

# JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

A Story of Change

by Uriel Simon

translated by David Louvish



המרכז לחינוך יהודי בתפוצות ע"ש הרב ד"ר יוסף לוקשטיין  
ביה"ס לחינוך, אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

**The Dr. Joseph H. Lookstein Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora  
School of Education Bar-Ilan University**

To borrow from George Leonard's 1968 classic, *Education and Ecstasy*, to learn is to change. Education is a process that changes the learner. We are pleased to present this translation from the original Hebrew, of Professor Uriel Simon's *Joseph and His Brothers—A Story of Change*, a masterful analysis of these biblical figures. Using this chapter as the basis, Professor Simon delivered the opening lecture at the Lookstein Center's Summer Principals' Seminar which took place at Bar-Ilan University in July, 2001.

To date, over 110 educators from 8 countries have participated in our school leadership programs, representing a wide variety of institutions including Community, Conservative, Labor Zionist, Orthodox, and Reform day schools. Their cooperative interaction has enhanced the learning process, and serves as a model of inclusion and mutual respect.

The Principals' Seminar Programs have covered a number of topics including Transformational Leadership, Team Building, Dynamics of Change, Supervision of Instruction, Curriculum Development, Heterogeneous Instruction, Character Education, and Conflict Resolution. In addition, each seminar includes lectures by Judaic scholars in residence. These lectures are designed to enrich and invigorate the dialogue at the seminar, and to connect the educational discussions to classical Jewish texts and sources. In addition to Uriel Simon, other scholars of Judaica who have lectured at our seminars include Yeshayahu Gafni, James Kugel, and David Silber.

The lecture which follows reflects Uriel Simon's usual methodical and distinctive close reading of the text. Listening to his lectures and analysis of a biblical text is like transporting yourself into the actual story. This lecture as well was enthusiastically received by the forty principals in attendance and set a magnificent tone for the two weeks of intensive interaction that took place during Summer Seminar 2001. We wanted to give you the opportunity to study this well known text in the light of the "peshat" presented here. We welcome and encourage your comments.

We wish to express our appreciation to Uriel Simon for his permission to translate, print and distribute this lecture, to David Louvish for his outstanding work of translation, and to Chana Honig-German for editing and proofreading the text in preparation for publication.

Bivrakha,  
**Stuart Zweiter**  
Director



A story of change, describing how its protagonists rose above themselves and mended their ways, is primarily an optimistic, moralistic tale (as the prophet put it: “...get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit”—Ezek. 18:31). On the other hand, a story of Divine Providence, telling us how God guided the protagonists’ footsteps to the place he had appointed for them, is primarily a theological, rather ironical, tale (as we read in Proverbs [19:21]: “Many designs are in a man’s mind, but it is the Lord’s plan that is accomplished”). On the face of it, Divine determinism is inconsistent with human freedom: if man is merely an instrument in the execution of God’s plan, he should surely bear no responsibility for his actions; conversely, if he possesses freedom of action, one might think that God does not govern him but only responds to his actions. That is not the case. In the story of Joseph and his brothers, Divine Providence achieves its goals, despite the fact that the subjects of the story possess free choice, and even through its agency (in the first part of the story—unknowingly and involuntarily, in the second part—knowingly and voluntarily). Since the Covenant “between the pieces,” Jacob and his sons were predestined to be strangers in Egypt (Gen. 15:13–14), and they were indeed brought there by the famine. Joseph was chosen to go down to Egypt in advance of

---

Chapter 3 of Uriel Simon, *Seek Peace and Pursue It—Topical Issues in the Light of the Bible; The Bible in the Light of Topical Issues*, Tel Aviv 2002 (Heb.), pp. 58–85. English translation by David Louvish.

his brothers, in order to ensure their welfare there; while they, in an attempt to confute his dreams of dominance by violent means, sold him into the very place where his dreams would be fulfilled. Not only are Providence and Divine retribution consistent with each other; in some mysterious way, they are actually fused together: Providence guides the protagonists to their destiny while giving them their just deserts; the terrible suffering endured by Jacob's sons not only purges them of their sins, but in fact helps them to change and become worthy of that destiny.

## **1** IN THE HOUSE OF JACOB: HAUGHTINESS AND HATRED

Speaking from a purely ethical standpoint, it was Jacob's favoritism toward Joseph that caused all his family's misfortunes, as stated in the Talmud by Resh Lakish in the name of R. Eleazar b. Azariah: "A man should not show favor toward one of his sons; for because of the long-sleeved robe<sup>1</sup> (that Jacob made for Joseph) 'they hated him' (Gen. 37:4)" (Gen. Rabba 84:8). But how is Jacob's excessive love for Joseph made reasonable in the story? What impelled Jacob to give it such demonstrative expression through the "long-sleeved robe"? The rivalry between Joseph and his brothers was largely a sequel to the jealousy between their mothers, Rachel and her sister Leah. Jacob's great love for Rachel, who had died while giving birth to Benjamin, was now transferred to her son Joseph. While Joseph was Rachel's firstborn, she had been barren for so long that his position in the family as a whole was that of "the child of [Jacob's] old age" (37:3), just as she had been the younger

---

<sup>1</sup> The nature of the "long-sleeved robe" [Heb. *ketonet passim*; cf. the familiar old translation "coat of many colors"; the New JPS translation reads "ornamented tunic"], which is mentioned only once more in the Bible, in the story of Amnon and Tamar ("She was wearing a long-sleeved robe, for maiden princesses were customarily dressed in such garments"—2 Sam. 13:18), is uncertain. One explanation understands *passim* as referring to the palms of the hands (as in Dan. 5:5) or the feet, in which case S. D. Luzzatto may be correct in interpreting the phrase as designating a long robe with long sleeves: "The length of one's clothing is a sign of liberation and prominence, [indicating] that one does not have to do manual work" (S. D. Luzzatto, *The Five Books of the Pentateuch Translated into Italian with a Hebrew Commentary*, Padua 1871 [Heb.], I, p. 335).

daughter in her father's house (29:16). In addition, Joseph surely reminded Jacob of himself as a youth: they were both younger sons, scheming to regain the birthright that had been denied them; and both were dreamers, with far-reaching ambitions. Like many parents, intent on saving their child from their own hardships, who try to use their authority or wealth to help him or her avoid the obstacle course that they themselves had to endure, Jacob was determined to guide Joseph to his birthright painlessly and effortlessly. Since his own brother Esau had been his father's favorite, he had secured his birthright and the paternal blessing only at the cost of deceit and humiliation. Determined that his beloved Joseph would not have to come to his father under cover of blindness, disguised as his brother in the firstborn's clothing, Jacob openly and publicly granted him the garment of importance and preference.

