

# JOSEPH'S SELF-IMPOSED ESTRANGEMENT

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A reading of Genesis 47:28 - 50:26 leads to the inescapable conclusion that, throughout the seventeen years of Jacob's sojourn in Goshen (Gen. 47:28), under Joseph's patronage (Gen. 47:12), that beloved *son of Jacob's old age* (Gen. 37:3) did not once visit the family home until the closing stage of his father's life when he was summoned on two occasions to his father's bedside (Gen. 47:29; 48:1). Jacob himself makes that situation abundantly clear when, on Joseph's second visit, accompanied by his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, he says to Joseph: *I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well* (Gen. 48:11).

Thus, notwithstanding that Jacob's sight had deteriorated in his old age (Gen. 48:10), we must take at face value his query, *who are these?* with reference to the two young people accompanying Joseph (Gen. 48:8). After all, even a blind person recognises the presence of beloved grandchildren in the room. Jacob, however, did not. He had clearly never met them before, which would not have been surprising in a situation where Joseph's single previous visit had been on his own. That this second summons, to the bedside of a father who sensed that his days were numbered (Gen. 47:29), followed on shortly after the previous visit, is implicit in the words, *Some time afterwards, Joseph was told...* (Gen. 48:1).

Joseph's absence may, of course, be explained on the grounds of his total preoccupation with affairs of state, and the overwhelming challenge of distributing grain nationwide, during the years of the famine. Notwithstanding the vast investment of time and energy involved, it is still difficult to imagine that he appeared neither willing nor able to find a little time, over all those years, to pay more than two visits to an aged father who lived in fairly close proximity!<sup>1</sup>

I have argued elsewhere<sup>2</sup> that the most plausible explanation for Joseph's absence was that he had chosen the lesser of two evils: To have remained

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estranged was to prolong his father's sorrow; but to have visited would have brought about a revelation of how he had originally been brought to Egypt.

His presence at the family home would have necessarily involved the disclosure to his father - who had originally sent him out on the mission to find out how his brothers were faring - that they had been the ones responsible for his kidnap and sale. Jacob would not have forgotten that fateful day when they had all brought to him Joseph's torn and bloodied robe, and claimed that they had found it abandoned, leading him to the natural conclusion that Joseph had been torn in pieces by a wild animal (Gen. 37:33). Joseph's grand and physically-impressive appearance at the reunion with his father would have instinctively called into question the veracity of their account, since there was no way he could have emerged unscathed after such a violent attack, leaving his robe totally torn and saturated with blood.

Jacob would also have vividly recalled how all the sons had heard his agonising cry, *My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!* (Genesis 37:33), and yet remained callously silent. He must have wondered how they could possibly have stood by and watched their aged father descend into grief, rend his robe, and perform other tokens and rituals of mourning, knowing full-well that there wasn't a shred of evidence in their minds to substantiate Joseph's death?

Joseph was well aware that any visit to the family home at Canaan would inevitably have caused all the ugly truth to pour forth into the open. He knew his own temperament. He was not one to suppress his emotions. What was on his mind was on his tongue, a fact exemplified by his disclosure of his dreams to his father and brothers notwithstanding the jealousy that he must have known this would engender and the hostile repercussions for his continued relationship with them. He would have known full-well then the consequences of any disclosure that his brothers had been implicated in his kidnap, namely the blighting of any relationship between father Jacob and his other sons. He, himself, was too preoccupied with affairs of state to keep a watchful eye on his father; he needed to leave behind in Goshen a relationship of love and trust within the family so that his father received all the support and care that he needed in his old age, as well as a tranquil home environment. Knowledge of how callously his sons had behaved towards Joseph, and how inconsiderate they had been toward his own feelings, would have totally

soured Jacob's relationship with them. Joseph's concern for his father meant that he could not allow such a situation to develop, and hence his decision never to visit the family as long as they remained in Canaan. He also knew, that the shame and fear that was ever-present in the minds of his brothers at their treatment of him, would only be exacerbated by any visit he made to them;

That concern is, in fact, articulated by the Midrash:

*Joseph was told, Your father is ill* (Gen. 48:1). Was that a praiseworthy act on Joseph's part, that he was so concerned not to burden his father that he didn't visit him, and that, were it not for the fact that strangers came and told him that his father was ill, he wouldn't have known the situation? [Yes it was:] The Torah actually discloses his righteousness here, namely that he didn't want to be alone with his father in case he cross-examined him, saying, 'What exactly did your brothers do to you?' [When the truth came out] Jacob would have cursed his other sons...Therefore he kept his distance from his father.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph's determination not to engage privately with his brothers accounts for the fact that, hardly had Jacob and sons had time to alight from their carriages and step onto Egyptian soil, to receive Joseph's welcoming embrace, when he immediately gets down to business and prepares them for their impending audiences with Pharaoh (Gen. 46:31 – 47:10), ensuring that no idle chat or family reminiscences were allowed to come to the fore.

