THE ENIGMA OF THE JOSEPH NARRATIVE

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The *Amidah*, the core prayer recited by Jews thrice daily for more than two millennia, opens with a declaration and a reminder that the patriarchs of the nation are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Bible is not simply a book of history. The moral lessons are taught as an integral part of the narrative. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, each in his own way, constituted the archetype of the Divine characteristics they emulated – *hesed* [goodness], *gevurah* [courage], *emet* [truth].[1] These are characteristics required in the founders of the nation.

The fourth generation, that of Jacob's sons, is considered the eponymic progenitors of the tribes of Israel but does not attain the status of the first three generations. The story of the four generations of the patriarchal family[1] stretches over 39 of the 50 chapters of Genesis, and 14 of them are devoted to this fourth generation and particularly to the life of Joseph, who is second only to Moses in the attention given to him in the Torah. Of the other brothers, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah and Benjamin appear as individuals, while the rest are mentioned only as a group and in the final blessings given by their father Jacob.

Joseph is unique in several aspects. He is identified by an unusual title, different from his predecessors and other personages in the Torah. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob us each traditionally known by the honorific *Avinu* [our father], which is essentially an indication of their status in the hierarchy of Israelite-Jewish history and belief. Moses is called *Rabbeinu* [our teacher] and Aaron is called *HaKohen* [the priest], identified by their functions. Joseph is known as *HaTzaddik* [the saintly one], as an exceptionally virtuous person. This reflects neither his historical ranking nor his task, but rather his personal character.

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Unlike the others, God never reveals Himself to Joseph directly nor in his dreams; Joseph neither erects altars nor offers sacrifices. Given these features, to gain an understanding of Joseph and his place in the hierarchy of Torah personages we must address the question: Why is so large a portion of the Torah text concerned with his life?

JOSEPH THE QUINTESSENTIAL JEW

Joseph can be described as the Jewish Everyman. He is the archetypical Jew, the one personage in the Torah most similar to the generations of Jews who follow. Like Joseph, the individual Jew is not addressed by God directly. He does not respond to explicit Divine directions. He neither builds altars nor brings animal sacrifices. He is required to respond to God's will as he sees it manifested in what appear to be natural occurrences. Many of the incidents in his life seem to be ill-fated or untoward. He has many occasions to feel that he has been abandoned to his fate without a guiding hand to direct him.

The features of his character that enable him to endure the vicissitudes of life and to prevail are the ones required by each Jew in every generation. Belief that everything is part of a cosmic design, that there is a Divine Hand guiding this world, that it is our obligation to respond to what we understand to be manifestations of that plan, that we are to be sensitive to the needs of others, that we have responsibilities to each other, that we are made in God's image – these are manifested in the life of Joseph.

Raphael Patai, in his monumental work *The Jewish Mind,*[2] poses an important question: What are the common features that characterize the Jew throughout the generations? If we compare Jews who are loyal to their faith in every generation, what are the most basic and constant features? Patai postulates three beliefs. First, the Jews believe that the universe was purposefully created by a conscious Entity – God. Second, this God takes an active interest in the world that He created and chose the Jews for a specific mission. Third, this chosenness places upon the individual Jew certain behavioral obligations vis-à-vis God, fellow Jews, and the world in general. In the life of Joseph, we see the quintessential Jew, the one who meets all these belief criteria and acts accordingly, the role model for hundreds of generations.

The story of Joseph is told in minute detail because he is the primary model for Jewish behavior. In the pantheon of Jewish heroes, he is the one who represents the combination of qualities and virtues that have enabled the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to prevail, as the chosen people of God, throughout a unique 4,000-year history. And to continue to perform their mission until the day that, as prophesied by Zechariah: *God will be King over all the world* (Zech. 14:9).

JOSEPH FULFILLS THE PROPHECY OF ABRAHAM

Through his position in government and the circumstances of that period, Joseph brought about the fulfillment of the prophetic vision granted to Abraham: *'Know well that your offspring will be strangers in a land not theirs'* (Gen. 15:13) The rest of Jacob's family would be required to stay in Egypt, but Joseph knew that this would not be permanent. At the end of his own life he declared: *'I am about to die, but God will surely remember you and bring you up out of this land to the land that He swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob* (50:24). Joseph knew that the children of Israel were not meant to stay in Egypt, and that their natural home, the place where they could fulfill their mission, was Eretz Yisrael.

HIS CHARACTER

From the detailed description of his life, we can learn how Joseph, grounded in the faith in God imbued by his fathers, grew and developed into an exemplary and saintly personality despite – or perhaps because of – the variations in circumstances and fortunes at different times in his life. He possessed virtues like those of his predecessors.

Like Abraham, he treated others, even those who harmed him, with kindness. Like Isaac, he accepted all that happened as part of God's plan without attempting by prayer or other supernatural means to change the events themselves. He responded naturally to what he believed to be God's intent. His response, like that of Isaac, was to accommodate himself to the reality that God imposed upon him. Like his father, he was a dreamer, and he changed with age. His father changed from Jacob to Israel, Joseph changed from adolescent youth to *tzadik*.

