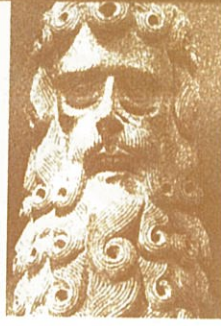


A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis



# OUR FATHERS' WELLS

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

PETER PITZELE

Joseph stands in his own stillness, listening to what may be given to him from his imagination. Here is either faith or folly in the extreme; in such extremes faith and folly meet.

Pharaoh narrates his dreams. In the first dream he saw seven fat cows coming out of the Nile, but they were followed by seven lean cows, which devoured the fat cows, yet, having devoured them, they were as lean as before. Pharaoh then dreamed again. In his second dream he saw seven ears of corn on a single stalk, full and good ears, but suddenly came seven other ears, hardened and lean, which sprang up after them and swallowed up the seven good ears.

"Tell me," says Pharaoh, "what do these dreams mean?"

"The two dreams are one," Joseph tells him. "They tell Pharaoh what God is about to do" (4:1:25). Seven years of prodigious abundance will be followed by seven ravaging years of famine, he explains. Joseph counsels Pharaoh to appoint overseers of the land to collect food from the seven years of abundance so there will be provisions for the seven years of famine.

Pharaoh is instantly struck by Joseph's acumen, and on the spot he appoints him his viceroy. His respect for Joseph goes beyond what Potiphar and the prison warden have felt about him. Almost reverently the king asks his court, "Can we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?" (4:1:37).

This phrase has been used only once before in Genesis. It was the force that "moved on the face of the waters" before the beginning of the world and that brought a world into being. For us as readers, Joseph's power is linked here to the deepest sources of human creativity; something in his soul is connected to the source of all creation. Joseph, the dreamer, is a man at home in imagination. He understands the symbolic; he mediates between a world of events and a hidden world of causes.

In recognition of his gifts, Pharaoh slips the royal signet ring onto Joseph's finger; he cloaks him in linen and hangs a gold chain around his neck. Joseph is given an Egyptian name, which translated means "God speaks and creates" (4:1:45). Joseph has the patriarchal power of speech. Enthroned at the right hand of the king, he receives the daughter of an Egyptian priest in marriage. At this time "Joseph's influence goes out over all the land of Egypt" (4:1:46). He has now entered public life and the political domain. With his new wife he has two sons. As the poet Rumi says:

*Pharaoh and the whole Egyptian world  
collapsed for such a Joseph.*

This moment of Joseph's release from prison and his appearance at court is nothing short of a revelation. This revelation produces a kind of con-

version experience for the temporal powers of Egypt. Through Joseph and his dreams, the sacred pours out into secular life. Joseph brings his God into Egypt, and therefore into history. The God who dwelled in the innermost region of Joseph's heart is now revealed as the same God who, through Joseph, will work in the public domain.

Joseph is revealed and recognized to be what he has been from the beginning. From his youth in his father's house, where he wore a cloak of many colors, to his tenure in the house of Potiphar, where the mistress was taken with his beauty, to his years in prison, where he distinguished himself in the eyes of the warden, Joseph has shone as a singular figure. Alone of the characters in Genesis Joseph possesses *charisma*.

Charisma is a myth word. In it we pay tribute to something alluring and dangerous about personal power that fascinates us and eludes our understanding. Though "charismatic" has traditionally modified the masculine, there is nothing gender-specific in the term. The charismatic person, demagogue or demigod, seems gifted beyond the ordinary, arousing in us the deepest ambivalence of admiration and envy, surrender and opposition. With a sexuality both potent and androgynous, such a person is often the object of both women's and men's desires. Charisma is precisely that irresistible mixture of the spiritual and the sexual that most deeply touches and at the same time confuses us. Culture forms in eddies around such men and women and turns them into leaders, national figures, superstars. Joseph's story is in part the myth of the charismatic man who is thrust into political and public life and who faces the temptations and corruptions that come with an extraordinary power.

Charisma is Greek; Hebrew has no word for it.<sup>4</sup> But two Hebrew words occur as leitmotifs throughout Joseph's story and convey this sense of his special grace and his power to gain favor. One of these words is *tsalach*. It means "to cause to prosper or bear fruit," "to push forward." It suggests a generative force that pushes forward and brings fertility.

The essential force of this Hebrew word *tsalach* is captured in a later biblical passage in which the young Samson is suddenly attacked by a lion.

*Behold, a young lion roared against Samson and the spirit of the Lord favored him mightily [tsalach], and he was able to rend the lion as he would have rent a kid, and he had nothing in his hand. (Judges 14:5-6)*

Here *tsalach* is associated with the prowess of a Samson, his immense physical potency infused by "the spirit of the Lord."

Later in the Bible the same word is used to describe the inspiration that enables the prophets to prophesy. The spirit of the Lord "favors them"; it

comes upon them with its power" (*isalach*). They are inflated and in this state peak words of fire; they excoriate and envision. *Isalach* 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 *salach*, 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

asy, release, and thanksgiving that fill the heart of this lost son who disin the end he has always been the Great Father's adopted child. And he at last, where his power came from. For what is revealed to Joseph in ment of his revelation to his brothers is nothing short of the providence are of power, a sense for him that there has been a meaning in his life, a in his experiences, that bespeaks a divine will. All of his personal has flowed from a higher source.

ea of a providential power is Joseph's legacy to us, the latest gift of the chah tradition. The word *providence* is an idea, mere air, but it is an idea divides us with a way of articulating our sense of design, not as mere sci-order, but as something at work in the apparent confusion of life, some-hat is repeatedly reborn as a new order out of dissolution and chaos. ence is a way of affirming that there is a meaning in life, an emergent from an evident evil, a possible healing from enormous wounds. This of the present to reclaim the past lays the myth-theological ground-for all subsequent tales of redemption. It is no coincidence that the of the father of the messiah in the Christian dispensation is Joseph. Joseph affirms this redemptive truth to his brothers and to himself when s them he was enlisted ("I was sent ahead") by a supreme Providence. caks of his relationship to his brothers and to the famished world as a rance."

*"God has sent me ahead of you to preserve your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance." (45:7)*

Joseph recognizes here that his powers are dependent on a superior r. The provider acts as an agent of Providence. What he does succeeds be-it is in line with the force field of divine intention. Joseph's rise to author-id always been authorized, not self-generated. He is not powerful but-owered, and in his realization he is "delivered" from his final imprisonment, his need to be in control. He casts off all his masks and strategies, his shows is feigning. He stands before his brothers as who he is, delivered from his from his revenge, and from his sense of personal betrayal. He accepts the-ing that yields him this current fulfillment. He pays tribute to a Power be-him and in that tribute relinquishes the illusion of personal power. No at-mous man, he knows his inferiority and experiences it as a blessing. According to the patriarchal imagination of Genesis, this sense of rance for self-arrangement

and autonomy. Joseph represents the soul that finds its proper relationship with the created world. With his recognition of the divinely articulated uni-verse, and only with such a sense, Joseph can in the end truly serve. He is a co-laborer with God. Joseph has become a man of wisdom.

Such wisdom comes when we find our vocation. When we find it, we feel it is necessary for us, that it was "meant to be." Crystallizing often for us out of many trials and errors, often requiring loss, a setting forth into the un-known, a sense of soul, peril, wrestling and darkness, this quest for vocation and its gradual attainment gives us a sense of personal necessity, and of con-nection to the Way, the Source, the Wheel of Life, the Ground of Being. We can come in the end—so the patriarchs would have us believe—to serve, to provide, and to find our brothers. With them we can fashion a brotherhood. This is our right livelihood, our way of being in the world without destroying it, our soul's work.

It is our right livelihood to measure, save, nourish, make, and maintain covenant, but also to bear witness to a providential reality. Joseph's story af-firms the esoteric truth that the flux of apparent experience is informed by hidden and benign intentions. Joseph knows that what we call reality—which once appeared governed only by Lady Luck, fickle fortune, blind chance, sheer coincidence—expresses the will of God. Joseph teaches that we are ac-tors in a providential play; or, to use another thematic line in his myth, that we are figures in a dream.

Joseph had dreams of power, and in the end he entered them. He lived according to his dreams, even when he was unaware of the dream structure that undergirded his life. When he comes to his providential realization, it is as if he knew consciously what he had known unconsciously all along, that he had been a figure in God's dream, and that the reality he called his life was a part of a different reality altogether. Joseph understands the surreality of life, its ironies, strange connections, and odd foreshadowings.

