

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS: THE UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

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The saga of the biblical patriarchs comes to an end with Jacob's death as his sons in unison, in accordance with his last will and testament, bury him in *Maarat Hamakhpelah*. The subsequent unexpected encounter between Joseph and his brothers, takes the reader out of his comfort zone, Witness the text:

And Joseph returned into Egypt, he, and his brethren, and all that went up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father. And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said: 'It may be that Joseph will hate us and will fully requite us all the evil which we did unto him.' And they sent a message unto Joseph, saying: 'Thy father did command before he died, saying: So shall ye say unto Joseph: Forgive, I pray thee now, the transgression of thy brethren, and their sin, for that they did unto thee evil. And now, we pray thee, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of thy father.' And Joseph wept when they spoke unto him. And his brethren also went and fell down before his face; and they said: 'Behold, we are thy bondmen.' And Joseph said unto them: 'Fear not; for am I in the place of God? And as for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not; I will sustain you, and your little ones.' And he comforted them and spoke kindly unto them. (Gen. 50:14-21).

Had the text skipped over this encounter, the chronicle of the Israelite people could have progressed ostensibly, with nothing missing. The reader would have remained in blissful ignorance, assuming that the sale of Joseph (after his near fratricide) no longer plagued the parties, as its ultimate outcome saved the family from famine. Why then was it recorded? The aim of this discourse is to uncover what would have been missed for posterity had it in fact been omitted.

THE ORPHANS

It is remarkable that with respect to Jacob's burial it is the: **sons** who *did unto him according as he commanded them. For his sons carried him into the land of Canaan* (Gen. 50:12-13). They quickly however, metamorphize into **Joseph (he), and his brethren . . . after he had buried his father** (Gen.

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50:14). After the death of the unifying patriarch, the family from the perspective of Joseph's brothers, re-divides into two camps along the lines of an old fault.¹ They experience renewed vertigo with respect to their standing vis a vis Joseph: *And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead, they said: 'It may be that Joseph will hate us, and will fully requite us all the evil which we did unto him.'* They feared Joseph would unleash the revenge which he had repressed out of respect for his father or an unwillingness to pain him.²

It is remarkable that the brothers did not communicate their fears to Joseph (they could have done so in Jacob's absence, in order to spare him) during the entire seventeen years prior to Jacob's death. In this regard, we should be reminded of the longstanding culture of silence which pervaded the household of Jacob. Early on, the brothers neither confronted Jacob for favoring Joseph, nor the latter for his tattling (and only half-heartedly for his dream-bragging). To confront Joseph now, viceroy of the Pharaoh upon whom their very bread was dependent, was too daunting an undertaking.

The Midrashic literature implies that the brothers' suspicions may have remained latent, but they surfaced as a reaction to Joseph's actions following Jacob's death. *Midrash Agada* (Genesis, 50:15) and *Yalkut Shimoni* (*Vayehi*, 162) among others, claim that on the way back from Jacob's burial, Joseph detoured to the notorious pit into which he had been cast by his brothers, reciting a blessing of gratitude for his deliverance. Thanking God for performing a miracle on his behalf is an innocuous action, but the very fact that Joseph gave weight to the visit in their presence, ignoring the ill feelings it might stir up, was enough to arouse the brothers' fear. The text: *And Joseph returned into Egypt, he, and his brethren, and all that went up with him to bury his father, after he had buried his father. And when Joseph's brethren saw that their father was dead...* is redundant with respect to Jacob's burial and strangely anachronistic with respect to the brothers "seeing" Jacob's death (after his burial). Within the unusual structure of these verses may be nested the occurrence of an event the brothers witnessed subsequent to the burial, one that brought home the import of their fathers' demise with respect to their relationship with Joseph.

The other event suggested by *Psikta Zutrata* and *Seckhel Tov* (Genesis, 50:15) as well as other Midrashim, as triggering the brothers' fears is the change Joseph initiated with respect to the family's dining habits. Instead of sharing meals with them in the palace as had been customary during Jacob's lifetime, Joseph sent the repasts to the brothers' homes. The Midrash, in de-

fense of Joseph, maintains Joseph wished simply for all their sakes, to avoid the issue of who would sit at the table's head.³ They could have asked Joseph for an explanation instead of immediately drawing conclusions, but maybe they thought Joseph should initiate an explanation. Perhaps the Midrash reads back their concerns from Joseph's subsequent assurances: *Now therefore fear ye not; I will sustain you, and your little ones.* They feared their brother would go down the slippery slope and stop providing for them.

