

# JOSEPH UNDER SUSPICION

JEFFREY M. COHEN

Genesis 48 opens with the words: *Vayehiy acharei had'varim ha'eileh vayomer leyosef, 'Hinnei avikha choleh'* [And it came to pass after these things that someone<sup>1</sup> told Joseph, 'Behold your father is sick']. So, Joseph went to see his father, and took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that the evidence points to the fact that Joseph hardly visited his father and his brothers in their homestead in Goshen throughout the 17 years of their sojourn in Egypt. This would explain why Jacob does not immediately recognize Joseph's two sons, his own grandchildren, when they enter his room. This also explains why there is no record of any exchange between Joseph and his brothers throughout that time, and why the Torah describes Joseph as having learnt that his father was on his deathbed quite by chance, and not from his family: *Vayomer leYoseph, 'Hinnei avikha choleh'*; literally, *And someone or other*<sup>3</sup> *told Joseph, 'Behold your father is ill.'* There is an implicit impatient reproof to the absent son: Don't you think it's time to pay dad a visit?

Joseph's absence over that entire period would also explain why the brothers still retained an attitude of fear, and suspicion that Joseph's feelings toward them were hostile, so that at Jacob's death they felt the need to throw themselves on the mercy of Joseph and beg him to spare their lives for the sake of their father.

One can, of course, seek to explain or justify Joseph's absence on the grounds that he was totally preoccupied with affairs of state and could not absent himself even for a short period. It is also possible to speculate that Pharaoh may have actually banned Joseph from leaving the capital. The existence of such a ban seems to underlie the special petition and pleading that Joseph has to make to Pharaoh for permission to go with his father's funeral cortege back to Canaan. He even has to enlist the support of members of the royal house to support his plea:

*Jeffrey M. Cohen is rabbi of the Stanmore Synagogue in London, and a frequent contributor to Jewish Bible Quarterly. He is the author of several books, the most recent of which are 1001 Questions and Answers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (1997) and Issues of the Day (1999).*

*And Joseph spoke to the house of Pharaoh, saying, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, speak, I pray you, in the ears of Pharaoh, saying: My father made me swear, saying, Lo, I die; bury me in the grave that I have dug for myself in the land of Canaan. Now, therefore, let me go up, I pray thee, and bury my father, after which I shall return' (50:4-5).*

Fear for Joseph's security might also explain why Pharaoh sent with Joseph not only *all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt* (50:7), but also *both chariots and horsemen, a very great [military] camp* (50:9).

We should not be surprised that Pharaoh was unwilling to let his Viceroy leave, and feared so much for his safety. After all, Joseph was not a popular figure in the country. The Egyptians would not have forgotten that he was the mastermind of the plan whereby they had all forfeited their ancestral land to the crown in exchange for food during the years of famine. There must have been a large, disgruntled, dispossessed citizenry, of upper and lower classes, who would have been waiting for the day to get their hands on Joseph once he was away from the protection of his palace, and, travelling across the country, vulnerable to attack and assassination.

That is one explanation of why Pharaoh might have been opposed to Joseph's travelling around, and is consistent with our explanation of why Joseph hardly visited his father's home during the entire 17 years, for fear of assassination by any of the locals whose lands he had compelled them to sell.

There may also have been another reason why Pharaoh objected to Joseph's leaving Egypt to accompany his father to his last resting-place in Canaan. That reason suggests itself from one single word that Joseph tacks on to the end of his plea to Pharaoh for permission to go. He says, *'Ve'attah e'eleh nah v'ekberah et avi, v'ashuvah'* [*And now, therefore, let me go up, I pray thee, and bury my father, **after which I shall return***']. Why, we may ask, did Joseph need to stress the fact that he would return? Obviously, a man whose home is in Egypt, whose loyalty is to the Egyptian crown, who had achieved so much for the state, would wish to return home! By adding '[I promise that] *I shall return*' it is as though Joseph is making a vehement assertion, and giving a solemn undertaking, to a king who entertains clear reservations about the loyalties of his chief minister; who fears that, if he lets him go, he might

remain in Canaan to muster support there, from his erstwhile contacts, friends and confrères, in order to launch an armed invasion of Egypt.

That such suspicions were rife in court circles is apparent from the very next chapter, the beginning of the Book of Exodus, where we are told of a new king *who knew not Joseph*, and who publicly articulates his fears that the Hebrews might join a confederacy of Egypt's enemies and, as a fifth column, fight to secure their freedom and return to their own land. It would make sense, therefore, that Joseph's Pharaoh would have wished to forestall that situation by preventing a leader as influential as Joseph from leaving Egypt to lay the grounds for a future coup.

Pharaoh is finally persuaded, however, to accede to Joseph's request, perhaps because of the great esteem in which Jacob was held in Egypt, and the necessity of showing respect to the memory of the man who had once blessed him in the name of the God who had saved Egypt from ruin (47:7). His decision may also have been prompted by his cherished religious beliefs. Egyptian religion was preoccupied with the dead and after-life. Its sacred text, The Book of the Dead, is a collection of magical texts and formulae to enable the dead to reach their ultimate spiritual state. It is very possible that Pharaoh would have feared greatly to frustrate the solemnly-imposed last will and testament of a man like Jacob (47:29-30), that he be buried in Canaan, a wish repeated on his deathbed in the form of a command to his children (49:29-31). Fear of execration by the dead was predominant in ancient Egypt, and such a punishment was frequently engraved on sarcophagi as a threat against anyone attempting to disturb the tranquility of the dead.

Pharaoh was astute enough, however, to take precautionary measures, sending a vast military guard to ensure that Joseph neither came to harm himself, nor was able to inflict harm on Egypt. No wonder the Canaanites, when they saw that vast encampment, were moved to exclaim, *'What a weighty expression of Egyptian mourning this is!'* (50:11). One may wonder whether or not they were being facetious here, and were alluding to the fact that what should have been an intimate, family, and exclusively Hebrew, mourning procession had in fact been appropriated by the Egyptians because of their suspicion of one their own leaders!

#### NOTES

## JOSEPH UNDER SUSPICION

1. English renderings in this article follow the Jewish Publication Society of America translation except where the requirements of our interpretation suggest a variant nuance.
2. See Jeffrey M. Cohen, *Moments of Insight: Biblical and Contemporary Jewish Themes* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1989) pp. 21-27.
3. That is how Rashi interprets the absence of a subject for the verb *vayomer*. It is elliptical for *echad min hamaggidim* -- [One of those who are given to passing on information] told Joseph . . . . Rashi's second interpretation, that Joseph's informant was none other than his own son Ephraim, "who regularly studied with Jacob," may be construed as having two purposes. First, to temper any criticism of Joseph and his offspring for not visiting their elderly father and grandfather. This tradition shows that regular contact was maintained, through Ephraim - a view that the writer of this article does not find convincing. Its second purpose was to buttress the rabbinic tradition that Torah was studied, observed and handed down to their offspring, by the Patriarchal families

## ANSWERS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book TORAH DIALOGUES

1. Jewish law lists 39 tasks prohibited on Shabbat. The Talmud derives these from the various labors needed to prepare all the appurtenances of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and to erect it.
2. In this context, it refers to the fact that the natural produce of the wilderness could not have sustained the Israelites during their sojourn there. God's special beneficence ("that proceeds from the Lord's mouth...") in the form of manna was necessary. The phrase conveys the wider message that life depends upon spiritual as well as material content
3. a. Homicide. b. Civil suit. c. Assault. (Based on Ibn Ezra as opposed to Rashi. Cf. New JPS.)