Joseph had additional characteristics. First, he always mentioned that everything is in the hands of God. His continual references to God when addressing others, including Pharaoh who believed himself to be a god, make him a *m'kadesh shem shamayim* – one who publicly sanctifies the name of G o d .

Second, we notice sensitivity in the make-up of his personality. This is shown through seven recorded occasions when Joseph was moved to tears; more oftenthan recorded of any other person in the Torah.[3]

Third, it could be said that Joseph had a good self-image, enabling him to conduct himself with dignity, and providing him with sanguinity, confidence, cheerfulness, charm, and a charismatic persona even when enslaved, imprisoned, and forced to live among the dregs of Egyptian society.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

The Torah tells us candidly about his immaturity, when *Joseph brought evil reports of them unto their father* (37:2) and the way he boasted about his dreams. In *'Listen, please, to this dream which I have dreamed'* (37:5), he uses the word "*please*" which implies politeness but, at the same time, he was apparently unaware that he would increase his brothers' enmity toward him by telling them of his dreams. Although polite and intelligent, he still did not have the mature insight to see the results of his actions. *And his brethren went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. And Israel said unto Joseph . . . 'Come, and I will send you to them'* (37:12). According to Abarbanel, Jacob wanted his sons to live at peace with one another and he felt that if overtures of friendship were initiated by Joseph, the brothers might change their opinion about him. Jacob's intention was to achieve peace with the brothers. Sending Joseph may have been a subterfuge to cover his real intent, or it may have been a way to provide Joseph with an opportunity to take some responsibility upon himself.

In any event, it appears that Joseph acted in a responsible way when given the opportunity. When he did not find his brothers at the place where they were supposed to be, he could have simply returned to his father and reported that he

had not found them. Instead, he continued his search, going off into the unknown in the region of Shechem, which had a reputation as a dangerous area.

Thus, Joseph began to exhibit his basic characteristic of responsibility.

Whether to obey his father and find out how the brothers and the flocks were faring, or to fulfill his father's wishes and mend his relationship with his brothers, Joseph began to display the dependability and trustworthiness that were to characterize his behavior later as viceroy of Egypt and patron of his family in Goshen.

And God was with Joseph and he was successful, and he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. And his master saw that God was with him and that God made all that he did to prosper in his hand (39:2).

The first verse is a statement of fact: God made Joseph successful. As he rose in position from common slave to overseer of all the activities in the house of Potiphar, he publicly acknowledged the Hand of God in his accomplishments.

JOSEPH AND THE WIFE OF POTIPHAR

Probably, his outstanding attribute that gained him the title of *tzadik*, saintly one, was his ability to resist temptation. Joseph was steadfast enough not to allow himself to be drawn into a situation where he would – as he said to Potiphar's wife – sin in the eyes of both God and man. This quality is put in perspective by the actions of the other protagonist of the story of Joseph and his brothers, Judah.

Judah acts egregiously twice, in the sale of Joseph and the illicit liaison with his daughter-in-law Tamar. In both cases, he courageously admits his shortcomings and takes action required to make amends despite the risks.

JOSEPH IN PRISON

Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw them and behold, they were aggrieved. And he asked Pharaoh's ministers . . . 'Why do you appear downcast today?' (40:6-7). The fact that Joseph noted the change in their appearance demonstrates several features of his character. He was so sensitive to those around them that he could note changes in their demeanor and moods. Since a prison in Egypt could not have been a pleasant place, it would be natural for those imprisoned to be downcast. But apparently Joseph himself was cheerful, otherwise he would not have asked his question.[4]

Joseph's telling the chamberlain to remember him to Pharaoh was the rare incident when he did not behave in the manner that was so characteristic of him; to accept occurrences as God's will and to allow matters to work themselves out. He should have realized that the strange incident of the dreams of Pharaoh's ministers was a message that God was working on some process to get him released. However, true to form, Joseph had made a *kiddush HaShem* by telling the chamberlain that only God has the power to resolve the meaning of dreams. Yet, by not telling the chamberlain to mention to Pharaoh that he had been able to interpret the dreams because of God's help, he missed an opportunity to further sanctify the Name of God. For this lapse in judgment, Joseph was punished by spending an additional two years in prison. Joseph later makes amends for this when he tells Pharaoh that he is only the conduit through which God reveals the meaning of dreams.

INTERPRETATION OF THE DREAM OF PHARAOH

The manner in which Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and provided solutions is indicative of his superior intelligence.

Joseph assumed that a dream that God caused to occur to the head of a kingdom would have to be related to something of national importance and not simply a message concerning a personal matter. He was also aware that the nation, humans and livestock, lived from the crops that depended on the Nile River. Thus the appearance of the animals, river and wheat, which is the basic crop of Egypt, combined to form the message that Joseph gave to Pharaoh. An important question that has to be addressed is why Pharaoh bestowed all these honors on Joseph before his knew whether his interpretation of the dream was correct. The key element here can be described as *déjà vu*.

