Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Miketz, Genesis, Chapters 39-41 | December 16, 2023

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The Tears of Joseph, the Journey of Judah, and the Insights of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

In 1956, a young talmudic scholar by the name of Aharon Lichtenstein met Robert Frost in Vermont. Frost, by then a world-famous poet, surely did not have a full appreciation of the caliber of the young man who stood before him; for Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein would become one of the greatest Talmud scholars of his time, a leader of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel, and a brilliant expositor of the talmudic method of his father-in-law, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. That Rabbi Lichtenstein sought out Frost highlighted the rabbi's own love of English literature, a subject in which he received a doctorate.

While Torah study was his first and foremost spiritual and intellectual occupation, Rabbi Lichtenstein would often illustrate how his study of literature broadened his own spiritual horizons, and how it could do the same for his students. In one extraordinary episode, he delivered an entire lecture in the yeshiva on Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," first translating the entire poem into Hebrew—in his own hand—in order that the Israeli students could engage the words of the Vermont literary light. Of all of Rabbi Lichtenstein's biblically-inspired literary reflections, perhaps the most moving is his analysis of the identity of *Yosef*, or Joseph. Utilizing the verses that Rabbi Lichtenstein cites, and his own brilliant interpretation of them, we will attempt to understand the struggle that takes place within Joseph, and what this tells us about the contrast between *Yosef* and *Yehuda*, or Judah, the other critical character in our tale.

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For Rabbi Lichtenstein, the literary key to understanding Joseph can be found in his tears; for this is a man who will weep more than most figures found in the Bible. The weeping, as will be revealed, will provide insight into the struggle that surges in Joseph's soul.

Let us briefly summarize the early events of the *parashah*. Pharaoh experiences two dreams, each with a similar theme: seven sheaves of glorious grain are suddenly swallowed by paltry ones, and then seven healthy cows are

devoured by seven emaciated animals of the same species. Pharaoh's "minister of drinks" recalls a young Hebrew in prison with a gift for dream interpretation, and Joseph is summarily summoned. The Hebrew youth explains that both dreams predict seven years of sustenance followed by seven of famine, and he advises the ruler of Egypt to prepare for what is yet to come. Impressed by the young man, Pharaoh promotes him to vizier, and bestows a new name upon the former prisoner, and sudden statesman: *Tsafnat Pa'neah*, the revealer of what is hidden.

This indicates that Joseph has a new, Egyptian identity, and the name bestowed upon his eldest child, Menasseh, similarly signals that he has left his past behind. The root of the name Menasseh is "forgetting," and Joseph seeks to forget his unpleasant familial past:

> For God has allowed me to forget my troubles, and my father's household. (Genesis 41:51)

At this moment, Joseph seems eager to forget who he once was, and the sign of this forgetting is his placidity. As Rabbi Lichtenstein notes, Joseph is too successful and unchallenged to weep, too engaged in politics to ponder his past, even as there is turmoil yet to come:

> Under these circumstances—severance from homeland and family; occupation with steering an empire through its challenges; building his household and family; a day-to-day reality of impressive achievement; a sense of strength and power that provide enormous satisfaction—there is no one and nothing that causes Joseph to weep.
>
> It is only when he comes face to face with his brothers again that he wants and needs to weep. On some occasions, when Joseph is unable to hold himself back, his tears burst forth. In these encounters, all of the feelings that have been suppressed and submerged rise up again. All that has been forgotten floods back into his consciousness.

When the famine comes, this turmoil is about to begin. Joseph's brothers end up in Egypt, seeking sustenance on behalf of themselves and their elderly father, standing before a powerful personage who, unbeknownst to them, is the half-brother that they betrayed. Suddenly, we are told,

> Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamt about them. (Genesis 42:9)

This is no mere remembrance; as Rabbi Lichtenstein explains,

> Joseph remembers not only the dreams, but also everything that came with them, the atmosphere within which they had appeared, and the chain of events they brought in their wake.

Joseph demands that his brethren return to the Holy Land and bring back with them Benjamin, the other son of Jacob's beloved Rachel, Joseph's full brother. Until they return, one of them—Jacob's second son Simeon—would be held hostage. The brothers, bewildered, take their leave of Joseph, and ponder why God brought about such a bizarre and terrible turn of events.

> Then they said to one another, But in truth, we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he besought us and we would not listen; therefore is this distress come upon us. (Genesis 42:21)

The brothers see in their plight providential punishment for what they did to Joseph. As they speak to each other (in Hebrew), they have no idea that they are understood by the apparently Egyptian vizier. At this point, something stirs within Joseph:

> He turned away from them and wept. (Genesis 42:24)

This, for Rabbi Lichtenstein, is a sign of more weeping yet to come, a reflection that the man who was apparently placid until now has a sudden surge of emotions within him.

