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## SOURCES & RESOURCES

### *HOW COLORFUL WAS JOSEPH'S COAT?*

Thanks to the popularity of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, we've been conditioned to translate "*ketonet passim*" as "coat of many colors" (Genesis 37:3). However, a survey of classical commentaries and midrashic interpretations reveals that the Broadway musical's understanding of Jacob's gift to his favored son is far from the only possibility—nor is it the most colorful.

In fact, Radak seems to be the only classical commentator to explain *ketonet passim* this way; even the prooftext on which he bases his approach is subject to different interpretations, each of which leads to a different portrayal of Joseph's *ketonet*.<sup>1</sup>

Searching for another biblical text that uses the word "*pas*" and might shed light on what a *ketonet passim* could be, Radak lands on the phrase "*pas yad*" (Daniel 5:5).<sup>2</sup> In that verse, Belshazzar is enjoying a great feast, serving wine out of the holy vessels his father had taken from the Jerusalem Temple, when he literally sees the writing on the wall:

In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the *pas* of the hand that wrote.

Radak doesn't fully explain his reference to "*pas yad*," but he seems to be working off of Ibn Ezra's explanation of that verse in Daniel: "*pas yeda*—the piece of a hand... also, "*ketonet passim*." Ibn Ezra understands the

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, we will ignore the word "*ketonet*" and simply assume it is some sort of garment. Our interest is in what the modifier *passim* tells us about it.

<sup>2</sup> Radak doesn't have many options to work with. The only other biblical occurrence of the word *passim* is found in II Samuel 13:18-19, where the princess Tamar wore a *ketonet passim*, as will be discussed below. The passage in Daniel offers the only instance of the singular *pas*.

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word “*pas*” in Daniel to mean “piece”—a reference to the fingers, i.e., part of a hand that was writing. He connects the word to “*ketonet passim*,” and Radak’s comment (Genesis 37:3) fills that connection out for us: “The *ketonet* was made of one piece of one color, and one piece of another color.” Hence, Joseph’s coat of many colors.<sup>3</sup>

Radak goes on to explain the significance of such a garment, and why it sparked hatred in Joseph’s brothers: “The *ketonet* was beautiful, and this caused their hatred for him—aside from the fact that he would speak badly of them to their father.”

On one hand, Radak’s description of the garment is a neat, straightforward explanation: we have textual basis for it, and it tells us why the brothers were upset about this special garment. On the other hand, while it makes for excellent Broadway visuals, technicolor alone might not seem like enough reason for attempted manslaughter. As Seforno points out, (v. 18) “they were all completely righteous, to the extent that their names were a remembrance before God [i.e., listed on the priestly breastplate]” and we might well wonder what could have led such people “to determine, as one, to kill their brother or to sell him, and they didn’t [even] regret the evil.” Was the *ketonet*’s beauty alone sufficient to generate such a degree of jealousy, resulting in such extreme behavior, from people who seem otherwise to have earned God’s favor?

Abarbanel is similarly unimpressed by such a mundane understanding of the *ketonet*’s significance:

How is it possible that all his father did to elevate Joseph, in his love for him, was that he made him a nice garment? This would be appropriate for babies, not pleasant and wise young men! And how were his brothers jealous of him because of this?

Righteousness aside, Abarbanel notes that Joseph was a little old for his father to be spoiling him with a pretty piece of clothing, and his older brothers should have been beyond getting quite that worked up about it. He goes on to point out that between their flocks and their booty from Shechem, Jacob’s sons certainly had enough wealth to make whatever they wanted—including a custom-tailored *ketonot passim* for every member of the family. Radak might argue that such is simply the way people sometimes behave: after years of building resentment, yes, such a simple thing

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ezra himself is less descriptive in his commentary on Genesis than Radak is. He cites the verse in Daniel, but also describes the *ketonet passim* as embroidered. Perhaps his view is of a garment embroidered with differently colored pieces of thread, or of a garment made up of pieces of fabric embroidered together.

as a “nice *ketonet*,” even if they had the means to get their own, might be the straw that breaks the siblings’ tolerance. But Seforno, Abarbanel, and others think there must be more to it than that.

As we examine what more there might have been, we ought to bear in mind a nuance articulated by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Following the precedent of Seforno...we think it our duty to look, if not for a justification, still for an explanation for the event which now follows.

After all we [are not dealing] with a band of robbers and murderers who would lightly commit murder for the sake of a coat.

