Deception Through Disguise in the Joseph Story to Complete Midah K'neged Midah

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Abstract: This paper will examine the role of clothing and its relation to the theme of midah k'neged midah, often translated as a type of measure for measure punishment, as it unfolds in the Joseph story in Genesis. While Joseph's brothers and father seem to receive proportional punishments for the sins that they commit, due to ambiguities in the story regarding God's role, it is unclear who or what is driving this "measure for measure punishment" scheme. Is it Joseph, God, or perhaps simply nature's equilibrium? This paper will investigate each of these three possible mechanisms for the ultimate fulfillment of midah k'neged midah based on textual clues of divine presence and human agency. Based on a close textual reading and analysis, this paper will conclude that while divine intervention appears to play a role in providing Joseph with opportunities, ultimately, Joseph is the one who capitalizes on these opportunities in order to complete his revenge scheme.

This narrative also illustrates the concept of maaseh avot siman l'banim (the actions of the forefathers are a sign for the children), representing how the mistakes of earlier generations have a cyclical effect on their descendents. This principle serves as a timeless warning to future generations, cautioning individuals to avoid past mistakes of their ancestors. Although the text contains many ambiguities, it seems clear that humans, like Joseph, certainly play some role in shaping their own destiny, and thus can hopefully break the cycle of sinning that began with the forefathers.

Introduction

Many people are familiar with the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors, especially thanks to Andrew Lloyd Webber's renowned musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Yet, this well-known piece of clothing and the story that goes along with it is much more than just a narrative about Joseph and his brothers. Rather, it represents a greater pattern throughout the Hebrew Bible of the relationship between one's actions and their consequences.

The ancient principle of eye for an eye first appears in Hammurabi's Code, characterizing a type of retaliatory justice where the punishment of a crime should equal the harm committed. The phrase "eye for an eye" in the Hebrew Bible first appears when God relays the second code of laws to Moses at Mount Sinai, in what scholars refer to as the "Book of the Covenant."[1]God instructs Moses to communicate this principle to the People of Israel: "If other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth."[2] Biblical scholar Pamela Barmash refers to this retributive punishment, or *lex talionis*, as a "principle of legal symmetry, of repaying in kind." According to Barbash, the Hebrew Bible equates two injuries as part of a "reversal of roles," in which "the original agent of harm becomes the recipient of the same action of the type that constituted the offense."[3] This reciprocal legal model applies both to human life: "If a man strikes down any human being he shall be put to death,"[4] as well as to other crimes: "And a man who inflicts an injury upon his fellow man just as he did, so shall be done to him."[5] The *lex talionis* is legally satisfying: wrong someone and you will be wronged in the same way.

The biblical "eye for an eye" shares qualities with the concept of *midah k'neged midah*, or measure for measure. Jonathan Jacobs, in his Hebrew book *Measure Against Measure in the Biblical Story* writes that "on the level of sin, the doer of evil receives his reward and receives evil for his evil, and there is some correspondence between the evil deed and its reward."[6] Sages after the Second Temple period reference *midah k'neged midah* throughout their commentary, including in a discussion of Jacob's descendants in the midrashic text, Genesis Rabbah, and in rabbinical explanations of the Mishnah.[7]

While an eye for an eye is a legal idea, the principle of *midah k'neged midah* is a broader metaphysical and philosophical one that speaks to the way the

[1] Kaufmann Kohler, et al. (2021) Jewishencyclopedia.com, COVENANT - JewishEncyclopedia.com. Available at: https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4714-covenant (Accessed: 30 March 2025).
[2] Exodus 21:23-24 (Jewish Publication Society).
[3] Pamela Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[4] Leviticus 24:17 (JPS).
[5] Leviticus 24:19 (JPS).
[6] Original translation - Jonathan Jacobs, *Measure Against Measure in the Biblical Story* (Tavanut, 1905-06), 51.
[7] Genesis Rabbah 94:9; Jacobs, *Measure Against Measure,* 15.

world does and should work that operates throughout Hebrew Biblical narratives, beginning in Genesis. In such narratives, elements of *midah k'neged midah* link the chain of events within a story and focus the reader's attention on the relationship between action and consequence, completing a story with satisfying retribution for the offender.[8] Although not as legal or explicitly as an eye for an eye, the *midah k'neged midah* paradigm does encompass the concept of retributive punishment, but more descriptively and narratively. This framework and its ambiguity provide flexibility in interpreting the relationship between crime and punishment. In this paper, I will address some of the ambiguities surrounding the concept of *midah k'neged midah* as it plays out in the Joseph story: Who or what is driving the scheme? Do characters exert their own agency to serve justice to their offenders, or does God ensure that those who wrong human beings are appropriately punished?

Finally, clothing plays a major role in the *midah k'neged midah* theme throughout Biblical narrative and law. The motif of clothing is present throughout Genesis, representing a multi-generational tendency towards using clothing as a disguise for the purpose of deception. I will explore how this motif embodies different characteristics within each story such as favoritism, disguise, shame, and deception.

