

DVAR TORAH on PARASHA MIKETZ

Chazan Jacky Chernett

VaYeshev, Miketz, VaYigash, VaYechi – the last four sidrot of the book of Bereshit - all span the story of Joseph, from his childhood and his relationship with his family, through his later life, which led to his remarkable rise to leadership of Egypt at a critical time of famine, and to the reunion with his family there and particularly with his father, and ultimately to his death.

It is the only piece of text in the Torah that guarantees each year without fail to make me cry, particularly when father and son are reunited.

Who is Joseph?

The beloved son of the beloved Rachel, who died giving birth to Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin. His father Jacob made it abundantly clear that Joseph was the favourite child, causing terrible jealousy among his brothers who tried to murder him. They almost succeeded and would have done had Judah not got him out of the pit and sold him into slavery for twenty shekels of silver (these stories repeat themselves). How cruel to bring his blood-soaked coat of many colours back to their father Jacob who assumed Joseph had been killed.

Joseph's internal sense of 'knowing' is strange. He has dreams of his own omnipotence. No wonder his brothers are angry. Even Jacob is doubtful – just for a short while – but he is so blinded by love for this boy that instead of ensuring there is 'shalom bayit' – a peaceful household – he adds insult to injury, as far as the others are concerned, by gifting the objectionable Joseph and treating him as superior.

In her book on 'How the Bible embraces those with Special Needs,' Dr Ora Horn Prouser, the Principal of my alma mater, the Academy for Jewish Religion, sees Joseph as a 'gifted child' developing from the spoiled child within his family, through years of slavery and imprisonment alone in Egypt, to eventual attainment of the highest rank in Pharaoh's court. We cannot ignore the trauma in all this. All along, she says, Joseph develops greater sensitivity to others and a deeper understanding of his relationship with God. She sees Jacob the father, having been brought up on a life of deceit, favouring the son who lives a life of truth as he sees it which, of course, comes full circle in the end. But Joseph is not without deceit himself, as he deceives his brothers when they come to Egypt in search of food and even abuses the starving Egyptians (in Vayigash next week).

Dr Prouser sees Joseph as a gifted child. Psychological research has revealed, she says, that gifted individuals often experience a fair degree of social isolation. Joseph is the first individual in the Bible to recognise that the details in his dreams are symbols, many of which represent future events. His exceptional intellectual prowess enables him not only to grasp new concepts but also to apply them in his own life. But his method of sharing his insights shows the gap between intellectual and emotional maturity. As a child, the way he shares his insights is not only insensitive but can even be seen as malicious. But to give him credit, he was motherless and kids can be cruel even in the most 'normal' of circumstances.

Then Ora asks how does one become a 'gifted parent'? Jacob was certainly not a model of one. She acknowledges that it is a very difficult task for a parent to raise such a child. The brothers hated Joseph, and one has to wonder if they hated their father also, even though they cared for him into old age.

Joseph develops remarkable leadership qualities. His giftedness enables him to solve interpersonal and societal dilemmas. In studies, Ora says, gifted adults have explained that an abiding sense of great possibilities and potential solutions allows them to overcome victimisation and defeat when problems arise. Joseph quite brilliantly uses his political skills and special insights to achieve a position of influence, ultimately attaining the highest position possible because of them.

As one of the most poignant of all life stories told in the Hebrew Bible, two thousand years of commentary, layer upon layer of reading, re-reading and extracting meaning, include us in this process. We all dive into the texts and see different things.

While we can look at this dysfunctional family with sadness and sometimes horror (let's not forget the story of the rape of Dinah in VaYishlach), which one of us today can claim no dysfunction in our families too at some point or other and however it might manifest itself? Not all of us are parents. But all of us are children who have our story to tell. And we can only see it through our own eyes.

However, this isn't the point of the Hebrew Bible. The stories tell of our people's developing relationship with the Hebrew God, the understanding of which changes throughout the ages of human engagement. And that's another story...

Chazan Jacky Chernett

4 December 2021