

**Date:** 19 Kislev 5786 (December 9, 2025)

**Torah Portion:** Vayeshev

**Topic:** The Justification of the Brothers

It is written (Gen. 37:27): “Let us go and sell him to the Yismaelites.” This verse highlights one of the most puzzling parts of the story of Yosef and his brothers: how should we understand their treatment of Yosef? It seems unthinkable that the sons of Ya’akov — righteous individuals whose names appear on the breastplate and ephod of the Kohen Gadol as a merit for the nation of Israel — would plot to kill or sell their brother out of hatred or jealousy.

However, the Midrash makes it clear that the brothers believed they were acting correctly when they sold Yosef into slavery. They did not see their actions as being driven by hatred. Instead, they believed that they were justified in what they did.

This belief is also seen later in the story, when the brothers are imprisoned by Yosef in Egypt. In Genesis 42:21 they say, “Indeed, we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us and we did not listen; that is why this anguish has come upon us.” Their guilt focused not on the sale of Yosef itself, but on their lack of compassion when he begged for mercy. Even at that point, they still believed that their decision to sell him was the right one, but they now understood that their emotional cruelty was something for which Hashem held them accountable.

Why, then, did the brothers think they had the right to sell Yosef—or even to kill him? Some commentators explain that the brothers actually convened a **beit din** (rabbinical court), discussed the matter together, and reached a decision that Yosef was deserving of death. Sforno explains that they saw Yosef as a **rodef** (one who pursues another to harm them), and according to Jewish law, a rodef may be killed to protect the intended victim (Sanhedrin 72a, 73a). Yosef frequently reported their actions to Ya’akov, and the brothers believed he was trying to bring about their downfall. They assumed he came to observe them in order to find more faults to report to their father—or even to cause them to sin, so that they would be punished by Hashem. In their view, Yosef’s goal was to destroy them either in this world or the next.

Another reason they may have viewed Yosef as a rodef was because he seemed to be positioning himself as Ya’akov’s sole heir. Just as Avraham cast out Yishmael and Yitzchak rejected Esav, the brothers feared that Ya’akov might also choose only Yosef and exclude them from the legacy of building the nation of Israel. Yosef even resembled Ya’akov physically, and the Sages (Sotah 36b) say that Yosef was worthy to have twelve tribes descend from him alone. This suggested to the brothers that his negative reports were part of a plan to remove them from the family and take their place.

Shelah (Torah Shebiksav, Tzon Yosef, Parashat Vayeishev) offers a different explanation. He suggests the brothers believed Yosef was trying to become king over them, as his dreams seemed to indicate. But leadership had already been designated to Yehudah, the ancestor of the Davidic dynasty. Yehudah had already taken leadership among the brothers: he was the one who suggested selling Yosef, later took responsibility for Binyamin, and spoke on behalf of the family. Yosef’s apparent attempt to rule over the brothers could have been seen as rebellion against Yehudah’s monarchy — and a rebel against the king is subject to the death penalty.

According to all these interpretations, the brothers believed they were judging Yosef fairly and that he deserved his punishment. Even when they later recognized divine punishment, they did not regret selling him — only the harshness with which they treated him.

But despite their efforts to judge the situation correctly, they were wrong. Yosef did not want to harm them or become the sole heir. He told their father about their behavior out of sincere concern, hoping Ya’akov would correct them. Nor did he intend to take leadership away from Yehudah. In fact, Yosef’s rise to power was essential for future events: without it, there would have been no exile to Egypt and no redemption — and no Davidic dynasty.

Ultimately, it was Hashem who guided their actions, setting in motion the events that would fulfill the prophecy made to Avraham at the **Covenant Between the Parts** — that his descendants would be strangers in a land not their own.

Shalom.