It may be objected, however, that, following the audiences, the Torah specifically describes Joseph as personally settling his family into Goshen (Gen. 47:11) and providing for their food and needs (Gen. 47:12). This would surely have involved a number of tense face-to-face contacts between the parties, with the guilt of the brothers inevitably surfacing on those occasions, something that Jacob would inevitably have picked up on. However, a close reading of the text reveals that the latter two verses are linked seamlessly to the subsequent lengthy description of Joseph's manifold activities on behalf of Pharaoh to bring all the Egyptians' property under state ownership in return for the provision of food during the years of famine, and to effect 'a forced transfer of the rural population as part of the program of nationalization of the farmland.'<sup>4</sup>

Now, while the Torah describes every stage of the latter enterprise as having been undertaken by Joseph personally, it is indisputable that the construction of the local granaries and the arrangements for an orderly distribution could not have been implemented without a vast network of state officials and superintendents, including police and security personnel to hold in check a disgruntled and fractious population witnessing their estates being seized. It is clear, therefore, that, while the provision of the family's food and other needs is attributed directly to Joseph (47:12), it was in fact organised on a daily basis by his representatives, allowing Joseph to keep his distance from the family from the very outset of their arrival.

In this context, it is significant that there is no account of any subsequent verbal exchange between Joseph and his family until years later when he is summoned to his father's death-bed! The only plausible rationale is that Joseph was desperate to avoid having to explain to his father the true circumstances of his kidnap. It was only when he was finally summoned to his dying father's bedside that he had no other choice but to reveal the truth of what had occurred. At that time he might have hoped that, by describing to his father the many and miraculous ways in which God had guided his life and career, he could convince him that what the brothers had done to him had all been part of that divine plan, as first revealed through his teenage dreams, and that no blame should therefore attach to them.

The brothers' self-imposed absence from the family home during Joseph's two visits would also account for why Jacob felt no inhibition in telling Joseph that he was reducing his bequest to his other sons by making Joseph's two sons, his grandchildren, Ephraim and Manasseh, equal beneficiaries as future tribes of Israel, allocating to them tribal inheritances in Canaan (Gen. 48:5-6), and bequeathing to Joseph an extra parcel of land that he had seized from the Amorites (Gen. 48:22). Jacob went even further, and instituted a formula of blessing for his posterity to bestow on their children, invoking the names of Joseph's two sons, namely, *God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh* (Gen. 48:20). Having once already fomented intense jealousy of Joseph on the part of his other sons, by merely giving him a coat of many colours, it would have been inconceivable for Jacob to have bestowed on Joseph and his family such an infinitely more munificent gift in the presence or earshot of the other brothers at this stage of his life. It could only have been gift-

ed in a situation wherein the brothers had absented themselves from the home during both of Joseph's visits.

Ramban goes beyond our thesis and asserts that as long as he lived Jacob never learnt the truth about the brothers' part in the kidnap and sale of Joseph. He postulates that Jacob would have inevitably assumed that someone must have come across Joseph when he was searching for his brothers (Gen. 37:15-16), and that it was he that had carried Joseph off and sold him to Egypt.<sup>5</sup> Y. M. Immanueli offers support to Ramban's suggestion by pointing out that, had the brothers admitted their crime to their father, they would assuredly have begged him at the same time to intercede with Joseph not to take revenge on them after his death, thus relieving them of having to resort to subterfuge in order to secure clemency at that time.<sup>6</sup>

We find Ramban's view difficult to reconcile, however, with Jacob's death-bed reference to Joseph, and to *the archers who bitterly assailed him, shot at him and harried him* (Gen. 49:23). Jacob, all those years back at the time of Joseph's dreams, had anticipated some ramifications of the brothers' early jealousy of, and hatred for, Joseph,<sup>7</sup> so it is hard to imagine that, by this particularly enigmatic reference he had any other violent episode of Joseph's life in mind, given that no other such situation of violence with reference to Joseph is even hinted at in the Torah. The probability that the reference was, indeed, to Joseph is a view found in the Midrash, as quoted by Rashi.<sup>8</sup> As we have argued, Joseph would have felt constrained to disclose the details of the brothers' treachery during those two meetings when he was summoned to his father's bedside.

That Joseph's decision not to visit was rooted in the apprehension that it would reignite the old fear and shame on the part of the brothers, may be confirmed by the latter's inability to find a single one of their siblings prepared to go and inform Joseph that their father's strength was declining and that he wished to see him. This is indicated by the phraseology, *va-yiqra li-vno le-Yosef* (*He summoned his son Joseph*; Gen. 47:29). We may assume that, had the messenger been one of the brothers, his identity would have been revealed in the biblical text.

The same formulation occurs twice in the context of Joseph's second, and final, visit to his dying father's bedside: *va-yomer le-Yosef hinnei avikha choleh*, *Joseph was told, Your father is ill* (Gen. 48:1). Mild reproof is im-

plicit in this curt, three-word, message, as if to say, "Do you not think that it's time you paid your dad a visit, before it's too late?" and secondly, *When Jacob was told* (*va-yagged le-Ya'akov*), *Your son Joseph has come to see you...* (Gen. 48:2). Joseph had to learn from a total stranger that his father was on his death-bed; and Jacob was informed by some member of his household, other than by one of his own sons, that Joseph had arrived.<sup>9</sup> We would surely have expected all of the brothers to have left the family home and gone to meet, and give a warm and respectful welcome to, their illustrious brother and national leader, Joseph, while delegating one of their number to hasten to their father's bedside to give him the news of his approach. Had that been the case, again the Torah should have included that significant detail.