Clothing in the Garden of Eden

We first encounter the clothing motif when Adam and Eve commit humankind's first sin by eating fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. They immediately attain wisdom, which leads to shame. Upon realizing their nakedness, they cover themselves with fig leaves. Their instinctual understanding of the naked body's implied scandalousness prompts them to hide behind makeshift clothing. After assigning respective punishments to Adam and Eve, God clothes them in the first formal garments, protecting them from further embarrassment, while affirming the instinctive shame surrounding their nakedness. Some midrashim later make an explicit connection between this garment and Joseph's tunic.[9] For the first time in the Hebrew Bible, the root for clothing, ש-ב-ל,[10] appears between the respective punishments of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Gan Eden.[11] The creation of clothing is born as a response to sin, forever embodying shame and guilt.

Clothing develops further as a motif in the story of human sin and *midah k'neged midah* punishment in the Joseph story, where both sin and punishment are associated with clothing, but God plays a less tangible role. The role of clothing with respect to *midah k'neged midah* thus depends on the specific

[8] Jacobs, *Measure Against Measure in the Biblical Story*, 51, 168.
[9] Rachel Adelman. "Primeval Coats" TheTorah.com (2015), https://thetorah.com/article/primeval-coats.
[10] Romanized: L-V-SH.
[11] Genesis 3: 23, David E.S. Stein, Adale Berlin, Ellen H Frankel and Carol L. Meyers. "The Contemporary Torah: a gender-sensitive adaptation of the JPS translation." (2006).

narrative in question, since clothing in the Joseph narrative functions differently than in the creation story.

Clothing in the Jacob Story

To discuss how clothing functions in the Joseph story, we must first analyze clothing's role in the Jacob story (from several chapters earlier in Genesis). Jacob and his twin Esau are born to Rebecca and Isaac, who each choose favorite children: "Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob."[12] In a demonstration of his favoritism, Isaac requests that Esau hunt and prepare food for him to receive a blessing before he dies. Rebecca overhears Isaac's proposition and informs Jacob of the plan, encouraging him to steal the blessing. Jacob objects, assuming that Isaac will surely recognize him as Jacob: "But my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am smooth-skinned. If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse, not a blessing."[13] In response, Rebecca suggests that Jacob wear Esau's clothing and cover himself with the hairy skin of baby goats in order to deceive and convince Isaac that he is really Esau.

Rebecca and Jacob thus perform the first instance of disguise as deception: "Rebekah then took the best clothes of her older son Esau […] and had her younger son Jacob put them on; and she covered his hands and the hairless part of his neck with the skins of the kids."[14] Jacob obeys his mother, using Esau's clothes to deceive, and says to his father, "I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing."[15] Isaac immediately becomes suspicious, not understanding how "Esau" could have hunted and prepared the dish so quickly, or why his voice sounded more like Jacob's: "Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau."[16] Isaac does not recognize Jacob, "because his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau," and so Jacob's disguise ultimately convinces and deceives Isaac such that he blesses Jacob: "May God give you Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, Abundance of new grain and wine."[17]

When Esau returns from his hunt, he is outraged when he learns that his blessing was stolen and becomes angry at Jacob, "Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing which his father had given him, and Esau said to himself, "Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob."[18] Isaac's favoritism leads Jacob to deceive him and sparks a rivalry between the brothers. Jacob's deception launches the *midah k'neged midah*

[12] Genesis 25:28 (JPS).
[13] Genesis 27:11-12 (JPS).
[14] Genesis 27:15-16 (JPS).
[15] Genesis 27:19 (JPS).
[16] Genesis 27:22 (JPS).
[17] Genesis 27:23-28 (JPS).
[18] Genesis 27:41 (JPS).

scheme, which will later culminate in his punishment.

In each paradigm, the sinner causes irrevocable damage for future generations and each sin or punishment is associated with clothing. Adam and Eve become aware and embarrassed of their nakedness, leading humankind to be clothed as an eternal reminder of man's first sin. Jacob uses clothing to deceive and steal the blessing from Esau, causing Esau to hold a grudge against Jacob, and inspiring future national rivalries. Jacob's trickery begins by exploiting his own father and causes an enduring rivalry between him and Esau with clothing at the root of the conflict.

Jacob's Gift of Clothing to Joseph

Deceit through clothing continues to develop in the story of Joseph and his brothers under the *midah k'neged midah* structure. Although Jacob was undermined and disadvantaged by Isaac's favoritism of Esau, Jacob (referred to here as "Israel") perpetuates exactly the same public preferential treatment towards his favorite son, Joseph: "Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons — he was his 'child of age."[19] Immediately following this declaration, the text reads, "and he [Jacob] had made him [Joseph] an ornamented tunic."[20] The clothing motif is reintroduced when Jacob gifts the tunic to Joseph, which quickly triggers yet another sibling rivalry, now between Joseph and his brothers. Prompted by his father's overt favoritism, Joseph taunts his brothers by retelling his dreams where they worshiped Joseph. His brothers answered, "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?" And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams."[21]

Joseph soon faces the consequences of incitement when his brothers see him from afar and plot to kill him as revenge: "Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.' We shall see what comes of his dreams!"[22] Straying from their plan, the first thing the brothers attack is not Joseph, but his beloved gifted tunic: "They stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was wearing."[23] The immediate removal of Joseph's tunic highlights the point of controversy between the brothers—Jacob's love for Joseph is represented by Joseph's tunic. This poignant moment signifies the start of the next sequence of sibling hatred, which ironically is perpetuated by Jacob.

