

JOSEPH: THE TZADDIK WHO RARELY PRAYED

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There is not a single recorded occasion of God having revealed Himself to Joseph throughout the biblical account of his life. This is remarkable, given that he is presented as a man possessed of profound faith and moral integrity, to the extent that in the Talmud, Midrash and Zohar he is referred to as *Yosef ha-tzaddik*, ‘Joseph the righteous.’¹

His profound God-consciousness is reflected in the fact that he refers to God no less than five times in the course of a single response to Pharaoh’s request to him to interpret his dreams (See Gen. 41: 16,25,28,32(x2)); and again, when he visits his father on his death-bed, together with his two sons, and is asked by Jacob who they are, Joseph does not simply reply, *They are my sons*, but adds the qualification, *whom God has given me here* (Gen. 48:9).

All this heightens the mystery of why there is not a single prayer or plea for deliverance to God attributed to him amid all his trials and tribulations: neither when the brothers strip him of his precious coat (Gen. 37:23), cast him into the pit (v.24) and sell him (v.28), while he is being constantly importuned by the wife of Potiphar (Gen. 39:7-13), when facing her false allegations (vv.17-20), and, subsequently, when thrown into jail (v.20).

How unlike his father, Jacob, who prayed fervently to God to restore him safely to his parental home (Gen.28:21), and who instinctively implored divine deliverance at the approach of Esau with a troop of 400 men (Gen. 32:10-13)! Joseph, on the other hand, the devoted ‘son of his old age,’ offers no such prayers. He complains to the butler that the charge against him is false, but he does not complain to his God!

Again, when he offers to interpret the butler’s dream (Gen. 40:7ff.), he does not ask for divine inspiration, as his father, Jacob, had instinctively done while on the road in flight from Esau (Gen. 28:20-22); and when Pharaoh

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tells him that he has heard of his reputation as an interpreter of dreams, he does no more than correct the king and inform him that it is God who works through him (See 41:25, 28, 32). Beyond that pious clarification, he does not turn to God in prayer for guidance as one might have expected, nor does he do so before embarking on his awesome and perilous challenge of dispossession almost the entire citizenry of Egypt and reorganising the very basis of the social, economic and agricultural structure of that land (Gen. 41: 26-36, 46-49, 53-57; 47:13-26). The same anomaly occurs later, when revealing his identity to his brothers. He refers to God four times (See Gen. 45:5,7,8,9), but offers no prayer of thanksgiving at their reunion. Similarly, at the later reunion with his father in Egypt, Joseph embraces him and weeps profusely,² but utters no prayer of thanksgiving.

Such a failure to initiate dialogue with God was clearly a radical departure from the spiritual tradition of his family. One has only to think of his great-grandfather Abraham's instinctive appeal to God at every turn, as exemplified by the fact that the very first eight verses, which describe his arrival on the scene of history, recount two separate divine revelations to him (See Gen. 12:1, 7), as well as a description of his having built his first two altars to commemorate those revelations and to serve as sacred shrines where he 'called upon the name of the Lord' (12: 7-8; 13:3-4).

Abraham's relationship with God even became a talking-point in the region, to the extent that the Philistine king, Abimelech, and Phikhol, the commander of his army, were moved to assert, *God is with you in everything that you do* (Gen. 21:22). That his spirituality also inspired his entire household is manifest through the approach of his servant, Eliezer, who involves God in his strategy to find the ordained soul-mate for his master's son, Isaac (Gen. 24:12-14), and who instinctively acknowledges God's guidance as many as six times when he sees his plan working out (vv. 21, 26, 27, 48, 52, 56). Abraham's spirituality was clearly contagious, to the extent that Eliezer, in turn, passed it on, albeit momentarily, to Laban, who finds himself uttering such uncharacteristically pious sentiments as, *Welcome, O blessed of the Lord* (Gen. 24:31); *This matter proceeds from the Lord* (v.50); and, *Let her become the wife of your master, as the Lord has ordained* (v.51). Again, when Isaac and his wife are later unable to have children, they also instinctively turn to God in prayer; and the influence of her father-in-law's home,

coupled with her own developing spiritual confidence, is so strong that, shortly afterwards, when she suffers severe pregnancy pains, Rebekah *goes off to seek out the Lord* (Gen. 25:22).³

