

Rabbi Answers: Why Does the Bible Sometimes Teach Out of Order?

There are times when we are reading the Bible that we come a place where, in the middle of an event, it seems as if an unrelated story or series of verses appears within the text. We know that every word in the Holy Scriptures was written by G-D's design, so that means that these seemingly unrelated verses must, in some way, be related to the text found both before and after them.

One such text is found in Genesis 38, which is the story of Judah and Tamar. This chapter is found folded between chapter 37, which tells of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, and chapter 39, which continues the narrative of Joseph's life in slavery. Basically, if you read chapter 37, then turn past chapter 38 to chapter 39, we find a seamless continuity of the narrative of Joseph's life.

So, we must ask why the story of Judah and Tamar is placed in between chapters 37 and 39 in such a way that it breaks up the story. When reading the text, it almost feels as if we turn the page and find that someone has bound a page from another book in the wrong location. Or, to put it into more modern terms, it seems as if for a few minutes, the channel gets changed and we begin to view a completely different program.

Yet, because we know that the Bible is perfectly constructed, we know that chapter 39 was placed where it is in the text because it belongs there. Knowing this, we, as the intended audience, must take the time to read the text to find the connection between these two seemingly disjointed events. Then we can find how these chapters become part of the Torah (instructions) for our lives.

So, let's take a look. In Chapter 37, we read that Joseph's brothers hate him enough to kill him. Judah convinces his brothers that instead of killing Joseph, it would be better for them to sell him into slavery. After selling Joseph into slavery, his brothers inform their father, Jacob, that an animal has killed Joseph. Then, we read that Jacob mourns the death of his son.

As we enter Chapter 38, we find that Judah experiences the loss of two of his sons. Judah learns firsthand what his father went through when he and his brothers lied to Jacob about the death of Joseph. Judah feels the deep loss and pain of losing not just one but two of his sons. It is this experience in Judah's life that causes such repentance in him when later he is willing to become a slave in the place of Benjamin to keep his father from experiencing the pain of losing a second son.

Genesis 44:33-34 says: "'Now therefore, please let your servant stay as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go up with his brothers. For how can I go up to my father if the boy is not with me, lest perhaps I see the evil that would find my father?'"

As we see this subplot involving Judah, we realize the two stories are not separate; they are intertwined. Judah's painful experience in Chapter 38 shaped his life so dramatically and unto true repentance that he is willing to give his life for his brother. The placement of Chapter 38 isn't a mistake; it isn't out of proper order at all. In fact, it is the events of Chapter 38 that bring the story of Joseph and his brothers into proper order. Chapter 38 also brings the repentance, which makes it possible for Joseph and his brothers to be brought back into proper order. {eoa}

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