

Mikeitz 5768
Joseph

Shabbat Shalom.

*Seven years of bumper crops are on their way.
Years of plenty, endless wheat, and tons of hay.
Your farms will bloom. There won't be room
To store the surplus food you grow.
After that the future doesn't look so bright.
Egypt's fortune will change completely over night
And famine's hand will destroy the land
With food at all-time low.
Noble king, there is no doubt
What your dream is all about.
All those things you saw in your pajamas
Are a long-range forecast for your farmers.
But I'm sure it's crossed your mind
What it is you'll have to find.
Find a man to lead you through this famine
With a flair for economic planning.
But who this man shall be, I just don't know.*

Andrew Lloyd Webber's song from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, about Joseph's interpreting Pharaoh's dream as we read in the beginning of this morning's *parashah*, has always been one of my favorites. Maybe it was the British accent. Maybe it was learning it as a child and putting it on in plays at my Jewish summer camps and Jewish schools. Or, maybe because it's simply such a great story. I've always loved the saga of Joseph and especially Webber's retelling of it.

Joseph's life story, filled with drama and excitement, makes him a compelling figure. This trilogy of Joseph is wondrous, and we find ourselves this week reading the middle of this three-part series. The first installment related Joseph's dreams of grandeur, his being sold into slavery, his being tempted by Potiphar's wife, and his interpreting the dreams of the butler and the baker. This week he interprets Pharaoh's dream and becomes second-in-command of Egypt, the world's greatest super power 3700 years ago.

While Joseph is called "Yosef Hatzaddik – Joseph the righteous" by the rabbis, he, like other biblical characters, is complex. Yes, he is a hero, but there is a lot to criticize. For example, he is so caught up with himself that he shares his egocentric dreams with his family.

This morning I want to re-examine Joseph's story and point out five critical lessons that I have learned from him.

First, we have to understand Joseph's context before we judge him. Just a couple of weeks ago, I spoke about judging others *lekhaif zekhut*, giving them the benefit of the doubt. I think that we need to give Joseph the benefit of the doubt. Why? Well, think about what happens to him. Joseph loses his mother at a young age. Rachel dies as she is giving birth to Joseph's younger brother Benjamin. I think that anyone who loses a parent while so young deserves compassion, and it also helps explain some of his feelings and behaviors.

Beyond his mother's death, Joseph is favored by his father and given preferential treatment. In a family, that is a recipe for disaster. Jacob's favoritism of Joseph feeds into his visions of grandeur, so it is not so surprising that he unwisely shares these dreams. Of course, Joseph shares these dreams when he is only a teenager; he is only seventeen when he is sold into slavery.

Joseph's multi-colored tunic only adds to his brother's jealousy, which leads them to ostracize him. In many moments on Joseph's journey, he is an outsider – in his relationship with his brothers, in slavery, and in jail, even when he rises to power. In some sense, the story of Joseph is a reminder to us as Jews that we are different, that we play a unique, often lonely, role in the world as outsiders.

The second Joseph lesson is about making moral choices. Joseph is tempted by Potiphar's wife. He has an easy opportunity to engage discreetly in an adulterous affair with a married woman. But Joseph shows his moral fiber. Refusing, Joseph explains, "How could I do this most wicked thing and sin before God? It would be immoral and wrong to Potiphar and wrong before God."

Lest we dismiss this, the Masoretes (rabbis from a millennium ago) highlight Joseph's behavior. As a matter of fact, they place a *shalshelet* on the word "*Vayemaen* - and he refused" to show that he wavered in his refusal. While Joseph was attracted to Potiphar's wife, his moral sensibilities carried the day.

The third element that is so powerful about Joseph is his *Ruah Elohim* - he is imbued with the spirit of God. As the Torah (Genesis 41:38) states: "And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, 'Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?'" Joseph is filled with divine energy. It is interesting to note that while dreams have been prominent in the Joseph story from the beginning, it is only now, when Joseph has gone through a period of slavery and incarceration, that he has become truly mature and wise, deserving of this new description.

Pharaoh realizes that Joseph is not only incredibly insightful in the dream business, but he also understands the economic situation and is someone who has moral sensibility. Pharaoh immediately trusts Joseph as did Potiphar before him.

The fourth element that we learn from the Joseph story is *teshuvah*. Not only does Joseph go through a process of *teshuvah*, of repentance and transformation and maturation, but he also affords his brothers the opportunity to engage in *teshuvah* and repentance. The elaborate scheme that he concocts to test his half-brothers who do not recognize him, where he takes Benjamin, his only full brother, captive to see if they will now protect him, is really a beautiful opportunity to renew their relationship.

Can he trust his brothers? And in this elaborate test, which some might say is almost too intricate, he makes sure that his brothers have changed.

I think the elaborate scheme that he concocts is important because it gives his brothers the opportunity for true repentance. Maimonides cites this moment as a classic example. The brothers could simply have left Benjamin behind as they left Joseph in the pit, but, as we will read next week, Judah steps into the breach and gives one of the most beautiful and impassioned speeches in all the Torah. You'll have to come back next week, if only to hear that.

The fifth Joseph lesson concerns his deep feelings and emotions. The Torah does not state exactly what Joseph – already an outsider – felt when he was thrown into the pit, but one can imagine that his deep loneliness is only intensified. We do not know what he feels when he is thrown into jail, but it must have been a repetition of the previous trauma. We do, however, know how he feels when he sees his brothers. Joseph is filled with intense emotions. The scene in this morning's reading when the brothers are speaking to each other as Joseph is testing them is quite telling. Reuben says to his brothers, "Did I not tell you to do no wrong to the boy, but you paid no heed? Now comes the reckoning for his blood." They did not know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them. Joseph turned away from them and wept.

Joseph has become a deeply feeling person. His early vulnerabilities and missteps have turned him into a well-rounded, mature adult. He weeps seeing the intensity of his brothers and that they are struggling for the moment with their decision. When he finally sees his brother Benjamin, he asks, "Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?" And then he continues, "May God be gracious to you, my boy." And then Joseph hurries out for he is overcome with feeling towards his brother and is on the verge of tears. He goes into a room and weeps there.

And finally, in next week's reading when he reveals himself to his brothers, he embraces his brother Benjamin, hugs him around the neck, and weeps. He kisses all of his brothers and weeps upon them.

Thus we learn from Joseph that – first, even if one lacks humility in an early place in life, he should be understood with an eye to his context – for

Joseph the tragedy of losing his mother at a young age and being favored by his father. The real test is whether one can grow and change as Joseph did. Second, we learn that when it comes to the major moral choices in our lives, we must choose wisely, carefully, and ethically. Third, one who is inspired by God shares divine insights with others. Fourth, we learn from Joseph to give others the chance to change, to repent, to transform, and to heal a broken relationship. And finally Joseph matures, becoming a sensitive and feeling person who is open with his emotions.

Joseph, to me, is *Yosef Hatzadik*, a righteous person, a model of one who matures and is a great leader on many levels. Or, in the words of Andrew Lloyd Webber:

*Shanana Joseph, you know what they say.
Shanana Joseph, you're doing fine...
You and your dreams are ahead of your time.....*

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah!