

## Chanukah & Parshat Miketz

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# Joseph's Ambivalence

Joseph is a rather enigmatic character. He raises key questions about Jewish identity, not unfamiliar to the modern ear. Is he Jewish or is he Egyptian? In which direction do his loyalties lie? On the one hand, the Torah would seem to present him in a largely positive light; he still remains his father's favoured son after twenty-two years in Egypt. On the other hand he sits at the summit of the Egyptian government, fully integrated, or so it would seem. We will examine the way that Joseph, son of Jacob, negotiates the culture of Egypt and its corridors of power.

### IDENTIFYING JOSEPH

“Joseph's brothers came and bowed down low to him... Joseph recognised his brothers but they did not recognise him.” (42:7-8)

They are brothers. They lived together, they played together, they celebrated and sang together. How do the brothers not recognise Joseph? However much he has changed, why can they not identify him?

The commentators suggest a number of explanations. The Sephorno says that his harsh tone startled them. Joseph spoke in a tough voice rather than his customary soft tone. This threw the brothers off. In a different approach, the Rashbam suggests that translators communicated between them thereby creating a distance. The brothers heard only Egyptian from Joseph so they didn't recognise his speech. The intermediary of a translator ensured that the brothers were not concentrating on his voice nor his facial features.

Other commentators - Ramban and Radak - point to a further aspect of this first meeting. The brothers meet the viceroy of Egypt - the Prime Minister - surrounded by advisors and translators and dressed in royal regalia. However much he would resemble their long lost brother, it would never enter their minds that this high-ranking official could be Joseph. They might think that he looks or sounds like Joseph, but they would never identify him as their brother.

The Hizkuni relates to Joseph's acculturation into Egypt; his fluency in the Egyptian language, his Egyptian court name, his beard in line with common Egyptian fashions. The brothers did not recognise the updated Egyptian version of Joseph.

### JOSEPH THE EGYPTIAN

Let us think about what this tells us about Joseph. Joseph looks and acts like an Egyptian. He talks like an Egyptian. He is at the head of Egyptian society.

There is additional evidence that suggests Joseph's full adaptation to his new country. He adopts an Egyptian name (41:45) and marries an Egyptian wife, a daughter of a priest no less. When they have their first son, he is named Menashe, meaning; “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.”, and his second son; Ephraim; “For God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction” (41:51-52). The Midrash goes even further: When Jacob met his grandsons, he found them so alien looking that he could not

recognise them. Remember - during the long years of separation, Joseph never made any attempt to contact his aging father.

On the basis of this evidence, Joseph would certainly not appear as our immediate candidate for promotion to the category of our Biblical fathers. He has left that all behind and has found a new identity! Or has he? Has Joseph truly forgotten his parental home, his tradition, his origin? Is Joseph the personification of the assimilated Jew?

### THE HEBREW

This is clearly not the whole picture. Joseph's integration into mainstream Egyptian society bears certain cracks. It would appear that Egypt was mindful of ethnic origin and wary of outsiders. (Maybe this was the societal foundation that allowed the possibility of persecution and enslavement of the foreigner.) When Joseph was first mentioned to Pharaoh he is described as “A Hebrew (Ivri) youth” (41:12). He appears to belong to a different ethnic group. In Egypt there are social barriers that restrict social mingling between Egyptians and these groups:

“They served him (Joseph) by himself.... and the Egyptians... by themselves, for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians” (43:32)

But this is not the only way in which Joseph retains his distinctiveness. He is not simply a Jew by virtue of his being marked as such by others. He remains true to his religious origins and ethical standards; he is special because of his unique faith. Let us see.

### JOSEPH HATZADDIK

In the eyes of our Rabbinic tradition, Joseph is known by a venerable epithet. He is referred to quite simply as - HaZaddik - The righteous one. In what way does Joseph earn this title?