Analyzing the *ketonet passim* for something beyond petty jealousy is not a simple matter of trying to whitewash the brothers’ behavior. It is not about justifying, but understanding; they might well have made a terrible mistake, even committed a major sin—but in light of other information about these individuals, which paints them more positively, or even the simple fact of their being adults, we might want to *explain* what could possibly have brought them to do such a thing. Was it really just because their father gave Joseph a “nice *ketonet*”? Or could there be another way to understand Jacob’s gift, one that would offer further insight into why it upset these otherwise more than respectable gentlemen to such a degree?

It is instructive to place this issue within the broader context of R. Hirsch’s approach to biblical heroes. He writes: “Our sages never hesitate to point out the errors and shortcomings, both great and small, of our forefathers, and precisely thus they make Torah great and glorious, heightening its instructiveness for us” (Genesis 25:27). In the subsequent passage, he faults Isaac and Rebecca for giving Esau and Jacob the same upbringing despite their disparate educational needs. His analysis of Abraham’s sojourn in Egypt strikes a similar note. “The Torah does not hide from us the faults, errors, and weaknesses of our great men, and this is precisely what gives its stories credibility. The knowledge given us of their faults and weaknesses does not detract from the stature of our great men; on the contrary, it adds to their stature and makes their life stories even more instructive” (Genesis 12:10). That being said, however, R. Hirsch goes on to justify Abraham’s strategy in Egypt. Thus, treating the patriarchs and matriarchs as subject to human emotions and fallibility does not necessarily entail finding their flaws in every story. We want to understand the human psychology of the brothers, and what led them to their problematic behavior, in the context of all the information we have about them. We may criticize them as well, but the first goal is to understand them.

### More Than a Pretty Coat

Turning back to the verse in Daniel at the root of Radak's explanation, we find an alternative explanation of "*pas*" that might help. The verse first mentions "fingers" writing on the wall, then a "*pas* of a hand" writing the message. According to Ibn Ezra and Radak, the two phrases are identical: "*pas*" means "piece" and refers to the fingers already mentioned. Metzudat David, however, explains "*pas yeda*" as "*kaf ha-yad*"— the *palm* of the hand.<sup>4</sup>

Could Joseph's *ketonet* have been a "*ketonet* of palms"? What would that mean, and what significance would the gift then have carried?

The midrash (Genesis Rabba 84:8) offers a number of interpretations of the word *passim* here, which fall at different points on the spectrum ranging from *peshat* to *derash*. At the *peshat* end of the spectrum are two which relate to *pas* as "palm of the hand":

"*Passim*"— that the sleeve reached to the palm of his hand; alternatively, that it was fine and light [enough to be] hidden in the palm of the hand.

Both of these explanations describe a garment that was more than just clothing, but that symbolized a particular rank or role. After all, who would wear a garment with sleeves all the way to the palms? Probably not a menial laborer; the sleeves would just get in the way. As we know from our traditional graduation gowns, scholars are one group of people who might wear long sleeves; indeed, there is a strong thread in midrashic tradition that sees Joseph as Jacob's particular student,<sup>5</sup> so the garment may have symbolized Jacob's recognition of Joseph as his intellectual and spiritual heir. Another type of person who might wear long sleeves, or perhaps a particularly fine, delicate fabric, would be royalty; Jacob's gift could then have marked Joseph as the next patriarch, set to rule his brothers and the budding nation to come.<sup>6</sup>

This connotation may be implied as well by Rashi's first explanation of the *ketonet passim*, that it describes a garment of fine wool. Rashi points out that the same phrase is used later in the Bible, in the story of Amnon and Tamar; there, we are told that Tamar's *ketonet passim* was associated

<sup>4</sup> See Malbim, *ibid.*, for a fascinating interpretation of the shift from fingers to palm.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, an earlier line in Genesis Rabba states that Jacob transmitted to Joseph all the laws which he had received from Shem and Eber.

<sup>6</sup> Seforno and Abarbanel both suggest the *ketonet* was a mark of special status being granted by Jacob to his most beloved son, though without relating to the word "*passim*" specifically.

with her royalty (II Samuel 13:18).<sup>7</sup> Though the precise nature of the garment or its symbolism is unclear in Samuel, as it is in Genesis, the implications of luxury are clear. Whether royal or of some other hierarchical advantage, those implications offer a stronger motivation for Joseph's brothers' reaction than Radak's vague statement that the *ketonet* was "beautiful." As R. Menachem Leibtag has suggested, they might well have thought they were being rejected in favor of Joseph—and perhaps thought Jacob was making a mistake they were duty-bound to rectify, just as Jacob himself had acted to prevent his father from selecting Esau as his heir.<sup>8</sup>