> This encounter opens a Pandora's box. Joseph is waging a battle not only with his brothers, but also with himself, with his past, present, and future.

And here, in a mesmerizing melding of Torah and literature, Rabbi Lichtenstein reflects on what Joseph's tears reveal:

> The great Irish writer W.B. Yeats said that "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." The world of poetry, he maintains, is the pure, refined world of emotion—a world in which weeping, whether external or internal, is granted a place of honor. This world is something Joseph cannot escape.

The weeping, in other words, marks a quarrel within Joseph, a quarrel about who he is, and who he is called to be.

The brothers despondently return to Canaan, and report to Jacob that the Egyptian vizier has demanded that Benjamin return with them. The elderly patriarch refuses to send Benjamin to Egypt, as he is the only remaining son of Rachel. We are told by the Torah what Jacob said to them:

> You know that my wife bore me two sons. (Genesis 44:27)

How Jacob's words must have stung! It is the mother of Joseph and Benjamin that is "my wife," with the mothers of all his other children seemingly consigned to secondary status. All of the hatred and jealousy directed against Joseph could so easily have found a new target in Benjamin.

But it does not. And it does not because of the other main character in the story, and we must briefly review the tale of this other endlessly fascinating figure. It was Judah who, in last week's reading, had suggested selling Joseph. We were then told that, following this betrayal of his brother, Judah had left his larger family entirely, distancing himself from his brethren, raising his children elsewhere. When his eldest son died because of moral wickedness, Judah's daughter-in-law, Tamar, was given Judah's second son as a husband, in fulfillment of the obligation of levirate marriage. This son was similarly punished for wickedness by God; and with Tamar a widow

again, Judah dishonestly promised her his third son, Shelah, but did not allow the marriage to go forward.

Unable to marry anyone else, Tamar, in the guise of a prostitute, met Judah and was propositioned by him. She demanded of Judah an *eravon*, a collateral, to ensure his ultimate payment:

> He said, What collateral shall I give you? She replied, Your signet, and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand. So he gave them to her . . . (Genesis 38:18)

A pregnancy resulted. The society in which they lived assumed that the pregnancy indicated that Tamar had had illicit relations, and Tamar is brought before the local court. It is at this point that Tamar produced the collateral that she had been given:

> As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, saying, By the man to whom these belong, I am with child; and she said, Recognize, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff. (Genesis 38:25)

As we noted in Bible 365, Tamar hit upon the exact words that stabbed most deeply and sharply at Judah's conscience. For these, as many have noted, were the exact words that he and his brothers had used in presenting the blood-soaked colorful coat of Jospeh to their father. "Recognize this, please!" Judah suddenly realized all the wrong that had occurred because of him, recognizing the collateral before the court and absolving Tamar:

> Then Judah acknowledged them and said, She is more righteous than I; inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah. (Genesis 38:26)

This moment seems to have produced a total moral transformation in Judah. He recognized not only the collateral that he gave Tamar, but also that he needed to act as collateral for his family; his repentance would take place through his being responsible for them.

We can now return to our reading, where Judah is back with his brothers, a sign that he has wholly joined his family once more. When Jacob is reluctant to send Benjamin to Egypt, Judah—who quite literally once sold Joseph down the river (or at least down to the river)—now pledges himself for his other half-brother:

> And Judah said to Israel his father, Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I will be collateral for him; of my hand you shall require him. (Genesis 43:8)

Thus does the very same Judah who had betrayed one half-brother pledge himself to another. What we find here is complete repentance, so that by the time he is back in Egypt, he seems to be the leader of the brothers. Judah's pledge on behalf of Benjamin has somehow fostered a sense of communion with the entire family, and he reflects the talmudic principle that "all Jews are collateral for one another."

Benjamin is brought by his brothers before Joseph, and another urge for emotional expression erupts:

> Joseph hastened, for he felt compassion towards his brother, and he wanted to weep; so he entered his chamber and wept there. (Genesis 43:30)

Whereas Joseph originally had "turned aside" to weep, here he hurries from the room. For Rabbi Lichtenstein, this is significant:

> The element of compassion, the inner, emotional bond that contrasts so starkly with the royal role that Joseph plays in Egypt, rises up all at once, and with great power.
>
> He heads from the vestibule to the hall. The move expresses more than just a physical, geographical transition from one place to another. It is a transition from one level of existence to an entirely different one; from the external world to the inner world, the world of home.