Deception Through Clothing by Joseph's Brothers

The story continues as the brothers intend to kill Joseph, but at the behest of Judah, they agree to sell him to merchants and spare his life. This shift of

[19] Genesis 37:3 (JPS).
[20] Genesis 37:3 (JPS).
[21] Genesis 37:8 (JPS).
[22] Genesis 37:20 (JPS).
[23] Genesis 37:23 (JPS); Adelman, "Primeval Coats."

plans occurs while Reuben is absent, and when he returns to see an empty pit, he assumes that Joseph was killed and rips his own clothing in mourning, resembling the earlier event of ripping the tunic off of Joseph. The brothers then take the stolen ornamented tunic and dip it in the blood of a baby goat to deceive Jacob that Joseph has died. Upon seeing the blood-soaked tunic, Jacob understands that his favorite son has been killed, and rips his own garments as a sign of mourning, again mirroring the tearing of Joseph's own tunic.

Just as Jacob used goats and clothing as part of his scheme to steal his father's blessing, his own sons used the blood of goats on clothing to falsely convince Jacob of Joseph's death. In this striking instance of *midah k'neged midah*, Jacob is deceived by his sons with the very objects he used to deceive his own father. Thus, while the brothers' sin may be directed towards Joseph, it ultimately causes the greatest pain to Jacob, who is deceived into believing that he has lost his most beloved son.

Clothing as Deception at the Hands of Potiphar's Wife

While Jacob is grieving his son's supposed death and the brothers have returned to Canaan, the clothing motif resurfaces in a subplot. Joseph is taken by the Ishmaelites to Egypt and sold again to a courtier of Pharaoh named Potiphar. God is with Joseph and helps him succeed, so Potiphar promotes Joseph, placing him in charge of the slaves of the household. The text asserts that Joseph was handsome immediately before describing Potiphar's wife's attempted seduction of Joseph. After he repeatedly refuses her advances, she grabs his garment in a final effort to seduce him when no one else is around. Joseph escapes, but Potiphar's wife, "kept his garment beside her, until his master came home. Then she told Potiphar the same story, saying, 'The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me; but when I screamed at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me and fled outside.'"[24] Potiphar's wife uses Joseph's garment as a tool of deception to paint Joseph as the adulterer or rapist, leading Potiphar to send Joseph to an underground prison for his alleged crime.

There are various words used for clothing in Biblical Hebrew including *beged*, *simlah,* and derivations of the root ל-ב-ש,[25] the verb used to describe God's clothing of Adam and Eve. In this account, Joseph's garment is called *beged* which has the same three-letter root as *begidah,* or betrayal. Interestingly, the word describing the clothing Jacob uses to impersonate Esau and deceive Isaac is also *beged,* pointing to another parallel between the two narratives. Thus far, Joseph has been betrayed twice; each time, his garment is used as false testimony, and each betrayal is followed by Joseph being cast into a pit.[26] The brothers use his tunic as evidence of his death, while Potiphar's wife uses his snagged garment which she took to support her allegations of attempted rape.

[24] Genesis 39:16-18 (JPS).
[25] Romanized: L-V-SH.
[26] Adelman, "Primeval Coats."

This parallel plot furthers the palpable link between deception and clothing in the Joseph story, although it doesn't directly contribute to the *midah k'neged midah* scheme with the brothers.

Clothing as Deception: Joseph and the Fulfillment of *Midah K'neged Midah*

After being in prison for two years and accurately predicting fellow inmates' dreams, Joseph rises in the ranks due to his divine talents as an interpreter of dreams. Pharaoh hears about Joseph's aptitude and calls him to interpret his own puzzling dreams that none of his magicians were able to interpret. When Pharaoh summons him, Joseph improves his appearance to become more presentable, "He had his hair cut and changed his clothes, and he appeared before Pharaoh."[27] Joseph accurately interpreted Pharaoh's dream and in return, Pharaoh placed him in charge of rationing Egypt's food supply during the famine which Joseph had predicted. Then, Pharaoh improves Joseph's appearance, making him look even more royal: "And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand, and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck."[28]

The famine begins, according to Joseph's prediction and guidance, but there is sufficient food in Egypt. Joseph's brothers travel down to Egypt to collect food for their family and are greeted by Joseph, who serves as the chief distributor. Joseph uses deception through disguise to conceal his true identity, and the text writes that he "acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them."[29] Joseph immediately recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him, as he succeeds at playing a stranger through his new appearance and due to the crucial fact that the brothers still believe that he is a slave elsewhere.[30] Believing him to be a true Egyptian master, the text writes that his brothers "bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground," exactly as Joseph dreamed many years earlier, when he informed his brothers of his dream: "then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf."[31]

In another notable *midah k'neged midah* instance, Joseph further takes advantage of this ironic situation to accuse his brothers of espionage and ultimately to imprison them. Joseph says to them: "You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness."[32] The brothers respond that they have only come to Egypt to collect food for their family, and that their father is still in Canaan with their youngest brother. Joseph continues to charge them with treason and places them in the guardhouse for three days in another notable *midah k'neged midah* instance. Of this, Robert Alter writes:

[27] Genesis 41:14 (JPS).
[28] Genesis 41:42 (JPS).
[29] Genesis 42:7 (JPS).
[30] Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible,* (Norton & Company, 2019) 163; Genesis 42: 8 (JPS).
[31] Genesis 37:7 (JPS); Genesis 42:6 (JPS).
[32] Genesis 42: 9 (JPS).

