FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER STUDY PRAY EXPLORE

Parashah:	Vayechi
Read On:	January 3, 2026 | 14 Tevet 5786
Torah:	Genesis 47:28–50:26
Triennial:	Genesis 47:28–48:22
Haftorah:	I Kings 2:1–12

TORAH SPARKS

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR CHILDREN ARE?

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt
Dvar Parashah

The Hebrew word מוֹלֶדֶת appears twenty-two times in the Bible. Twenty-one times, it means birthplace, homeland, origin, the place that bore you. It points backward.

We know it best from what God says to Abraham, לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ, "Go forth from your land and your birthplace and the house of your father." Abraham does go forth, but decades later, long after having settled in Canaan, he still thinks of Padan Aram as home, still refers to it as מוֹלַדְתִּי, "my birthplace," when he sends for a wife for Isaac. For Abraham, origin never shifts. Canaan is where he lives; Mesopotamia is where he's from.

For Jacob, the word pivots. He has gone forth from Canaan back to Abraham's Padan Aram. And God summons him home: שׁוּב אֶל־אֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ וּלְמוֹלַדְתֶּךָ, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your birthplace." Because Jacob's מוֹלֶדֶת is Canaan; he was born there. He is our first real native.

And on it goes, the word מולדת meaning birthplace. Ruth will leave behind her מוֹלֶדֶת, in the style of Abraham. Esther conceals hers. Jeremiah warns against clinging to it. Ezekiel weaponizes it as indictment.

It is only here, in Genesis 48:6, that the word means something different. Jacob tells Joseph about progeny fathered after Ephraim and Manasseh: וּמוֹלַדְתְּךָ אֲשֶׁר־הוֹלַדְתָּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם לְךָ יִהְיוּ, "And your מוֹלַדְתְּךָ that you beget after them shall be yours." This is unprecedented. Only here, in all of Tanakh, do we read מוֹלֶדֶת as offspring. The backward-pointing word suddenly points forward. The place that bore you becomes what you have borne.

Why?

Because Joseph has no מוֹלֶדֶת anymore. He broke the pattern.

He named his firstborn Manasseh: כִּי־נַשַּׁנִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלִי וְאֵת כָּל־בֵּית אָבִי, "God has made me forget my hardship and the house of my father." He named Ephraim for being made fruitful בְּאֶרֶץ עָנְיִי, "in the land of my affliction." And he stayed there. He married an Egyptian. He dressed Egyptian. He took an Egyptian name. He governed Egypt. For Joseph, Egypt ceased to be affliction and became home.

This happens with no one else. Abraham longed for Padan Aram even while living in Canaan. Jacob insisted on burial at home even after seventeen good years in Egypt. The place of origin stays fixed. You leave it or return to it. It does not move.

Joseph let it move. He severed identity from origin. Egypt became his מוֹלֶדֶת.

So Jacob, in this one verse, strips the word of its meaning. Your מוֹלֶדֶת? It means only offspring now. The word that should anchor you to origin points only forward, because you have already cut the backward cord yourself.

Look at how father and son meet. After more than twenty years, after believing his son dead, Jacob hardly recognizes the son before him, and wastes no joy upon the reunion. Meanwhile, Joseph harnesses his chariot and goes up to meet his father: וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוָּארָיו וַיֵּבְךְּ עַל־צַוָּארָיו עוֹד , "And he fell on his neck and wept on his neck still." Joseph weeps and weeps.

And Jacob? The text gives us nothing. No embrace. No tears. And we expect them. This is the third family reunion we've had in Genesis, where one person falls on the other's neck. In the other two, both men then weep together. Here, Joseph weeps and weeps alone.

From Jacob, we hear only this: אָמוּתָה הַפָּעַם אַחֲרֵי רְאוֹתִי אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ כִּי עוֹדְךָ חָי, "Now I can die, having seen your face, that you are still alive." Perhaps, even more strongly, "Let me die now, having seen your face." Joseph weeps for the father he remembers. Jacob looks at an Egyptian lord, the man his son has become. And it is as lord, not as son, that Jacob must address him.

