In Joseph’s Feast, Joseph struggles with his family trauma as well as his desire for familial love. The title as well as some of the content of the poem alludes to Belshazzar’s feast as told in the Book of Daniel (Chapter Five).

Joseph’s Feast
When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to his house steward, “Take the men into the house; slaughter and prepare an animal, for the men will dine with me at noon.”—Genesis 43:16

I can hear right through you
right through your pleasantness
through your silent pleading with me
you’re pleading with me and I am waiting
for the fingers not of a person
but Divine
to write on your hearts
that I heard you then as I do now
without mercy, without compassion

but I have no balance
to weigh you in,
no tare to honestly measure
tear’ against tear’,
though I know you’d be found wanting
I am, too.
I am too.

Visit learn.jtsa.edu to hear this poem sung to a composition also by Michael.

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1 as in teardrop
2 as in torn

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seven years of famine. (Gen. 41:38-44) He immediately gives Joseph two gifts that can be read as heart-wrenching examples of the price he will pay for that power. Joseph will have an Egyptian name, Tsafenat Pané'ah—‘the sustainer of life’—and an Egyptian wife, Asenat, the daughter of a priest, Poti Fera. (v.41:45)

The story that follows reads differently because of those moves by the king to forcibly integrate Joseph into Egyptian society and culture. Joseph himself testifies to the pain of his situation as the highest outsider in the land. When (vv. 50-52) “two sons were born to [him] by Asenat the daughter of Poti Fera, the priest of On, Joseph called the first-born Menasheh, because ‘God has made me forget completely my hardship and the house of my father.’ And Joseph called the second son Ephraim, because ‘God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.’” We will soon learn that he has not forgotten the pain suffered in his father’s house. When the brothers arrive to purchase grain, he at once recognizes them and—seeing them bow before him—remembers the dream in which they symbolically had done exactly that. (42:6-9) He has not forgotten his father either: when the brothers return home empty-handed, having left Simeon behind as a hostage, they tell Jacob (43:7) that the man in charge of distributing grain had asked them if their father was still alive—and, in next week’s portion Vayigash, when Joseph finally breaks down in tears and reveals himself to his brothers (45:3), the very first question out of his mouth will be, “Is my father still alive?”

Consider the irony: the survival of the children of Israel is secured by this child of Israel who, married to the daughter of a gentile priest, brings his family down to Egypt, where he and they loyally serve the Pharaoh. The survival of the Children of Israel in a later generation will be secured by another Israelite, that one from the tribe of Levi, also married to the daughter of a gentile priest, who will lead a rebellion that liberates his people from Pharaoh’s service/slavery. (The Hebrew word for “slavery” and “service” is the same.) Had Joseph and Moses not been at home at Pharaoh’s court, wise in the ways of ministers and kings, skillful at magic arts beyond the capacity of Pharaoh’s magicians (dream interpretation and the working of miracles), and gifted with the right word at the right time and inside knowledge of Egyptian society and culture; and had they not, despite all this, retained a strong sense of divine mission and purpose—they would not have been able to perform the redemptive tasks assigned them.

We might say, in contemporary terms, that a certain measure of assimilation was required for their success, as was a measure of resistance to assimilation. Contemporary Jews know from experience that the balance is difficult to calibrate correctly. That has been all the more true of the Jews who have served gentile kings and courts over the centuries—and by so doing, served their people and their God. From the poet and general Shmuel Hanagid at the Spanish court to Henry Kissinger at the Nixon White House to the many humble tax collectors in Polish domains populated by Ukrainian peasants, the Joseph story has time after time repeated itself.

Gerson Cohen, chancellor of JTS from 1972 to 1986 and a magisterial historian of Jewish societies and cultures in many eras on many continents, probed these dilemmas 50 years ago in a brilliant essay entitled “The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History.” Cohen took issue with the well-known midrash that attributes Jewish survival to the fact that our ancestors did not change their names, abandon their ancestral language, or stop wearing distinctive clothing. He notes that this generalization did not hold for Jacob’s grandchildren in Egypt (who according to the Torah took Egyptian names such as Aaron and Moses), or for the later generations who adopted Greek names like those of the ambassadors whom Judah Maccabee sent to Rome, Jason and Eupolemos. Nor did Jews refrain from writing and giving sermons in other languages than Hebrew, or (when permitted to do so) from dressing like their gentle neighbors. (The author of this Torah commentary, written in English, of course bears the name Arnold, and happens to be wearing a V-neck sweater.) Cohen forcefully disputed the claim that Jews survived only by remaining utterly distinct from the cultures that surrounded them. Rather, “a frank appraisal of the periods in which Judaism flourished will indicate that not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation not impede Jewish continuity, but that in a profound sense, this assimilation and acculturation was a stimulus to original thinking and expression, a source or renewed vitality.” (Jewish History and Jewish Destiny, 151)

The lesson of Hanukkah, then, or of the Joseph story, or of countless episodes in the long history of Jewish encounter with gentile ways, is that if Jews assimilate completely to those ways, we lose our own way, and Jewish continuity is lost with it, but if we don’t wish to “ghettoize” ourselves, or allow Judaism to become “fossilized,” we will need “to assimilate—at least to some extent.” (ibid.,152) That has meant learning to speak new languages, and to have Torah speak in those languages. We have adapted customs and laws to new circumstances and found latent meanings in classical texts that previous generations had not seen there. We continue to draw lines that are at times squiggly or blurred, and at other times razor-sharp—and to argue with one another about which kind of boundary is required, and how to maintain it. And thanks to the cycle of weekly Torah readings, Joseph is here with us each year to guide us through the complexities of this holiday season.

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