

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



An Alternative Hero

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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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Hearing the Scream

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Perhaps no scream is more famous than the one portrayed in Edvard Munch's painting popularly known simply as *The Scream*. The irony is that almost none of us is aware of the scream that Munch intended to portray.

The original full title of the painting is *Der Schrei der Natur, The Scream of Nature*. According to Munch, the scream comes from the blood-orange/red sky. He describes the inspiration for the painting as follows:



I was walking down the road with two friends when the sun set; suddenly, the sky turned as red as blood. I stopped and leaned against the fence, feeling unspeakably tired. Tongues of fire and blood stretched over the bluish black fjord. My friends went on walking, while I lagged behind, shivering with fear. Then I heard the enormous infinite scream of nature.

The figure who seems to be screaming is actually reacting to another scream, and he is striving not to hear without success—covering his ears in a vain attempt to block out the shrieks that assail him. His mouth is open wide with shock and terror. But though he can convey that sense of horror he cannot make his friends—or us—hear nature’s scream; he alone is trapped with it inside his own head, held in, as it were, by the same hands that struggle to fend it off. His cries must seem to others to be those of a madman, because they are

oblivious to the cause of his terror. Munch brilliantly expresses this by using a visual medium to depict an aural event. We can imagine the scream, but we can never hear it; a wall of silence stands between us and the anguished figure in the foreground of the painting.

In Parashat Miketz we read of another cry that was not heard. Upon recognizing his brothers, Joseph accuses them of being spies. He first threatens to jail all but one of his brothers and send the remaining one to bring back Benjamin with him. He then relents and requires only one of them, Simeon, to remain as hostage while the others bring food to their families and then return with their youngest brother. After their release the brothers ruminate on the cause of their adversities. “They said to one another, ‘Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked upon his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why his distress has come upon us’” (Gen. 42:21).

As he pleaded with us. We are thunderstruck: we, like the brothers, never heard Joseph’s pleas. We accepted the narrative as it was recorded in Genesis 37; the brothers strip Joseph of his clothes, cast him into a pit, consider letting him die and finally sell him into slavery. We hear not a word from Joseph. And yet, if we think for a moment, we realize that of course Joseph must have spoken. He must have protested, screamed, begged, perhaps even cursed. Although rendered in the style of the omniscient narrator, the Genesis 37 narrative is in fact told from the brothers’ perspective. Joseph is a thorn in their side that needs to be removed. How? Sale? Murder? Slow death? No need to consult your prospective victim. And after casting him naked into a pit you can always decide upon his ultimate fate over a satisfying lunch—“then they sat down to a meal” (v. 25). Joseph’s screams are just background noise for the brothers; they hear it but it does not stir them.

In Genesis 38, the brothers, after so many years have passed, finally open their ears to Joseph’s cries. It is as if the sounds have been frozen in time and now come rushing in to fill the brothers’ ears. The aural experience of hearing happened long ago; now the listening begins. To truly hear those cries must have been unbearable for the brothers; in that act they were acknowledging Joseph’s humanity and therefore their own inhumanity in being indifferent to his suffering.

And we finally hear Joseph’s screams as well, inserting them into the narrative we know so well. And we acknowledge that we are co-conspirators in our willingness to imagine the story of Joseph’s sale without the inclusion of Joseph’s voice. And so now we must tell ourselves the story in a new way, one that includes Joseph’s heartrending cries. To tell the story this way is almost unbearable, and it helps us understand why the brothers had to edit Joseph’s screams out of their collective memory.

Some cries, like those of a child with loving parents, are heard at once. Some are resisted for a short time and then acknowledged, as when lovers quarrel. Some cries are left unheard for years, even decades, like those of Joseph. Some cries, like Munch’s scream, remain frozen in time, always being sounded, never being truly heard.

And yet it is Munch’s cry of nature that we most need to hear in this dangerous hour. Melting ice caps, bizarre weather—in so many ways the earth calls out to us, “You are killing me!” We may choose not to hear it. But I shudder when I think of the day upon which we will look at a devastated planet and say—if we are still alive to say it—“Alas, we are being punished because we looked upon our planet’s anguish, yet paid no heed as it pleaded with us.”

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