When his death approaches, Jacob summons Joseph, and Joseph alone, to prepare for it. The midrash picks up on this: why does Jacob call Joseph, rather than Reuben the firstborn or Judah the king? We read in Bereshit Rabbah 96: לָמָּה כֵּן, בִּשְׁבִיל שֶׁהָיָה סֵפֶק בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת, "Because Joseph had the power to do it." Jacob calls Joseph, the Egyptian lord, with all of the power of second in command to Pharaoh, in order to ensure his proper burial. He does not call on Joseph as his son. And he speaks to him as a petitioner begging a potentate, minding his ps and qs: אִם־נָא מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ.

The narrator of this passage keeps reminding us of their actual relationship, calling them father and son. But they do not address each other in these terms.

The midrash twists the knife in even further, imagining that Jacob calls Joseph saying: בִּשְׁבִילְךָ יָרַדְתִּי לְמִצְרַיִם, "Because of you, I went down to Egypt." And, בִּשְׁבִילְךָ אָמַרְתִּי אָמוּתָה הַפָּעַם, "Because of you I said, 'Now I can die.'"This is indictment. Because of you I am here. Because of you I must beg with hand under thigh, oaths, and political supplication for what should be obvious.

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So Jacob claims the grandchildren: אֶפְרַיִם וּמְנַשֶּׁה כִּרְאוּבֵן וְשִׁמְעוֹן יִהְיוּ־לִי, "Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine like Reuben and Simeon." He is reaching into Egypt to pull them out before Joseph's מוֹלֶדֶת-erasure swallows them too. Ephraim and Manasseh were born in Egypt; that is their origin. But Jacob overwrites it. He adopts them into Israel, makes them tribes, gives them inheritance in a land they have never seen.

And then he tells Joseph: whatever else you produce is yours. מוֹלַדְתְּךָ means offspring only now. That word has broken for you.

There is still hope for Joseph's children. But only as בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, children of Israel, rather than as carriers of Joseph's legacy. They will not be called by his name. When Israel blesses children forever after, it will be: יְשִׂמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאֶפְרַיִם וְכִמְנַשֶּׁה, "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." The ones claimed back. The ones rescued from Egypt while still in it.

Joseph built the infrastructure of diaspora survival. Without him, there is no descent to Egypt, no preservation through famine, no story at all. But he built it by becoming what he built. The coat of many colors became the garments of an Egyptian lord. The dreamer who saw sheaves bowing became the administrator who made a nation bow.

You have made Egypt your מוֹלֶדֶת. Your children will not.

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THE SEED OF JOSEPH OVER WHOM THE EVIL EYE HAS NO AUTHORITY

Jonathan Lipnick
Language of the Parashah

One of the hallmarks of the contemporary liberal Judaism practiced by readers of *Torah Sparks* is its wholesale rejection of superstition. Few of us have much patience for magical rituals involving astrological tables, kabbalistic amulets and incantations recited beside the graves of sages. And yet, many of us feel perfectly comfortable spitting three times (or saying *tfu,tfu,tfu*) and using the phrase *keyn eyn-hore*, particularly when discussing very consequential matters such as an impending wedding or birth. The Yiddish phrase קיין עין־הרע, or its Hebrew equivalent *b'li ayin hara* בלי עין הרע, means "without the evil eye" and is meant to nullify the malicious power of jealous gazes that are believed to be lurking whenever one is on the cusp of good fortune. The origins of this belief are ancient and complex; suffice to say, among all the peoples of the Mediterranean Basin, there is a deep fixation on warding off its malevolent power by means of talismans, rituals and mantras. Another common apotropaic (Greek for "to turn away") phrase that is frequently heard in daily speech here in Israel (particularly among Mizrahi Jews) is borrowed from the blessing of Joseph - the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh - that appears in this week's parashah:

בֵּן פֹּרָת יוֹסֵף בֵּן פֹּרָת עֲלֵי־עָיִן בָּנוֹת צָעֲדָה עֲלֵי־שׁוּר׃
Joseph is a wild ass, a wild ass by a spring;
Wild colts on a hillside. (Gen. 49:22)