> The alertness to analogy to which biblical narrative should have accustomed us ought to make us see that Joseph perpetrated on the brothers first a reversal, then a repetition, of what they did to him. They once cast him into a pit where he lay uncertain of his fate; now he throws all ten of them into the guardhouse where he lets them stew for three days.[33]

On the third day, Joseph releases all but one brother, Simeon, further tormenting them. Joseph claims that he will believe their story only if they bring their youngest brother, Jacob's new favorite, Benjamin, to corroborate their narrative. This test, however, is not exactly logical, as the brothers could have been telling the truth about their brother remaining home while lying about the true purpose of their visit to Egypt. The brothers return to Canaan with no other option than to beg a reluctant Jacob to allow Benjamin to return to Egypt with them. Joseph places the brothers in an impossible situation, as they desperately need food from Egypt and the only way to get it is to risk Benjamin's life. This act of vengeance directed at Joseph's brothers once again is most devastating to Jacob, who laments, "It is always me that you bereave: Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you would take away Benjamin. These things always happen to me!"[34] Jacob ultimately concedes and sends Benjamin back with the brothers.

Despite Joseph's assurances that he will believe the brothers if Benjamin comes down to Egypt, Joseph does not end his deception upon Benjamin's arrival. Rather, Joseph frames Benjamin for theft by placing his silver goblet in Benjamin's sack, further escalating the revenge scheme. This final act of deception by Joseph, which implicates Benjamin, is exactly what the brothers feared for their father's sake. The brothers promptly rip their clothes, understanding the repercussions of this most recent tragedy on their already bereaved father. Here too is another significant instance of *midah k'neged midah,* as the brothers, who once ripped off Joseph's tunic to mimic his death, now rip their own clothes to mark the impending death of their father from the heartbreak of losing Benjamin. Judah, unable to stand by silently, begs Joseph to listen to his supplication, which fully recounts the ordeal from his father's perspective. He ends his plea exclaiming, "For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!"[35] At this moment, when Joseph fully understands the vast pain he repeatedly caused his father throughout his revenge scheme, he reveals his true identity to his brothers.

Why End The Punishment Now?

From the brother's first appearance before Joseph until Judah's appeal,

[33] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), 166.
[34] Genesis 42:36 (JPS).
[35] Genesis 44:34 (JPS).

Joseph has many opportunities to reveal himself, alert his father of his well-being to alleviate his pain, and allow his brothers to return to Canaan in peace. The brothers even understand their sin against Joseph much earlier than Joseph decides to end this deception. After Joseph puts them in the guardhouse, they say to one another, "Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us."[36] So what was Joseph waiting for? Was the initial satisfaction of his brothers treating him with the utmost respect, just as he had dreamed, not enough? What did he need from his brothers before he could forgive them?

Since Joseph only completes this retributive scheme when Judah concludes his heartfelt speech and explicitly mentions Jacob,[37] the text seems to suggest that Joseph wants his brothers to understand their actions from Jacob's perspective. Although the brothers may understand the hurt they caused Joseph much earlier, at that point, they had not yet expressed the severe effects of their sin on Jacob.

Judah's speech demonstrates, for the first time, a high level of empathy for their father and an admission of responsibility as Jacob's sons. Judah offers to sacrifice himself and become a slave to spare his father more pain and begins making amends for his earlier role as a bystander to Joseph's sale as a slave. This final appeal causes Joseph to reveal himself: "Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers."[38] He reveals himself at the first moment his father's well-being is questioned before him, unable to hold back his intense emotions and worry for Jacob. The text confirms Joseph's concern for his father, as immediately after revealing himself he asks, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?"[39] Ironically, Joseph himself prolonged this saga, by actively causing Jacob more distress in the lengthy trickery of his brothers. Perhaps this represents a failure of this self-orchestrated punishment scheme, as Joseph ends up harming the very person he is seeking to protect.

End of *Midah K'neged Midah* for the Brothers

Joseph witnesses what he interprets as his brother's repentance which prompts him to completely forgive them. Yet his brothers are unable to answer him, "so dumbfounded were they on account of him."[40] They are hesitant to believe that Joseph did indeed forgive them after the anguish they caused him. Joseph could further continue the cycle of retribution even after divulging who

[36] Genesis 42:21 (JPS).
[37] David R. Blumenthal, "What Did Joseph Want from His Brothers?" (2013); Genesis 44: 34 (JPS).
[38] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 175, Genesis 45: 1 (JPS).
[39] Genesis 45: 3 (JPS).
[40] Genesis 45: 3 (JPS).

he is, but instead he reassures them, saying, "Do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you."[41] He weeps for the first time in front of his brothers, kisses them, and gives each of his brothers "a change of clothing."[42]

This final gift of clothing symbolically signifies an end to the cycle of *midah k'neged midah* and trickery through disguise, acting as reparations for the actions of the previous two generations. Joseph's gift of new garments to his brothers is antithetical to his own experience when they stripped off his tunic.[43] Additionally, Joseph gives Benjamin a special gift of "three hundred pieces of silver and several changes of clothing."[44] This exclusive gift of silver to Benjamin completes the cycle, serving as a stark contrast to the silver that the brothers collected when they sold Joseph as a slave. This parting gift further completes the parallel, correcting the way Joseph treated Benjamin earlier, when he framed Benjamin as a thief by placing his silver goblet in his sack. Now instead of distinguishing Benjamin through shame, Joseph bestows the silver to Benjamin, honoring him.

