



Journeying to Sheol, And Returning Again to Life:
Torah Reflections on Vayeshev
Genesis 37:1 – 40:23

Upon hearing that his beloved son, Joseph, has been torn to pieces by wild animals, Jacob declares, “I will go down to my son, in mourning, to Sheol!”^[1] In the ancient Israelite imagination, Sheol is the dark, shadowy underworld where the dead reside. It is the place everyone will go at the end of their lives, and it is also the place that one “visits” while in the depths of grief or despair. In the Joseph story, Jacob’s grief over his son’s (apparent) death is so profound that he wishes to follow his son to the realm of the dead.

Much later in the Bible’s narrative, David describes the despair he felt as he fled from Saul. He recalls, “The snares of Sheol encircled me.”^[2] David, like Jacob, feels pain so great he imagines his emotions to be like Sheol’s cold, grey wisps of icy death. In both stories, David and Jacob are so completely consumed by their feelings that they travel temporarily to another abode, the bleakest and most abandoned place in their society’s cosmos.

Sheol is filled with what the modern psychotherapist Miriam Greenspan might call the “dark emotions” of fear, despair, and grief. Greenspan suggests that our culture shies away from these emotions, encouraging us to ignore, minimize, or master emotions that cause us discomfort. She writes, “In the throes of grief, fear, or despair, we generally believe that giving feelings like these too much space in our psyches is a sign of emotional weakness or breakdown.”^[3] Greenspan persuasively makes the case for a different approach. She suggests we “attend to, befriend, and surrender to the energies of grief, despair, and fear.” Put another way, we might follow Jacob and David’s examples of deeply experiencing painful emotions.

To allow “dark emotions” into our lives does not mean we will never feel joy again. Rather, the ebbs and flows of our lives are filled with loss and regeneration, pain and joy. We travel to Sheol and we travel back home again.

After the birth of her son, Hannah offers a prayer of thanksgiving to God. She declares, “God deals death and gives life/ Casts down into Sheol and raises up.”^[4] Similarly, in Psalm 30:4, the psalmist declares, “God, you brought me up from Sheol.” Sometimes, recovery from sickness or the birth of a longed for child are the events that allow us to return from the depths; other times, as in Psalm 30, connection to God or community might be the extended hand that pulls us up from the pit. This understanding that dark and light times cycle through our lives is particularly fitting this week as we celebrate Chanukah, the holiday of light in the darkest of times.

When Jonah spends three days and nights in the belly of a huge fish, he uses the metaphor of Sheol to explain his distress. He uttered these words of prayer:

“I called to God from my troubles/ and God answered me. /From the belly of Sheol I cried out/ and you heard my voice.[5]”

One possible root of the word Sheol is the Hebrew verb *sha'al*, meaning “to ask” or “to request.” From the depths of despair – from the stinking innards of a giant fish – Jonah called out for help and heard his cries answered. Jonah’s cries remind us that we don’t need to make these journeys alone. His story gives us permission to scream out our truths from the depths and to call out for help. And his story reminds us to heed the cries of others, and to be the hand that helps bring someone back up from Sheol. In this way, we and those we love might be like Jacob, David, Hannah, and Jonah, descending to Sheol and returning again to new chapters of life.

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[1] Gen 37:34. I have borrowed Everett Fox’s translation (*The Five Books of Moses*, Schocken Books: 1983, 181).

[2] II Sam 22:6 and Ps 18:6.

[3] Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair* (Boston and London: Shambala, 2004), 1.

[4] I Sam 2:6.

[5] Jonah 2:3.



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