### More Than a Coat at All

So far, we have considered the *ketonet passim* primarily on the level of straightforward *peshat*, with attention to what it might have been and how it might have impacted the behavior of the individuals in the story. The questions broaden, however, when we examine the text from a mid-rashic perspective. Midrash tends to seek not only the facts of what happens in the biblical story, and why, but the hints beneath the surface that might offer meaning for the reader beyond what could have been appreciated or even known by those in the narrative themselves. And so, turning back to Genesis Rabba, we find three more suggested interpretations for the uncommon word, *passim*:

1. "*Passim*"—that they cast lots (*paysis*) over it, which of them would bring it to his father [after they threw Joseph in the pit, to make Jacob believe Joseph was dead] – and it came up for Judah.<sup>9</sup>
2. "*Passim*"—An acronym for the names of the troubles that came to [Joseph]: Potiphar; *socharim* (merchants); Ishmaelites; Midianites.
3. "*Passim*"—Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, "Come and see the works of God!" (Psalms 66:5)—and

<sup>7</sup> Rashi also notes the similarity to the word *karpas* in Esther 1:6, describing luxurious fabrics. Rashi's basic identification of "*ketonet passim*" as a garment of fine wool, is based on the statement that blames the descent to Egypt on "the weight of two *sela* of fine wool that Jacob gave to Joseph more than his other sons" (*Shabbat* 10b). The details here are subject to some discussion (including a question raised by Maharsha of whether a whole *ketonet* could possibly weigh so little), and Rashi suggests that the fine wool was actually just a trimming around the *pas* of his hand (presumably the cuff of the sleeve); see the commentary of R. Eliyahu Mizrahi for further analysis of the sources behind Rashi's explanation.

<sup>8</sup> Menachem Leibtag, *Tanach Study Center* ([www.tanach.org/miketz.htm](http://www.tanach.org/miketz.htm)).

<sup>9</sup> See Genesis Rabba, *ibid.* 19, regarding this singling out of Judah; also interpretations of Genesis 38:1 that discuss the connection between the sale of Joseph and the apparently subsequent "descent" of Judah.

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it is written afterwards, “He turned the sea to dry land” (v. 6). Why “and they hated him” (Gen. 37:4)? So that He would split the sea before them. *Passim*—*pas yam*—split the sea.

The common denominator in these three interpretations—and what places them squarely at the *derash* end of the exegetical spectrum—is that they use word plays to read meaning into the gift Jacob gave Joseph that neither Jacob nor Joseph could possibly have known at the time, and that would have been an odd symbolism for a gift if they had known.

This sort of interpretation sometimes inspires skepticism in modern readers: Is that *really* what the text means, or is it merely a cute word game? Were the rabbis really saying that Jacob gave his son a gift that predicted any or all of these future events? Did he know those things would happen, and if so, why didn’t he stop the brothers from doing anything to Joseph? Why give him a gift that would actually represent the coming disasters? It seems more likely that it was simply a particularly nice, even royal garment—as straightforwardly indicated by the verse that states Tamar and other nobles wore them too.

But that is exactly the difference between *peshat* and *derash*. From the perspective of a midrashic interpretation, what Jacob called his gift, and why he called it that and what it signified, may be irrelevant or at least only a part of the picture. Maybe he gave his son a garment that was made of differently colored strips of fabric, or was woven from fine wool; maybe it had long sleeves or was very delicate; maybe it signified a position over the other brothers, or maybe he just thought it was a nice thing that Joseph would enjoy wearing. All those elements tell us about the people in the story and their motivations, but the midrash is interested in the Torah’s careful choice of words and what they might reveal, not just about those facts but about the bigger picture.<sup>10</sup> Not just what happened, but how is it *told*; not just what they did, but what we can learn.

And so the midrash finds meaning in the word *passim* that Jacob could not have known or appreciated—but that we understand all too well. We consider the relationship between the story of Joseph in chapter 37 and that of Judah in chapter 38, and look for the roots of the latter even in the beginning of the former; we see how Jacob himself was tragically responsible for the troubles Joseph experienced, being sold (as this

<sup>10</sup> *Maskil le-David* (18<sup>th</sup> century commentary on Rashi by R. David Pardo) offers a straightforward explanation of the connection between Jacob’s role and God’s role: “The Holy One, blessed be He, placed [the idea] in Jacob’s heart to make it of *passim* rather than any other type, to hint through it to the troubles which would happen to him in the future.”

midrash understands it) several times in succession until he ultimately ended up at the mercy of Potiphar in Egypt; and we recognize that the threads of Joseph's garment were actually woven into a much larger tapestry of divine planning, which began with God's promise to Abraham that his children would be slaves in Egypt, orchestrated their arrival there through a complex sequence of events (including the sale of Joseph motivated in part by the *ketonet passim*), and ultimately led them out to their promised great wealth through a split sea.<sup>11</sup>

### Appreciating the Basis, Meaning, and Color of Midrash

Rashi, as he often does, selects a midrashic interpretation to preserve alongside his *peshat*; in our case, the interpretation in Genesis Rabba that reads *passim* as an acronym for the troubles that befell Joseph. Scholars differ in explaining how and when and why Rashi chooses midrashim to quote; this is not the place for that analysis, but we will simply note that Rashi himself states that he cites those *midrashim* which “settle the words of the text,” meaning there must be a textual connection.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, some argue Rashi was interested in midrashim for their didactic elements as well.

