



A Narrative for Our Lives

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[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).

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.



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ויגש תש"ף



Why Everyone Should Cry in Public

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Vayiggash brings us to the culmination of the drama between Joseph and his brothers that began in Parashat Miketz. Ten of Joseph’s brothers—all but Benjamin—had travelled to Egypt to buy food during a famine. Joseph, newly in command in Egypt, had disguised himself and, perhaps in retaliation for the way they had treated him earlier, forced his brothers to go through various ordeals and humiliating situations. One of Joseph’s demands was that his brothers bring their youngest brother Benjamin when they returned to Egypt, with which they now comply, despite their father Jacob’s resistance to putting his youngest and beloved son in danger. When they finally arrive in Egypt with Benjamin, Joseph frames all the brothers for theft of money and Benjamin for theft of a silver goblet. Joseph confronts the brothers and they find the goblet in Benjamin’s bag. Judah begs Joseph to imprison him in Benjamin’s place, explaining that if Joseph detains Benjamin instead, their father Jacob will die of grief.

After hearing Judah’s words, Joseph is overcome and finally makes himself known to his brothers:

“Then Joseph could not restrain himself before everyone who stood by him, and he cried: ‘Get everyone away from me.’ No one was standing with Joseph when he revealed his identity to his brothers. And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians heard, and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Joseph said to his brothers: ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’” (Gen. 45:1-3)

In these powerful verses, Joseph expresses a need both for concealment and for self-expression. He is about to tell the truth to his brothers, but he also

demands that the others around him leave. If he is about to make public an identity that is no secret from those around him, what then is motivating Joseph's demand to be alone with his family? Rashi tells us that by making sure that only family is left in the room, Joseph is acting out of a desire to protect his family from any further humiliation: he does not want the Egyptians to see his brothers put to shame when they realize who he is. According to this read, Joseph's need to expel the Egyptians demonstrates that he is beginning to express compassion for his brothers.

But perhaps Joseph's need for privacy at that moment has less to do with Joseph's feelings towards his brothers and more to do with Joseph's awareness, even self-consciousness, of his own emotional reactions. In his explanation of this verse, Rashbam focuses on the fact that we are told that Joseph "could not restrain himself," and calls our attention to the appearance of Joseph's self-restraint two chapters earlier, when Joseph first sees Benjamin in Egypt. Immediately after he recognizes his brother, the Torah tells us:

"Joseph hurried out, for he was growing warm and tender toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went to a room and wept there. Then he washed his face, reappeared, and restrained himself, and he said, 'Set out the bread.'" (43:30-31)

Joseph notices that his emotions are welling up and he is about to cry. He immediately leaves the room and cries in private. When he emerges, his face is washed clean of tears and his true feelings of compassion and warmth towards his brother are hidden under a veneer of restraint.

Rashbam explains that from that point until the moment he decides to reveal himself to his brothers, Joseph "was able to do everything he did"—that is, continuing to carry out his deceit towards his brothers—"because he was restraining himself in his heart." In other words, his ability to suppress his own emotions is what enabled his cruel manipulation of his family. Now that he is no longer able to restrain himself, however, he cannot maintain the deception, and he is overcome by weeping and his own desire to make amends.

When read alongside Joseph's earlier reaction to his own weeping, then, it seems as though Joseph's demand to be left alone may come from a place of not wanting his emotionally vulnerable side to be publicly revealed.

Joseph is a political ruler, after all; perhaps his weeping could be seen as a sign of weakness by his subjects. Yet ironically, Joseph's request for privacy is revealed to be completely ineffective: this time, when he cries, he is so loud that he is audible to everyone in the building.

Whereas earlier Joseph wept in secret, now Joseph is unable to hide the intensity of his emotion, not just from his family but from the people who are likely essentially his courtiers. Even though his powerful role may have served as a barrier to his ability to express vulnerability, he is unable to maintain his grip on himself any longer, and he reveals his full self. And it is in this moment of complete self-disclosure, of not only the outer trappings of his identity but his inner emotional life, that he is able to make amends with his brothers. If Joseph's earlier self-restraint enabled his cruelty, his release now enables his compassion.

A powerful male political leader is perhaps an unusual role model for emotional honesty and vulnerability—but he also may serve as a role model precisely for those of us who, for reasons of gender, profession, or general personality, spend most of the time with a tight rein on our emotional self-expression. It is all the more striking that despite his ability to control himself most of the time, Joseph also lets go when he needs to, and it is only at this moment that he is able to become his best self and heal wounds that were created by long-ago interactions and family dynamics. If only we all could learn, as Joseph did over these few chapters, how to display our soft underbellies when we need to, and to allow our raw and tender emotions to show us how to be kind.

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