Isaac also receives divine revelations (See 26:1-5; 24). After one such revelation he expresses his profound gratitude to God for the prosperity bestowed on him: *For, now God has granted us ample space [hirschiv], and we have flourished in the land* (Gen. 26:22). Hence the name *Rechovot* that he gave to one of the new wells he had dug. He also follows in his father's footsteps by building an altar and 'calling upon the name of the Lord' (Gen. 26:25).

To return to Joseph's father: If Jacob had entertained any misgivings as to his own worthiness, these were very shortly allayed by God's revelation to him by way of his dream of the ladder with angels ascending and descending and with God Himself giving him a reassurance of protection and future prosperity (See Gen. 28:10-15). If Jacob had needed any confirmation of the fact that he was being invested with succession to the patriarchal mission, it was inherent in God's opening words, *I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and God of Isaac* (Gen. 28:13). Indeed, on several occasions, Jacob expresses his pride at being heir to those two spiritual traditions, referred to as having been inspired by the *God of Abraham* and *the awe of Isaac*, respectively (Gen. 31:42, 53). God later instructs him to return to Beth-El and to construct a permanent altar and shrine, symbolic of His pleasure in Jacob's acts of worship (See Gen. 35:1). Add to this the Torah's lengthy description of Jacob's plaintive plea for deliverance from the hand of his scheming brother: *Save me, I pray You, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau* (Gen. 32:10-13). Contrast this with Joseph, who, rather than seeking direction from God when he loses his way on the journey to meet his scheming brothers, seeks that direction from some random passer-by (Gen. 37:16) who might well have misled him.

All this strongly begs the question why Joseph never followed that pious example of his three forebears by offering a prayer for deliverance from his brothers' machinations, or by invoking God's aid in any of his subsequent trials. An attendant problem is why God did not take the initiative, even once, to reassure him of His protection and to offer him a promise that his dreams would come to fruition?

A possible answer to this is indicated by reference to a famous Mishnaic insight into prayer, to the effect that, ‘If someone prays to God to reverse what has already occurred, that is a vain prayer (*tefillat shav*).’⁷⁴ The Mishnah exemplifies this with the case of someone approaching his home and hearing the sound of tumult and anguished outcry: ‘If he prays, “let it be God’s will that the calamity be not in my home and among my family,” that is a vain prayer.’ In other words, the decree regarding the specific home to be targeted had already been issued and implemented. God does not back-track on destiny or offer an alternative history. It was vain, therefore, to pray for something that could not be reversed.

Joseph was unique among the patriarchal family for his unequivocal belief that his life had already been mapped out in every detail from his childhood onwards, and that destiny had already summoned him to be the instrument of God’s plan for his people. That unswerving belief meant that, in his eyes, it was irrevocable. It was as if his facilitating role in the history of the Israelite clan had already been written in stone. To pray for a different fate was a veritable *tefillat shav*. It was tantamount to one who had already been rescued continuing to pray to God to come to his aid.

And hence it is that a man so filled with the spirit of God, with the ability to elucidate the mysteries symbolised by dreams, with wisdom beyond his years, and with unique diplomatic talents and organisational skills, should yet have been so naïve and reckless as to bring back an evil report about his brothers and to disclose his dreams that they would all ultimately become subservient to him. He, more than anyone, should have been able to foresee the hurt his words would inflict and the consequences of his action!

But, according to his perception, those consequences were irrevocably determined. His future was as certain as if it had already been enacted. His mind-set prefigured that of the classical prophets who often employed the past tense -called, accordingly, ‘the prophetic perfect’ - to describe future events; their being so vivid in their minds that they appeared to have already occurred. Joseph knew therefore that nothing – neither his hopes and fears, *nor even his petitionary prayers* – could alter his destiny in any way. However uncomfortable it may have been for the brothers to have had to listen to his boasted proclamation of future pre-eminence, yet from Joseph’s perspective it simply had to be disclosed. His approach foreshadows here the mindset of

the later prophets, as succinctly expressed by Amos, *The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?* (3:8).