Within this narrative, there are two simultaneous trajectories of the fulfillment of *midah k'neged midah,* each associated with the object of clothing. The first is the completion on the brother-Joseph level, which begins when the brothers consolidate their power to use Joseph's tunic to deceive Jacob, and then sell Joseph as a slave. The text addresses this sin in *midah k'neged midah* fashion when Joseph takes advantage of his superior position in Egypt, concealing his identity to deceive and test his brothers, again using clothing as the tool for deception. Joseph exerts power over them through deception as they once exerted power over him.

Yet, there also exists an overarching level of *midah k'neged midah* that affects Jacob. After he cheats his father Isaac, everyone in his life deceives him, including Laban, Rachel, and his sons.[45] This story begins with Jacob's deception of his own father Isaac via disguise, is later countered by his own son's deceit through clothing with parallels that constitute the *midah k'neged midah* scheme. Both cases of deception also use the physical anatomy of baby goats as part of their persuasion: Jacob uses baby goat skin to impersonate Esau, and the brothers use baby goat blood to impersonate Joseph's blood. Furthering this parallel, the Hebrew word *haker*, or recognize, appears at the moment Issac fails to recognize Jacob, when the brothers ask Jacob if he recognizes Joseph's blood-stained tunic, and when Joseph recognizes his brothers in Egypt and plays a stranger to them. Finally, each stage of the brotherly narrative causes immense pain to Jacob, constituting the greatest degree of intergenerational *midah k'neged midah,* which

[41] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible,* 176; Genesis 45: 5 (JPS).
[42] Genesis 45: 22 (JPS).
[43] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible,* 179.
[44] Genesis 45: 22 (JPS).
[45] Original translation - Jonathan Jacobs, Measure Against Measure in the Biblical Story (Tavanut, 1905-06) 173.

resolves broader issues of deceit within the Genesis narrative. Jacob's life is in large part defined by his deceitful act against his father and is portrayed as "a long series of punishments in measure against measure for this sin," most notably in the Joseph narrative.[46]

Who Instigates the Punishment?

But who is driving the *midah k'neged midah* scheme in the Joseph story? The text does not provide a clear answer, especially because God's role here is distinct from God's role in the two earlier narratives of creation and Jacob's early life. In the story of Adam and Eve, God is a main character, designating and explaining the punishment for each sin. The text explicitly clarifies God's active role, for example, in assigning Adam's punishment and the corresponding reason, stating: "Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it."[47] In Jacob's life, although God functions as a character who speaks, appearing in Jacob's dream, and changing Jacob's name to Israel, God does not directly assign a punishment for Jacob's initial deception. In Jacob's story, the text begins its move towards the more ambiguous framing expressed in the Joseph story, where God's name is invoked by characters, though not a main character in implementing punishment.

Following this narrative shift in the Jacob story, God does not directly assign a punishment through speech after sin. For the first time in Genesis, God's role in the punishment is obscure. So, it appears that Joseph is the actor initiating the continuation of the *midah k'neged midah* cycle. Joseph uses clothing and his new appearance to conceal his true identity from his brothers in Egypt, Joseph holds them in prison for three days, Joseph holds Simeon hostage when the brothers return to Canaan, and Joseph demands that Benjamin be brought down. This series of climactic tricks by Joseph simultaneously completes both levels of the *midah k'neged midah* scheme for the brothers and for Jacob. Yet it is unclear who is driving the comprehensive scheme. Does Joseph realize on his own that he has an opportunity to take revenge on his brothers for their crime from over twenty years ago and thus actively decide to use his human wit to punish them? Is Joseph put in this position of power because of divine intervention, which then leads him to complete the scheme? Is Joseph simply acting as an agent of God, in the absence of any free will? Or, is this a model of the "what goes around comes around" wisdom literature paradigm inserted here to produce a compelling narrative?

Perhaps a combination of these factors is driving the Joseph story, or different parts are driven by different factors. For example, maybe Joseph actively chooses to implement his own retribution against his brothers, but God ensures that this punishment, directed at the brothers, extends to punish Jacob as

[46] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible,* 179.
[47] Genesis 3:17 (JPS).

well. The Hebrew Bible reader's understanding of how narrative justice operates in the world hinges on the true engineer of this act of discipline. Are readers supposed to seize opportunities to take justice into their own hands? Will those who harm us naturally be punished by the universe? Will God place us in positions of power such that we can use human wit to decide the appropriate course of action? Studying the Hebrew Bible offer the potential to weigh theories about the nature of man, such as the ideas found in Wisdom Literature.[48]

Path One: Wisdom Literature

The first approach uses the lens of wisdom literature to interpret the *midah k'neged midah* scheme. This ancient genre maintains that the world operates according to specific laws of nature, like wisdom, relationships between actions and consequences, and not necessarily through God's direct providence. Wisdom literature is an appealing narrative strategy, as readers gain satisfaction from the resolution of characters' actions. By observing actions mentioned in the stories of biblical characters and their recurrence in the description of the reward or punishment of that character through the lens of wisdom literature, we may further define the *midah k'neged midah* paradigm.

