

more circumspect, thank God. He has learned, by the end of Genesis, that the way to find your brothers is not to lord it over them, whether through exercise, force, or the power of interpreting their lives to them, but to forgive and love them.

Of course Joseph cannot keep himself from loving Benjamin more than all the others, and rewarding him with “several changes of clothing” (45:22). He probably took a degree of pleasure in watching his brothers make his dream come true, but can only look on helplessly as his dying father blesses Joseph’s own second-born son, Ephraim, before his firstborn, Manasseh. This is Israel’s story, after all, and Joseph—like all children of Israel—is part of it. He lives to take it forward.

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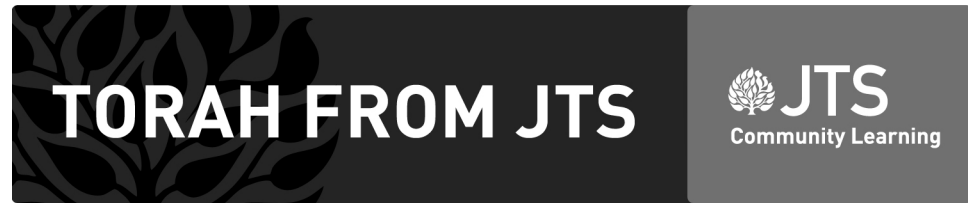
## דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

This week’s “A Different Perspective” is a recording of *Al Hanissim*, performed by the Chorus of the H. L. Miller Cantorial School and College of Jewish Music, and composed by Mike Boxer of the Jewish a cappella group Six13.

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## Parashat Vayeshev 5775

פרשת וישב תשע"ה



### His Father’s Son

By Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor of The Jewish Theological Seminary

To the memory of Polly Leveen, 1925–2014

Bereishit Rabbah, commenting on our parashah’s opening statement, “This is the line [or: story] of Jacob. Joseph . . .” (Gen. 37:2), asks why Joseph is mentioned instead of Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn. In response, the Midrash provides a cogent explanation of why “Israel (i.e., Jacob) loved Joseph best of all his sons” (37:3). Jacob recognized that his story and Joseph’s are, in many ways, the same. Jacob’s mother had two sons, and so did Joseph’s; the former had great difficulty in childbirth, and so did the latter (Rachel died in delivering Benjamin); “just as this one was the firstborn, so that one was the firstborn”; “just as this one was hated by his brother [Esau], so that one was hated by [all] his brother[s]”—hated because neither one of them attained the status of firstborn by actually being the first to come out of the womb (Bereishit Rabbah 84:6). Jacob knows Joseph is his true heir, regardless of birth order; the destiny that passed to him from his own father and grandfather—not in any simple way, and certainly not because of personal virtue—will continue through Joseph, however vain, tactless, and feckless his son might be. God rewards those who dream the dreams that God inspires. Jacob knows this God, and knows he lives inside a story that God has set in motion.

And we—what is the source of *our* attraction to Joseph? We stand in a very long line of children of Israel who have been fascinated with Joseph, the first person to have stood in that line. It’s hard in 2014 to see him, like the Rabbis, as a great tzadik, even if he did resist the temptation of betraying Potiphar by sleeping with his wife; brought his brothers to *teshuvah* (repentance) through an elaborate and risky ruse; forgave them for selling him into slavery; and apparently administered the entire wealth of Egypt without ever profiting personally from his position. Joseph seems too worldly for the role of tzadik, too complex, too much a man of action rather than reflection.

We never once see Joseph pray, nor does God address him as God had his forebears. Joseph seems too multifaceted a person to be the exemplar of any one trait. He is a man of many parts—indeed, he seems to know early on that he must play these parts successfully on whatever stages he is placed by life in order to survive in the world and fulfill his youthful dreams. We watch the man, admire his skill at making his way, enter into his self-consciousness—and *we too, like Jacob, identify*. Joseph is not only a contemporary of Pharaoh, he is *our* contemporary. He is, like us, a child of Israel, exhibiting a kind of righteousness to which we too can aspire.

