

“Now, do not be sad or angry with yourselves that you sold me, because God sent me before you to save lives. . . . So it was not you that sent me here, but God” (Gen. 45:4–8).

Joseph’s certitude about his life’s mission, about why he was sold into slavery and why he rose to prominence in Egypt, is at once enviable and disturbing. Who wouldn’t like a little more assurance about what they have achieved and what their purpose is, something to cling to when the world is in turmoil? But the price for this confidence is that the brothers’ agency has been eliminated.

We all depend on the frameworks that we create to make sense of our experiences. The challenge is to forge narratives for our lives that are strong enough to hold us steady when confronted with life’s ups and downs, yet flexible enough to allow others in so that they can impact our lives.

Parashat Vayiggash 5775

פרשת ויגש תשע"ה



Finding the Larger Message

By Rabbi Judith Hauptman, E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture, JTS

When kids in Hebrew School read the story of Joseph, he looks very good. He saves the lives of many Egyptians by storing grain in the fat years and dispensing it in the lean years. But when an adult reads the same verses, Joseph appears unscrupulous. We ask: when the hungry people come to him during the years without crops, does he have to make them sell him all their cattle? And when they come back a second time, does he have to make them sell him all their land and also offer themselves as slaves (Gen. 47:13-26)?

As moving as the reunion between Joseph and his brothers at the beginning of Parashat Vayigash is (Gen. 44:18–46:30)—I cry each time I read it—even so, when I discover how Joseph manipulated and exploited the starving Egyptians, I am deeply troubled. Professor Jon D. Levenson comments in the *Oxford Jewish Study Bible* (Gen. 47:13–27): “The cruelty of Joseph’s enslavement of Egypt does not seem to bother the narrator.” But it bothers me.

Many traditional commentators explain the verses without judging Joseph. Rashi says that when the people ask Joseph for seed during the lean years, which seems to make little sense since nothing will grow, it is a sign that the famine is beginning to abate (Gen. 47:19). The reason for the change is that when Jacob came down to Egypt, blessings came with him. That is so, continues Rashi, because when a tzaddik, a pious man, enters the world, blessing enters with him, and when he dies, blessing departs (Tosefta Sotah 10:1). As for Gen. 47:20, which says that the entire land belonged to Pharaoh because Joseph purchased it for him, Rashi merely comments on a grammatical point. He remains silent with regard to Joseph’s actions.

Nahmanides, a very perceptive Medieval commentator, does seem troubled by Joseph's exploitation of the Egyptians. He reads several verses closely in order to argue that after buying everything they owned, Joseph behaved kindly towards them. In v. 19 they offer themselves and their land to Pharaoh in exchange for bread and seed. When Joseph responds to their plea, he takes their land but does not take them as slaves (v. 20). That is, he negotiates a deal in which they remain as tenant farmers on the land and may keep four-fifths of the yield, turning over only one-fifth to Pharaoh. That is surely not the same as becoming slaves, says Nahmanides, even if they are legally bound to keep working the land. And for that reason they further say to Joseph, "we will find favor in your eyes" (v. 25), apparently meaning that they know he could have asked for much more but graciously settled for less.

I agree with Nahmanides that these verses, which end the chapter and also the parashah, do seem to be saying that the terms Joseph offered were not as severe as they could have been. But I still ask, what is this characterization of Joseph coming to teach us? That one may exploit the vulnerable when one is able to do so, as long as one stops a little short of making it as bad as could be?

Professor Nahum Sarna, in his Jewish Publication Society commentary on Genesis, suggests that one should not read this episode separately from the rest of the story. The book of Genesis tells the early history of the Jewish people. It is necessary for the Narrator to point out that Joseph had the interests of the Pharaoh at heart, and turned over to him every penny he collected, because this allows the listener to be shocked and outraged when the book of Exodus states in its eighth verse that the new king of Egypt "did not know Joseph." It is hard to imagine that Joseph could have been forgotten by a later Pharaoh, and even more so by the people, whom he had stripped of all possessions. To prepare the reader to grasp fully the horror of the Israelite enslavement in Egypt, it is necessary for the Narrator to show how devoted Joseph was to this Pharaoh and hence how ungrateful the later Pharaoh was. For the same reason, the Narrator also wishes to distinguish between the way Joseph enslaved the Egyptians and the way the other Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites, i.e., by assigning them hard manual labor.

The way to read biblical narratives for moral and religious teachings is to look at the bigger picture, the unfolding story of the Israelite

people and their long journey to the Promised Land. Only by doing so will we extricate ourselves from the quandary in which a close reading of the text with adult eyes sometimes places us.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



A Narrative for Our Lives

By Rabbi Tim Daniel Bernard, Director of Digital Learning and Engagement, JTS

"[W]e adopt, in so far as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged. . . . But simplicity as a guiding principle in constructing conceptual schemes is not a clear and unambiguous idea."

W.V.O. Quine, "On What There Is,"
From a Logical Point of View, 16–17

No matter if we are philosophers (like Quine), scientists, or grand viziers of Egypt (like Joseph), we all constantly engage in the process of slotting the "disordered fragments of raw experience" into an overarching framework. And, Quine notes, however strictly we cleave to the path of greatest simplicity, we still exercise some choice in constructing these narratives. On revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph makes clear that he has developed such a framework; in the words of Aviva Zornberg, he has "discovered a vocabulary to describe his life" (*Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, 335).

וְעַתָּה אֵל-תַּעֲצְבוּ וְאֵל-יַחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מִכְרַתֶּם אֹתִי הֲנֵה כִּי
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