



Midrashic Landscapes

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Parashat VaYeishev 5784

Certain unique landscapes in the Torah carry a strong association with a particular kind of experience. A garden reminds us of innocence. A mountain is a place of revelation. At a well, one might find love.¹

A far more common landscape in the Torah is the field. The field is not usually where the main action takes place. We take it for granted as a background setting, where work happens, or through which travelers pass. So when we come upon Yosef wandering through a field in Parashat VaYeishev, we may not make much of it. According to a midrashically-styled reading by the Keli Yakar,² however, a deeper understanding of the field is precisely what might have saved Yosef from all the disaster that will follow.

¹ On gardens, see Genesis 2:25; on mountains, see Genesis 22:14, Exodus 19:20; on wells, see Genesis 24:11-13, 29:9-11, Exodus 2:15-21.

² The Keli Yakar ("Precious Vessel") is the work of R. Shlomo Ephraim Lunschitz, who was a Rosh Yeshiva in Lvov, Poland and then served as the rabbi of Prague in the early 17th century. Dr. Marc Shapiro points out that the phrase יקר כלי is taken from Proverbs 20:15, "יש זָהָב וְרַב פְּנִינִים וְכִלֵּי יָקָר שִׁפְתֵי דָעִת", and should therefore be vowelized: *Keli Yekar*. I am following the standard custom of vowelizing the title of a work as if the words stood on their own, pronounced in Rabbinic Hebrew, and not exactly as they were vowelized in their reference point in Tanakh. The original reference, because it follows the conjunctive *vav* is actually pronounced, *ukhli yekar*, so the title is already a step removed from the citation.



When we first meet Yosef, his brothers already resent him—both because their father has favored him with a special coat, and because Yosef cannot stop sharing the dreams he has in which his family all bow down to him (Genesis 37:2-11). So when Ya'akov sends Yosef to go check on his brothers, who are pasturing in Shekhem (Genesis 37:14), we might already anticipate that danger lies ahead. But before he gets there, we read this mysterious interlude:

בראשית לז:טו-יז

וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר מֶה תִּבְקֹשׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת אַחֵי אֲנֹכִי מִבְּקֹשׁ הִגִּידָה נָא לִי אִיפֹה הֵם רְעִים: וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נָסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמָרִים נִלְכָּה דְתִינָה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֵר אָחִיו וַיִּמְצָאם בְּדֹתָן: וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נָסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמָרִים נִלְכָּה דְתִינָה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֵר אָחִיו וַיִּמְצָאם בְּדֹתָן.

Genesis 37:15-17

A man found him **wandering in the field**, and the man asked him, “What are you looking for?” And he said, “I am looking for my brothers. Please tell me where they are pasturing.” And the man said, “They have gone on from there. For I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dotan.’” So Yosef went after his brothers and found them in Dotan.

The phrase “תעה בשדה - wandering in the fields,” catches the Keli Yakar’s attention. He begins by noting that the verb, “wandering,” indicates not only a physical movement, but a state of mind:

שהלך בשדה תועה בדעתו כי הלך לשלום ואין שלום לאחיו עמו.

For as he walked through the field, he **wandered off in his consciousness**. Because he was going to find peace, but his brothers wanted no peace with him.

Yosef is more than lost in the field: he is lost in his understanding of the relationships in his life. His physical meandering is a manifestation of his dreamy, detached personality, and his cluelessness in social dynamics.

The Keli Yakar then turns to consider the other word in the phrase, “בשדה” - in the field,” and here he shows off the virtuosity of his interpretive technique by making two linguistic connections at once:

ומדרשו שטעה בענין השדה הנאמר בקין והבל כי יוסף היה לו לשום אל לבו מה שקרה להבל עם קין
 שמצד הקנאה הרג איש את אחיו

The “*midrash*”³ of this phrase is that he **made a mistake** in the matter of the field that was the field of Kayin and Hevel. For Yosef should have paid closer attention to what happened to Hevel—that because of jealousy, his brother Kayin killed him.

The Keli Yakar is playing with the fact that the word for “wandering” (תעה) is a homophone for the word for “making a mistake” (טעה). Yosef, he says, is not just **wandering** in the field; he’s **making a mistake** about the field. Not just any field (and here is the other connection), but the field of Kayin and Hevel.

It may seem strange to suggest that Yosef should be thinking about a much earlier story in the Torah. It’s true that there are some obvious parallels: brothers in contention, jealousy brings enmity between them, and violence erupts. Yosef might do well to contemplate the tale of Kayin and Hevel. But why would he be thinking about all that at this particular moment? Because, the Keli Yakar reminds us, that first murder took place in a field:

³ I put the word, “*midrash*” in quotes here, because the Keli Yakar uses the term (as Rashi often does) as if he were about to quote an earlier *midrash*, but the interpretation that follows—as far as I know—is his own. That means he is instead using the term to signal his own participation in this interpretative style.



בראשית ד:ח

וַיְהִי בִּהְיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל הָבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ:

Genesis 4:8

And it was when they were in the field that Kayin arose against his brother Hevel and killed him.

The verse emphasizes specifically that they were in the field. The Keli Yakar takes this to mean that the field is being fixed in the Torah's symbolic language as a place of potential violence between siblings. So when Yosef was wandering through his field, he should have remembered the story of that other field. He should have suddenly realized that he was in danger, that the field is the place where brothers kill brothers.⁴

Having made this link of his own, the Keli Yakar then cites an earlier midrashic tradition from the Kayin and Hevel story.

לפי שנאמר ויהי בהיותם בשדה. על עסקי שדה, כי אמר שדה דאת קאים עליה דידי הוא.