Like many of the curses/blessings in Jacob's final testament, the language of Joseph's blessing is difficult, archaic Hebrew. Many scholars consider this to be among the oldest texts contained in the Torah, likely composed sometime in the early 10th century BCE. Joseph's blessing is longer than any other tribe's with the exception of Judah. It is also the only blessing that does not begin with the name of the tribe itself. However, the NJPS translation (1985) seen above is hardly accepted by all. See, for example, the earlier JPS translation (1917) which very closely resembles the King James Version (1611):

Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine by a fountain;
Its branches run over the wall. (Gen. 49:22)

In Robert Alter's translation (1996), the first clause is very similar to the JPS, while the second is quite different:

A fruitful son is Joseph, a fruitful son by a spring,
daughters strode by a rampart. (Gen. 49:22)

Why so much disagreement between these translations? The main point of contention is the phrase *ben porat* בֵּן פֹּרָת which is repeated twice in this verse for emphasis. The first word, *ben* בֵּן which generally means "son," is understood by some to mean "branch" in this instance, as seen in the following verse:

וְכַנָּה אֲשֶׁר־נָטְעָה יְמִינֶךָ וְעַל־**בֵּן** אִמַּצְתָּה לָּךְ׃
The stock planted by Your right hand, the **stem** you have taken as your own. (Ps. 80:16)

The second word, *porat* is usually understood to be a variant of the word *poriah* פֹּרִיָּה meaning "fertile" (see Isaiah 17:6), from the root PRH פרה meaning "to bear fruit." Those who understand this to mean "wild ass" (*pereh* פֶּרֶא), as seen in NJPS, mainly do so because of the animal theme seen in many of the other tribes' blessings. After all, Joseph is compared to both a bull (*shor*) and a wild ox (*re'em*) in the final blessings given by Moses in Deuteronomy 33:17, so wouldn't it make sense for the same to be true here in Genesis? This novel interpretation, however, is unlikely, because the letter *aleph* which is integral to the word *pereh* פֶּרֶא does not appear in the word *porat* פֹּרָת. It is more likely that *porat* has to do with fruitfulness, as older translations correctly assumed. This root PRH פרה is ostensibly the source of the name Ephraim, the more powerful of Joseph's two sons:

וְאֵת שֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי קָרָא **אֶפְרָיִם** כִּי־**הִפְרַנִי** אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עָנְיִי׃
And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me **fruitful** in the land of my affliction." (Gen. 41:52)

So, if we set aside the faunal translation of NJPS and follow the floral translation accepted by the majority, what we have is a beautiful, typically biblical image (see Isa. 17:8, Ezek. 17:8) of a lush tree growing beside a spring of water (*ayin* עַיִן). For example, in the opening chapter of the Book of Psalms, the righteous person is compared to such a tree:

וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שָׁתוּל עַל־פַּלְגֵי־מָיִם אֲשֶׁר פִּרְיוֹ יִתֵּן בְּעִתּוֹ וְעָלֵהוּ לֹא־יִבּוֹל וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂה יַצְלִיחַ׃

Such a one is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives. (Ps. 1:3)

So, if the simple meaning of this verse is to acclaim the agricultural bounty of the territory of Joseph, how did the phrase *ben porat yosef* become such a common way for Hebrew speakers to ward off the evil eye? The origins are found in tractate *Berachot* of the Babylonian Talmud where the following story is told:

רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן הֲוָה רָגִיל דַּהֲוָה קָא אָזֵיל וְיָתֵיב אַשַּׁעֲרֵי דִּטְבִילָה. אֲמַר: כִּי סָלְקָן בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָתְיָין מִטְּבִילָה, מְסְתַּכְּלָן בִּי, וְנֶהֱוֵי לְהוּ זַרְעָא דְּשַׁפִּירֵי כְּווֹתִי.

Rabbi Yoḥanan was accustomed to go and sit at the gates of immersion sites. He said: When the daughters of Israel emerge from their immersion, they will look at me, and will have children as beautiful as me.