Jacob's farewell address, the brother's last communication with their father, was still fresh in the brother's minds (Genesis, 49); it also sheds light on their perceptions. On the one hand, it renders their fears vis a vis Joseph puzzling. Divinely inspired, Jacob speaks of a family composed of twelve distinct and interdependent tribes, each with an indispensable role in building a collective destiny for Israel. The future of the nation, Jacob clearly iterated and reiterated, depends upon all the tribes contributing to form an organic whole: *And Jacob called unto his sons, and said: 'Gather yourselves together...assemble yourselves* (Gen. 49:1-2); *All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is it that their father spoke unto them and blessed them; every one according to his blessing he blessed them* (Gen. 49: 28). In order for all the sons not only to survive but to flourish; each would need the other. Joseph heard the divinely inspired address along with the other brothers. Was it rational for them to entertain the possibility that Joseph would conspire to kill them, defying both his father and the God of his fathers? What about *Shivtai Yisrael!*? Yet this seems to be what the brothers feared: [he] *will fully requite us all the evil which we did unto him-* kidnapping and selling an individual (not to speak of a brother) into slavery is punishable by death according to Israelite law⁴. Hoping for clemency of sorts, they offered themselves up as slaves to Joseph, out of their own volition.

There is in this regard however, another side to Jacob's address. To get to the "end of the days" (*aharit hayamim*, a future time in which the nation of Israel will settle down in Canaan)⁵ which Jacob speaks of one has to survive "these days" in Egypt. But there is stark dissonance between the period Jacob was referring to and the lived experience of the family immediately after Jacob's death. Joseph is viceroy to the Pharaoh and has absolute hold on the Egyptian economy; the brothers are dependent on him for their daily sustenance. At this point, is there any interdependence? What, from their perspective, can the brothers do for Joseph, what can they contribute to the Israelite collective?

The brothers' feelings of inferiority were fed by the splendor and bountifulness of Joseph's blessings: *Even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall **bless** thee with **blessings** of heaven above, **blessings** of the deep that lieth under, **blessings** of the breasts, and of the womb: The **blessings** of thy father have prevailed above the **blessings** of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: **they** shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren* (Gen. 49: 22-26). Given the current situation, would not Joseph exploit his "separate" standing? He had both God and father on his side. The blessings also reopened a closed wound (of guilt), or perhaps added salt to an open wound: *The archers have dealt bitterly with him, And shot at him, and hated him* (Genesis, 49: 23). Many commentators⁶ identify *the archers* with the brothers. The use of the root s-t-m to connote hatred moreover, is again remindful of Esau's conspiracy to kill Jacob after Isaac's death. Although the conspiracy against Joseph was probably not a subject of discussion during the years of their sojourn in Egypt, in his final address Jacob chooses to allude to the brothers' unbridled aggression toward Joseph, contrasting it with to the latter's noble restraint, as reflected in the text: [Joseph's] *bow abode firm* (*Hizkuni*, commentary to Gen. 49:16).

THE ENCOUNTER

Afraid to "face" Joseph face to face, the brothers approached him in a "twice removed" manner. They communicated through a messenger and in addition, hid behind Jacob's command (possibly fabricated) that he forgive them: Only on its coattails are the messengers instructed to continue with: . . . 'we pray thee, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of thy father.' They did not even request forgiveness for their *sins*, although they claim Jacob commanded this as well. The brothers themselves appeared in person only after hearing of Joseph tears, signs of softness perhaps remindful of the tears Joseph shed when he revealed himself to them seventeen years ago. At this point, but not prior to falling down before him, did they finally communicate directly, offering themselves up to be his slaves: '*Behold, we are thy bondmen*', this gesture reflects their assumption that they cannot expect complete exoneration. The scene is painfully pathetic, indeed bringing Joseph to tears.

The brothers put themselves in Joseph's shoes. Had they been sold by a brother into slavery and subsequently risen to power, they would have exploited their position by taking revenge. The words *hashev yashiv* which the

brothers use to describe Joseph's retaliatory intentions- twice for emphasis- contain the root sh-v-b. The latter connotes to give back but also implies to regress to avenge the past, for which Joseph had no desire. More-so however, he saw himself lacking the moral authority to do so: *am I in the place of God?* As the brothers themselves said, they are God's servants; their freedom is not Joseph's for the taking (*N'tziv*, commentary to Genesis 50:19). More importantly, he is anchored in the future- perceiving himself an agent of divine providence with the mandate of sustaining a multitude: *And as for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.* This is no longer about **you** against **me** in the past but about a collective future- and *God meant it for good*-it is the good of the entire family and as an entirety which is at stake.

