

## Syllabus

**Bible 562 The Joseph Story:** *Genesis 37-50 through the eyes of the classic medieval Bible commentaries*

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### Scope of the Course

*All texts for this course will be read in translation.*

We will study the Joseph story verse-by-verse, starting with Genesis 37, accompanied by a similarly close reading of Rashi's commentary. This close literary reading means that we cannot hope to cover the entire Joseph story in a single semester. However, we do aspire to identify and analyze key themes and to solidify skills so that each of us can return with confidence to the Joseph story after the course is completed.

In order to anchor the Joseph story, we will spend three or more sessions on Chapter 37, which sets the stage for everything that happens thereafter. When we have completed our in-depth study of Chapter 37, we will make choices among the remaining texts.

### Schedule of Sessions [flexible]

#### Opening session

- (i) How to get an overview of the Joseph story— traditional ways of grouping Torah texts:
- chapter divisions [Stephen Langton],
  - weekly portion [*parshat ha-shavua*],
  - Torah scroll scribal divisions [*petucha* and *setumah*]
- (ii) The Joseph story vs. the Jacob story
- (iii) Targum Onkelos (and Targum [ps.]Jonathan)
- (iv) The 'keyword' or *leitwort*
- (v) 'Exigetical decisions' of medievals and moderns
- (vi) *chavruta* study

#### Sessions 1-4, Genesis 37

- (i). How does Rashi open his commentary to the Joseph story?
- (ii) Rashi as issue-spotter.
- (ii) Multiple causes— the rupture in the family
- (iii) Joseph wanders— Rashi, Ramban
- (iv) The crime— Rashi, Ramban: Can the Torah lie?  
Rashi, Rashbam: Who sold Joseph?
- (v) The coverup: What is God's role?

#### Sessions 4-5

a source-critical reading of Chapter 37.

#### Sessions 4-5-6

Chapter 39— in Potiphar's House: Linking this chapter to Chapter 37; the Koran on the Joseph story

#### Sessions 5-6

Returning to Chapter 38 (Judah and Tamar). Why is this episode intertwined with the Joseph story?

#### Session 6-7-8

Chapter 40 Joseph in prison; comparing Joseph's fate in Chapter 40 to his fate in Chapter 39.

#### Sessions 7-8-9

Chapter 41, Pharaoh's dreams; Joseph's rise to power; naming the children; Wisdom literature

#### Sessions 9-10-11

Chapter 42, the famine in Canaan; the brothers' first trip to Egypt— why do they undertake the journey?

#### Session 11-12-13

Chapters 43-44, The brothers twist in the wind; what does Jacob know and when does he know it?

#### Session 14

Chapter 45, Joseph reveals all.  
Is history being written?

#### Session 15

Chapter 46 Father and son together: Rashi, Ramban

### Secondary literature: focus on Biblical text

The best way to be an active reader of modern scholarly literature on the Joseph story is to be steeped in the raw material with which scholars are working, namely the Biblical text itself. I therefore suggest that we postpone reading the rich scholarly literature on the Joseph story until we ourselves have become fully conversant with the nuances of the Biblical text. In postponing exploration of what *others* say about the Joseph story, we will discover that *each of us* has much to say about the story, its structure and its meaning.

Insightful and beautifully written analyses of the Joseph story are included in Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* and in Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*

### Our goals

Even though Rashi is apparently not interested in appreciating the text as a literary narrative, we will use

Rashi's commentary to enhance our own appreciation of the literary aspects of the Biblical text. In addition, we are looking at Rashi's commentary—

- a. as a masterpiece in the use of language,
- b. as a repository for the midrashic tradition,
- c. as an issue spotter, with Rashi constantly making exegetical decisions, and
- d. as staging ground for the study of later medieval Jewish commentaries.

### Translations

Members of our class bring together many different skills and life experiences that enrich our group. In addition, we have varying levels of knowledge of the Hebrew language. In order to bridge these levels, I have created handouts for our use in this course that contain my translations of Genesis 37-46 and of Rashi's commentary. These translations have the follow features:

- i. the translations are carefully lined up with the corresponding Hebrew text.
- ii. the translations are literal to a fault.
- iii. In addition to choosing literalness over elegance, I have chosen literalness over *clarity*. In other words, the translation does not aim to be totally clear, but rather to reflect the ambiguities of the Hebrew text. In several cases, I simply transliterated a term found in the original.

