

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



An Alternative Hero

By Dr. S. Alisa Braun, Academic Director,
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Joseph, not Moses, torn apart
dreams snakes brothers father
sins and returns loves and is silent
wanders between the gleanings of Ephraim and the
delight of Manasseh
Joseph knowledge Joseph pain
Joseph summer

From *Yonatan Aviv (Jonathan Spring)* by Natan
Yonatan (transl. David C. Jacobson)

Do you recognize this Joseph? In the first stanza of Israeli poet Natan Yonatan's (1923–2004) *Yonatan Aviv (Jonathan Spring)*, the Joseph of Miketz is barely discernible—there is no reference to his rise in political power or his clever dealings with his brothers. His journey is no simple straight line from the bottom of the pit to overlord of all Egypt. Instead, this Joseph “wanders between”; he “sins and returns.” His life is one of confusion and heartbreak. Though not actually “torn apart,” as in his brothers’ fabrication, the poet reminds us how Joseph was indeed torn from his loved ones.

Why “Joseph, not Moses”? Yonatan’s poem demonstrates the way modern Jewish poets mine traditional sources, transforming figures from the Tanakh so that they reflect the values that speak to their own experience. Yonatan, whose elder son was killed in battle during the Yom Kippur War, seeks a hero not among Moses and David, the great military and national leaders of the Jewish people, but among Joseph and Jonathan, who embody vulnerability and love. Yonatan seeks an alternative hero whose path in life isn’t charmed, but rather fraught with the reality that the quest for knowledge can be painful.

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Parashat Miketz 5775

פרשת מקץ תשע"ה



A Blessing of Reconciliation

By Rabbi Lilly Kaufman, Director of the Torah Fund Campaign
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In Parashat Miketz, the masterful Joseph, *hashalit al ha'aretz* (the sovereign of the land) engages in a series of tests of his brothers’ honesty. Also at stake is the resilience of their father Jacob’s legacies.

Joseph invents a plan to hold one brother hostage in Egypt, echoing his own sale into slavery by his brothers, years earlier, in Parashat Vayeshev. Now, when faced with the temptation to put Rachel’s second-born son Benjamin at risk, if the brothers respond better than they did towards Joseph years earlier, they will prove their moral progress. The test begins to succeed when Judah offers to take personal responsibility for Benjamin, before the second journey from Canaan to Egypt (Gen. 43:8–10).

Between the first and second journeys of Joseph’s brothers to Egypt, Joseph holds Simeon hostage against the eventuality that the famine might end before the brothers can return to Egypt with Benjamin. Simeon seems a last-minute choice, a tactical move to ensure that the real strategic object of his attention, Benjamin, is brought back. Why Simeon, of all the brothers? Is it poetic justice: Leah’s second-born son held back in exchange for Rachel’s?

Nahum Sarna gives two explanations: “Having heard that Reuben, the eldest, had tried to save his life, Joseph selects the next in seniority to be detained. Besides, Simeon had a reputation for cruelty and may well have been the one who actually led the others in persecuting Joseph” (*Genesis: The JPS Commentary*, 295). Simeon’s reputation for cruelty stems from his and Levi’s violent attack on the men of Shekhem to avenge the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34:1–31). Birth order and cruel reputation are the reasons Sarna cites that Joseph holds Simeon hostage.

Simeon's name offers another possibility. The name that Leah bestowed on her second-born son in Parashat Vayetzei had meaning: "This is because the Lord heard that I was unloved and has given me this one also," so she named him Simeon (Gen. 29:33). When Joseph cried out from the bottom of the pit, Simeon, who was named for God's compassionate listening, failed, along with his brothers, to listen. Parashat Miketz makes Joseph's cries from the pit explicit in retrospect, and reveals that the brothers feel guilty: "They said to one another, 'Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, for we looked on at his anguish, yet we did not listen as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us'" (Gen. 42:21).

This text does not single out Simeon for not listening: its language of collective guilt is its most notable feature. But Simeon is the only one whose name should have schooled him to listen to the unloved person. Instead, he was the classic silent collaborator in a violent crime perpetrated by a mob, afraid to exercise his God-like capacity for compassionate listening, and to act on what he hears. His name critiques him as a follower who could have led from within the mob, but who chose not to do so.

The result is the undoing of Jacob's finest ethical teaching, taught to his wives, Leah and Rachel, to persuade them to flee their father Laban's house, in Parashat Vayetzei. There Jacob uttered the Bible's first definition of slavery: "And you know that with all my strength I have served your father. But your father has tricked me, changing my salary ten times over, and yet God has not let him do me harm" (Gen. 31:6–7). Jacob defined slavery as the employer's capricious creation of conditions of financial insecurity in the life of a worker. In the very next generation, Leah's oldest sons sell Rachel's oldest son into slavery. Jacob's legacy of opposing slavery has been abandoned in his lifetime.

Benjamin, by contrast, represents the potential for the success of another one of Jacob's legacies. When Joseph finally sees Benjamin, the sight of his younger brother elicits from Joseph a unique act of spiritual creativity, the invention of a blessing: "May God be gracious to you my son" (Gen. 43:29). Here Joseph echoes the word *hen* (grace) in Jacob's description of his children—"the children with which God has graced your servant" — said to Esau in Parashat Vayishlah (Gen. 33:5). When they were very young, Jacob characterized his children as the evidence of God's grace. Now Joseph takes his father's spiritual insight, spoken during a fraternal conflict, and transforms it into a blessing, uttered at a fraternal reconciliation.

It is striking that Joseph calls Benjamin "beni" (my son), even though they are brothers. His grand stature in Egypt and their age difference do not fully explain his paternal attitude toward Benjamin. The idea of legacy does. A blessing given by an elder person to a younger one is more than a good wish. It is a spiritual legacy, spoken here in the delicately exalted language of *hen*.

Simeon's story makes clear that there is no guarantee that children will act in accordance with their parents' ethical legacy, whether Simeon is the cruel instigator, as Sarna says, or a cowardly collaborator, as I suggest. But the potential to develop good character is present at each new birth, and is a sign of God's grace. This is the hope that Joseph expresses for Benjamin, the youngest soul in Jacob's clan.

Joseph is *hashalit* (the sovereign) over the land of Egypt. With some difficulty he is also *hashalit* over himself, twice restraining his feelings of love in order to inculcate repentance in his brothers (Gen. 42:24, 43:30). And he is *hashalit* over our national family story, placing betrayal of a legacy (Simeon) and the potential to fulfill a legacy (Benjamin) in instructive tension. Joseph's blessing gives new, transmissible form to God's grace in the world: in the loving, hopeful words offered from brother to brother, and, simultaneously, from elder to younger. It is the transcendent moment which Joseph could not have predicted, toward which he nevertheless dared to hope and to act.

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