In the words of Abarbanel (roughly translated) when the interpreter of the dreams tells the dreamer the true
interpretation, the dreamer will recall the details and will instinctively feel that this is indeed what he saw and felt in the dream. This is because it is characteristic of someone who forgets something (especially if only a short time has passed) that, when reminded by someone that this is indeed what he forgot, he will himself remember that this is what he forgot. In other words, he would be

comfortable with the interpretation almost instinctively. That is why Pharaoh could not accept the interpretations of the necromancers since they did not give him that feeling. This is hinted at by the expression *they could not interpret it to Pharaoh* (41:8).

MEETING HIS BROTHERS

The Torah states that when the brothers arrived in Egypt and Joseph recognized them *he made himself strange to them* (42:7). This was important to his plans, because everything Joseph did was to ensure that his earlier dreams came to fruition. The Torah mentions the fact that he remembered the dreams. When Joseph realized that he was able to interpret properly the dreams of Pharaoh and his two servants, he was sure that it was God's will that his own dreams be fulfilled.

Joseph's twin goals were to see the realization of the earlier dreams and to provide his brothers with the opportunity to repent for their behavior. By being harsh to the brothers, Joseph initiated the process of their repentance. Up to this point, the brothers simply believed that Joseph was making a mistake in suspecting them of being spies. When they comprehended that he was testing them in order to find the truth, they began to think about the possible cause of their troubles. It was then that they said *'we are guilty because of what we did to our brother'* (42:21). The brothers surely had shared many experiences in the years that passed since the incident with Joseph, yet the one common event that weighed upon them was their harsh treatment of their brother. Even though the brothers did not care for Joseph, he was certainly not deserving of the harsh treatment to which they subjected him.

Joseph achieved his goal when Judah volunteered to remain as a slave in place of Benjamin. Judah was willing to give up his freedom to atone for the sale of Joseph and the grief caused to his father. At this crucial moment, Joseph, although emotionally moved, remained clearheaded and ordered the Egyptians out of the room in order not to embarrass his brothers when he reveals his identity to them. This is further evidenced when he told them to come close to him, out of earshot of the Egyptians, to reveal the fact that they had sold him. The

Torah gives no indication that others ever found out how Joseph came to be brought down to Egypt as a slave, pointing out Joseph's discretion and sensitivity to his brothers' feelings.

The brothers never really knew Joseph throughout their relationship with him from beginning to end. They implied that Jacob knew what they had done to Joseph by saying that Jacob had commanded them to tell Joseph not to take revenge upon them. That is why Joseph cried – because he realized that his brothers suspected that his behavior would change after the death of Jacob.

JOSEPH AND JACOB

The true enigma in the Joseph narrative is Joseph's puzzling relationship to his father. Why did Joseph, already in a high position, not inform his father that he was alive? Was it truly necessary to add to his father's grief for Joseph to demand that his brothers bring Benjamin to Egypt? Was Jacob aware of what had transpired between Joseph and his brothers? The Torah is entirely silent on these troubling questions, but we can venture an observation. Joseph, like his grandfather Isaac, believed in *midat hadin*. That is, he trusted that everything that happened was in accordance with some Divine plan. Thus, he allowed things to run their course, without his interference, so that God's Will would be revealed. And, indeed, the entire unfolding of the story shows that he was justified.

FINAL REDEMPTION

Jewish belief in the ultimate redemption of the world includes two forms of messianic personalities, *Mashiah ben Yosef* and *Mashiah ben David,* a messiah of the house of Joseph and a messiah of the house of David, with the former appearing first. Each has a specific function to perform. King David, a descendant of Judah, exhibited the same qualities as his forebear – honesty in dealing with his shortcomings and correcting his errors. The Joseph virtues are the backbone of Jewish survival, without which the nation would not have weathered the vicissitudes of history; the David virtues add the element of spiritual renewal required for the ultimate redemption.

In the daily prayer *Aleinu* we repeat three times daily that our ultimate goal in this world is *to perfect the universe through the Almighty's sovereignty*. In predicting this eschatological period, the prophet Obadiah describes it as: *And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the Lord hath spoken it*.

This description of Joseph as representing the contrast to Esau is not simply allegorical. Judaism believes that there is a Creator and that human existence has meaning. Esau, symbolizing Rome and its dominance by force and tyranny, is the opposing force. Judaism is the belief in the existence of God and His purpose for mankind, kept alive by the Jewish people. The Jews are sustained by the qualities first manifested in Joseph.

NOTES

1. See C. Spring, J. Shapiro, *Chesed Gevurah Emet* (Israel: Dov Press, 2004) for a full analysis.
2. Raphael lPatai, *The Jewish Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1977) p. 243.
3. Spring & Shapiro.
4. *And he turned himself from them and wept* (Gen. 42:24); *And Joseph made haste for his heart yearned toward his brother and he sought where to weep* (43:30); *And he wept aloud* (45:2); *And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept* (45:14); *And Joseph made ready his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father to Goshen and he presented himself to him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while* (46:29); *And Joseph fell upon his father's face and wept upon him and kissed him* (50:1); *And Joseph wept when they spoke to him* (50:17).
5. From *sichot* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.