

OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHARACTER OF JOSEPH IN EGYPT

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JOSEPH'S RISE TO PROMINENCE

Unknowingly, Jacob's sons were ordained to bring about a change in the status of our people. That divinely ordained historical goal, however, was to be attained through the ordinary animosities of Jacob's sons. Joseph was sold to Midianite traders by his brothers who despised him and carried to Egypt as a slave. There, in an extraordinary series of adventures, he rose to control Egypt's agriculture and economy, becoming the second most powerful figure in the country. From the impertinent, spoiled favorite of his aging father, Joseph had come through slavery to become a wise public figure, perceptive, persuasive and articulate beyond compare.

UNRECOGNIZED BY HIS BROTHERS

So changed was he in his role as vizier of Egypt that when providence brings the brothers before him we are told: *For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him* (Gen. 42:8). Rashi suggests that it was because the bare faced youth had since grown a full beard. But ancient Egyptian illustrations invariably show Semitic peoples to be bearded, while they themselves are represented to be clean shaven. Joseph himself, when summoned before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams, shaved (Gen. 41:14) since it was unacceptable to appear before the ruler unshaven. It is therefore highly improbable that he would have defied local custom as vizier. In keeping with Bekhor Shor's assumption, his matured face and changed demeanor, his regal garments and his totally unanticipated status would no doubt have been sufficient to disguise their brother's true identity.

DOES OUR FATHER STILL LIVE?

It will be recalled that out of a clear blue sky his father, Jacob, sends Joseph to look for his brothers tending the flocks. *And he said to him: Go now, see whether it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring me back*

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word (Gen. 37:14). This seems extremely naïve. Certainly Jacob realized that Joseph's brothers loathed him. In Gen. 37:4 we read . . . *And they could not speak to him peaceably*. Jacob must have been aware of such deep animosity in his household.

In the above quote, *Whether it is well* is rendered in the original *re'eh et shalom aḥekha* – literally, "See the peace of your brothers," the very brothers who could not speak to him peaceably! One can only speculate about Jacob's motivation for sending Joseph to join his brothers in the field. Jacob probably hoped that by being with them as they tended the flock they would be drawn closer to him and make peace.

And what of Joseph? Didn't he sense the dangers that lurked in his mission to the brothers? It seems that Joseph too may have believed that his journey would enable him to make peace with them. When the stranger found him straying on the way, he asks *mah tivakesh* (Gen. 37:15) which could mean either "What are you looking for?" or "What do you wish?" Joseph answers portentously *et aḥai ani mevakesh* – I seek my brothers (Gen. 37:16). It is apparently an old Jewish trait going back to our ancestors, to naively expect that if we only reach out to our enemies they will love us.

Encountering his brothers after his rise to prominence, Joseph misses no opportunity, both before and after revealing his identity, to gain information concerning his aged father's well being (Gen. 43:27; 45:3). Many scholars have marveled at one puzzling aspect of the story as it unfolds. If Joseph was so concerned for his father why in all those years that passed hadn't he taken the trouble to contact him or seek his welfare?! In the beginning, as a slave and later as a prisoner, that would have been difficult, but certainly not once he had gained his position of prominence.

There has been much speculation and many suggested reasons to explain Joseph's failure to contact his father before the appearance of his brothers in Egypt, but to me it appears that only one answer is plausible: Joseph did not want to contact Jacob! After all, didn't all his troubles begin when his father sent him to his brother's camp? I am sure that on more than one occasion, the enslaved and exiled Joseph must have looked back on these events and construed Jacob to be a partner in the brothers' plot against him. Why else would he have sent him to his hateful brothers? With that in mind, the heartbroken Joseph would have no more desire to contact his father than to contact his

siblings. Only when he discovered that the brothers had deceived their father did he again seek to find out about Jacob's well being.¹

JOSEPH THE DIPLOMAT

Joseph had become the consummate diplomat in both speech and action. Nowhere is this more clearly presented than in his masterful performance when brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. Joseph, the imprisoned slave, begins his task with due modesty: *It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace* (Gen. 41:16). But he quickly progresses with amazing self confidence to interpret the dreams with not the slightest hint of hesitation. The Bible relates: *And Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'The dream of Pharaoh is one; what God is about to do He has revealed to Pharaoh'* (Gen. 41:25).