The Torah intends this identification. It does not want to be a mere history book, or a work of literature. We are obligated by and responsible to the stories the Torah tells. It needs us to take those stories forward—and to that end the Torah introduces us to ancestors who are like us in their “human-all-too-human” combination of nobility and imperfection; sets those ancestors in social and political circumstances that we recognize as similar to our own, for all the differences between ancient Egypt and modern America; and, most important of all, shows us the ancestors interacting with a God much like the God we know and do not know: a God sometimes there when you want God near at hand, sometimes not there when you want and need God close; sometimes there when you decidedly do *not* want God around—and sometimes, as with Joseph, perhaps there and perhaps not. This third similarity between Joseph and us is to my mind what most binds us to his story, and prevents us from ever letting go.

How lonely he must have been, this young man favored by his father but deprived of his mother, gifted with dream after dream that promises he will matter greatly in the world and earn the adoration of his older brothers—but results, because he cannot stop himself from sharing his dreams with others, in his brothers being unable to say a civil word to him. They hate him for his dreams. “I am ready,” Joseph says at once when his father asks him to go in search of his brothers; *hineni*—the same word through which his great-grandfather Abraham declared willingness to be sent on divine errands. Joseph tells the “man” who finds him wandering in the fields, “I am looking for my brothers”—a prerequisite, it seems, of looking for and finding God. Joseph knows, if he credits his dreams, that he will never simply be one of the group, but rather their leader. His father knows this too. But neither one of them can be certain. God’s plans are never realized in a straightforward fashion. Destiny, in this story, is never an unmixed blessing.

God’s failure to appear directly in Joseph’s story is part of what attracts us modern readers to him; like Joseph, we are left by the text to ponder. The coincidences in plot and language could be just that: coincidences imposed by the storyteller, perhaps overdoing it a bit, as Joseph might have suspected himself of doing in his own mind. What shall we/he make of the fact that his brothers strip off his garment from him—and so does Potiphar’s wife? How shall we/he interpret the fact that Joseph is rescued from the pit into which his brothers cast him, then made a slave in a home where everything prospers “because the Lord blessed his [master’s] house for Joseph’s sake, so that the blessing of the Lord was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside?” (Gen. 39:5), and then ends up in another dungeon, where he again prospers, a dungeon which he himself calls a “pit” (40:15)? It is true that God never appears to Joseph to bestow blessings as God did to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—but God does palpably bless him, as God did them. Shall he/we not acknowledge such blessing, and its Source? Sometimes life repeats itself in ways that cry out for interpretation—and thanksgiving!—all the more if a person’s dreams, and interpretation of dreams, are responsible for the steepest of descents and ascents.

I think Joseph is sincere when he ascribes dreams, and his ability to interpret them, to God. Too much has happened in Joseph’s life (and in the lives of his ancestors, as in the lives of everyone who has interacted with YHWH in the Torah’s narrative) for Joseph to dismiss the ups and downs of his own story as mere coincidence. Joseph does not know God intimately, and if he knows more about God than we do, he is not permitted by the narrator to tell about it. But he seems certain, amidst the massive uncertainties that have tossed him about, that God stands behind him, watches over him, intends his life for a purpose.

We never see Joseph interpreting his life with the level of detail that characterizes his interpretation of dreams, except when he tells his brothers (45:5) that not they but God sent him down to Egypt in order “to save life.” Beyond that, Joseph and the text are reticent—a silence that further attracts me to the man and his story. Should Joseph have given God credit for his good looks? For his oratorical skill? For the color of his eyes, the money in his pocket? Should we see every fact of biography or history as divinely ordained, and then interpret those facts in accordance with our reading of God’s intentions? So much evil has been done (and still is, every day) by men and women who presume to know what God has in mind. So much awful theology is put forth in God’s name, whether “explanations” for the Holocaust or “reasons” why a train crash kills dozens of children (and spares others). Joseph is