In this sense Joseph is the one who has been "sent ahead" to provide for us. He has provided for us a myth that gives us a glimpse into the mysteries. His sense of providence, of life having meaning, may be ours whenever we recognize that our souls belong to a different order of reality as well as to the mundane and material. There is nothing dated about his tale or about his wis-dom. Like him we can know that we live in two worlds, or that this world is shot through with glints and glimmers of mysterious connections, far-fetched coincidences that hint to us of immense designs.

In Joseph's time men called those hints the hand of God. The men of his time, who preserved these tales from some

i-theology of Providence and Power as a legacy. It is also a guidance and affirmation: We can and do still know this experience thousands of years them and in part because they, the old patriarchs, first constructed it. At s, with a rending force, we see momentarily through this life into an r; the helter-skelter suddenly crystallizes into a design. At such moments have entered the landscape of the ancestors, Dreamtime. For a spell the ant wisdom of the fathers and mothers comes home to us. At such times :now that we do not know, but by some reach, some grace, we intuit the :tery beyond and within us. Only when we accept the incomplete and par- :nature of our knowledge, the provisional, may we glimpse the providen- :what Wordsworth called

*a sense sublime*

*Of something far more deeply interfused,*

*Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,*

*And the round ocean and the living air,*

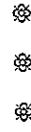
*And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:*

*A motion and a spirit, that impels*

*All thinking things, all objects of all thought,*

*And rolls through all things.*

Moved by such a "sense" of the sublime, we find our place with the an- :ats; we stand by their wells and look into the depths. We hear their stories :our own.<sup>6</sup>



he aftermath of these several revelations the last bonds of emotional con- :l are loosed between the brothers.

*Joseph embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him. (45: 14-15)*

We will be reminded of an earlier moment when a brother wept on the :ck of a brother, that moment after the night wrestling of Jacob, when his :me was changed and he met his brother Esau in reconciliation and atone- :nt. Joseph, too, suffers a change of name, but it is back into who he has al- :ve been. In his heartming was forecast his end.

For me the remainder of Joseph's story is denouement, a matter of gath- :ering up many loose ends and settling his family in Egypt, receiving the bless- :ing of his father, and then burying him in Canaan in Machpelah. Just after :Jacob dies, the brothers, fearing again that Joseph will avenge himself on :them, lie to him, telling him that it had been their father's dying wish that he :forgive them. It is clear that the brothers still stand in awe of Joseph's powers :and still live in the shadow of their own guilt. Joseph weeps and says to them:

*"Do not be afraid. Do you think I am God? You did plot against me, but God plotted it for good so that this day might come and that many people might live. I will provide for you and your little ones." (50:19-21)*

Once again Joseph affirms providence. He seeks to reframe his brothers' :guilt into a sense of faith in a plot beyond their plottings. It is written that he :did in fact "comfort them and spoke to their hearts" (50:21). It is the best he :can do. Their lie indicates how fragile their faith in him is. His final words reas- :sure them, but they cannot completely dispel their fears. The tears of cathartic :reconciliation do not wash away all the old paranoia. It runs so deep in men.

Everything that happens in this long finale flows within the awareness :Joseph has achieved of his being an actor in a divine play. The theatrical :metaphor is all but explicit in his words about plots. It is a literary as well as a :providential metaphor. Joseph's story is now complete.

On his own deathbed Joseph speaks to them once more:

*"I am dying, but God will take account of you; He will bring you up from this land to the land which he promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." (50:24)*

Asking them only to bring his bones with them into that land when they :leave Egypt, he dies. The words of the ancient promise hang in the air after the :curtain falls. Joseph links his life to the lives of his forebears and sends into :the next generation the patriarchal promise: the dream of a promised land in :which the fellowship of brothers will secure the peace.

At his death twelve inheritors remain.<sup>7</sup> When Joseph dies, they will be :the progenitors of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel. This brotherhood :of tribes is the Bible's way of saying that the world is made up of men living in :tribes. Twelve is only a number to represent a zodiac of differences imagined :in some cosmic relation to one another. The task is always the same: to find :our brothers, and live with them in peace. At the bedside of Joseph the twelve :stand, comforted by his words. For he had "spoken to their hearts."<sup>8</sup>