The immediate address for the origin of this title would seem to be the incident with Potiphar's wife. Joseph resists the sexual advances of Madame Potiphar, clearly exhibiting immense self control. He is young, attractive, a slave with little to lose. He has much to gain. This liaison with Madame Potiphar might better his position and elevate him further. The consequences of refusal -as we see at the end of the story - are dire. Madame Potiphar repeatedly attempts to seduce Joseph “day after day” (39:10). According to the midrash, she would change her clothes three times a day to attract his fashionable eye. Joseph resists temptation:

“Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands... he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” (39:8-9)

There is no doubt that this episode demonstrates important qualities in Joseph; his integrity, honesty and self-control. But can an isolated incident give Joseph his title of Tzaddik? There must be more.

The discerning reader of the Joseph story will notice an ongoing consciousness of God which animates Joseph throughout every page of this story and every stage of his life in Egypt. The name of God never leaves his lips. Nechama Leibowitz observes this trait in an incisive and important comment (Torah Insights pg.166):

“ What does Joseph say - in his own words - from the day he left his father? From the moment his brothers spot him at Dothan, throughout the ordeal in the cistern and the sale, the text tells us nothing of what he said, as though he was struck dumb. During his forced journey to Egypt, his sale to Potiphar, his service in his master's house, and his gradual elevation, he never opens his mouth...he does not speak.

Only at the moment of the greatest test, when he struggles with desire - after giving his reasons to his master's wife in terms which she can understand - does he conclude with the words 'And I shall have sinned to God' (39:10) . Later on we hear him, locked up in prison, say to the messengers sent by divine providence for his deliverance: 'Does not God provide interpretations?' (40:8). Finally, at the great moment when he has been released from prison, has shaved and changed his clothes, when he is standing before Pharaoh who demands his 'expert' interpretation of his dreams, his very first words are: 'Not me! God will speak to put Pharaoh's mind at rest'(41:16)”

#### GOD AT EVERY STAGE

Nechama Leibowitz goes on to study Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream which opens our Parsha this week (41:1-32). She notes a pattern in Joseph's words.

VERSE 25 : “What GOD is about to do, he has revealed to Pharaoh”

26 AND 27 : Interpretation of the symbols in the dreams: the cows, the ears of corn.

VERSE 28 : “That which GOD is about to do he has revealed to Pharaoh”

29 TO 31 : The meaning of the dream : 7 plentiful years. 7 years of famine.

VERSE 32 : “Concerning the repetition of the dream... The matter is imminent, (on instruction) from GOD and GOD will be swift in putting it into effect.”

She notes how God is mentioned at every juncture of Joseph's interpretation, at the beginning, the middle and the end. Even at his moment of glory, standing before the great Pharaoh, Joseph puts God first. He does not act as if this skill is a personal talent; he attributes all the power to God. God is the symbol emblazoned on Joseph's banner.

if in last week's Parsha, Joseph appeared a little vain and arrogant, now, at the age of thirty, he is more mature and more experienced, Joseph is not so certain that he is the centre of things. God is the centre of his life to the degree that he cannot fail to convey this to all with whom he converses. One example would be Pharaoh's response to Joseph's interpretation:

“Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?” (41:38)

Maybe it was precisely this aspect of Joseph that distinguished him in the court of Pharaoh. When the brothers stand before Joseph in trepidation, there are three simple words that Joseph tells them in the understanding that it would provide some reassurance. Joseph tells them, “I fear God” (42:18).

#### THE GALUT JEW

Joseph then, is not the assimilated Jew, but rather the Jew who lives in Galut. He must obey the codes, the fashions and haircuts, the etiquette of Egyptian high society. He is fully integrated into that society; yet, at the same time, the name of God never leaves his lips, he upholds moral standards and a yearning for his homeland. Of all the sons of Jacob, Joseph is the only one who demands from his children - on oath - that they will take his bones out of Egypt and bury them in the Holy Land (50:24-25). Joseph has a strong sense of Jewish Identity. It is just that his Judaism differs vastly from that of his brothers.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (on the basis of the Biblical text and Midrashic sources) builds a fascinating study of the Joseph phenomenon and its place in the Jewish people.