The brothers would have jumped to the assumption that during one of their two private meetings Joseph had disclosed the situation to their father, a conclusion that would have been confirmed when they stood around their father's death-bed and heard him making a clear allusion to the violence perpetrated against Joseph. They would not have known, however, whether or not Joseph had whole-heartedly excused them, or whether their father had accepted that they were mere agents of a divinely-ordained plan, and exonerated them accordingly. In the light of that uncertainty, and their father's impending death, their fear of Joseph's reprisals would have inevitably intensified. Perhaps it was those private meetings that gave them the idea to concoct a meeting between themselves and their father, at which he allegedly 'commanded them' (Gen. 50:16) to seek Joseph's forgiveness. Such a command contained an implicit directive to Joseph to accept their plea.

The intense fear that gripped them at this time explains why, true to form, they couldn't muster the courage to petition Joseph personally, but sent an intermediary to intercede with him: *And they sent a message* (*va-y'tzavvu el Yosef*) *to Joseph, saying...* (Gen. 50:16).<sup>10</sup>

This total lack of communication with the family also explains why, in the account of Jacob's death and the subsequent description of the weeping and mourning for him, only Joseph's grief is referred to, with no mention of his being accompanied, and his grief being shared, by his brothers. Understandably, he was the one who took charge of all the arrangements for his father's embalming, but, curiously, while we are told that the Egyptians wept for Ja-

cob seventy days, nowhere is the brothers' participations in the mourning described (See Gen. 50:1-4a). Furthermore, in the description of the seven days of mourning, it is only Joseph's observance that is referred to, with no mention of the participation of the brothers (v. 10). Only when it comes to the actual burial are the brothers included (v. 13).

Joseph's apparent aloofness from them throughout that entire episode explains the otherwise enigmatic verse that follows: *When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said: What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for the wrong that we did him!* (Gen. 50:15). Taken as a statement of death, this verse is totally misplaced, given that the death of Jacob had already been recorded in the previous chapter, with the present chapter dealing exclusively with the burial preparations and rituals. It may be understood, however, as the brothers' reaction to Joseph's continued estrangement from them *since* the death of their father and throughout the subsequent and protracted mourning period. Hence their instinctively felt need to throw themselves immediately on his mercy.

Joseph lived for one hundred and ten years (Gen. 50:22), pre-deceasing his brothers (Gen. 50:24-25). Given the tone of Genesis 50: 24-26, wherein the brothers give a solemn undertaking to Joseph on his death-bed to take his remains with them to be buried in Canaan on the day God fulfils his promise of redemption, we may assume that their fear of their brother totally dissipated over the ensuing fifty-four years following their father's death.<sup>11</sup> Under the new Pharaoh, *who did not know Joseph* (Exodus 1:8), we may assume that he lived out his long retirement in close proximity to his family, all of whom put the past well and truly behind them.

#### NOTES

1. See Genesis 45:10.
2. See Jeffrey M. Cohen, *Moments of Insight* (London, Vallentine, Mitchell, 1989), pp. 21-27.
3. Midrash *Pesiqta Rabbati* on Genesis 48:1.
4. See Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 94, note to v.21.
5. See Ramban on Genesis 45:27.
6. See Y. M. Immanueli, *Sefer Bereshit: Hesberim Ve-Ha'arot* (Tel Aviv, Publ. Ha-Chevrach Le-cheker Ha-Mikra, 1978), p. 482.
7. See Genesis 37:11.
8. See Rashi on Genesis 49:23

9. Rashi on the phrases, *va-yomer le-Yosef* (Gen. 48:1) and *va-yaged le-Ya'akov* (48:2) draws attention to both their impersonal formulations, describing them as examples of *mikra katzar*, 'an elliptical phrase,' the hidden subject of which is to be understood as *echad min ha-maggidim*, 'someone charged with passing on information'. Rashi's second interpretation, that Joseph's informant was none other than his own grandson, Ephraim, "who regularly studied with Jacob," may be construed as serving 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 in fact maintained, through Ephraim. Its second purpose was to buttress the rabbinic tradition that Torah was studied, observed, and handed down to their offspring, by the Patriarchal families.

10. Rashi again emphasises here the force of the verb *tz-v-h* with the dative *el*, in the sense of 'sending a command via a messenger'. See his comment on 50:16.

11. We arrive at this number on the basis of the fact that Joseph lived one hundred and ten years, and was thirty years of age when appointed Viceroy by Pharaoh (See Gen. 41:46). There followed seven years of plenty, with Jacob and family coming down to Egypt during the second year of the famine (Gen. 45:11), when Joseph was thirty-nine years old. Jacob lived for seventeen years in Egypt (See 47:28), and died, therefore, when Joseph was fifty-six.