The third century amoraic sage, Yohanan b. Nafḥa, who was famously handsome (b. *Bava Metzia* 84a), is alluding to a widespread ancient belief that a woman had the power to influence the state of her gestating fetus by means of the visual stimuli she apprehended at the moment of conception. A good example of this is the biblical story of the spotted and speckled goats in Genesis 30, in which Jacob is able to influence the appearance of newborn goats by showing their mothers a type of pigmented stick at the time of mating. In this odd Talmudic story, the women who have immersed themselves in the mikveh receive a positive visual impression by seeing the face of Rabbi Yohanan before returning home to sleep with their husbands. However, Rabbi Yohanan's colleagues worry that his pride will attract the evil eye, to which he responds:

אֲמַר לְהוּ: אֲנָא מִזַּרְעָא דְּיוֹסֵף קָא אָתֵינָא, דְּלָא שָׁלְטָא בֵּיהּ עֵינָא בִּישָׁא, דִּכְתִיב ״בֵּן פּוֹרָת יוֹסֵף בֵּן פּוֹרָת עֲלֵי עָיִן״, וְאָמַר רַבִּי אֲבָהוּ: אַל תִּקְרֵי ״עֲלֵי עָיִן״, אֶלָּא ״עוֹלֵי עָיִן״.

He said to them: I descend from the seed of Joseph over whom the evil eye has no dominion, as it is written: "Joseph is a bountiful vine, a bountiful vine beside a spring [*alei ayin*]" (Genesis

49:22). And Rabbi Abbahu said: Do not read it *alei ayin*, rather *olei ayin*, above the eye; they transcend the influence of the evil eye. (b. *Ber* 20a)

The core idea of this text is that the biblical figure of Joseph and the words associated with him have eternal power to nullify the evil eye. This is surprising, to say the least, given Joseph's vaingloriousness throughout the Book of Genesis. As we saw above, the *peshat* meaning of the word *ayin* עָיִן in this verse is "spring." However, the midrash shifts its meaning back to its literal meaning of "eye" (both eyes and springs are small round patches of moisture surrounded by dryness) and uses this as a bridge to the theme of the evil eye. The midrash then goes on to quote the opinion of a second rabbi who derives Joseph's power over the evil eye from the blessing that Jacob gave to Ephraim and Manasseh in the previous chapter:

רַבִּי יוֹסֵי בְּרַבִּי חֲנִינָא אָמַר מֵהָכָא: **"וְיִדְגוּ** לָרֹב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ", מָה דָּגִים שֶׁבַּיָּם מַיִם מְכַסִּין עֲלֵיהֶם וְאֵין עַיִן הָרָע שׁוֹלֶטֶת בָּהֶם, אַף זַרְעוֹ שֶׁל יוֹסֵף אֵין עַיִן הָרָע שׁוֹלֶטֶת בָּהֶם.

Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Ḥanina, "and may they multiply [*veyidgu*] in the midst of the earth" (Genesis 48:16). Just as the fish in the sea, water covers them and the evil eye has no dominion over them, so too the seed of Joseph, the evil eye has no dominion over them. (b. *Ber* 20a)

In this second midrash, Joseph is connected to the evil eye by means of the one-of-a-kind verb *veyidgu* וְיִדְגוּ ("proliferate") which is etymologically related to the word *dag* דָּג meaning "fish." Many of the cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle East associate fish with good luck. On Shabbat and Rosh Hashanah, we eat fish as a symbol of bounty, blessing and, of course, to nullify the forces of the evil eye. The images in this midrash are an excellent window into the meaning of typical charms and amulets sold in markets across the Middle East: the color turquoise (water), eyes (the evil eye), fish (protected under water), the palm or *ḥamsa* (to hold back the evil eye). Over time, the figure of Joseph became so synonymous with fighting the evil eye, that we find the following practical advice in the Babylonian Talmud:

> One who enters a city and fears the evil eye should hold the thumb of his right hand in his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand and recite the following: I, so-and-so son of so-and-so, come from the descendants of Joseph, over whom the evil eye has no dominion. (b. *Ber* 55b)

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BEARING THE BONES

Ilana Kurshan

Reflections on the Parashah

The drama within Joseph's family lies at the heart of the second half of the book of Genesis. Joseph, the seventeen-year-old dreamer with his grandiose visions of the rest of his family bowing down to him, incurs his older brothers' jealousy and wrath to such an extent that they throw him in a pit and report to their father that his beloved son has died. Joseph, though the brothers do not know it, is raised from the pit by traveling merchants and brought down to Egypt, where he rises to power and saves the nation from famine. Joseph's brothers, who come down to Egypt in search of food, do not realize until years later—when Joseph finally reveals his true identity—that it was their own brother who, as grand vizier in Egypt, provided their family with food. Now, in our parashah, their father Jacob dies and Joseph and the rest of his brothers have their final confrontation, a moment of pathos and tragedy that shapes the way we might think about forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