The Joseph story is the longest single narrative in Genesis, with many such instances of sin followed by natural resolution.[49] It possesses a unique story-like quality, with a beginning, middle, and end to form a "neat and satisfying whole," where "justice ultimately triumphs… [and] Joseph's virtue is rewarded."[50] For example, Joseph himself reverses the brothers' deception through clothing in his punishment of the brothers. As mentioned previously, stylistic links, such as recurring objects (the baby goat) and words (*haker*), also help focus attention on the relationship between sin and punishment.[51] Some scholars even point out wisdom's presence in the narrative itself. Jacob explains the reason for his love for Joseph, as he was the "son of his [Jacob's] old age."[52] Old age is often associated with wisdom, so perhaps Jacob loved Joseph the most not because he was a "child of age," but rather because he excelled in wisdom.[53] As God is not as active a character as in earlier Genesis narratives, there is room for wisdom to guide this story. The Joseph story "serve[s] as an embodiment of wisdom's great message in narrative form."[54] The New Testament's Book of Wisdom details this trajectory:

> When a righteous man was sold, Wisdom did not desert him, but delivered him from sin. She [Wisdom] descended with him into the

[48] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 189.
[49] James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, (Harvard University Press, 1994) 247.
[50] Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 13.
[51] Jacobs, *Measure Against Measure in the Biblical Story,* 56
[52] Genesis 37:3 (JPS).
[53] Kugel, *The Bible as it Was,* 248.
[54] Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 14.

> dungeon, and when he was in prison she did not leave him, until she brought him the scepter of a kingdom and authority over his masters. Those who accused him she showed to be false, and she gave him everlasting honor.[55]

The wisdom approach ensures that Joseph receives an opportunity to directly reverse his victimhood onto his brothers, leaving the readers satisfied with this narrative resolution.

Option Two: Divine Intervention

While the wisdom literature approach assumes that God takes a backseat role, it may still allow for a divine presence driving the scheme. James Kugel writes: "If wisdom philosophy had one single message or underlying theme in ancient Israel, it was that a divine plan underlies all the vicissitudes of human existence — and in this too, Joseph's story is an embodiment of sagely teachings."[56] Furthermore, Joseph himself ascribes his powers to God, saying to his brothers, "God has made me lord of all Egypt."[57] Does this mean there was indeed divine intervention in the Joseph story, even though God doesn't speak? Perhaps, in the Hebrew Bible, there are various ways to understand God's intervention. God may play an active role in controlling human pursuits, a completely passive role like in the Book of Esther (where God's name is not even mentioned once), or partially intervene by modifying conditions, by, for example, granting characters certain metaphysical powers (to interpret dreams, in this case) while permitting actors nominally free will.

Following these possibilities, in Jacob's story, God's role evolves from that of an active participant in responding to characters, to a more background role who is referenced by the text and characters. For example, Rebecca questions God when her twins are struggling in her womb and God responds that her twins represent two nations, one greater than the other, and that the older will serve the younger. Two chapters later, when Rebecca overhears Isaac instructing Esau to receive the blessing, Rebecca communicates Isaac and Esau's exchange to Jacob, but adds God's name into Isaac's words, quoting Isaac as having said: "Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you, with God's approval, before I die."[58] When Jacob commences with Rebecca's deceptive scheme and Isaac suspects that something is off, Jacob responds that God has granted him the good fortune of quickly returning from the hunt. Isaac falls for Jacob and Rebecca's ploy and blesses Jacob in God's name, although his original dialogue with Esau does not reference God. Later, Isaac blesses Jacob again and cites God's name. Thus, Jacob's story begins with God speaking to Rebecca but ends with God's absence from enforcing punishment in response to

[55] Wisd. 10:13-14, (New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition).
[56] Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 14.
[57] Genesis 44:9 (JPS).
[58] Genesis 27:7 (JPS).

Jacob and Rebecca's sin. This sets up the Joseph story which follows a similar but perhaps more obscure framing of God's role.

The Joseph narrative begins with the Hebrew Bible referencing God's presence frequently, though for the first time in Genesis, God is not featured as a speaking character at all (unlike the Jacob story where God initially does speak to both Jacob and Rebecca). After being sold as a slave by his brothers, Joseph arrives in Egypt, where the Hebrew Bible specifies, "God was with Joseph, and he was a successful man."[59] God's intervention elevates Joseph's stature, as his master realizes that God is on Joseph's side and takes a liking to him. God even blesses Potiphar's house for the sake of Joseph, and he continues to be successful until Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. Joseph refuses her and responds, "How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?"[60] Despite his refusal to commit adultery, Joseph is thrown in prison, where the text again reminds us that God is still with Joseph, writing, "But even while he was there in prison, God was with Joseph–extending kindness to him and disposing the chief jailer favorably toward him."[61] These are the only two instances that explicitly state God supporting Joseph and each, non-coincidentally, appears when it seems Joseph's destiny is doomed, yet, after God's mention, events quickly shift in his favor.