Even before receiving the long-sleeved robe, Joseph had been bringing his father bad reports of his brothers (37:2). Thus we learn that his arrogance toward them was due not to explicit favoritism, but to an inner feeling that his identification with his father was stronger than fraternal solidarity. Jacob, far from trying to prevent his talebearing, unhesitatingly demonstrated his special affection for Joseph through the symbol of the special robe, thus unintentionally making the beloved son a hated brother. His brothers' silence—"they could not speak peaceably to him" (37:4)—did not deter Joseph from continuing along his track of dominating them. Upon receiving Divine confirmation of his aspirations in two dreams, each conveying the same message, he rushed to relate them to his brothers, implicitly affirming the unambiguous interpretation of his dreams: he was indeed destined to reign over his brothers and rule them (v. 8). The seventeen-year-old youth did not seek his brothers' love; what he wanted was their recognition of the greatness for which he was intended by his father and by God. He knowingly gave the second dream, which now included his father and mother, added force by retelling it to his father in his brothers' presence. Jacob's rather clumsy effort to take the sting out of the dream could not have impressed any of the others: "So his brothers were jealous of him [in addition to their hatred for him], and his father kept the matter in mind" (v. 11).

When the brothers went north with their flocks for the long grazing season, Joseph did not share their burden but stayed home with his father. Despite the hatred and jealousy, and the fact that “they could not speak peaceably (Heb. *le-shalom*) to him” (v. 4), Jacob did not think twice about sending Joseph to Shechem, instructing him, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring (lit.: go and see your brothers’ situation [Heb. *shelom ahekha*] and the flock’s situation [Heb. *shelom ha-zon*])”—v. 14). Joseph, too, did not imagine that by setting out alone, attired in his provocative robe, to seek his brothers, he might find his killers. Surely it was the arrogance of rulers, intoxicated by power and success and oblivious to the surrounding hostility, that blinded father and son to the danger. In the meanwhile, the brothers had left Shechem, and had Joseph not met a man in the fields who had overheard them saying to each other, “Let us go to Dothan” (v. 17), he might have returned to his father, his errand unfulfilled. This unnamed man was clearly an agent of Divine Providence, whose contribution to the plot, while minor, was nevertheless instrumental in bringing the Divine plan to fruition.<sup>2</sup>

Like Esau, who waited for his father’s expected death to try and retrieve his birthright by killing his brother (27:41), Jacob’s sons now decide to take advantage of their father’s absence and to frustrate Joseph’s dreams by killing him: “Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, ‘A savage beast devoured him.’ We shall see what comes of his dreams!” (37:20). Reuben and Judah, however, restrain them from such extreme violence. Reuben persuades his brothers that they would achieve the same end by leaving Joseph to die of hunger and thirst, and Judah then convinces them that even indirect murder is unnecessary, for it will suffice to sell him into lifelong slavery.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rashi expressed this in a picturesque manner, identifying the “man” with the angel Gabriel, as Nahmanides explains with a rather far-reaching generalization: “...to inform us moreover that the decree is truth and the effort [to thwart it] is falsehood, for the Holy One, blessed be He, prepared a guide for him, who would lead him to them inadvertently. And this was our Rabbis’ intention when they said [Gen. Rabba 84:14, commenting on Gen. 37:15] that such men are angels, that this whole story [= the encounter with the ‘man’ in the fields] was not told in vain, but to inform us that ‘it is the Lord’s plan that is accomplished’ [Prov. 19:21].”

Seeing Joseph approach from afar, the brothers speak of him in scornful, hostile terms—“Here comes **that** dreamer!” (v. 19), and when he arrives they immediately assault the two symbolic expressions of his dominance: they divest him of the long-sleeved robe, and mock his dreams of supremacy by throwing down into the pit. Moreover, with their brother in the pit, doomed to die there of hunger and thirst, they even sit down to dine (v. 25).<sup>3</sup> However, once they have satisfied their burning need to humble their brother’s arrogance, the first crack appears in their determination, so that they can now listen to their brother Judah, remembering that, after all, this is their own brother: “What do we gain by killing our **brother** and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our **brother, our own flesh**” (vv. 26–27).<sup>4</sup>

So the brothers do indeed sell their brother, their own flesh, into slavery, and have no scruples about receiving full remuneration—twenty pieces of silver (in line with the price of a slave in the Code of Hammurabi, para. 252, as well as the “valuation” of a male aged from

<sup>3</sup> The Rabbis did not hesitate to compare Joseph’s brothers’ indifference to that of such typical Jew haters as Ahaseurus and Haman, explaining the latter as retribution for the former: “Said R. Yudan: Whoever says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is yielding, may his innards yield [= may he be stricken with diarrhea]! Nay, He withholds his anger but [ultimately] demands full payment. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to the tribes [i.e., to Jacob’s sons]: You sold your brother while eating and drinking, as Scripture says, ‘They sat down to eat’ [37:25]; so shall your children be sold in Susa in the course of eating and drinking, as Scripture says, ‘The king and Haman sat down to feast, [while the city of Shushan was dumfounded]’ [Esther 3:15]” (*Midrash Shoher Tov*, Psalm 10, s.v. *be-ga’avat*).

<sup>4</sup> In a synchronic analysis of the story of Joseph and his brothers, it is not necessary to discuss the tensions and apparent contradictions between the different proposals of Reuben and Judah, the question of whether Joseph was brought to Egypt by the Midianites or the Ishmaelites, or whether the money was found in the brothers’ bags in the encampment (42:27–28; 43:21) or in Jacob’s house in their sacks (42:35–36); as well as other such difficulties in the sequel. Such points, however, are the building blocks of R. Mordechai Breuer’s “Torat ha-behinot”; Breuer holds that such dialectical combinations of opposing elements constitute a basic mode of expression in the Torah. He discusses the Joseph narrative in the context of his method in his book, *Pirqa Bereshit*, Alon Shevut 1999, II, pp. 520–598. See also R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York 1981, whose literary theory compares such writing to cinematographic montage, which strives to achieve this effect of a multifaceted truth by setting in sequence two different versions that bring into focus two different dimensions of the subject (p. 140); one of his illustrations is indeed the Joseph narrative (pp. 137–140).

five to twenty in Lev. 27:5). To avert any suspicion on Jacob's part that they might have harmed their brother, and to make him forget the supposedly deceased Joseph, they slaughter a kid, dip the robe into its blood and have it sent to their father for identification, with an ice-cold, cruelly worded message: "We found this. Please examine whether it is your son's robe or not?" (v. 32), as if to say: We, who found this robe, think it may be your son's; now, since you yourself gave it to him, you should be able to confirm that. What terrible hatred rings through these cruel, cynical words!<sup>5</sup> Jacob indeed draws the expected (but false) conclusion from the contrived evidence: "My son's coat! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!" (v. 33). He rends his clothes and mourned Joseph as dead; but he surprised "all his sons and daughters" (v. 35) by prolonging his mourning beyond their expectations. Emphatically refusing to respond to their efforts to console him, he insists that he will never reconcile himself to Joseph's death; he cannot live without him: "I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol" (v. 35). The brothers now realize that, while they have successfully removed Joseph from the household and deceived their father, no amount of violence and trickery can ever eradicate Jacob's unbounded love for the son of his old age. His refusal to be consoled, his blunt declaration that his love for Joseph is unabated, that it is not relative but absolute, enables them to realize that the preference for their younger brother was less arbitrary than they had thought—and therefore less infuriating. However, they are powerless to alleviate their father's suffering, and their helplessness must have made them feel some sorrow, perhaps even remorse, for their part in his condition. The first part of the story thus comes to an end with a slight hint of change in the brothers.

---

<sup>5</sup> The Rabbis somewhat mitigated the pain of this difficult encounter by placing it in a multi-generational perspective, in which the sons, by repeating their father's misdeeds, are actually punishing him for those very actions: "The Holy One, blessed be He, repays people measure for measure, even repaying the righteous ones of old measure for measure. Jacob our father deceived his father in a kid's skins, and his sons deceived him with a kid: 'They... slaughtered a kid and dipped the robe in the blood' [Gen. 37:31]" (R. Menahem Kasher, *Torah Sheleimah, Va-yeshev*, sec. 181, based on *Ginzei Schechter*, I, p. 140).

## 2 IN EGYPT: UPS AND DOWNS ON THE WAY FROM SLAVERY TO KINGSHIP

In the meantime, Joseph has been brought down to Egypt and sold to a prominent nobleman, a member of the innermost circles of the Egyptian court: “Potiphar, a personal servant of Pharaoh and his chief steward” (39:1). We soon realize that the pampered youth, who in his father’s house had received success on a platter, with no effort on his part, is capable not only of surviving in difficult circumstances of slavery and solitude in a foreign country, but of excelling in everything he does. As in his home, he is not sent out to work in the fields but given a position in his master’s household, where his talents and diligence attract Potiphar’s attention, earning him his master’s affection and absolute trust. Potiphar appoints him first to be his personal servant and finally places him in charge of his whole household: “He left all that he had in Joseph’s hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate [probably a euphemism for his intimate relations with his wife]” (v. 6). The text reiterates that the secret of Joseph’s amazing success was the combination of considerable talent (presumably resourcefulness and leadership qualities) and God’s blessing upon all his actions: “And from the time that the Egyptian put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed his house for Joseph’s sake, so that the blessing of the Lord was upon everything that he owned, in the house and outside” (v. 5).

The reader will now recall that this was precisely Laban the Aramean’s conclusion as to Jacob’s contribution to the success of his flocks: “I have learned by divination [Heb. *nihashti*; while others explain, on the basis of Akkadian: I have enjoyed abundance] that the Lord has blessed me on your account” (30:27). Even more: Joseph is remarkably similar not only to Jacob, in that he serves as a channel for Divine blessing, but also to Rachel, by virtue of his great beauty. It is said of Rachel that she was “shapely and beautiful” (29:17), and Joseph is the only man in the Bible to be described by the very same Hebrew adjectives, *yefeh to’ar vi-yfeh mar’eh*: “Joseph was shapely and beautiful” (39:6). We may conclude that the plot of this narrative is thus offering

a dual answer to the argument that Jacob's preference for his young son was unjust. First, Joseph's great talents, manifested in his success in Potiphar's household, corroborate Jacob's evaluation of him, as represented by the long-sleeved robe. Second, Joseph's similarity to both his father and his mother reinforces and enhances his selection as Jacob's heir and successor.

That Joseph was so beautiful is not stated at the outset of the story, in connection with his father's love or his brothers' jealousy, but only now, to prepare us for his master's wife's attempt to seduce him. As usual in biblical narrative, we are told nothing about the relations between the master and his wife, since the whole episode focuses on what happened to Joseph. That the text mentions only Joseph's beauty, saying nothing about that of Potiphar's wife, implies that he was not attracted to her, the narrative concentrating mainly on his response to her desire for him. Her open, direct invitation, "Lie with me" (39:7), offers him a golden opportunity to enjoy the fruits of forbidden sex; to be raised, if only covertly and temporarily, from the humiliation of slavery; and perhaps also to further his own social ambitions through her and with her help. But he refuses, explaining in simple, ethical terms, why he cannot respond: He must repay his master's infinite trust in him with infinite loyalty; he must match his master's extreme generosity to him with his gratitude; far be it from him, therefore, to reach out behind his master's back and take the only thing that has been withheld from him. And he ends with a rhetorical question: "How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God!?" (v. 9). I believe that the point of the last words—"sin before God"—is not to add a religious reason to the ethical, but to point out that causing injury to another person is a sin before God. This is aptly affirmed by Nahmanides in his commentary *ad loc.*: "One may explain, moreover, that 'sin before God' means to betray, for [betrayal] is a great evil, which would constitute a sin before God, who looks favorably upon those who keep faith but will not suffer the betrayer..." In other words, even if his betrayal of trust were never to come to his master's knowledge, it would be a great evil, absolutely forbidden, a sin before God, before Whom there are no secrets.

By repeatedly, daily, refusing to enjoy the sweet fruits of sin, Joseph is also risking the consequences of snubbing his master's wife and damaging her pride as a woman and a mistress. Indeed, when she finally decides not merely to speak but also to take action, and Joseph, freeing himself from her clutch, flees outside, leaving her holding his empty garment, her unbridled lust is replaced by an implacable desire for revenge. She forthwith heaps her own blame upon him, determined to have him punished for his refusal to comply, with the severity due to a person who has actually raped her. She asserts her own innocence by hastily summoning the household servants, making them indirect witnesses to the foreigner's attempted rape of their mistress: "Look, he [presumably, as follows from v. 17, the master of the house] had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us [i.e., to treat us disrespectfully and contemptuously]! This one came to lie with me; but I screamed loud (the very scream that you have heard]. And when he heard me screaming at the top of my voice, he left his garment with me [she takes care not to say, 'in my hand,' as would be expected from v. 12] and got away and fled outside" (vv. 14–15). Screaming, the weapon of an assaulted woman, was considered ample proof that she had resisted (see Deut. 22:23–27),<sup>6</sup> and the garment the supposed rapist had left behind was proof both of his intentions and of his identity. Lest her servants treat these "proofs" with any suspicion, Potiphar's wife appeals to Egyptian solidarity in the face of the foreigner's presumption and attempt to exploit his lofty position. Then as now, xenophobia often raises the specter of the foreigner's legendary sexual prowess, characteristically also leveling accusations at those responsible for his ascendancy. Just so the Egyptian matron incites her compatriots against the master who, blind to the nature of foreigners, brought them "a Hebrew to dally with us" (v. 14), only to be betrayed—as he deserved and should have expected—in the most humiliating way.

---

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Yael Shemesh has drawn my attention to the fact that this is still the practice among Bedouin, referring me to Shabbetai Levi, *The Bedouin in the Sinai Desert—Model of a Desert Society*, Jerusalem & Tel Aviv 1987 (Heb.), p. 241: A woman who has been raped but has immediately complained is known as a *sa'itha* [screamer], whereas one who has told the story only after a few hours is called a *mithalme* [dreamer].

When Potiphar returns home, his wife immediately tells him the same story (v. 17), but not in the same words. Brazenly, she blames her betrayed, humiliated husband for what she claims has happened to her. She tries to arouse his wrath by emphasizing that Joseph is a foreigner, appealing not, as before, to his patriotic solidarity, but to his social consciousness: “The Hebrew slave whom you brought into our house came to me to dally with me” (v. 18).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, she is careful not to repeat the outspoken accusation, “to lie with me” (v. 14), to her husband, perhaps because of the similarity to her own guilt as summarized in her repeated words of seduction, “Lie with me” (vv. 7, 12, and in indirect speech in v. 10). Potiphar indeed flies into a rage at his slave and, without pausing to hear Joseph’s explanation of the circumstantial evidence his wife has shown him (the scream and the garment), throws him into prison for an unlimited time.

Joseph is thus condemned to a repeat performance of his experience in his father’s house in Canaan. Once again, he is toppled from his lofty position, and once again he is divested of the clothing that symbolized his standing; once again, the clothing taken from him is used to deceive his benefactor; and once again he is thrown into a “pit” (the same Hebrew word, *bor*, is used to designate the dungeon, by Joseph himself in 40:15 and by the narrator in 41:14). Nevertheless, despite the similarities, the differences are obvious: The long-sleeved robe and the position it signified were given him by his father without any effort on his part; whereas his achievements in Potiphar’s house were all the fruit of his talents, his labor, and the Divine blessing bestowed on his actions. He himself was partly to blame for losing the long-sleeved robe, since he had slandered his brothers and treated them with short-sighted condescension; while the loss of the garment in Potiphar’s house was exclusively due to his righteousness and loyalty. Although Joseph has changed for the best in all respects, the outcome is, for the time being, the same: intense hatred, cruel injustice, humiliation, and imprison-

---

<sup>7</sup> Most of these points were made by Nehama Leibowitz in her consummate discussion of the scene: “See, he brought us a Hebrew,” in her *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)*, transl. A. Newman, Jerusalem 1981, pp. 417–422.

ment in a “pit,” with no escape in sight. At home he had believed in his dreams out of youthful exuberance; in Potiphar’s house he might have been able to believe that he would win out, in the conviction that his righteousness would be rewarded and that one day he would indeed exchange a slave’s clothing for the trappings of a ruler. In the dungeon, however, in a situation of redoubled slavery for which he could not be blamed, it must have been extremely difficult to maintain hope in the promise embodied by those dreams, unless he was fully aware that the real test of righteousness is willingness to suffer for it.

While God does not for the moment save Joseph from his persecutors, He does help him climb up from the depths into which he has been cast. Divine Providence again helps Joseph (who has already proved, in Potiphar’s house, that he considers earning someone’s trust as not merely a talent but a moral imperative) to gain his new master’s trust, giving full expression to his marvelous talents and reach the highest rung in the prison service hierarchy: “The Lord was with Joseph: He extended kindness to him and disposed the chief jailer favorably toward him... and he was the one to carry out everything that was done there. The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the Lord was with him, and whatever he did the Lord made successful” (39:21–23).

Providence works in strange ways: Joseph’s term in prison—ostensibly the worst possible degradation—actually brings him nearer the center of Egyptian government, Pharaoh’s court. Not only does Potiphar incarcerate him in the royal prison, “where the king’s prisoners were confined” (v. 20), but when two of Pharaoh’s highest officials are imprisoned, he makes Joseph responsible for their well-being in jail: “The chief steward assigned Joseph to them, and he attended them” (40:4) (for there was no more efficient and devoted servant than he). Thus the “dreamer” meets with the two courtiers, both overwrought and depressed by their dreams, dreamt in the same night, which they cannot understand but are undoubtedly of momentous significance. Joseph does not hesitate, immediately offering them his assistance, based not on his proficiency in the Egyptian science of dream interpretation, but on his faith that God, Who reveals a person’s future in a dream, also prepares an

interpreter for the dream:<sup>8</sup> “Surely God can interpret! Tell me [your dreams] (40:8).”

In the cupbearer’s dream, everything happens in rapid, uninterrupted sequence: He observes a vine with three branches, which at once sprouts buds; these turn into flowers that develop into ripe grapes, which he presses straight into Pharaoh’s cup and serves his monarch the wine! Unlike Joseph’s own dreams, this dream also specifies the imminent date of its own fulfillment: “The three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will pardon you and restore you to your post...” (vv. 12–13). Since Joseph is absolutely confident in the prophetic truth of the dream and the correctness of the interpretation, he adds his own personal request, that the cupbearer, upon being released from imprisonment, should not fail to remember his benefactor, and try to persuade Pharaoh to redress the wrong done to him.

Joseph’s favorable interpretation of the cupbearer’s dream encourages the chief baker to tell him his dream as well. He has not done so up to this point, perhaps because his dream lacks that element of smooth flow and full control, but on the contrary seems to be marked by misfortune, hindrance and a nightmare-like helplessness: He is carrying three baskets on his head, one on top of the other, containing various baked goods; but the birds are freely eating what has been prepared for Pharaoh and the baker is powerless to drive them off. Joseph’s interpretation is immeasurably worse than the dream itself: in three days time not only will Pharaoh not restore him to his position, as he did the cupbearer, but he will condemn him to the most degrading death: “In three days Pharaoh will... impale you upon a pole; and the birds will pick off your flesh” (v. 19).

The two interpretations, favorable and unfavorable, are fulfilled to the letter on the third day, corroborating Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams. However, his attempt to obtain his freedom through the cupbearer fails, because of the latter’s ingratitude: “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him” (v. 23). Like Potiphar’s wife, the cupbearer has betrayed Joseph; however, he does not cause Joseph

---

<sup>8</sup> Thus R. David Kimhi *ad loc.*, probably on the strength of Dan. 2:27–30.

to be thrown into the pit—only to remain there. Relying on a midrash (cited in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and in Genesis Rabba 89:3), Rashi explains this as God’s punishment of Joseph for placing his trust in a mortal rather than in God: “Because he relied upon [the cupbearer] to remember him, he had to remain in prison for two years [more], as Scripture says: ‘Happy is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who turns not to the arrogant (Heb. *rehavim*)’ (Ps. 40:5)—that is to say, who does not rely upon Egyptians, who are called *rahav* (Isa. 51:9).” However, according to the *peshat*, nowhere does the Joseph narrative disapprove of self-reliance and appeal to human agency; hence, if we can find no explanation for Joseph’s failure on the level of retribution, we should seek it in the area of Divine Providence. Joseph was fated to remain behind bars for another two years not as a punishment but of necessity, because of what he was destined to be and to do. Indeed, when the time comes for Joseph to go free, he discovers that, in order to progress from slavery to kingship, his liberation had to coincide with his appointment as Pharaoh’s deputy.

Only when all the magicians and wise men of Egypt fail to devise a convincing interpretation of the two dreams that troubled Pharaoh is the cupbearer forced to recall his imprisonment. He has to bring up that unfortunate episode because it had apprised him of the wonderful ability of that “Hebrew youth, a servant of the chief steward” (41:12) to find the correct interpretation of his own dream and that of his colleague. Pharaoh gives the order to free Joseph immediately, not because of his innocence as he had hoped, but because of his usefulness: “He was rushed from the dungeon. He had his hair cut [as was the custom at the Egyptian court] and changed his clothes [a sure sign of the expected improvement in his personal status!], and he appeared before Pharaoh” (v. 14). Pharaoh assumes that Joseph has the same qualifications as those of his court magicians, but is simply better at his trade of dream interpretation: “Now I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning” (v. 15). Joseph, however, again rejects the efficacy of the Egyptian science of dream interpretation, which was based on the interpreter’s magical aptitude, in favor of the prophetic conception according to which God, through the interpreter,

answers the dreamer's query concerning his or her situation (or welfare; Heb. *shalom*, see Gen. 37:14): "Not I! God will answer concerning Pharaoh's situation" (v. 16).

In both of Pharaoh's dreams, not only do the lean consume the healthy and the sturdy: they show no sign of having done so, remaining as lean as before, and none of Pharaoh's magicians can interpret this dual puzzle. Joseph, by contrast, proposes a persuasively simple solution: the dreams are a metaphor for a very realistic phenomenon: seven consecutive years of famine that will utterly eradicate whatever remains of the preceding seven years of plenty, so much so that they will be forgotten. Just as in the dungeon Joseph appended a practical request to his interpretation, now too he adds practical advice as to how Pharaoh may avert the country's desolation in the coming famine (v. 36). He is thus pointing out that the events foretold by the dreams are not to be taken in a fatalistic spirit; on the contrary, this prior revelation of the Divine plan ("God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do"—v. 25) provides an opportunity to try and contain the imminent disaster by human agency ("let Pharaoh take steps..."—v. 34). The detailed counsel, to appoint a special official over the whole of Egypt who will, with the help of a suitable bureaucracy, store up the surplus produce of the seven years of plenty in preparation for the years of famine, is no less convincing than the interpretation of the dreams; indeed, it is universally accepted, despite Joseph's lowly rank and foreign origin: "The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his courtiers" (v. 37).

For a third time, then, Joseph has earned the absolute trust of the person who controls his own fate; and, like Potiphar and the chief jailer, Pharaoh appoints him to be his deputy or viceroy, putting him in charge of everything he has save for one thing: "Only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you" (v. 40). Now, however, the stakes are immeasurably higher: "You shall be in charge of my house" (*ibid.*) refers to the royal palace and the court; and in addition to this high court position Joseph is also entrusted with economic and administrative jurisdiction over "all the land of Egypt" (v. 41). Just as in his father's house and in Potiphar's house, Joseph now receives—for the third time—clothing signifying his rank and his far-reaching authority: "And removing his

signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck" (v. 42). This recurring regularity governing Joseph's life provides a *posteriori* confirmation of the validity of his youthful dreams, now coming true out of a combination of providence and remuneration for his behavior.

After thirteen years of slavery (see Gen. 37:2 together with 41:46), Joseph's personal status is also put in order. Pharaoh gives him a high-born wife, a living link with Egyptian nobility, "and he gave him for a wife Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On" (v. 45), and she bears him two sons. The Hebrew names he gives them express his gratitude to God for the dramatic reversal in his situation: "Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, 'God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home [i.e., my hardship in my parental home].' And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, 'God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction' [i.e., in Egypt]" (vv. 51–52). The second etiology is obvious: for Joseph, the birth of his two sons—not necessarily the distinguished position that has come his way—signifies his final emergence from a condition of affliction. But what does he mean by the first etiology? He is clearly referring not to informative forgetting, but to emotional forgetting (a preliminary to forgiveness; see Isa. 43:25; Ps. 79:8; Job 11:6), since he certainly still remembers his treatment at his brothers' hands. The point is that in his new, more fortunate circumstances the memory is no longer painful. In Joseph's personal life, the years of plenty follow upon the lean years and help him forget them.

This conclusion to the second part of the story is indispensable for an understanding of the sequel. When Joseph meets his brothers and treats them harshly, we are supposed to recall that, according to the name he gave his firstborn son, the recollection that it was they who sold him into slavery no longer arouses his wrath and vengeful feelings. Now, if Joseph has indeed reconciled himself in some way to the evil done him by his brothers, why does he not inform his father that he is alive, but leaves him to mourn and grieve? This well-known crux, generally cited from Nahmanides' commentary to Gen. 42:9, was first

pointed out by R. Joseph Bekhor Shor (Northern France, first half of the 12th century). Of all the solutions that have been suggested, the most plausible seems to me that of R. Judah he-Hasid (Germany, end of 12th century), in his commentary on Gen. 44:21: “One has to marvel: a great man like Joseph caused his father grief and did not inform him immediately that he was living and ruling over the land? You may say [in answer] that had he done so, all his brothers would have fled, one to the east and one to the west, for shame...”<sup>9</sup> It is indeed obvious that if the news that Joseph had not fallen prey to a wild animal but had been sold into slavery in Egypt had reached Jacob, even in a brief, perfunctory form, he would soon, inevitably, have discovered the terrible secret of the brothers’ responsibility. Once this had come to his knowledge, Jacob’s joy at the survival of his young son would have been more than offset by anguish over what his ten sons had done to him and the son of his old age; they would never have been able to look him in the face again. Thus Joseph’s silence—painful both to himself and to his father—is unavoidable. The fact that he was sold has to remain hidden as long as the brothers cannot prove to Joseph, to Jacob, to their families and, above all, to themselves that they have changed completely.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> For an account of the interpretive history of this issue see my article, “A Commentator is Judged not only By His Method But Also by His Questions” (Heb.), in M. Arend et al., *Pirkei Nehama. A Memorial to Nehama Leibowitz*, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 241–261.

<sup>10</sup> Joel Bin-Nun, “Division and Unity: Duplication of a Bitter Mistake and the Shock of Discovery—Why Did Joseph Not Send (an Emissary) to His Father?” *Megadim* 1 (Nisan 1986), pp. 20–31, has suggested an alternative explanation: Joseph kept silent because he had expected his father to search for him in Egypt, and since that did not happen, he began to suspect that Jacob might have sent him to his brothers because he had given in to their demand that he send Joseph away, just as Abraham and Isaac had sent Lot, Ishmael and Esau away. My answer to most of Bin-Nun’s assumptions and arguments is implicit in what follows; I offer only the following explicit comments: (i) Joseph could have attributed his father’s failure to search for him in Egypt (assuming that such a search was at all possible) to Jacob’s belief that some disaster had befallen him on his way to meet his brothers. (ii) It hardly seems plausible that Joseph would have thought that his father, dismissing the dreams, should have taken part in the brothers’ plot to counteract them, moreover sending him away with the palpably false instruction, “bring me back word” (37:14). Even the treatment of Lot, Ishmael and Esau is no precedent for such treacherous behavior of a father toward his son.

### 3 JOSEPH MENDS THE RIFT IN HIS FATHER'S HOUSE

In the course of the first year of famine Jacob sent his ten sons down to Egypt to buy food in the royal grain stores administered by Joseph. Benjamin was not included, since Jacob preferred to forswear about one tenth of the grain that could be brought from Egypt, rather than place Rachel's one remaining son at risk: "Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, since he feared that he might meet with disaster" (42:4). The brothers, upon coming before "the vizier of the land..., who dispensed rations to all the people of the land" (v. 6), bowed down before him, as was proper, thus unknowingly fulfilling Joseph's dreams of twenty years before (the thirteen years of his slavery and the seven years of plenty). Joseph, acutely aware of this dramatic irony, decided to take full advantage of the situation in which he had recognized them and could understand them speaking in Hebrew, while they could not even imagine that the Egyptian official, resplendent in the trappings of his high position, was the brother whose long-sleeved robe they had stripped from him. Moreover, Joseph, noting the absence of his brother Benjamin, could readily understand that his father was treating his maternal brother just as he had treated him, keeping him by his side while the brothers had to seek sustenance in far-off parts. Jacob had clearly not changed, despite his terrible suffering, and the inferior status he accorded the ten brothers was presumably still causing them concern and pain. Since change can be discerned only in relation to something fixed, the fact that the father has not changed gives Joseph the opportunity to determine whether the brothers have changed their reaction to the preference of the younger brother.

First and foremost, they have to experience in person what they did to Joseph when they sold him into slavery in Egypt. He is now treating them as strangers, just as they treated him when they last met at Dothan. He had then gone, on his father's instructions, to seek his brothers—and found foes: "They saw him from afar, and before he came close to them they conspired [Heb. *va-yitnakkelu*] to kill him" (37:18); and now he is suppressing his brotherly feelings, acting toward them as a stranger or enemy: "When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he

acted like a stranger [Heb. *va-yitnakker*] toward them and spoke harshly to them” (42:7). He accuses them of being spies, his purpose being to imprison them for this alleged betrayal, just as had happened to him in Potiphar’s house. Joseph reinforces the analogy by using a sexual metaphor: “You have come to see the land in its nakedness” (v. 9), recalling the false accusation of sexual assault leveled against himself (39:17). In defense, they protest that they are a family group, not an intelligence unit: “We your servants were twelve brothers, sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more” (v. 13). In Genesis, the typological number twelve represents ethnic completeness: twelve nations of Canaan (10:15–18); twelve chieftains of Ishmael (17:20; 25:13–16); twelve sons of Nahor (22:20–24); and Esau’s twelve grandchildren (36:10–14, not including the concubine’s son Amalek). The same is true of the ten sons coming to buy food; they too are a complete family, but two are missing for reasons beyond their control.

The reader is aware that the brothers’ protestation “We are honest men” (42:11) is perfectly true in regard to Joseph’s accusation, but it is quite absurd as a self-characterization of those who dipped their brother’s robe into the blood of a kid. Neither does it impress the overbearing Egyptian vizier, and he is prepared only to allow them to prove the veracity of their case by sending one of them back to Canaan to bring their young brother. Until Benjamin and the accompanying brother return they will be imprisoned in what is named a “guardhouse” (Heb. *mishmar*)—just like the prison where Joseph had been held (41:10). And just as they had thrown him into a pit to die, but then relented and instead sold him into slavery, the Egyptian ruler now reconsiders after three days and, claiming that his conscience moves him to permit them to allow for their families’ sustenance (“Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man”; v. 18), is willing to free nine of them, holding only one as a hostage. Despite this more lenient treatment, the brothers rightly relate Joseph’s accusation and the hunger threatening their families to the death by hunger to which they had condemned Joseph, Simeon’s imprisonment to Joseph’s sale as a slave, and Joseph’s separation from his father to Benjamin’s separation. Perceiving the motive of

measure for measure, they readily admit their guilt: “They said to one another, ‘Indeed,<sup>11</sup> we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us’” (v. 21). Possibly, Joseph’s anguish and pleading are recounted here (in a flashback) rather than in Chapter 37, when they actually took place, to avoid arousing the reader’s anger at the brother’s indifference, and also to enhance the impression made on the reader by their present recognition of guilt. The brothers’ ability to hear in the present the pleas to which they had been immune in the past almost breaks down Joseph’s resistance. But he is obliged to conceal his emotional turmoil and weeping, which contradict his apparent indifference toward them; indeed, their remorse for selling him, in itself, is still inadequate to atone for their actions: “He turned away from them and wept” (v. 24). Upon returning to them, he orders Simeon to be bound (presumably in chains) in their presence, knowing that this dramatic repetition of their treatment of him when they sold him will cause them considerable pain: their sin has become their punishment.

Joseph commands his attendants to restore the money the brothers have paid for their provisions, unbeknownst, to their bags, so that their concern over being accused of espionage will be compounded by the fear of being suspected of theft. For twenty years, they have been able to cover up the theft and sale of their brother, but Joseph is now preparing a trap that will shatter their honorable façade and shake their self-confidence; for they know that when they return to Egypt—as they will be forced to do by the famine and by Simeon’s imprisonment—they will be treated as thieves. Their control of their own lives is being taken away, and fate seems to be closing in on them: “Their hearts sank; and, trembling, they turned to one another, saying, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’” (42:28).

Back in Canaan, the brothers have no choice but to tell their father what happened to them, so as to explain both Simeon’s absence and the unavoidable need to take Benjamin along on their next trip. In

---

<sup>11</sup> Heb. *aval*, as in Gen. 17:19. Another possible meaning is “alas,” as in 2 Sam. 14:5.

the telling, they telescope the two encounters with “the man who is lord of the land” (v. 30) into one, suppressing the three intervening days spent in prison. In precise terms, they describe the Egyptian vizier’s firm demand to bring their young brother with them as indirect proof that they are not spies, but at the same time try to spare their father by hiding the vizier’s brutal treatment of them and by softening his tone. While he had said “let one of your brothers be held in detention” (42:19), they report, “leave one of your brothers with me” (v. 33); referring to the future, he had warned them that failure to comply would be punishable by death: “...that your words may be verified and that you may not die” (v. 20), but they phrase this in positive terms: “...I will then restore your brother to you, and you shall be free to move about in the land” (v. 34).<sup>12</sup>

Jacob reacts to their story in bitter, complaining tones, which must have sounded to his sons (who knew what they had done to him) like a pointed accusation: “It is always me that you bereave: Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you would take away Benjamin?! Everything is against me!” (v. 36). Since biblical thought does not make a clear distinction between subjective intentionality and objective outcome (cf., for example, “Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land...”—Exod. 20:12), Jacob is not accusing his sons of actually bereaving him, but angrily pointing out that such is the outcome of their actions: He, the father, is the real victim of bereavement, and he alone will have to pay the full price if Benjamin goes down to Egypt. The sons (and the reader) nonetheless understand his tirade literally: they have indeed—directly—caused his bereavement by selling Joseph and dipping his robe in blood, which in turn brought about Simeon’s imprisonment and the demand for Benjamin’s presence. Jacob ignores Reuben’s offer to make his own sons’ lives surety for Benjamin (thereby promising his father that he would protect Benjamin not as a brother but as a father shielding his own son). He vehemently refuses to endanger the life of Rachel’s last remaining son, enjoining them to go back to Egypt without Benjamin and extricate themselves

---

<sup>12</sup> For the considerable latitude with which previous speech or events are quoted or retold in the Bible, and the expressive functions of such free quotation, see George W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling—Quotation in Biblical Narrative*, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1988.

from the Egyptian trap by their own devices: “My son will not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If he meets with disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief” (v. 38).

Jacob is essentially telling his sons that Benjamin’s blood is redder than theirs—they hear, and offer no objection. Surely, the terrible failure of their violent attempt to oppose what they perceived as discrimination has taught them to listen sensitively to their father’s pained and wounding expressions of his great love for Rachel and her sons. They make no attempt to press him with either moralistic or practical arguments, leaving the work of persuasion to the gnawing hunger threatening them all. Indeed, once the food supplies brought from Egypt have been exhausted, Jacob has no choice but to admit what they all know: they must return to that dangerous country: “Go again and procure some food for us” (43:2). In a flashback, Judah and his brothers add some important details about their encounter with the Egyptian vizier (which are unknown to the reader as well, and whose truth will be verified by the account of the events in Judah’s great speech in Egypt, 44:18–34). Given the Egyptian’s curiosity about the make-up of their family and his firm insistence, “You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you” (43:5), it is clear that Benjamin’s presence in Egypt will be necessary to liberate Simeon, but also in order to replenish their food supplies. And Judah adds three weighty arguments: Jacob’s exaggerated concern for Benjamin’s welfare will cause the entire family (including Benjamin) to die of hunger; he himself will act as surety for Benjamin’s safe return to his father; and Jacob’s fear of the dangers along the road are unrealistic: “For we could have been there and back twice (safely!) if we had not dawdled (because of you!)” (v. 10).

Jacob has no choice but to accept the inevitable. As head of the family, he suggests that his sons pacify the Egyptian ruler by a gift of “some of the choice products of the land” (v. 11) and try to avoid the accusation of theft by bringing back “double the money” (v. 12). He finally permits them to take “their brother” (v. 13) with them, confers a blessing upon them, entreating God’s help in disposing the Egyptian to be more lenient with them, and ends in a tone of pained resignation,

indicating that he has given in but has not changed: “As for me, if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved” (v. 14).

Once Joseph has verified that the brothers have indeed brought their brother with them, he gives orders to summon them to his home to dine with him. Racked with guilt for their past sale of their brother into slavery, and full of trepidation at the false accusations leveled against them, the brothers now fear that the Egyptians will use the restored money as an excuse to enslave them and seize their asses (the two-way comparison of men to animals and of the animal to its owner expresses the worthlessness of human dignity, freedom and property when the strong are harassing the weak). They hasten to mollify Joseph’s majordomo by giving him the “double money” that they had brought, but he refuses to accept it, saying that God must have wrought a miracle for them, for he had already received full payment. After thus allaying their fears, he frees Simeon as agreed, explaining that they had been brought there in order to dine with the master of the house. While their fears are indeed somewhat calmed, the brothers are still apprehensive, for they cannot believe themselves worthy of such favorable treatment at God’s hands. When the Egyptian vizier arrives, they present the gift as an expression of loyalty, and once again prostrate themselves before him, this time with Benjamin, adding up to the number eleven (as in his dream, 37:9).

Pharaoh’s viceroy, for his part, now speaks with them for the first time on an equal footing: he inquires after their welfare and their father’s health (aware that he too has caused him much anguish by his demand to see Benjamin), and welcomes their younger brother with a kind blessing: “May God be gracious to you, my son” (v. 29). Being so close to Benjamin and still maintaining his stern exterior is very difficult for him, and only with difficulty does he steel himself against an emotional outburst and retire to a nearby room to weep there. Returning to them with his face bathed, he continues to maintain the balance of familiarity and distance and injects an element of misgiving into the generally relaxed atmosphere: they will be dining together but separately (for he is superior to them, and besides, they are Hebrews and he, an Egyptian). The brothers are seated in order of their birth, and are

astounded at their host's possession of this information (a worrisome indication that they have no secrets in this place). They receive portions from the ruler's table, but Benjamin receives five times more (so even strangers will single him out for favorable treatment!). All these tensions are mitigated by the consumption of large quantities of wine by all: "And they drank their fill with him" (v. 34).

When day breaks, all their worries are dissipated: "The men were sent off (all eleven of them!) with their asses (carrying food for their families, which were not stolen after all)" (44:3). But the tables are quickly turned thanks to a new libel devised by the authorities: the theft of their host's silver goblet, ostensibly evidence of gross ingratitude: "Why do you repay good with evil?" (v. 4). In the vain hope that the incident was merely an error on the part of the majordomo, the brothers try to protest: how could anyone suspect them of stealing silver or gold, insofar as they had voluntarily brought back the money found in their bags? Obviously, however, the only way to prove their innocence is to ask for their bags to be searched, and they express their confidence in the outcome by consenting in advance to the ultimate penalty if they should indeed prove guilty (just as Jacob tried to clear his family of any suspicion in connection with the theft of Laban's idols, Gen. 31:32): "Whichever of your servants it (= the goblet) is found with shall die; the rest of us, moreover, shall become slaves to my lord" (v. 9). The Egyptian official replies with a counter-proposal, demonstrating a more restrained and cautious punitive policy. Despite the serious collective accusation: "It was a wicked thing for you (plural!) to do!" (v. 5), the punishment should be focused and less severe: "Only the one with whom it is found shall be my slave; but the rest of you shall go free" (v. 10). The search is indeed carried out, in order of their birth—again designed to arouse their puzzled apprehension at the official's precise information, but at the same time, by leaving the discovery of the goblet to the last, disguising the fact that he, of course, knows in advance just where to find it.