### Focus on Rashi

In our focus on Rashi,, there are several questions that we will keep constantly in mind:

- i. What are the exegetical insights that Rashi offers? How is he reading the biblical verse? What is he adding to the text? What difficulties has he spotted?
- ii. Are there motifs that Rashi carries through from chapter to chapter?
- iii. How does Rashi express himself? What is the relationship of his language with the language of the Bible? How does Rashi use language to advance his goals?
- iv. Does Rashi have an overall approach to the Joseph story or is he simply reacting to the text line by line?

### Electronic Word Searches

Electronic word searches of Biblical texts can offer surprising insights. Here is a link for those comfortable with Hebrew: <http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/i/t/t0.htm>

To conduct similar searches of the Bible in English: [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) or [www.biblos.com](http://www.biblos.com)  
Please explore these websites to discover how they can enhance your study.

### Other translations of Rashi's commentary

Two translations are available on the Web. A.J. Rosenberg's translation is available at [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org). The Metzudah translation is available in searchable form at <http://www.tachash.org/texis/vtx/chumash>.

In addition, to the Metzudah translation, the Artscroll translation and the Rosenbaum & Silberman translations are widely available in hard copy with a fully vocalized Hebrew text.

The Hebrew Rashi text is currently not available on-line. It is, however, included in every major electronic collection of rabbinic texts, such as Davka and Bar-Ilan.

### Aramaic Targum

In addition to the Hebrew text, my Genesis translations for this course include Targum Onkelos, the classic Aramaic translation of the Torah, carefully lined up with the Hebrew. We will discuss in class how to make this an accessible resource for you.

### Chavruta study

The class will have a *chavruta* study component. We will devote part of the first session to getting comfortable with *chavruta* study. Thereafter, I ask you will meet weekly on your own with another member of the class to prepare for the upcoming session.

A *chavruta* is simply a study partner together with whom you study texts. A *chavruta* is very definitely your peer rather than your teacher; both you will have roughly the same level of familiarity with the text.

*Chavruta* study poses a paradox. If two study partners are sitting together, and neither feels able to decode a difficult Biblical or rabbinic text, how do the two study partners together succeed in de-coding the text? I promise that your personal experience will give you an answer to this question.

We will rely on *chavruta* study in order to achieve a first reading of the text. The goal of your *chavruta* study is not to gain total mastery over the text, but rather to gain familiarity with the text and with some of its issues, thus facilitating greater depth when we study together as an entire class.

**Email**

Feel free to email me with any questions, comments or insights. I welcome such emails.

**Bring complete Tanach to class**

In addition to the materials that I provide, please bring a complete Tanach to class, with any translation. We will try to have at least one copy of the major modern translations with us in the room, so that we can compare and contrast them.

**Term Paper**

*[for those taking the course for academic credit]*

A 10-12 page single-spaced paper is to be submitted electronically within a week after the end of the semester. The paper should analyze any one chapter of the Joseph story that we have not studied in class, using the methods that we develop during the class. Please discuss your chosen topic with me by mid-November.

**Long term goals for future study:**

1) With respect to Rashi:

(a) Comparison between Rashi's comments and the rabbinic sources from which he draws; his decisions about what to select, as well as the subtle shifts he makes in his articulation of the sources.

(b) Comparison of Rashi's commentary with those of his successors, his grandson Rashbam, Abraham ibn Ezra, who was Rashbam's contemporary, and the great kabbalist and halachist Ramban, who flourished almost two centuries after Rashi.

The works of the legendary Nechama Leibowitz, widely available in English translation, are an excellent starting point for the goals listed just above. For those fluent in Hebrew, see the excellent website [www.nechama.org.il](http://www.nechama.org.il). Another work that is very useful is James Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*.

2) The World of Translation

Comparison of modern translations can be an excellent entry into the world of 'exegetical decision-making'. Everett Fox discusses the art of translation in the introduction to his ground-breaking translation of the Torah. Fox has also translated several interesting essays by Buber and Rosenzweig on their German translation of the Bible. James Kugel discusses Fox's translation in the introduction to his *Great Poems of the Bible*. Robert Alter also has interesting things to say in the introduction

to his own translation of the Torah. Richard E. Freedman, best known for *Who Wrote the Bible?* has also translated the Torah.

3) Thomas Mann's masterpiece, *Joseph and his Brothers*, is a close and thoughtful reading of Genesis. It is now available in a fresh translation by John E. Woods. Mann read and mastered a German language midrashic anthology. Mann also corresponded with Rabbi Jakob Horowitz of Frankfort am Main. It is fascinating to read Mann's work in search of his creative exegetical decisions.