דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Mourning for Joseph

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***Yūsuf va Zulaykhā* (Joseph and Zulaykha)**
Author: Jāmī, (1414-1492)
Scribe: Eliyahu ben Nisan ben Eliyahu Gorgī
Mashad, Iran: 1852–1853
ms. 1534

Joseph and Zulaykha was written by Jāmī, a Persian poet and adherent of the mystical tradition of Islam (Sufism). It is based on the biblical story of Joseph and the wife of the Egyptian courtier, Potiphar (she is known as Zulaykha in Muslim tradition). In parashat Vayeshev, she attempted to seduce Joseph but was spurned. In contrast, in Sufism, the eventual love between Joseph and Zulaykha was a model of the love between God and his mystical devotees.

This manuscript was produced after the Jewish community of Mashad had been forcibly converted to Islam in 1839. However, the ongoing popularity of this story among Jews shows that their affection for this Sufi tale was not a product of coercion but of their attraction to Sufi spirituality. The text is a Judeo-Persian transcription of the story, and this page describes the death of Joseph, as is also found in this week's parashah. In this account, however, it is Zulaykha who mourns him.

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Parashat Vayehi 5776 **פרשת ויחי תשע"ו**

Blessings From Love

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Given all that's come before in Genesis, the Torah's notice that Israel's days are nearing their end brings dread. This stems not from fear of death, but a dread of blessing. The passing of a patriarch means that a scene of generational blessing is imminent. Experience tells us that these transitions are neither easy nor clean. Abraham accedes to God's elevation of Isaac over his firstborn, Ishmael. Even though Ishmael will also be great even by the measure of "keeping up with the Jacobs" (he, too, will father twelve nations), God explicitly rejects Ishmael's inheritance of God's blessing. Worse still, Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, are banished in an unforgettable episode of rupture and vulnerability. The imperative of Isaac's destiny as heir to the blessing cannot be denied, even at great pain.

In like manner, Jacob twice takes for himself blessings ostensibly reserved for his older twin. That his rightful inheritance was already established when he and his brother wrestled in Rebecca's womb reads as small comfort because Esau's pain is so palpable and radiates outward, damaging his whole family. While I'm blurring the distinction between the household inheritance that Jacob ladles into his own bowl and the Abrahamic blessing that he claims as a wolf in sheep's clothing, the fact is that the imperative of Jacob's destiny sunders the bonds of family. Against the threat of fratricide, Jacob flees into a long exile. Isaac and Rebecca take sides vis-à-vis their sons and Esau tries to regain love he hadn't known he'd lost.

By the time we get to Jacob's adult family—his wives, their maidservants, their sons, and their daughter, blessing as such is not even on the table. Rather, in this family, the blessing of rank and status gets established as an expression of irrational love. The rivalries, deceit, and violence that mark every turn of the story of Jacob and his sons are one miserably failed attempt after another at compelling love (Jacob's, by Leah and Rachel) or destroying a beloved that cannot be had (Joseph, by Potiphar's wife) or denying a beloved to another (Joseph, by his

brothers). How many times in a single story can Joseph die a death of sorts on the road to realizing his destiny? How many times can Jacob be bereft of a child over the error of loving one overmuch?

It's no wonder, then, that the reader feels dread in our parashah when Jacob is nearing death and word is somehow dispatched to Joseph alone, who presents himself at his father's bed with his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Indeed, the scene goes forward in as inauspicious way as we have come to expect: The favored son again gains his father's special attention as he always has. Joseph learns that Jacob will exercise his prerogative and elevate Joseph's sons through adoption to the same status (vis-à-vis inheritance) as Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 48:5–6). Joseph's "take" relative to his brothers is now doubled.

What follows is confusing, as it seems that Jacob—having just adopted the boys—seems not to know who they are. "Who are these boys?" he asks in verse 8, to which Joseph responds: "They're my sons, whom God gave me in this place [Egypt]." With the seeming confusion cleared up, Jacob says, "Bring them to me that I may bless them."

Scholars explain that the bumpy sequence in our passage results from the Torah editing together two different tellings of the same story. The commentator Keli Yakar, though, understands Jacob's hesitation differently. He reads Jacob's words to be elliptical—an unfinished sentence that when expressed in full reads thus: "Joseph, who are you bringing forward for a blessing? These boys are unworthy." Jacob's entire life has been about destiny and the struggle to protect it. He is also a prophet. His comment derives from his knowledge that Ephraim's descendants will include the evil kings of Israel Jeroboam and Ahab. "How," Jacob is wondering, "could I possibly invoke God's blessing on these boys, knowing as I do who will come from them?" Joseph replies, "They are my children. Whatever else may be true about them and their descendants they are my children and from my perspective they merit blessing."

Joseph brings as proof the fact that God blesses Isaac when God knows that Isaac's son Esau will bear descendants who include idol worshipers. In the Keli Yakar's interpretation, Joseph counters his father's resistance to blessing his sons by referencing the moment when God saves Ishmael, the rejected son. Ishmael lies dying of thirst in the wilderness (because God himself endorsed his banishment)! In that moment, Ishmael is an innocent. God does not leave him to die but, seeing him הוּא-שָׁם בַּאֲשֶׁר, *as he is and where he is*, reveals to

Hagar a well of water at hand from which she might save her son's life and her own (Gen. 21:17–19). In *our* scene at Jacob's deathbed, Joseph tells his father that he must bless the boys. "They are my children and from my perspective they merit blessing. When it comes to blessing, *who one is and where he is now* is the only thing that matters. For all creatures are blessed by God. So of course you should bless them."

The penultimate scene in Parashat Vayehi, and with it the Book of Genesis, is a heartbreaking moment of reconciliation. Jacob has died and Joseph's brothers fear that Joseph will finally feel free to retaliate against them for their long ago cruelties toward him. In their panic, they resort to a lie (well, I'm not certain they're lying, but it sure feels like it). They say that before Jacob died he conveyed to them that Joseph must forgive them their wrongs. Joseph weeps. He recognizes that the destiny that has driven his life and driven his family from the very first was from God and was for the good. It has placed him in exactly the position of superiority of which he dreamt as an adolescent. But the damage wrought in realizing that destiny lingers still. Seeking yet again to heal its wound, Joseph reassures his family that the grand, generational trajectory of that destiny—which secured the establishment of the clan that will become the Children of Israel, God's covenanted people—does not wipe away the filial bonds upon which it is built. In Genesis 50:20 he recognizes that he was destined to sustain a vast nation. But in the next verse he speaks to the individual people, his brothers, standing before him: "Fear not. I will sustain you and your children." The Torah adds that "He comforted them and spoke to their hearts."

The magnanimity and fundamental kindness that close the book of Genesis resolve with peace and love the colliding trajectories of national destiny and family integrity we have tracked since Abram first quarreled with Lot. What has been a continual tear in the fabric of Abraham's family is finally mended.

Judaism calls on us to live in response to the great imperatives of the Jewish People, mindful of our covenantal responsibilities that in varying ways transcend time, space, autonomy, nationality, and more. Our answer to that call sometimes yields a "no" to other imperatives, and sometimes at great pain. Yet that very "no" must sometimes be checked by Joseph's rejoinder to his father, Jacob: "They are my children. From my perspective, they merit blessing. They are blessed by God. So you bless them, too."

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