When confronted with a midrashic interpretation that seems not to fit these criteria, the sort that is easy for our often *peshat*-oriented minds to dismiss as farfetched Rabbinic imaginings, supercommentaries on Rashi can be an invaluable resource. In our case, Mahara!l, in his *Gur Arye* commentary, explores both the textual basis for the midrashic interpretation and a poignant insight into its meaning. He first highlights a question about the text that is “settled” by the midrash:

Why did it have to write what [Jacob] made Joseph? It should have written only “And Israel loved Joseph more than all his brothers”! ... Alternatively, it should have written, “And he clothed him in a *ketonet passim*.” What is [the significance of] “and he made”?

<sup>11</sup> If the word *passim* indeed carries any or all of these connotations specific to the story of Joseph, why did Tamar wear one? *Yefeh To'ar* on Genesis Rabba reminds us that only the first instance needs explanation; once Joseph had a *ketonet passim*, for whatever reason, the practice could then have developed of wearing one as a mark of status. This explanation fits neatly with our suggestion that *passim* is both descriptive of the garment, and something more: the latter meaning would have applied only with regard to the original, but the physical description and its significance would be perpetuated in later fashions.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Rashi on Genesis 3:8.

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Maharal observes that if all one needed to know was what the people in the story did, and their general motivations, the details of the *ketonet passim* would be completely unnecessary. We don't hear about every extra smile Jacob bestowed on his favorite son; what is it about this gift that makes it worth the Torah's sacred ink? Moreover, even were it to be mentioned, Maharal argues that the verb is off: Is it important that Jacob *made* his son's gift, or could the Torah have said more simply that he *clothed* him in it or that he gifted it to him?

Midrashic interpretation is deeply interested, after all, in both the Torah's choice of details and the literary methods used to communicate those details. Maharal highlights for us the significance in the wording by pointing out another apparent textual anomaly, this time in the midrash itself: The acronym is out of order!<sup>13</sup> Potiphar was the last step; why isn't the *ketonet* described as *missap*, hinting to the series of events in chronological order? Perhaps to allude as well to any or all of the other potential meanings we've uncovered – or as the Maharal suggests,

Because the end of the deed originates in thought: God, the blessed One, wanted him to go down to Egypt and that was the essential point; therefore, Scripture placed it [the arrival at Potiphar's house in Egypt;] first.

The entire story of Joseph carries a running theme of Divine planning and providence. Joseph himself alludes to it when he reveals his identity to his brothers and midrashic traditions find hints throughout to a Divine plan even greater than the one Joseph perceived,<sup>14</sup> so it should be no surprise to find this central message embedded in the *ketonet passim* as well.

The reversal of events alluded to in the midrashic reading of the word *passim* emphasizes the point Maharal noted in the phrase “and he *made* for him a *ketonet passim*.” Jacob surely had the best intentions for his son in bestowing this gift – yet his intentions were flipped around and the *ketonet passim* caused his son nothing but trouble. As Resh Lakish suggests in the name of R. Elazar ben Azarya, “A person must not differentiate between his children, for because of the *ketonet passim* ... they hated him”—and as the version in Shabbat 10b continues, “the matter developed and our forefathers descended to Egypt.”

<sup>13</sup> Maharal, and others, also address the midrashic separation of “Midianites” and “merchants” into two separate entities, though the verse implies they are the same group. They argue that if these two words referred to the same group, there would be no need for both words.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Genesis Rabba 84:13.

The midrash, then, digs into the words of the text to offer broader messages on both the human and Divine scales, and on the interplay between the two. Beyond understanding what Jacob did and why he thought he did it, beyond understanding how the brothers reacted and why, we are reminded of the extent to which our ill-considered behaviors can be disastrous, the exact opposite of our intentions. We are reminded as well that, ultimately, God will work with our actions to ensure that His plan will succeed exactly as intended, from beginning to end.

The *ketonet passim* was the reason and it wasn't; it was the beginning and it was the middle and it was the end. Whatever it looked like, whether Jacob called it *passim* or not, and for whatever reason, the rabbis of the midrash call our attention to the fact that Scripture applies that descriptor to his gift.

That choice of wording itself offers more avenues for meaningful exploration than there were colors in Joseph's coat.