Every single experience of his life, painful or pleasurable, significant or superficial, he viewed through the prism of God's will. Not only his own dreams, but also those of the king's butler and baker, and of the king himself – even including Potiphar's wife's attempted seduction of him – he perceived as scripted by God to secure his and his people's destiny, as foretold to his ancestors.

Joseph would have been told by his father, Jacob, of the divine promise to his own grandfather, Abraham, that his offspring would be strangers in an alien land for 400 years, before returning to take possession of Canaan (Ex. 15:13-16). He would have had little doubt but that Egypt was that alien land and that his presence there must presage the commencement of that fateful promise. He would have inferred that, however painful were the circumstances of his sale, and whatever trials lay ahead, he would ultimately triumph with the help of God.

At the moment Joseph reveals his physical identity to his brothers he also reveals his spiritual identity and his mission as agent of God's providence: *Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you...God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt* (Genesis 45:5, 7-8).

It was certainly not a case of Joseph having arrived at this realisation of a master plan only after the fact, or as an attempt to make the best of a bad situation purely to assuage the fear of the brothers. It was an integrated divine plan that he was disclosing to them, one that he encapsulated in but three sentences. It was a plan to be read forward, from the moment he was 'sent ahead' of his brothers, a telling phrase employed to reinforce the divinely ordained role he was summoned to fulfil, already as a mere seventeen-year old youth.

But this conviction did not mean that all his suffering along the way was not fearful and that it did not elicit an instinctive cry of pain and complaint. It would have been unnatural for him not to have been frightened when his

brothers threw him into the pit, and not to have cried and pleaded with them to release him, as later related by Reuben (Gen. 42:21). One may willingly put oneself through a trial of physical and mental endurance and yet still cry out at its overwhelmingly painful effects. After all, although Joseph may have been fired by the conviction that ‘everything the Almighty imposes is for the best,’ yet he had no certain way of discerning which specific experiences were essential component of God’s central plan and which were independently-initiated and compounded hostile human supplements.

This may be exemplified by the moral problem thrown up by God’s having hardened Pharaoh’s heart in the matter of the final five plagues, depriving him thereby of his free will. This is rationalised by some commentators on the basis that, because God had given him as many as five previous opportunities to release the Hebrews and avoid punishment thereby, it followed that Pharaoh’s continued refusal to do so meant that he was essentially hardening his own heart and bringing extra punishment on his land and people.⁵ Similarly, Joseph was entitled to assume that, by throwing him into the pit, his brothers were acting purely out of their own hostile volition and in defiance of God’s will. And hence his heart-rending appeal for mercy. In the same way, his petition to the cup-bearer, to mention him to Pharaoh and to secure his release from jail, may be harmonised with his certain belief that God would make it all come out well in the end. After all, it was not beyond the self-interest of Potiphar to keep Joseph incarcerated far beyond the period ordained by God. God’s plan would ultimately prevail, but – for all Joseph knew – at the price of his prolonged suffering.

The situation of Moses at the burning bush provides a further example of this. God had made a solemn promise to him, reinforced by a ‘sign’ (Ex. 3:19), that his mission would be successful; and yet, on several occasions, due to his stress and frustration at the difficulties and obstructions thrown in his path, he expresses despair at his ability to succeed. Malevolent human activity may interfere with, though never ultimately frustrate, God’s overall purpose. Implicit faith in the latter does not exclude the pain and frustration of the former.

We are not suggesting that the lack of any recorded prayer by Joseph necessarily implies that he was never disposed to pray. Indeed, we have already referred to Reuben’s later expression of remorse at the fact that the brothers

had ignored Joseph's cries and pleas for mercy when they threw him into the pit. Yet the fact that the Torah suppressed that significant fact in its initial account of what the brothers were doing to him, only to reveal it indirectly in the context of Reuben's later outburst, is equally significant.