In fact, God's protection over Joseph is so evident that both Joseph and Pharaoh recognize it. When Pharaoh hears that Joseph has successfully interpreted dreams in prison, he says to Joseph, "I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning," but Joseph replies, "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare."[62] Joseph is then summoned by Pharaoh to interpret his two dreams. Joseph posits that there will be seven prosperous years of harvest followed by seven years of famine. After each analysis, Joseph credits God with the interpretation, saying "Pharaoh has been told what God is about to do."[63] Pharaoh is pleased with Joseph's explanation and asks his courtiers if they can find anyone else like Joseph who has a "divine spirit."[64]

Pharaoh then appoints Joseph to direct all activities in Egypt and act as second in command to Pharaoh, telling him, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you."[65] This promotion is a direct consequence of God's gift of divine wisdom. We then learn that Joseph has two sons and names each one as a testimony to God's help in helping him to forget his hardships and helping him to be fertile.[66] In yet another example of Joseph's belief in God, after Joseph's brothers come to collect food, he requests to hold

[59] Genesis 39:2 (JPS).
[60] Genesis 39:9 (JPS).
[61] Genesis 39:20-21 (JPS).
[62] Genesis 41:15-16 (JPS).
[63] Genesis 41:25 (JPS).
[64] Genesis 41:38 (JPS).
[65] Genesis 41:39 (JPS).
[66] Genesis 41:51-53 (JPS).

one of them as collateral and warns them to trust him because he is God-fearing.[67] The brothers return to the land of Canaan, describe what has occurred in Egypt, and request Jacob's permission to bring Benjamin down to Egypt.[68] Jacob asks that God make the mysterious man (Joseph) have mercy on them and release the brothers.[69] When Joseph ultimately does reveal himself and pardon his brothers, he assures them not to be distressed for their past deceit, because, notably, God has placed Joseph in his position to save lives.[70] Two verses later, Joseph again clarifies that the brothers are not the reason Joseph ended up in Egypt, but rather it was God's hand.[71] The narrative finally concludes as Joseph instructs his brothers to return to Jacob and alert him that God has made Joseph ruler of all of Egypt.[72]

It is because of God that Joseph attains the divine ability to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh's courtiers which lead him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, who appoint him as a senior official–it seems unlikely that Joseph would have been able to attain the superior standing on his own. The commentator Ephraem Syrus (also known as Ephrem of Syria) was a 4th-century Syrian Christian deacon, theologian, and hymnographer, widely regarded for his writings on doctrine, asceticism, and biblical exegesis.[73] According to James Kugel, Ephraem argued that God puts Joseph in the position to become viceroy to fulfill his earlier dreams of dominance over his brothers.[74] Although God does not have speaking lines to explicitly clarify such divine intervention, Joseph's success in Egypt and his consequent opportunity to punish his brothers and fulfill his dreams are clearly articulated by the human characters as a result of God's intervention.

Option Three: Human Wit

It is possible that God ensures Joseph's success in the Egyptian political system to save his family in Canaan, or even to fulfill Joseph's dream where the brothers bow down before Joseph, as Ephraem suggests. But there is no evidence that God intends to punish the brothers through Joseph's especially prolonged deception. This framing suggests a third possibility in which Joseph acts as an agent of God in some instances, while also using his human abilities and intelligence. He takes advantage of his God-given powers to execute a revenge scheme against his brothers. One instance that supports this model is when the brothers notice that the money they used to pay for the food Joseph provided has been returned to their sack, they exclaim, "What is this that God has done to

[67] Genesis 42:18 (JPS).
[68] Genesis 42:29-43:10 (JPS).
[69] Genesis 43:14 (JPS).
[70] Genesis 45:1, 45:5 (JPS).
[71] Genesis 45:7 (JPS).
[72] Genesis 45:9 (JPS).
[73] Saint Ephraem Syrus Christian Theologian, Britannica, www.britannica.com. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Ephraem-Syrus.
[74] Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*, 266.

us?"[75] The brothers here conflate God's actions with Joseph's–even though it is Joseph who returns their money, they suggest that Joseph may be serving as God's instrument.

Joseph himself repeats this framing to Pharaoh and his brothers–that he acts on behalf of God.[76] Similarly, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he says, "God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance."[77] Some commentators interpret this to mean that Joseph serves as God's mouthpiece, recognizing God's greater plan to save his family from famine. Yet there is no indication that Joseph's lengthy, calculated plan was completely detached from his brilliance. So perhaps when Joseph refers to God here, he is not attributing everything to God but rather also referring to his partnership with God in accomplishing his own deliberate scheme. Even if God did send Joseph to Egypt to save his family from the famine, why does Joseph conceal his identity for such a long time? How is that necessary for him to provide food for his family? Why does he not identify himself immediately to maximize this salvation, especially since he already has a taste of revenge when the brothers stood before Joseph literally fulfilling his earlier dreams? Alter offers this idea in his commentary on the Hebrew Bible, writing:

> This brief memory-flashback is a device rarely used in biblical narrative. Its importance here is that the brothers, prostrated before Joseph, are, unbeknownst to them, literally fulfilling his two prophetic dreams, the very dreams that enrages them and triggered the violence they perpetrated against him. There is surely an element of sweet triumph for Joseph in seeing his grandiose dreams fulfilled so precisely.[78]

