

A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis



OUR FATHERS' WELLS

*"A truly superb book,
one that stretches the mind
and nourishes the soul."
- Rabbi Harold S. Kushner*

PETER PITZELE

"comes upon them with its power" (*salach*). They are inflated and in this state speak words of fire; they excoriate and envision. *Tsalach* is associated, then, with Samson's splendid potency on the one hand and with prophetic language and vision on the other.

The second word used to describe Joseph is *chen*, which means "grace" as both a physical and a spiritual beauty. The fusion of these two words, *chen* and *tsalach*, in the character of Joseph defines his charisma. He articulates a certain type of masculine eros and beauty. In Joseph we find the prototype of a masculinity in which power is present as charm and can cast its spell. In a less homophobic age than ours, this loveliness was celebrated and recognized as a power. We have not met such an image of manhood in the gallery of Genesis.

If we stop his story at this point, we see in Joseph the myth of the man of power in all its glory and hollowness. On the one hand he has climbed to supreme success in the world's terms. Newly cast in the role of Pharaoh's regent, he becomes a new character, complete with new props, sets, scenes, and auxiliaries. In the eyes of the Egyptians he is, and is named, a god, having risen meteorically from obscurity on the basis of his extraordinary charisma. We see him as they see him; we, too, are dazzled by his successes.

On the other hand, we know—and the Egyptians do not—that this achievement has taken Joseph farther than ever from his own identity. He is no longer even "Joseph," but bears an exalted Egyptian name. The very trappings of his office trap him in isolation. He has lost his inferiority, and he has lost the kind of self-awareness, the wisdom, it can bring. As a prisoner Joseph was able to look past his own disappointments to notice the "dejection" of two inmates. Now he is insulated from disappointment by his supreme election.

At this season of his life Joseph represents the dangers that await the charismatic man whose life becomes so consumed with power that his inner life, his family life, his connection to his roots and sources, wither. Inflated with power, such a man acts like a god and believes that nothing can touch him. The same quality in masculine eros that can swell us can make us swell. Joseph's inflation rises toward grandiosity. He reminds me of the men of Babel, who believed they were building a tower that would reach to heaven. Joseph's imperial power and regal authority verge on idolatry. He is in danger of losing his soul.

During the years of famine he collectivizes the Egyptian economy, and by the time he is done, former landholders have become slaves. Joseph is the means for creating a centralized, totalitarian regime. Though it may be dangerous to judge him by modern democratic values, one can mark the lengths to which he goes. He begs a people who in their hunger willingly give up

what is precious to them, silver, livestock, land, and finally their own freedom in order to survive.

Genesis makes it possible for us to be critical of Joseph even as it chronicles his career. In showing us his prominence, it also shows us his emptiness. In the names of his sons we hear his pain and his denial. The first son he names Manasseh, for Joseph says, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." The second he calls Ephraim, because "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction" (41:51-52). He is a man who wills himself to forget his afflictions, but he cannot fail to remember his hardships each time he regards his sons. As readers we are privy to the loneliness that comes with his enormous temporal success. The seven fat years fatten him.

As the lean years begin, the Egyptians come to Joseph for rations. Having spread beyond Egypt, the famine now brings foreigners to Egypt for food. Hunger reaches all the way to Canaan and to the house of Jacob. Hunger is the hidden means by which a mysterious God, master of plots and timing, begins to move the past into the present.



We have been so immersed in the saga of Joseph that we have all but forgotten the family that abandoned him and that he left behind. (Never once does he send news home to his father that he has survived.) Our saga gains new interest from the suspense of its unfinished business.

When the famine reaches the house of Jacob, it brings with it news that rations may be procured in Egypt. Thinking only of their survival, the old patriarch sends his sons "down" to Egypt for food (42:2). But he keeps Benjamin home with him, toward whom apparently he feels a special protectiveness, intensified, one may suppose, by his actual loss of Benjamin's mother, Rachel, and also by his loss of Joseph years earlier. In all innocence the brothers leave on this business trip.

In time "Joseph's brothers come and bow low to him, with their faces to the ground" (42:6). Joseph stands above them. In dress, speech, and position he has so changed that they do not recognize him. But he recognizes them. What he feels in this moment is, as usual, left up to our midrashic imaginations—a flashback to years of imprisonment perhaps, to a dry well in a wilderness, to a murderous conversation overheard, to earlier childhood wounds and ostracism, to a father's love, a colored cloak, perhaps to a dream of sheaves, to a mother's death. Joseph may have an eerie feeling of something moving from one dimension to another. The dead past comes to life in

the present; old, forgotten dreams break into a settled and successful life; buried passions, deep and painful, erupt into consciousness. Ironies glint: Do the brothers come to Joseph that they might be saved, or do they come in some way to save him?

