

The Pit in Joseph

The story of Joseph begins in parshat VaYeshev where his rise to power begins in a pit: *They [Joseph's brothers] took him and threw him into a pit* (Genesis 27:31).

A short midrash explores the effect of this moment on the young Joseph:

They took him (vayikachu-hu) is written as though it could be read, *he took him* (vayikachey-hu). Now, who is the “he” among the brothers who might have thrown Joseph into that pit? It was Shimon, whom Joseph paid back when the brothers came to buy grain in Egypt and Joseph *took Shimon from among them and imprisoned him* (Genesis 42:24).

In the hands of the midrash, a missing vowel reveals a drama hidden in the text—the story of a traumatized brother-now-a-prince who spent years imagining and then taking his revenge.

Scripture ultimately portrays a wise and settled Joseph who accepts the bruises of his fate as part of the divine plan to save his family and the world from famine. But perhaps Joseph's acceptance appeared only when the fire of revenge burned away. According to the midrash, by the time that his brothers appeared in Egypt to buy grain, it had been years since Joseph had been in the pit. But when he met his brothers again, the pit was still in him.

The Israeli poet, Rivka Miriam, embellishes the theme:

לבשתי ופשטתי את הבור חליפות.
או שמא לבש אותי הבור חליפות ופשט.
אני במעמקיו הוכתרתי עוורת בתכריכי.
והוא הוכתר במעמקיי.
עד אין כתר.
עד אין די.

I put on and stripped off the pit in turns.

Or, perhaps it was the pit that robed me and stripped me off.

I was crowned in its depths, blind in my shrouds.

And it was crowned in my depths

Until crown made no difference

Until it was never enough.

Every word in Rivka's first line appears in the story of Joseph, either when he is thrown into a pit by his brothers or when he is raised from one by Pharaoh. Not mentioning Joseph by name, the poet allows the pit to be our own.