God's intervention places Joseph in a position of power, but Joseph chooses to act like a stranger and torment them after the brothers fail to recognize him.[79] Therefore, his repeated mention of God and God's power is in reference to saving his brothers from the famine, not his own extended revenge plot. Robert Alter expands on this idea, explaining that there is an implicit theology in the Hebrew Bible, but that it depends on the actions of individuals.[80] The divine plan is counterbalanced with man's nature, so as much as God does provide for Joseph, he still maintains some agency.[81] So**,** while God may grant Joseph some favors while in Egypt, there are no textual clues that lead us to believe that God implements an elongated punishment scheme for Joseph's brothers. Instead, Joseph capitalizes on his divinely gifted power to discipline his brothers for an

[75] Genesis 42:28 (JPS).
[76] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,*139; Alter, *The Hebrew Bible,* 163.
[77] Genesis 45: 7 (JPS).
[78] Alter, *The Hebrew Bible,* 163.
[79] Kugel, *The Bible as it Was,* 266.
[80] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 12.
[81] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 34.

extended period, through his calculated series of tests.

Conclusion

Clothing has a dual function in the Joseph story. It can "bestow honor and privilege," like when Jacob gifts Joseph the ornamented tunic and when Joseph is dressed as royalty in Egypt. Yet, it also "induces shame" and is used as a vehicle for deception by the brothers and Joseph himself. It adapts to different properties and symbolisms.[82] Just as clothing embraces various roles depending on its context in the story, so too *midah k'neged midah* assumes various models. Thus, while there are merits to each of these three approaches above, I find parts of the divine approach mixed with human wit to be the most compelling drivers of the motif. God in the Joseph story appears to have an essential role in situating the *midah k'neged midah* scheme, albeit a more ambiguous one than in earlier Genesis narratives. Yet, God's name almost exclusively appears in reference to Joseph's power, success, divine wisdom, or placement in his role in Egypt's administration. God's name is essentially absent from the actual infliction of the punishment, only invoked when the brothers realize that their money has been returned and cry out to God asking why they are being punished. Even then, it is Joseph who decides to return their money to frighten them, not God, as the brothers again conflate God and Joseph. The Joseph story thus exemplifies the balance between divine intervention and human will, and, as Robert Alter puts it:

> Suggests the endlessly complicated ramifications and contradictions of a principle of divine election intervening in the accepted orders of society and nature. The biblical tale […] leads us again and again to ponder complexities of motive and ambiguities of character because there are essential aspects of its vision of man, created by God, enjoying or suffering all the consequences of human freedom.[83]

Although God may construct the premise for a great *midah k'neged midah* scheme, Joseph is the actor who exploits this divine vision to serve his own objectives. Interestingly, Jacob is known as one who seizes his fate, from the time he is a fetus in Rachel's womb and grabs Esau's ankle to his seizing of Esau's birthright and blessing.[84] Perhaps, Joseph imitates his father's ambition in his own life, seeing and taking advantage of divinely inspired opportunities.

Implications

The prevalence of the clothing motif in the Joseph story and the *midah k'neged midah* narrative supports the principle of *maaseh avot siman l'banim,* which translates to: the actions of the forefathers are a sign for the children.

[82] Adelman, "Primeval Coats."
[83] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 22.
[84] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 55.

Maimonides, a 12th-century commentator, introduces this concept in his commentary attempting to understand the storyline of the patriarchs.[85] Similar to measure for measure, this concept consists of a cyclical quality where one's ancestors' actions are repeated and have clear repercussions on the lives of their descendants. Although *midah k'neged midah* seems to reach a resolution when Joseph gifts his brothers new clothing, *maaseh avot siman lebanim* is a timeless warning to avoid the same mistakes as one's ancestors. Unsurprisingly, this principle operates throughout the entirety of the Book of Genesis, where major mistakes are made by each generation. For this reason, the Hebrew Bible can be characterized as a history that has consequences for the destiny of the People of Israel.[86] The question that remains is: Who, if anyone, is tasked with ending this cycle? God, humans, or the universe?

I offer a suggestion based on the ambiguities and analysis of the Joseph story. The Hebrew Bible begins by recounting two separate creation stories. Although this dual structure is more complicated, it highlights the extremely complex and ambiguous interactions between God, man, and the natural tendencies of the world. Robert Alter, who refers to this as a composite narrative, characterizes its paramount role in understanding and reconciling contradictory themes in Genesis, for example, human imperfection and divine perfection.[87]

The Joseph story serves as an exemplar of the composite narrative due to the textual ambiguities throughout the punishment scheme. Although we, the readers, cannot conclusively determine who initiates the punishment, what is apparent from the text is the "bewildering complex reality" where God appears to have an initial transcendent presence, yet God's later role in the scheme seems to be clouded by human resolve.[88] So while there is no conclusive answer to the *maaseh avot siman lebanim* question, there is hope that humans can play an active role in shaping their destiny, just as Joseph, with God's help, actively decides to end Genesis' transgenerational cycle of sibling rivalry.

[85] Maimonides on Genesis 12:6.
[86] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 33.
[87] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 146-147, 154.
[88] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative,* 147.

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