EMPOWERING THE BROTHERS

The Midrash is sensitive to something which Joseph understood still crucial to address the brothers' feelings. The words: *And Joseph kept on comforting them, speaking to the needs of their hearts* (Gen. 50: 21) are the nails upon which the Midrash hangs its hat in this regard. They clearly add something beyond sustaining the brothers in a physical sense. These are the empowering words the Midrash puts into Joseph's mouth: (paraphrase of *Bereshit Rabah*, Genesis 50: 19-21, first paragraph): **You** are part of the indestructible national order of the world- the stars, the earth, the world's fauna. You (myself included) are akin to the twelve constellations of the zodiac, underpinning the astrological stability of the world. With respect to their indispensability to the family's destiny Joseph says: you, akin to ten candles, were incapable of snuffing out one candle (myself), how can (I) one candle snuff out ten?⁸ Candles enhance the flame of other candles; they can't put them out. *Gur Aryeh* (commentary on Rashi, Genesis 50:21) associates the constellation of the stars with the stars in Joseph's dream and the candles as reflection of these stars. Admittedly, there were only eleven stars in the dream and Joseph perceived them as bowing down to him, he has come a long way and now sees himself as an integral part of the family. They now become whole, together making up the zodiac holding together the world. Taking the brothers back to Jacob's farewell address, Joseph reminds them of the summative blessing: *everyone according to his blessing he blessed them.* (Gen. 49:28): each of us is included in the blessing of the other; if one (certainly ten!) is missing the blessings will be annulled.⁹ It is remarkable that the word *Ya'yinahem* con-

notes not only to comfort but enable a change in paradigm;¹⁰ Joseph wanted most of all, to return to his brothers their self-esteem.

AN ADDITIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR CLOSURE

And Joseph said unto his brethren: 'I die; but God will surely remember you and bring you up out of this land unto the land which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence (Gen. 50: 24-25. As Joseph approached his own death, he beseeched his brothers under oath to do something for him which he was incapable of doing for himself. He the Egyptian viceroy, second to the Pharaoh, needs them! Ironically, because of his powerful position, Pharaoh will not allow for his burial in Canaan. Joseph entrusts the brothers, not his sons, to pass down his last will and testament in this respect, until the time of the exodus. For Joseph, this last will and testament as penultimate. The brothers make good on the promise; Moses eventually retrieves his bones and the nation of Israel transport them from Egypt to be reburied in *She'khem*. Joseph thereby gave the brothers an opportunity to reach their own closure with respect to the past: From *Sh'khem* you took me (i.e., sold me), to *Sh'khem* you will return me (*Mechilta B'shalach* 13: 19; TB *Sotah* 13b).

THE ENCOUNTER NEEDED TO BE RECORDED

After unraveling the encounter, it becomes clear why it was recorded for posterity. Family dynamics are often complex, and wrongdoings inevitably occur in every family- hopefully not as extreme as selling a brother. Parents have many challenges in preserving the peace and integrity of the family, protecting their children from the pains of life to the extent possible and moving toward a legacy which reflects their values. Unresolved issues and regrets sometimes pass on to the next generation and the children need to take on the responsibility for their resolution. The balance of power among family members is often not balanced. Those in a position to resolve issues might be ones who were wronged, but no matter. A family has a collective future; whoever is in a position to promote a more constructive destiny is obligated to lead the way. It is important along this path, to empower all members of a family as contributors to this destiny; no single individual can do it alone. Joseph has given inspiration.

NOTES

1. Malbim, and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary to Genesis 50:15, point out that the head of the family [at least in traditional societies] is its unifying force, around whom all the members rally.
2. Radak, and Ralbag, commentary to Genesis 50:15, respectively.
3. *Siftei Hahamim*, commentary to Rashi, Genesis 50:15.
4. See Exodus 21:16; although predating the giving of the Torah, tradition has it that the patriarchs abided by its rulings to various degrees.
5. See for example, Shadal, commentary to Genesis 49:1.
6. See Avraham ben HaRambam, Netziv, Radak, and Ralbag (commentaries to Genesis 50:23), among others.
7. Also appears in *Yalkut Shimoni* (Genesis 50:21).
8. These words appear in several sources: TB *Megilah* 16b; *Midrash Agadah*, *Midrash Lekhah Tov* and *Sekhel Tov*, *Yalkut Shimoni*, and are brought down by commentaries to Genesis 50: 21.
9. *Midrash Lekhah Tov* and *Sekhel Tov*, Genesis 50:21.
10. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh (commentary to Genesis 50:21) points this out. The term *Va'yinahem* with reference to God's decision to bring the flood is (according to Rashi, R. David Zvi Hoffman and others, commentary to Genesis 6:6) is explained as a change in approach.



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