

# The Story of Joseph in the Bible

From Prisoner to Prince

By [Yehuda Altein](#)



Art by [Sefira Lightstone](#)

Joseph was one of the twelve tribes of Israel, a son of Jacob and his wife Rachel. Known as “the righteous one,” he was favoured by his father (who gave him a special coloured coat) and sold by his brothers to Egypt, where he ultimately became ruler of the land, second only to King Pharaoh.

## Joseph—The Beloved Son



Art by [Sefira Lightstone](#)

Joseph was born in the Mesopotamian town of Haran, to his parents Jacob and Rachel. At the age of six, he left Haran along with his family and journeyed to the land of Canaan, eventually settling in Hebron.

Jacob displayed extra affection to Joseph, who was born to his father's old age, presenting him with a specially crafted garment. This prompted feelings of jealousy within his brothers, especially the sons of Jacob's other wife, Leah. These ill feelings exacerbated when Joseph repeated two of his dreams to them, in which he was portrayed as ruling over his brethren. In the first, the brothers were gathering wheat in the field, and the brothers' bundles bowed to Joseph's bundle. In the second, Joseph envisioned the sun, the moon, and eleven stars (symbolizing his parents and brothers) bowing to him.

Soon enough, when Joseph was seventeen, the tension came to a head.

## Sold by His Brothers



One day, Jacob instructed Joseph to visit his brothers in Shechem, where they were tending their sheep. Little did he know that this would be the last time he would see his dear son, until their reunion a long twenty-two years later.

Seizing their chance, the brothers threw the unsuspecting Joseph into a pit. A short while later they spotted an Arab caravan passing the scene, and the brothers sold Joseph to the traders. He was eventually brought to Egypt, where he was sold to Potiphar, one of King Pharaoh's ministers.

## Steadfast Morality



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For a while, things started to look up for young Joseph. Divine success enabled him to find favour in his master's eyes, and he was appointed head of Potiphar's estate. However, this would not last for long.

Attracted by his handsome looks, Potiphar's wife desired to be intimate with him. To her consternation, Joseph continuously refused. One day, when no one was home other than the two of them, the mistress grasped Joseph's garment, demanding that he consent. Thinking quickly, Joseph slid out of his cloak and ran outside. This self-control earned him the appellation, "Joseph the righteous."

But Potiphar's wife turned the tables on Joseph, telling her husband that it was Joseph who had tried to entice her. The angry master reacted by placing his trustworthy assistant in prison.

## Joseph—Interpreter and Viceroy



Art by [Sefira Lightstone](#)

Joseph's charisma followed him to prison as well, and the warden soon appointed him as his right-hand man. In time, his unique qualities expressed themselves in an additional area: when the king's royal cupbearer and baker were imprisoned, Joseph successfully interpreted their dreams, correctly predicting that the cupbearer would be released and the baker, hanged.

Two years later, King Pharaoh himself envisioned two dreams, which none of his advisors were able to explain. Remembering the Hebrew youth from his prison days, the cupbearer suggested that Joseph be summoned. Joseph, then thirty, interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as being a Divine prediction for seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, and advised Pharaoh to prepare by storing grain during the first seven years. Impressed by Joseph's wisdom, Pharaoh appointed him as his viceroy, second only to the king himself, and tasked him with readying the nation for the years of famine.

## Climactic Reunion



Joseph enjoying a feast with his brothers. (Art by Yoram Raanan)

Meanwhile, the effects of the famine were felt in nearby Canaan. Hearing that there was grain in Egypt, Joseph's brothers journeyed there to buy precious food from the viceroy, not realizing that he was their very own brother.

Joseph decided to utilize this opportunity to observe whether his brothers truly regretted having sold him. Using a succession of dramatic manoeuvres, Joseph tested his brothers' determination to save their youngest brother Benjamin—Joseph's only maternal brother—from the plot he set up for him. Once he saw their devotion toward Benjamin, Joseph finally revealed his identity to his astonished siblings.

