

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.



Miketz 5781

מקץ תשפ"א



Strangers to Ourselves

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The Joseph narrative contains a striking number of contronyms—words that simultaneously convey opposite meanings. Why?

Contronyms are a natural linguistic expression of the Torah’s insistence that a “both/and” perspective is essential to understanding deep truths, other people, and ourselves. The portrayal of Joseph is a prime example:

Is Joseph a hero, who saves everyone from famine? Or is he an authoritarian enabler who, seduced by proximity to power and wealth, sets the stage for oppression by consolidating land, wealth, and population control under Pharaoh?

Are his machinations with his brothers a test of their remorse and repentance, calculated to lead to reconciliation? Or is he using his position to exact revenge, cruelly toying with his brothers’ and father’s fears?

Is he genuinely pious, or does he abuse his charismatic gifts in the service of his ego, invoking God to shore up his position, or to appear humble and disinterested?

Does he truly wield power, or has he surrendered his agency—becoming the highest-ranking slave to Pharaoh, enslaved as well to his own emotional needs?

The answer in every case is “yes.” But it’s hard to hold simultaneously such conflicting views of one person. So depending on how we’ve “read” Joseph in the past and what we expect from our biblical ancestors (do we want to admire and emulate them? do we want to critique them?), we as readers are likely to credit some aspects of the story while discounting or not even noticing other

details. As with people in our lives, absent significant effort and ongoing study, we tend to construct for ourselves an artificially smooth narrative of who Joseph is, consisting of only part of the reality.

This tendency helps explain the most striking contranym in the story, the root נכר (nun-khaf-resh), which is used—within a single verse—to mean both “recognize” and “unrecognizable”: “When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them (וַיִּכְרֶם / *vayakirem*); but he made himself unrecognizable (וַיִּתְנַצֵּר / *vayitnaker*) to them” (Gen. 42:7).

The term refers to actual identification, of course, but suggests much more. I “recognize” someone when I see them accurately as an independent Other, acknowledging and accepting what we share and also how we differ. To “not be recognized” is to be overlooked or seen falsely—as a partial rather than whole self, or a projection of the one seeing.

The problem of recognizing an Other is thus entangled with the problem of recognizing one’s self. If I don’t recognize my own preconceptions, biases, unconsciousness narratives, agendas, etc., how can I know if I’m truly seeing anyone else?

“Joseph recognized (וַיִּכְרֶם / *vayaker*) his brothers, but they did not recognize him (לֹא הִכְרִיחוּ / *lo hikruhu*)” (Gen. 42:8).

The Midrash explains that Joseph could recognize his brothers because when he left them, they were already fully mature and bearded. He however was a youth, and the greater change in his appearance made him unrecognizable now (*Genesis Rabbah* 91:7).

But in a stunningly insightful (and contemporary!) reading, the Or Hahayyim (Chaim Ibn Attar, 18th c. Morocco) rejects this. He explains that, usually, once *I know you* dawns on one person, the Other too senses it unconsciously and begins scrutinizing more carefully, eventually also realizing, *ah yes, I do know this person*. But the Torah specifically informs us that that didn’t happen. Why? Because seeing him in such an exalted position, says the Or Hahayyim, they had already decided what they would see in him, and “distanced this thought from their consciousness.” In other words, because the brothers’ operative narrative had Joseph in a debased, disempowered state, at the bottom of an actual pit the last time they saw him, they were unable or unwilling to recognize him raised high.

This reading comes remarkably close to what cognitive scientists call confirmation bias—the human tendency to only notice or give credence to data if it can be understood as conforming to our existing beliefs, such that our views of Self and Other tend to reinforce themselves. The brothers’ confirmation bias prevented them from recognizing him. But Joseph “made himself strange” (an alternate translation of *vayitnaker*)—a good description of the conscious effort required to see past what we already believe—and so he could recognize them.

Now we can understand the profound significance of having the same word mean both “recognize” and “unrecognizable.” A simple inability to make a physical identification may be the result of too *little* familiarity. But deeper failures of recognition are often a problem of too *much* familiarity: we fail to truly see someone because we think we already know who they are. Recognition thus depends upon a kind of estrangement, allowing who and what we think we know to become a bit foreign, becoming strangers to ourselves.

It is no accident that this insight is highlighted just at this point in the story, as it begins its movement toward the dramatic reconciliation of brothers who hated and hurt one another. Stepping out of our familiar interior landscapes into a strange land of new thoughts—becoming a bit foreign to ourselves—takes effort and courage. But it is essential to moving past hatred, to seeking and granting forgiveness, to truly seeing and understanding the Other, ourselves, and our world.

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