This great talmudic sage introduces another fascinating element from his study of English literature:

> Elizabethan theater in England featured two stages. First, there was a vestibule, an outer room, an external stage, where public events would take place—the "rhetoric," to employ Yeats's term. Then there was an inner, more intimate stage, where man's tragic struggles would be played out, in the form of the drama taking place within the hero himself. When Shakespeare's Juliet declares, "My dismal scene I needs must act alone" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Scene 3), she passes from the outer stage to the inner one. Her declaration accompanies her transition. "He entered his chamber," then, is the "dismal scene" that Joseph "needs must act alone." Here, in the inner chamber, he gives expression to his tragic conflict, to his explosion of emotion.

Joseph, we are told, washes his face before returning. This washing, Rabbi Lichtenstein argues, must be understood literarily. Joseph weeps as an Israelite, as Benjamin's brother; but that aspect of his identity must be washed clean as he stands before his brothers again:

> Joseph must compose himself and rearrange his official mask; when he leaves the chamber, his face washed and his demeanor composed, he is once again *Tsafnat Pa'neah*, the Revealer of Secrets, viceroy over Egypt.

The weeping, Rabbi Lichtenstein explains, finally allows us to understand the genuine battle of identity within:

> It speaks to the chasm between his inner being and his external appearance, all the more so because the external appearance is not merely playacting and reflects a genuine aspect of Joseph's existence in Egypt. Politically, his success is meteoric; economically, too, he prospers. He serves as both foreign minister and finance minister. He has an Egyptian wife, and his children grow up like any other aristocratic Egyptians. Joseph is well-integrated into the top tier of Egyptian society; he most likely also finds himself participating in its culture and absorbing its values. All of this is one facet of his identity.

> At the same time, Joseph constantly carries within himself a mental picture of his father's house and his Hebrew identity.

Joseph, in other words, confronts a question that will address itself to many figures in Jewish history: who am I and what is the essence of my identity?

The weekly reading ends with a cliffhanger. Joseph frames Benjamin and declares that the boy will be his slave. But we know what happens next: Judah steps forward and asks to be taken instead, declaring that he is collateral for his brother. Stunned, Joseph bursts into tears and identifies himself, weeping upon his brothers' shoulders. But the brothers, stunned, draw back, as indicated by Joseph's plea at this moment.

> "Please come near me." (Genesis 45:4)

Despite Joseph's heroic forgiveness, full communion has not been achieved. The plea, Rabbi Lichtenstein reflects, indicates what is to come. The years of distance, the shameful memory of what they had done to Joseph, and Joseph's position of power will ensure that the brothers will not be fully bonded with Joseph while he is still alive:

> [I]t becomes clear to Joseph the terrible price he has paid for his success, for his integration into Egyptian culture, for all of his restraint. Joseph stands alone. Even once he has decided to emerge from his isolation, to put an end to his alienation, those around him remain alienated from him. It is only now that Joseph discovers what he has sacrificed in exchange for the power that he has accumulated, for being the ruler over all of Egypt, for presuming to be the one to feed, nourish, command, and sustain.

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Joseph's political genius, his gift for statecraft in the court of Pharaoh, creates a chasm between him and his brothers that will never be fully bridged. By the end of Genesis, Jacob will reveal on his deathbed that the future of political leadership will not lie with Joseph:

> The scepter shall not depart from Judah. (Genesis 49:10)

In the end the Jewish leader must embody a sense of communion with the Jewish people, and have that sense reciprocated; and that is Judah's legacy.

The story of Joseph and Judah speaks to us profoundly in our particular time. There is no question that many Jews have suddenly been stirred to ponder their own roots. However different their own story is from that of

Joseph, they are also asking themselves: *Who am I and what is the essence of my identity*?

It is intriguing to wonder, as I believe I have seen other writers reflect, whether there will be Herzls or Jabotinskys that will emerge from this moment.

Meanwhile our reading also asks us how we will help cultivate the leadership of the future. For the truly great Jewish leader must combine the gifts of both Joseph and Judah, joining a deep and sophisticated understanding of world affairs with a heroic sense of communion with, and responsibility for, the present and posterity of the Jewish people. Seeking the melding of Joseph and Judah is the great task of our time.

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This week's episode is dedicated in the merit of Tzvi Aryeh ben Necha Zisel, *with prayers for a speedy* refuah sheleimah.

May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein on Robert Frost, "'The Woods Are Lovely, Dark and Deep': Reading a Poem by Robert Frost," *Alei Etzion* 16. Click here to read.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein on the Tears of Joseph, "Yosef's Tears," *Alei Etzion* 16. Click here to read.