After the death and burial of their father Jacob, Joseph's brothers suddenly panic. Perhaps all along Joseph was just acting kind to them so as not to upset their father? What if Joseph's fury and resentment will be unleashed now that their father is no longer alive? The Torah gives voice to their fear: "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did to him?" (Genesis 50:15). The brothers are so panicked that they cannot confront Joseph directly. Instead, they speak to him by means of an intermediary, conveying the following message to their brother: "Before his death, your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph: 'Forgive, I urge you the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father" (Genesis 50:16-17). The symmetry is striking: Joseph was afraid to speak to his brothers directly in Egypt lest they discover his true identity, and therefore used an interpreter; now the brothers are too scared to confront Joseph directly, and rely on a messenger to intervene.

The message Joseph's brothers send is, of course, untrue. Nowhere in the Bible does Jacob instruct Joseph to forgive his brothers. But the brothers are so afraid of Joseph's reaction that they fabricate this tale about their father's deathbed will. The midrash (Tanchuma Vayechi 17) explains that the reason for the brothers' fear was because following Jacob's death, they saw that Joseph went down to make a blessing over the pit where his brothers had thrown him. According to the midrash, Joseph made this blessing as one should do over a place where a miracle was performed for him. At that point, the brothers realized that Joseph had not forgotten what they'd done to him, and perhaps had not forgiven them either. Panicked, they send a messenger in the hope that their father Jacob—whose favoritism was once the cause of so much family strife—can now make peace from the grave. Joseph, though, forgives his brothers immediately, just as he did in Egypt. Back then, when he revealed himself to his

brothers, he immediately reassured them, "Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves you because you sold me here; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you... So it was not you who sent me here but God, and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord over all his household and ruler over the whole land of Egypt" (Genesis 45:5-8). Now again, after Jacob's death, Joseph relays the same message: He forgives his brothers because everything they did to him was all just part of the divine plan. "Although you intended it for harm," he tells them, "God intended it for good" (50:20). Jacob insists that his brothers were just a cog in the engine of history, necessary to bring about God's greater plan.

Although Joseph's response is often read as an act of supreme graciousness, there is also an air of superiority in his way of relating to his brothers. Joseph is unwilling to revisit the pain of his past. He does not want to remember the moment his brothers threw him into the pit as a moment of hurt, rejection, and terror. For Joseph, at this point in his life, he sees it primarily as a site of miracle, and as part of a larger providential plan. When Joseph's brothers, following their father's death, offer to be his slaves, he says to them, "Have no fear! Am I in place of God?" As Avivah Zornberg points out, Joseph compares himself to God because on some level, he really does think that he is like God: "On an unacceptable level, he is undifferentiated from God. Why else would he constantly refer to himself and God in the same breath?" (Zornberg, Murmuring Deep, p. 331). Perhaps the Talmud is picking up on the very same point when the rabbis teach, "Why did Joseph die before his brothers? Because he gave himself superior airs" (B. Sotah 13b). Joseph did not just act superior when he was the teenage dreamer; even now, after his father's death, he continues to hold himself above his brothers, preferring to be magnanimous and to lord his power over them, rather than to confront their painful past.

Sometimes, after a terrible family argument, it is best to just seize hold of any opportunity to reconcile and move on. But a reconciliation that does not truly confront the pain of the past—what went wrong, and why—will never allow for total closure and resolution. Even after Joseph dies, his brothers have to bear the weight of the hurt they inflicted upon him—not because their wrong was unforgiveable, but because Joseph was so quick to impose a providential pattern over their unsettled scores. As Zornberg puts it, "[Joseph] asserts a superiority that makes him untouchable and his brothers unredeemable" (ibid., p. 333). And so his brothers and their descendants will have to bear Joseph's bones throughout forty years of wilderness wandering, carrying the weight of their unresolved guilt because their brother was unable to grant them, even to his very last days, any possibility of redemption.