Joseph is not ready to reveal himself to them, but our anticipation of this great revelation is whetted by their arrival. He "acted like a stranger and spoke harshly to them" (4:2:7). The phrase "acted like a stranger" announces his assumption of a theatrical part, but the part that he plays is paradoxically the part he has been living, for he has been the "stranger" all along. The harshness he feigns is linked to a harshness he feels. In this moment he must recognize anew that he is an outsider both to the culture of his birth and to that of his assimilation. In Joseph we revisit the Myth of the Stranger, not as the God-called nomad who belongs nowhere, but as the orphan of history.⁵

Disguised, Joseph further disguises himself; he pretends ignorance, feigns a part. The suspense of the ensuing drama builds as we await the disclosure of his identity, the moment when he throws off his "acting" and lets his brothers see that he is, under the trappings, only Joseph, long lost, now found.

From this moment forward until the point when he can sustain the part no longer, Joseph is both an "actor" and an improvisational dramaturge, a psychodramatist if you will, who sets scenes, lays plots, devises ordeals for his unwitting brothers. Using his immense power, he stages their reality. Ironically, however, Joseph is unaware of a larger drama that enfolds him and within which he "acts" a part beyond the one he conceives. A greater power is moving in and through him. Though we are reading the myths of a culture with no formal theatrical conventions, we are in the presence of a profoundly theatrical imagination. There is a dizzying sense of plays within plays. As he "acts the stranger," the soundless turning of hidden gears, the *deus ex machina*, begins to act on him and moves him toward atonement.

That atonement begins as Joseph stages a theater of revenge. He accuses his brothers of being spies, and over their protestations of innocence he has them thrown into prison for three days. Then he insists that one remain behind as hostage while the other nine go and fetch Benjamin. The brothers agree to what he asks, while some sense of their ancient crime against Joseph appears to trickle into their awareness. They say to one another, "Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us" (4:2:21). Overhearing this, Joseph "turned away from them and wept" (4:2:24).

Two dramas are played out side by side—theirs and his. They begin to have a sense of nemesis, of something pursuing them for which a reckoning has to be made. Joseph is also pursued now by the pain of his old wounds and longings.

Simeon is selected as the hostage, perhaps because it was he who had suggested that Joseph be killed. Simeon is "bound before their eyes" in an act that replicates so many bindings (4:2:24). Then Joseph has the brothers' bags filled with grain and secretly has placed in them the money they had brought to pay for rations. On the way home, one of them opens a sack to feed his ass and discovers the money there, and "their hearts sank" (4:2:28).

The brothers return home and tell their father everything that has occurred, but so attached is the old man to his youngest son that only after all their rations are exhausted will Jacob finally part with Benjamin, and then with the greatest fear and reluctance. The brothers return with him to ransom Simeon.

As soon as he sees Benjamin, Joseph stages a feast. The brothers are understandably mystified. They fear that under their host's apparent hospitality lurks another intent; this vicerey seems to be toying with their lives. They are sure that he must think they stole back the money they had first brought for payment of the grain, but Joseph's steward reassures them.

Joseph now asks after "their" father's health and is told that he is well. He sees Benjamin, blurts out a greeting, then rushes offstage, overcome with feeling toward his brother and not ready to give himself away. He goes into a room and weeps there. Then "he washed his face and reappeared." Now in control of himself, he gives the order, "Serve the meal" (4:3:32).

Joseph now seats the brothers at his table, and to their immense surprise being served the largest share (4:3:33). Their feast flows with wine. But Benjamin is not done with his play-making. As the brothers prepare to return to Canaan, Joseph secretly instructs his servants to fill their bags with grain, but now to put each man's money in each man's bag and to secrete in Benjamin's bag his own personal silver goblet. No sooner have the brothers departed than Joseph sends his steward after them with the accusation that one of them has stolen his drinking cup, "the very one from which my master drinks and which he uses for divination" (4:4:5).

The brothers are, of course, terrified at this second reversal. They protest their innocence to the steward, swearing that if the cup is found, the person who has it shall be killed for the crime. The cup is discovered in the bag of Benjamin. In despair the brothers trek back to Joseph. They prostrate themselves