Through verse 41:32 Joseph is true to his task: he interprets the dreams. Then almost imperceptibly, Joseph makes the transition to advising Pharaoh on how to manage the affairs of state. *Now therefore let Pharaoh look for a man* (Gen. 41:33). What wonderful chutzpa! Who asked him for advice?! So skillfully was Joseph's move executed that Pharaoh and all his court could only be impressed and acknowledge that Joseph himself was that very self same man of wisdom.

The narrative repeatedly demonstrates Joseph's astute and insightful statesmanship but tactfully only alludes to his great concern with his status and appearances, what today would be called "political correctness." His diplomatic skill is clear in the way he addresses his brothers. Once they realized he was Joseph, the brothers must have assumed that his interest in ascertaining his father's state meant that Joseph would seek vengeance after Jacob's death (Gen. 50:15). His words of reconciliation at the time he revealed his identity, and again years later when Jacob died (Gen. 50:19-21), show profound understanding of their sense of guilt and natural fears of reprisal.

Still, Joseph had to contend with the great abhorrence in Egypt toward their Semitic neighbors (e.g. Gen. 43:32). Worse yet, Joseph's own family were shepherds, a lowly and disparaged occupation (Gen. 46:34). So when Joseph must introduce his family at court, he carefully selects which of the brothers to present and rehearses with them what to say about their reviled vocation. The court appearance is suitably concluded with the venerable Jacob's greet-

ings to the sovereign. Joseph was also very careful to forestall native antagonism by assuring that his family did not receive favored treatment with regard to food rations (Gen. 47:12).

When he had invited his family, he told the brothers that he wanted them close. Upon arrival, Joseph quickly settles his family in Goshen, an area conveniently out of the way, where their embarrassing Hebrew ways would not be too conspicuous to the royal court. Midrashim aside, there is no biblical evidence that Joseph actually maintained any regular contact with his family or even his father once they were settled in Goshen.

When Jacob, now extremely advanced in age, falls ill and Joseph goes his bedside, his visit is clearly a rare, if not unique event that had to be specially announced (Gen. 48:2). Furthermore, Jacob states ceremonially that Joseph's children would be like his own, yet it is obvious from the text that grandfather Jacob could not even identify Joseph's children! *And Israel beheld Joseph's sons and said, 'Who are these?'* (Gen. 48:8). His failure to identify his grandchildren is probably due to estrangement, not failing eyesight, since the text specifically uses the verb 'beheld'. One can contrast the distance implied between Jacob and Joseph's children with the warmth conveyed in the text regarding Joseph's family: *And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation; also the children of Machir, Manasseh's son were born upon Joseph's knee* (Gen. 50:23).

Another interesting example of Joseph's political correctness occurs when Jacob dies. Joseph turns his father's death into a proper state funeral, fit for the father of a high court official. However, when it is time to fulfill his oath to bury Jacob in Canaan, Joseph must receive Pharaoh's approval. He does not say to Pharaoh that his father wished to be buried with his forefathers, a powerful Hebrew notion, but carefully presents his wish to bury his father in the tomb he had prepared for himself (Gen. 50:5), a deeply ingrained Egyptian concept hard for Egyptian royalty to deny.²

CONCLUSION

We have looked at the story of Joseph in Egypt from the perspective of the growth of Joseph's character. Reading between the lines of the narrative gives us insights into the dramatic difference between Joseph the brash youngster

and the statesman he became in maturity. Joseph himself thought that his role was to save the family from starvation. The story of Joseph in Egypt, however, is not simply an interesting biography or just the story of how Joseph saved his family, but part of the process whereby God would forge the nation of Israel out of Jacob's contentious family. Although extraneous to this essay, the Bible hints at this greater significance by referring to Jacob as Israel in very carefully selected contexts. Joseph's unique qualities enabled the house of Jacob to establish itself in Egypt, where upon his death they sank into enslavement. That slavery would become a necessary component in shaping our nation's ethos to this very day.

NOTE

1. See the discussion on this approach in the journal *Megadim* (Hebrew), Y. Bin-Nun, "Division and Unity: Why Did Joseph Not Send a Message to his Father?" *Megadim* 1, pp. 20-31, the response of Y. Medan in *Megadim* 2, pp. 54-78, the reply of Y. Bin-Nun, pp. 109-110, and the response of Y. Spiegel in *Megadim* 5, pp. 93-94, where an early source for this approach is presented.

2. See Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter, *Egypt and the Egyptians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 172.



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