We view this as supportive of our theory that Joseph was being portrayed in the Torah as one who regarded his life's mission as a sacred calling – a veritable revelation – and all his attendant efforts to secure the success of that mission as specifically spiritual acts. The duty of personal prayer – if it existed in the patriarchal period⁶ – would surely have been superseded by the call to facilitate the unfolding of God's higher purpose for His people. Indeed, this example of Joseph may well represent a biblical paradigm of the later rabbinic principle, *Ha'osek b'mitzvah patur min ha-mitzvah*, that, 'one who is preoccupied with one mitzvah is absolved from the duty of fulfilling another.'⁷

From the Torah's perspective, whatever pleas or prayers Joseph may have uttered were incidental to his grander and more comprehensive mission. If he came over, therefore, as a man of entrepreneurial, rather than spiritual, purpose, so be it!

God did not need, therefore, to give him any further assurances by way of revelations. Joseph understood both the Source and the purpose of his pain and his success, his enslavement and his redemption. He would undoubtedly have interpreted the latter as a prefiguration of the future experience of his descendants in Egypt, as foretold by God to Abraham (Gen. 15:13). God's actions spoke to him louder than any words or revelations.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Joseph was the only biblical tzaddik who was never required to pray, and with whom God never felt the necessity to communicate. It could be said, however, that Joseph's entire life was a veritable prayer; an 'Amen' response to a divine summons.

The saga of the patriarchs may now be seen to have been prefaced by an account of the life of Noah, a *tzaddik* (Gen. 6:9) who responded to a divine mission with total silence, and which concludes with the life of another *tzaddik* whose response to his mission was to walk humbly – yet silently – with his God. It is perhaps that spiritual silence which accounts for the fact that Joseph was not invested with patriarchal rank, notwithstanding that,

while his forebears were merely informed of the Israelite destiny, it was Joseph who was responsible for having set it in motion.

NOTES

1. See TB *Yoma* 35b; Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1994) vol. V, 325; In the Zohar, Joseph is associated with the *sefirah* (divine emanation) of Yesod, "foundation;" for, just as the righteous man is considered 'the foundation of the world' (Prov. 10:25), so Joseph is regarded as the moral foundation of the Jewish people and the exemplar of chastity. See Gershom G Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1955), 235.
2. See *Rashi* on Gen. 46:29.
3. A close reading of the text might indeed suggest that Rebekah's sense of the immanence of God was even more profound than that of her husband; for, when Isaac asks Esau to bring him venison so that he might feel in a sufficiently contented state of mind to confer his blessing, he says, *that I may bless you before I die* (27:4); yet, when Rebekah quotes her husband's words to Jacob, she expands on them, saying, *that I may bless you before God before I die* (v.7). Whether the Talmudic sages took this view is a moot point, given the different explanation they offer for why God acceded to Isaac's prayer for a child, and apparently not to that of Rebekah. They suggest that, 'one cannot compare the efficacy of the prayer of a righteous person who is also the offspring of a righteous person to that of a righteous person who is the offspring of a wicked person' (See TB *Yevamot* 64a and *Rashi* on Gen. 25:21). It does not follow, however, that the latter may not him- or her-self be on a higher spiritual level than one in the former category.
4. Mishnah *Berakhot*. 9:3.
5. See comments of Rashi and Ramban on Exodus 7:3.
6. Those who take the Midrashic statement that the Patriarchs innovated (the) three daily services as historical fact would no doubt vehemently assert that Joseph would have been initiated into that exercise of daily prayer. Others, who embrace a more critical perspective, would view that statement merely as a rabbinic attempt to enhance the importance of that central institution of prayer as a ritual that was coeval with the very birth of the Israelite/Jewish faith. The absence of any recorded reference to prayer on the part of Joseph raises a fundamental question for exponents of the former view.
7. See TB *Berakhot* 11a; *Sukkah* 25a.