless defender of the vulnerable? The shift, I believe can be traced to another story in this week's *parashah*. Judah's son tragically dies, and Judah follows the custom of marrying off his son's widow to his second son. When that son dies as well, Judah, fearing that the problem lies with the widow, Tamar, and refuses to follow tradition in allowing her to marry his third and youngest son. Rather than telling her explicitly that there is no way she is ever getting near his third child, Judah takes the coward's way out. He sends her back to live with her parents, and assures her that he will eventually hold a wedding when his son gets older, which he has no intention of doing. Of course, he seems

oblivious to the impact of his actions on Tamar. Not only is he denying his deceased son the opportunity to have his legacy carried on by a child who would be attributed to him, but he is also harming Tamar. Tied to his family by the societal expectation that she have a child with a relative of her dead husband, she is unable to marry anyone, and is stuck in limbo, just waiting.

Tamar, however, is not one for waiting, so she takes matters into her own hands. Through a complicated plan, she manages to conceive a child with Judah without him knowing that the woman he was with was her. When it is found that she is pregnant, Judah is prepared to punish Tamar with death, until she presents him with truth that he is the father of her future child. At that moment, everything changes for Judah. He exclaims, **צדקה ממני !**. She is more right than I!



That statement is a powerful one. She is more right than I. Suddenly, Judah has a new way of approaching the world. He is able to see beyond himself, beyond a framework in which his own actions are justified because the things he cares about must be the most

important concerns in the world. He is able to imagine the world through the eyes of his daughter- in-law, and to see the pain that he has caused. He is able to admit that someone else could be more right than him.

Following his experience with Tamar, Judah has a new perspective on the world, a perspective which says that other people's concerns are as important as his own, sometimes more important. Judah is now ready for the big test of his life, his confrontation with Joseph, in which Judah risks everything in order to protect his brother Benjamin.

That detective-in-training in my mystery novel never managed to overcome her focus on herself to actually be able to zoom out and understand the larger picture of what was going on around her. However, I do think that these stories offer models for us both of the importance of seeing the world from somebody else's perspective, and of pushing ourselves, however incrementally, to build our capacity to do that. Hopefully, we don't all need to be the victims of violence like Joseph, or to inflict terrible pain on others like Judah, in order to grow as caring people. And in fact, neither being a victim or a perpetrator is a sure path to empathy. On the contrary, if we're not careful, each of those experiences can lead us to harden our views about the world. When we catch ourselves, like Joseph's brothers, being resentful about somebody else, or, like Judah, ignoring other people's problems in favor of focusing on our own, each of us is capable of asking ourselves: I wonder how that other person feels right now? If Judah could come so far, from calmly eating lunch next to his nearly-dead brother, to admitting his own wrong and ultimately nearly sacrificing himself to protect another of his brothers, then each of us, too, can build our capacity to care about others. I wish all of us the courage, and the self-awareness, to do so.