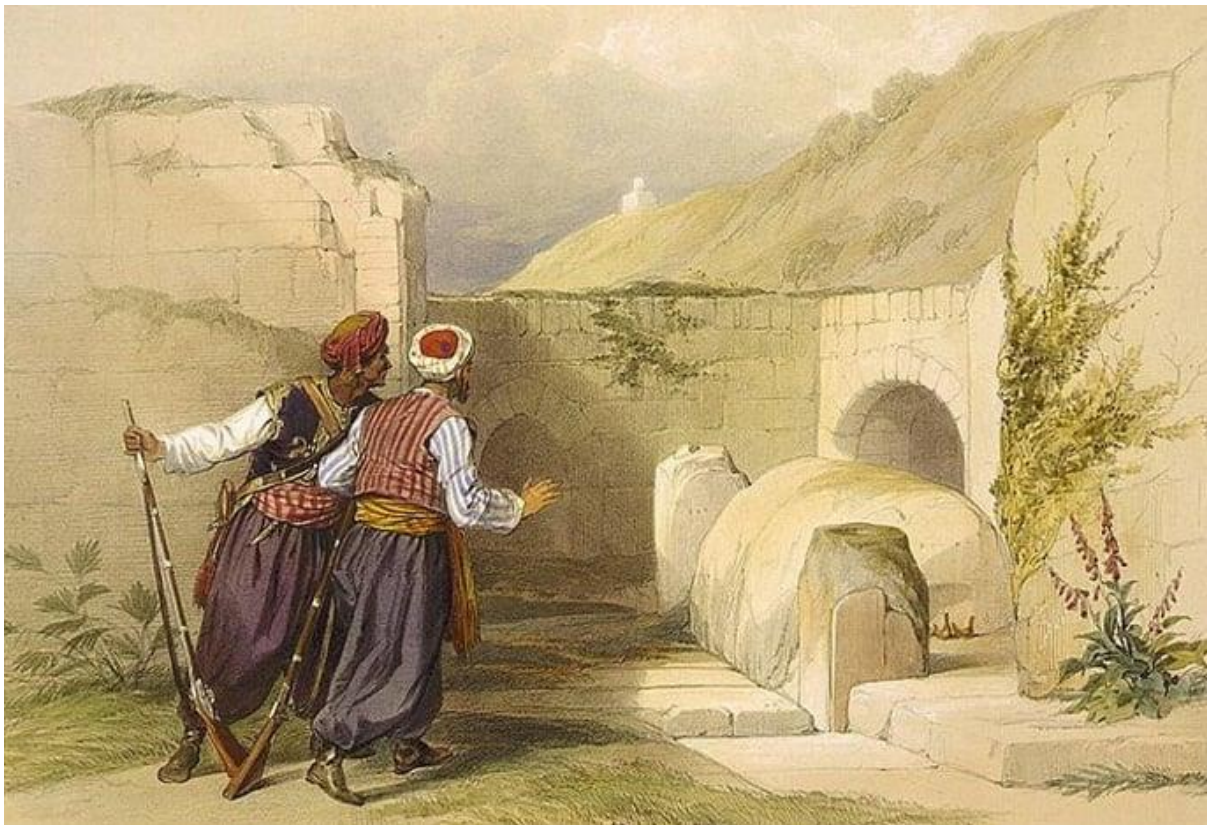
Following this heartfelt reunion, Jacob and his family settled in the Goshen section of Egypt. This series of events served as the backdrop for Israel's ultimate enslavement in Egypt and the subsequent Exodus.

## Joseph's Family

After appointing Joseph as viceroy, Pharaoh gave him as a wife Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. Midrashic sources identify Potiphera as none other than Potiphar, Joseph's previous master.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph and Asenath had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, both born during the seven years of plenty. Before Jacob's death, he gave Joseph a gift: his children would be the only ones from among Jacob's grandsons to be treated as independent tribes. Indeed, throughout the Jews' journey in the desert, the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim received equal status to the other tribes, and they inherited individual portions of the Land of Israel.

## Passing and Burial



"Joseph's Tomb" by David Roberts, 1839.

Joseph ruled Egypt for a total of eighty years, until his death at the age of 110. Before his passing, he made his brothers promise to take his coffin along with them when they would eventually leave Egypt for the Promised Land. After his death, he was embalmed and laid to rest in Egypt. Indeed, when the Jews left Egypt many years later, Moses made sure to locate Joseph's tomb and carry his remains to the Land of Israel.

Joseph was subsequently buried in Shechem (known today as Nablus), and his resting place is visited until today.

## Behind the Name

Joseph was born to Rachel after many years of infertility. She named her son Joseph, *Yosef* in Hebrew, which means “increase,” expressing her wish that God grant her an additional son. (Her prayers were indeed fulfilled, as she later begot Benjamin.) Additionally, *Yosef* is similar to *asaf*, to “bring in” and “conceal,” for with his birth, Rachel’s shame in being childless was obscured.

In one place in scripture, Joseph’s name appears with an added letter, spelling *Yehosef*. He merited the additional letter *hei*, which together with the preceding *yud* stands for [G-d](#), due to having sanctified G-d’s name when refusing to lie with Potiphar's wife.

Upon his appointment as viceroy, Pharaoh named Joseph *Tzafnat Paaneach*, meaning “one who clarifies secrets.”

## A Lesson in Forgiveness

Joseph’s story highlights the proper attitude toward difficulty and misfortune. Upon discovering Joseph’s identity, his brothers were sure he would utilize his imperial powers to exact revenge against them for their evil conduct. However, the sentiments expressed by Joseph were quite the opposite: *“But now do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me before you... You did not send me here, but G-d.”*

Joseph recognized that all the travails he had undergone were ordained by G-d to ensure the survival of Egypt and the surrounding countries. Keeping this in mind enabled him to forgive his brothers and repay animosity with benevolence.<sup>14</sup>

## Integrity in Egypt



Art by [Sefira Lightstone](#)

Scripture states that when Joseph's brothers first stood before him in Egypt, "Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him." The commentators explain that when Joseph left his brothers, he had not yet grown a beard, and that is why they did not recognize their now-bearded brother.

There is a deeper meaning to this passage. In the eyes of Joseph's brothers, involvement in material pursuits could not be reconciled with achieving spiritual heights, which they felt could only be attained through withdrawal from society. They could not imagine their brother as remaining righteous in a land as corrupt as Egypt. Joseph, however, demonstrated the ability to retain his integrity despite being in a leadership position.