

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Sibling Loyalty

Allison Kestenbaum, CPE Supervisor and Director of Programs, Center for Pastoral Education, JTS

Am I my brother's keeper?

Yes I am!

Yes I am!

When he's pushed to the edge when he's out on a ledge
 Can I help him to think with his heart
 When he's wrong when he's right I'll be there to remind him
 That he's made in the image of God
 When he struggles with troubles
 He needs to know
 That his mistakes don't define his life
 I'm a living example that there is a chance for redemption
 On the other side

Am I my brother's keeper?

Yes I am!

—“Brothers’ Keeper,” lyrics by India Arie Simpson and Shannon Sanders

This excerpt from the song “Brother’s Keeper” performed by India Arie is a powerful statement about the mutual responsibility human beings have for one another. It also echoes a significant moment in Parashat Vayiggash. Joseph is overcome by Judah’s loyalty to his captured brother Benjamin. Joseph reveals his identity to his brother, leading to reconciliation of the long-estranged and fractured family (Gen. 45:1-3).

When Arie sings “Am I my brother’s keeper?” she references the question asked by Cain when confronted by God in Parashat Bereishit about killing his brother Abel (Gen. 4:9). The exclaimed answer—“Yes I am! / Yes I am!”—reminds us of the moral strength demonstrated by Judah’s courageous actions in Vayiggash (Gen. 44:33). Judah is in effect answering a question posed generations before, demonstrating significant growth in moral responsibility and maturity.

Arie’s song raises questions (and answers) about mutual responsibility in our time. When we remind someone of the power of their heart, their likeness to God, and the possibility of redemption, we choose to stand up for and empower others.

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit www.jtsa.edu/torah



Vayiggash 5777

ויגש תשע"ז



In Pharaoh’s Court

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

Our attention as readers of Vayiggash is naturally riveted by the dramatic events in the first half of the portion: Joseph’s self-revelation to his brothers; the family of Jacob coming to dwell in Egypt; and Jacob’s declaration that he “must go and see [Joseph] before I die” (Gen. 45:28). What happens later in Vayiggash, however, is to my mind of far greater significance for the future of the children of Israel and the people of Egypt alike. The second half of the portion bears truths about Jewish history and destiny as relevant now as ever before.

Pharaoh sets the plot in motion when he urges Joseph not only to have his family come to Egypt but to have them “*come to me*; I will give you all the best of the land of Egypt and you shall live off the fat of the land” (45:18)—this, in the second year of the famine already reducing his people to desperation! Joseph understands what his boss has in mind: he knows that “all shepherds are abhorrent to Egyptians” (46:31-34), and that Pharaoh has special need for individuals with that skill set at this moment. Joseph will tell Pharaoh that his brothers “are shepherds; they have always been breeders of livestock,” and instructs them to say exactly that when Pharaoh asks their occupation. By so doing, they will gain permission to settle and remain in the region of Goshen.

Right after reading that Joseph settles his family “in the choicest part of the land of Egypt, in the region of Rameses” (47:11), thereby sustaining them despite the famine, we learn that the Egyptians have come to him begging that he allot them some of the grain he had collected from them during the seven years of plenty. Joseph does so—at a steep price. First he “gathered in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt,” and then, when their money was gone, he orders Egyptians to bring him all their livestock (vv. 13-16). Who will manage all those herds? Who will do the work of shepherding that Egyptians have always abhorred? Who can be trusted with this task? Joseph and his family.

The next year of the famine, the lot of the average Egyptian gets worse still: having given up their money and livestock, everyone but the families of priests (such as Joseph's father-in-law) must now give their lands to Pharaoh. Not only does Joseph have them sell their land, he also has them *leave* it: "And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other" (47:21). Rashi, far from being disturbed by Joseph's part in this national tragedy, draws an explicit connection between it and the welfare of Joseph's immediate family. "Joseph transferred the nation from city to city as a reminder that they no longer have any portion in the land. So he settled the residents of one city in its fellow [city]. Scripture did not have to write this but [did so] to inform you of Joseph's praise—that he intended to remove disgrace from upon his brothers, so that [the Egyptians] should not call [his brothers] exiles." For now, as the Artscroll edition clarifies with reference to a Talmudic passage [BT Hullin 60b], "after their resettlement, the Egyptians, too, were exiles."

