

# Parsha Ponders

Vayeishev | Dec 19, 2024 | 19 Kislev 5785

## Names, visions, and important stones<sup>1</sup>

ויבא הביתה לעשות מלאכתו ואין איש מאנשי הבית שם בבית...

[Yosef] went to the house to “do his work”, and there was no one else in the house <sup>2</sup>

While Yosef was a slave in Egypt, his master Potiphar’s wife was relentless. She wouldn’t give up on trying to seduce the attractive teenager. Day in and day out she would try different tactics to gain his attention. Yosef wouldn’t budge, as he knew that adultery was a terrible crime. One day, the Torah says that Yosef went to his house to “do his work”. Some say<sup>3</sup> that this is literal, and he was going to work on some bookkeeping for his master. Others say<sup>4</sup> that this is a euphemism for him finally caving into Potiphar’s wife’s seduction. However, even according to that opinion, Yosef took hold of himself and abstained.

What inspired him to stay on the right path? Our Sages say<sup>5</sup> that a vision of his father Yaakov’s face appeared to him in the window. Yaakov exclaimed: “Yosef! Your brothers are destined to have their names engraved in the stones of the Kohen Gadol’s *Eiphod*, and you’ll be among them! You want your name to be erased from amongst your brothers?” This vision inspired Yosef to maintain his integrity. However, one could ask on this teaching: Why didn’t this vision appear to Reuven, before he sinned with moving Yaakov’s bed? Why didn’t this vision appear to Yehuda, before he had a scandalous relationship with Tamar? Why didn’t it appear to Yosef’s brothers, before they sold him as a slave<sup>6</sup>?

Our Sages disagree<sup>7</sup> as to what was inscribed on the stones of the *Eiphod*. One opinion is that they had the names of the forefathers and the twelve tribes. Another opinion is that they contained the names of the different types of stones. If we analyze the names of the tribes, we’ll note that the letter *samech* only appears in the name of Yosef. Given these facts, we’ll have an answer to our question.

If Yosef’s name had been erased from the stones of the *Eiphod*, as the vision of Yaakov threatened, then we would have had a problem. The entire Hebrew alphabet needed to appear on the stones<sup>8</sup>, and without Yosef, there would be no letter *samech*. The only solution then would be to have the names of the stones inscribed, not the names of the forefathers and tribes.

Now we can understand why Yaakov specifically appeared in a vision to Yosef, and not the other brothers. If Yosef sinned with the wife of Potiphar, then not only would Yosef’s name be removed, but as we said, all the names of the forefathers and tribes would have to be removed. This would include Yaakov. Yaakov wanted to ensure that his name not be erased from the stones of the *Eiphod*. Thankfully, his vision inspired Yosef to withstand the test, maintaining his proper standing amongst the tribes<sup>9</sup>. Good Shabbos

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<sup>1</sup> Based on [Chasam Sofer](#) to [Shabbos](#) 49b s.v. בעי ר”י. This piece can only be found in the old editions. Perhaps it was removed from the newer editions due to the issues presented in the upcoming footnotes

<sup>2</sup> [Genesis](#) 39:11

<sup>3</sup> Either Rav or Shmuel in [Sotah](#) 36b says he went to do work, and [Targum Onkelos ad. loc.](#) says it was bookkeeping

<sup>4</sup> Rav or Shmuel (the one who argues on the previous opinion), [Sotah loc. cit.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Ibid](#)

<sup>6</sup> I would have assumed the reason was because Yosef was so close to Yaakov, that only he would be able to muster up a vision of his beloved father in his time of temptation

<sup>7</sup> The [Chasam Sofer](#) cites [Sotah](#), but the *gemarra* as we have it doesn’t present such a dispute. See [Sotah](#) 36ab. It’s unclear then what he is referring to

<sup>8</sup> This seemingly should only be true for the stones of the *Choshen Mishpat*, which lit up from the *Urim V’Tumim* to convey prophetic messages. It’s not clear why the stones of the *Eiphod* would also need all the letters

<sup>9</sup> It’s a little surprising that the [Chasam Sofer](#) would suggest that Yaakov had such a motivation in appearing in such a vision. While this explains why he appeared to Yosef, it doesn’t explain why he didn’t appear to the others. It would seem that the intent is that Yaakov wasn’t going to appear in a vision simply to save them from sin. In general it requires clarification how Yaakov could intend to appear in a vision to Yosef, when he thought Yosef was dead. An alternative understanding of our Sages’ teaching could be that Hashem sent Yosef a vision of his father, not that his father sent such a vision