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Joseph, Hanukkah, and the Dilemmas of Assimilation

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Ruminations about assimilation come naturally to Jews in North America during the winter holiday season. How much should a parent insist that Hanukkah is part of public school celebrations that give students a heavy dose of Christmas? How often should one remind store clerks who innocently ask Jewish children which gifts they hope to receive from Santa this year that there are other faiths observed in our communities, and other holidays? Intermarried couples are familiar with conversations about having a Christmas tree at home, or going to midnight mass, or allowing their kids to open gifts Christmas morning under the tree at their cousins' home. The Hanukkah story is the perfect stimulus for such reflections, especially when read, as some historians do, not as a conflict between Jews and a tyrannical government, but as a dispute among Jews themselves over which Greek customs are acceptable and which cross the line to assimilation or apostasy.

How much distinctiveness *should* Jews maintain in a society and culture like ours that offers unprecedented opportunity and freedom? How much distinctiveness *can* we maintain without putting our acceptance in jeopardy? And—perhaps the most difficult question on the communal agenda these days—how much distinctiveness can Jews *afford to sacrifice* without losing Jewish children and grandchildren to the ways and identity of the majority?

Joseph—the most important figure among the first generation of the children of Israel—struggles with a version of these same dilemmas as he rises from one prison-pit after another to the height of power at the court of Pharaoh. Of all the dramatic moments in the gripping story of his reconciliation with the brothers who once betrayed him, none is more poignant, I think, than when Pharaoh tells Joseph that he will have absolute power limited only by the Pharaoh himself. The astute ruler had taken the measure of Joseph and realized immediately that this "shrewd and perceptive" Israelite was perfectly suited to the nasty work of gathering up all the grain of Egypt during the seven years of plenty, and selling it back to them during the seven years of famine. (Gen. 41:38-44) He immediately gives Joseph two gifts that can be read as heart-wrenching examples of the price he will pay for that power. Joseph will have an Egyptian name, Tsafenat Pane'ah—"the sustainer of life"—and an Egyptian wife, Asenat, the daughter of a priest, Poti Fera. (41:45).

The story that follows reads differently because of those moves by the king to forcibly integrate Joseph into Egyptian society and culture. Joseph himself testifies to the pain of his situation as the highest outsider in the land. When (vv. 50-52) "two sons were born to [him] by Asenat the daughter of Poti Fera, the priest of On, Joseph called the first-born Menasheh, because 'God has made me forget completely my hardship and the house of my father.' And Joseph called the second son Ephraim, because 'God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.'" We will soon learn that he has *not* forgotten the pain suffered in his father's house. When the brothers arrive to purchase grain, he at once recognizes them and—seeing them bow before him—remembers the dream in which they symbolically had done exactly that. (42:6-9) He has not forgotten his father either: when the brothers return home empty-handed, having left Simeon behind as a hostage, they tell Jacob (43:7) that the man in charge of distributing grain had asked them if their father was still alive—and, in next week's portion Vayiggash, when Joseph finally breaks down in tears and reveals himself to his brothers (45:3), the very first question out of his mouth will be, "Is my father still alive?"

Consider the irony: the survival of the children of Israel is secured by this child of Israel who, married to the daughter of a gentile priest, brings his family down to Egypt, where he and they loyally serve the Pharaoh. The survival of the

Children of Israel in a later generation will be secured by another Israelite, that one from the tribe of Levi, also married to the daughter of a gentile priest, who will lead a rebellion that liberates his people from Pharaoh's service/slavery. (The Hebrew word for "slavery" and "service" is the same.) Had Joseph and Moses *not* been at home at Pharaoh's court, wise in the ways of ministers and kings, skillful at magic arts beyond the capacity of Pharaoh's magicians (dream interpretation and the working of miracles), and gifted with the right word at the right time and inside knowledge of Egyptian society and culture; and had they not, despite all this, retained a strong sense of divine mission and purpose—they would not have been able to perform the redemptive tasks assigned them.

We might say, in contemporary terms, that a certain measure of assimilation was required for their success, as was a measure of resistance to assimilation. Contemporary Jews know from experience that the balance is difficult to calibrate correctly. That has been all the more true of the Jews who have served gentile kings and courts over the centuries—and by so doing, served their people and their God. From the poet and general Shmuel Hanagid at the Spanish court to Henry Kissinger at the Nixon White House to the many humble tax collectors in Polish domains populated by Ukrainian peasants, the Joseph story has time after time repeated itself.

Gerson Cohen, chancellor of JTS from 1972 to 1986 and a magisterial historian of Jewish societies and cultures in many eras on many continents, probed these dilemmas 50 years ago in a brilliant essay entitled "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History." Cohen took issue with the well-known midrash that attributes Jewish survival to the fact that our ancestors did not change their names, abandon their ancestral language, or stop wearing distinctive clothing. He notes that this generalization did not hold for Jacob's grandchildren in Egypt (who according to the Torah took Egyptian names such as Aaron and Moses), or for the later generations who adopted Greek names like those of the ambassadors whom Judah Maccabee sent to Rome, Jason and Eupolemos. Nor did Jews refrain from writing and giving sermons in other languages than Hebrew, or (when permitted to do so) from dressing like their gentile neighbors. (The author of this Torah commentary, written in English, of course bears the name Arnold, and happens to be wearing slacks and a V-neck sweater.) Cohen forcefully disputed the claim that Jews survived only by remaining utterly distinct from the cultures that surrounded them. Rather, "a frank appraisal of the periods in which Judaism flourished will indicate that not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation not impede Jewish continuity, but that in a profound sense, this assimilation and acculturation was a stimulus to original thinking and expression, a source or renewed vitality." (*Jewish History and Jewish Destiny*, 151)

The lesson of Hanukkah, then, or of the Joseph story, or of countless episodes in the long history of Jewish encounter with gentile ways, is that if Jews assimilate completely to those ways, we lose our own way, and Jewish continuity is lost with it, but if we don't wish to "ghettoize" ourselves, or allow Judaism to become "fossilized," we will need "to assimilate—at least to some extent." (ibid.,152) That has meant learning to speak new languages, and to have Torah speak in those languages. We have adapted customs and laws to new circumstances and found latent meanings in classical texts that previous generations had not seen there. We continue to draw lines that are at times squiggly or blurred, and at other times razor-sharp—and to argue with one another about which kind of boundary is required, and how to maintain it. And thanks to the cycle of weekly Torah readings, Joseph is here with us each year to guide us through the complexities of this holiday season.

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