Because it says:⁵ “And when they were in the field—meaning, their conflict arose over matters of the field, for Kayin said, ‘The field that you are standing on is mine!’”⁶

⁴ The Keli Yakar never mentions Ya'akov and Esav in this piece, but field imagery is very prominent in that story as well: Esav is describes as “איש שדה - a man of the field” (Genesis 25:27). Ya'akov gets Esav to sell the birthright when he comes in “מן השדה - from the field” (Genesis 25:29) and Ya'akov comes in to take Esav's blessing while “עשו השדה - Esav went out to the field” (Genesis 27:25). And where do Yitzhak and Yishmael fit into this? We find Yitzhak out meditating in the field (לשוח בשדה) just after having come back from Be'er Le'hai Ro'i, Yishmael's home (Genesis 24:63). Perhaps he did learn the lessons of the field, and reconciled with Yishmael in a way that none of the other brother-rivals did.

⁵ Here, the Keli Yakar is referring to a *midrash* found in Tanhuma Mishpatim 13.

⁶ A version of the story in Bereshit Rabbah (22:7) brings the conversation to its most absurd, unreasonable conclusion: “This one said, ‘The land you are standing on is mine!’ That one said, ‘The shirt you are wearing is mine!’ That one said ‘Take it off!’ This one said, ‘Fly!’”

The *midrash* takes the setting of the field to be indicating the topic of the dispute that led to Hevel's murder. It turns out the brothers were fighting over land rights. The Keli Yakar, with just a quick reference to this background legend, is telling us that not only are siblings historically drawn into conflict, but what they tend to fight over is land and property.

In Parashat VaYeishev, however, Yosef and his brothers were not in conflict over a field, nor any other great riches. The most they had to go to war over was a nice jacket.

That, the Keli Yakar suggests, is precisely what Yosef was figuring. He imagines Yosef thinking through the dynamics of jealousy, and presuming—mistakenly—that he was safe from his brothers' wrath. Kayin and Hevel, after all, were battling over valuable commodities:

א"כ היה סבה לדבר אבל אחי למה יהרגוני חנם, כי קנאת כתונת פסים אינה דומה לקנאת שדה, זה"ש
והנה תועה בשדה כי שדה זה הנאמר אצל קין הטעהו ולא ידע שטבע הקנאה מחייבת שעל דבר מועט
"יקום איש על רעהו ורצחו נפש."

If so, [Yosef thought], there was some reason for that conflict. But my brothers? Why would they kill me over nothing? For jealousy over a striped coat is nothing like jealousy over a field. That is why it says, "He was wandering in the field." Because the story of Kayin's field led him astray, and he did not understand the nature of jealousy, which causes "a man who rises up against his fellow and murders him" over the littlest thing.

Here the Keli Yakar demonstrates his psychological acumen. Our most bitter conflicts are often with those who are closest to us. In those disputes, we often use physical commodities to play out our rage. But the truth is, once jealousy has taken over, we will fight over anything. If only Yosef had understood all this, he could have steered clear of all the tragedy that awaited him on the other side of that field.



There is one last connection the Keli Yakar makes for us, though this one is not explicit. You may have noticed that he ended with a quote: “a man who rises up against his fellow and murders him.” That language is taken from a case in Deuteronomy. There, the text exonerates a young woman who has been raped “in a field” from any suspicion of sexual impropriety.

דברים כב:כז-כח

...כִּי כְּאִשֶּׁר יִקְוֶה אִישׁ עַל רֵעֵהוּ וְרָצְחוֹ נָפֵשׁ כֵּן הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה: כִּי בַשָּׂדֶה מְצָאָה צֶעֱקָה הַנְּעָרָה הַמֵּאֲרָשָׁה וְאִין מוֹשִׁיעַ לָהּ:

Deuteronomy 22:26-27

...because this is like the case of a man who rises up against his fellow and murders him.

For it was in the field that he found her, and though the betrothed young woman cried out for help, there was no one around to save her.

The Keli Yakar is expanding the set of violent associations with this landscape. The field is more than just the setting for brotherly quarrels: it is a place where all sorts of terrible crimes can happen. Fields are isolated places, after all, perfect settings for violence to go undetected.

We are being asked to reflect on all the horrible things human beings can do to one another when no one else is looking. The image of the field, like the dark alley or the abandoned building, serves as a code, warning not just Yosef, but all of us, to be on the lookout for the most savage parts of humanity, and to walk more carefully through the world.

But why did the Keli Yakar leave that last connection unarticulated? He is clearly aware of the parallels between the two cases. Even the language from Deuteronomy, “**a man finds a betrothed young woman in the field**,” recalls the Yosef story, where, “**a man found him in the**

field.” That echo is no coincidence; these are the very words that the Keli Yakar is commenting on.

One can only conclude that the Keli Yakar wants us to make the final connection ourselves. He has laid out before us a series of links that takes us from Yosef’s field back to the field of Kayin and the origins of human violence, and then pushes us forward to consider the ongoing toll of that violence. But he leaves some of the work for us to do, to put the last pieces of the puzzle together. He has done his own *midrash*, and he has cited the *midrashim* of the past. Now he wants us to participate in the process, and to make some midrashic connections of our own.

Midrash, as an interpretive technique, involves searching for connections.⁷ It is a literary exercise in pattern-spotting. We look for recurring words and parallel images across the text of Tanakh, in order to expand our understanding of the words in front of us. This kind of reading trains us to see repetitions not only in our Torah, but in our history as well. As the Keli Yakar connects various stories of violence in the field, he leads us into a deeper understanding of the patterns of jealousy and violence that continue to plague human society.

Just as the Keli Yakar wishes Yosef had paid attention to the lessons of the field, and made the connections that would have saved him from violence, so does he invite us to make these connections ourselves, so that we might learn to avoid the violent legacies of our past.

⁷ Indeed, the root of the word, ש.ר.ד, means, “seek.”