“Two general spiritual powers were instilled in the two tribes destined to be kings in Israel: Joseph and Judah: ....Joseph is the provider (42:6) who God designated to ensure the survival of the family “and save the lives that will form a nation” (45:7). He supported Jacob and his sons in the physical-material realm, food for the young, at a time when the entire world was approaching Egypt for food. Joseph was integrated amongst the (gentile) nations. He knew seventy languages (Talmud Sota 36a) which demonstrates his ability to relate to all nations and peoples on equal terms; despite this Joseph was aware of his holiness and spiritual power. It is due to this dimension of Joseph's character that we are told 'Esau will fall to none other than the sons of Rachel' (Bereshit Rabba 63:8). Judah is the specific spiritual power, unique to the Jewish nation.” [Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook : Hamisped BiYerushalayim . in Ma'amrei HaRa'aya p.94-95]

Rav Kook is discussing classic models of Jewish spiritual leadership. Judah represents Judaism in its purest form-refined, undiluted, unaffected by any outside factor. Joseph however, represents the universal dimension of our national spirit. Joseph has a talent for succeeding in any environment. He can become an Egyptian with ease. Joseph represents the material aspects of life: a national economy, food procurement, foreign diplomacy, banking and industry. He represents the physical universal dimension yet he also knows how to retain his holiness. He can resist the wife of Potiphar, the challenges and attractions of the material world.

It is exactly Joseph who can defeat Esau because Joseph too feels at ease in the world of the physical. He can match Esau in the material dimension, but he has an added edge. He has spiritual strength too!

#### CHANUKA AND GREEK CULTURE

The story of Joseph always coincides with Chanuka. One begins to search for a connection between these two stories which at first glance, appear to have nothing in common. If we take the view of Joseph that we have developed, we may just view Joseph as an important source of inspiration on this winter festival of light.

Chanuka celebrates Jewish victory over the Greeks. But the battle was not simply a war of independence in the national sense of self-determination. The atmosphere out of which the Maccabean revolt grew was one of spiritual conflict. The question was the degree to which Jews would adopt Greek culture; the sport, the pagan gods, the logic and philosophy,

the worship of the body, the mythology, the systematic thinking. Greek culture was an attractive culture and Jews were adopting it unquestioned. The Maccabees came to fight not only the Greeks but Hellenistic Jews only too ready to adopt the Greek lifestyle. This was a battle for the soul of Judaism.

Is Greece bad then? Is everything that came out of their rich world of ideas to be seen as threatening to Judaism? We would have to answer "no"! Judaism recognises the power of Greece, its beauty and order. The Mishna states that : "A Torah scroll can be written in Greek" (Megilla 8b) and the rationale given by the Gemara for this ruling states that Greek beauty should find a place in Judaism. Likewise, Maimonides adopted many principles of the thought of Plato and Aristotle. There are elements of the Greek culture that are welcomed in the world of Judaism. But the paganism, the infatuation with beauty which lead to the worship of the body, these are simply unacceptable.

#### JOSEPH AND CHANNUKAH

Joseph is the Jew who lived steeped in foreign culture and remained true to his religion. Joseph is the person who knows how to take "Greece" absorbing what it offers him, but still retaining his Jewish identity. He knows what to take and what not to take. He is critically selective. He knows how to adopt those aspects of a foreign culture that are beneficial to a person, to a society and he can identify and reject those aspects that are antagonistic, and corrosive to the Jewish way of life.

In a way, Joseph always remained an enigma to his brothers. His brothers remained rugged sheep farming Canaanites. Joseph never fully became part of the family (see 50:15-21). He is treated with a certain distance and wariness by his brothers. He tragically remains an outsider. But for us, who live in a world of other cultures, Joseph's message is crucial. His path is a difficult one to tread but tread it we must if we are to create a harmony between our faith and the culture of the Western world. We have to know what to adopt and what to leave aside. In that way, we too may live up to the legacy of Joseph.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Channuka.