This is, to me, a truly incredible commentary on an incredible verse of Scripture. Imagine: Joseph removes the opprobrium of exile from all of his family by rendering every Egyptian an exile! I can understand the lack of distaste for Joseph's role among major commentators, and even their lack of interest. After all, he was merely carrying out the will of Pharaoh, who as the god-king of Egypt had the right to do with his people as he pleased. One does not expect or demand justice of an absolute ruler. What is more, God is the apparent behind-the-scenes mover of all these events. It is God Who has placed Joseph in Pharaoh's court for the purpose of preserving the family of Israel during famine. God has caused the Children of Israel to come to Egypt, having them suffer so as to eventually take them out of there with a strong hand and outstretched arm. With that larger drama in mind, it's hard to fault Joseph for the role he plays. Pharaoh, lord of Egypt, believes that he is running the show, but Joseph knows, as we do, that in truth the Lord of Heaven and Earth is in charge. And besides, it is no surprise that the commentators are not upset at the suffering of the people who soon afterwards (Exodus 1:13) "enslaved the Children of Israel with crushing labor" and presumably acquiesced in Pharaoh's plan for genocide.

But note that, as Rashi himself makes clear, there is a direct connection between the events that transpired in the time of Joseph and the eventual enslavement of his descendants: "A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8). Rashi reports the Talmudic opinion that he was perhaps the same king who ruled in Joseph's time, but that he issued new edicts, acting as *if* he did not know Joseph. In fact, the pharaoh knew Joseph

all too well. Having used him and his family for his own ends quite effectively, Pharaoh—having no more use for them as retainers—now turns them into slaves. Pharaoh declared to his nation, in effect, "Remember Joseph, to whom you said (Gen. 47:25), 'You have saved our lives! We are grateful to my lord, and we shall be serfs—*avadim*—to Pharaoh,' this as Joseph's own family settled on the very best land of Egypt, acquiring holdings in it at the very moment you lost your holdings (v. 27)—let's now make them into our *avadim*, our slaves." So, "the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel" (Exod. 1:13). And—I continue supplying the subtext to Pharaoh's decree—"Remember how Joseph removed you *le'arim*, to cities, while he and his family lived in the Rameses area of Goshen? How about if we put them to work building store-cities, *arei miskanot*, including one in Rameses?" (Exod. 1:11).

The Torah always works on the principle of measure for measure. What goes around comes around. Joseph, for reasons beyond his control, had been complicit in the enslavement of Egypt. His descendants—for reasons beyond their control—will one day be enslaved by those same Egyptians (the Hebrew word is the same in both cases). Pharaoh thinks he is in control of policy, and so of history, but is actually subservient to a Higher Power. Jacob recognizes this in the blessing he bestows on Joseph in next week's portion (Gen. 48:15-16), and we, the readers of Torah, are reminded of it again and again. Human beings have a measure of freedom, which we are called to use in the service (a third use of *אֲבָדָה*, the word for serf and slave) of God. The natural human tendency is to focus on events of a scale we can comprehend and even shape: family relations, communal affairs, local politics, the news today, and what we can expect tomorrow. But the Torah makes it clear that our private circumstances are directly impacted by the story of our people. We are connected to a past and future much larger and grander than we can know.

The people Israel have an outsized role to play in that story, whether as Israelites in the Pharaoh's house or present-day Jews in the White House. Actions taken by Jewish advisers and Gentile rulers in present circumstances, whatever they may be, will inevitably reverberate far into the future—in ways that are by definition impossible for all concerned to predict. Jacob will die in next week's portion, as will his son Joseph, but the portion is entitled *Vayehi*—"and he lived"—because God lives, and the Jewish people live, and therefore the story in which Jacob and Joseph once figured, and in which you and I figure today, continues to twist and turn its way through history.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).