When the goblet turns up in Benjamin's bag, the brothers could have easily perceived this as the hand of Divine Providence, releasing them from the oppressive burden of Jacob's favoritism toward Benjamin

and justifying the sale of Joseph into slavery in Egypt after the fact.<sup>13</sup> However, resisting the attraction of such theological rationalization, they listen instead to the voice of their ethical judgment and rend their clothes (just as Jacob had rent his clothes upon seeing Joseph's blood-stained robe, 37:34). All together, they return to the city and willingly enter the trap about to close on their young brother. Coming with rent garments before the Egyptian ruler, they throw themselves to the ground before him (humbling themselves completely, compared with the previous two times, when they had only bowed down before him—42:6; 43:26) and silently await his verdict. Joseph, for his part, is not content with this admirable demonstration of solidarity and brotherhood; in order to verify that these were not just spontaneous, temporary sentiments, he again rebukes them for the collective offense: "What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?" (v. 15; and the theft of a cultic vessel is an immeasurably graver offense than that of an ordinary goblet, as Joseph's majordomo had already told them in v. 15).

Judah now answers Joseph, not trying to excuse his brothers for what they have not done, but again reiterating the common responsibility of them all for the offense, which cannot be denied in view of the discovery of the goblet in the possession of one of them: "What can we say to my lord? How can we plead, how can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered the crime of your servants. Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found" (v. 16). Joseph has thus placed his brothers in a situation very similar to his own when thrown into prison. Just as he cannot gainsay the presence of his garment in Potiphar's wife's hands—proof positive of the truth of her accusation—they have no words to explain away the goblet's presence in Benjamin's bag. They still have the chance to limit the unjustified punishment by claiming ignorance of their young brother's action. Instead, however, they admit guilt (through Judah,

---

<sup>13</sup> This sinful option is beautifully illustrated in Genesis Rabba 92:9: "When the goblet was discovered, they (the brothers) said to [Benjamin]: 'You thief son of a thief (for your mother in her turn stole Laban's idols)!' He said to them: 'Here is a kid (in whose blood you dipped Joseph's robe and deceived our father), here are brothers who sold their brother!'"

acting as their spokesman), attributing the discovery of the goblet to Divine retribution for their crime—though they do not explain whether this refers to the supposed crime of stealing the goblet or their real crime, of which only they are aware.<sup>14</sup> Joseph, for his part, would like to test the firmness of the brothers' solidarity with Benjamin, to determine to what degree they realize the connection between their current predicament and their sin of twenty years before; he therefore tries to drive a wedge between them and Benjamin, announcing that, as a just man, he will replace the collective punishment by a personal one: "Far be it from me to act thus! Only he in whose possession the goblet was found shall be my slave; the rest of you go back in peace to your father" (v. 17).<sup>15</sup>

The reiterated announcement (now by the Egyptian vizier himself) that Benjamin alone is to be considered responsible again gives the brothers a chance not only to extricate themselves safely from their plight and leave with the food for their starving families, but also to rid themselves of Benjamin and the continued discrimination in favor of Rachel's sons. While Benjamin himself has not lorded it over them in a long-sleeved robe, nor threatened their birthright with dreams of domination, their father has treated him as the "child of his old age" (as Judah notes below, in v. 20) and openly expressed his special love for him; there is therefore a very real danger that Benjamin might be proclaimed his brothers' overlord. In light of their father's unfair attitude, surely they are entitled to believe that God has come to their help and given them the opportunity to leave Benjamin a slave in Egypt,<sup>16</sup> and that they should view his arbitrary punishment as an act of Providence?

---

<sup>14</sup> A similar case, in which reference is made to an offense known only to the speaker, is the appeal made by the widow of Zarephath to Elijah: "What is there between you and me, O man of God, that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son?" (1 Kgs. 17:18).

<sup>15</sup> David Daube has argued that Joseph is thereby expressing preference in principle for personal rather than collective punishment; see David Daube, *Studies in Biblical Law*, Cambridge 1947 (repr. New York 1969), pp. 244–245.

<sup>16</sup> A good example of such attribution of an unexpected turn of events to an act of Providence in someone's interest occurs when Saul, who has been pursuing David, suddenly becomes his prospective victim, and David's men tell him, "This is the day of which the Lord said to you, 'I will deliver your enemy into your hands; you can do with him as you please'" (1 Sam. 24:4).

Judah's reaction to the Egyptian vizier's verdict betrays nothing of this passive violence toward their father Jacob and their brother Benjamin. He begins by requesting permission to put his plea before the Egyptian, though surely aware that he, a slave, has no right to challenge the decision of the all-powerful master. Without mentioning the three false accusations aimed at the brothers—espionage, failure to pay for the grain and theft of the goblet—he describes the sequence of events beginning with their arrival in Egypt, from the viewpoint of himself and the brothers. Everything began with the vizier's interrogation, "Have you a father or another brother?" (v. 19), and they answered honestly that they had indeed left behind an old father and "a child of his old age" (v. 20), his mother's sole surviving child, "and his father dotes on him" (*ibid.*). The vizier had relied on this information when he demanded that they bring forth the youth, promising that no evil would befall him (this is Nahmanides' explanation of the phrase "that I may set eyes on him" [v. 21], on the basis of Jer. 24:6; 39:12). Despite their warning that their father's life would be at risk if his beloved son left him, he had insisted that they bring Benjamin, even conditioning the future selling of food upon their compliance. Left with no alternative, the brothers had put pressure on their father to allow the younger brother to come with them, and he had finally acquiesced, because of the need to procure more food (v. 25), at the same time complaining bitterly of what they were doing to him: "As you know, my (beloved) wife bore me (only) two sons. One is gone from me, and I said: 'Alas, he was torn by a beast!' And I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to Sheol in sorrow" (vv. 27–28). Jacob's words (reported by Judah in more dramatic and pathetic terms than originally phrased, cf. 42:38) constitute an indirect accusation of the heartless person who had forced them to act in this way toward their father in the past, and was now demanding that they do so again, fulfilling their father's own prediction concerning the youth—"...and he will meet with disaster."

The opening word "now" in v. 30 signifies the transition from the account of the past to a description of what may be expected if the brothers return to their father without the youth, "whose soul is so bound

up with his soul” (ibid.). Surely the father will soon die of grief, and the blame will fall upon the brothers who, in the name of the survival of the whole family, had demanded that, despite his great love for Benjamin, he should suppress his fears for the youth’s safety: “When he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief” (v. 31). Their admission of responsibility for their father’s expected demise is not merely a powerful rhetorical device to accuse Joseph implicitly of forcing them to cause their father such dreadful grief, but also a brave declaration that they see no need to act as mere pawns on his chessboard. To that end, they have to be willing to place their father’s well-being above their own, as Judah indeed does when he begs the Egyptian vizier to let him serve as a slave instead of Benjamin and so to avert his father’s death. He is relying here on the Egyptian’s decision to demand only personal punishment, sparing the rest of the brothers and allowing them see to the sustenance of their families; all he is asking is that his own punishment be substituted for that of Benjamin with its potentially catastrophic outcome. In order to make this amazing request more plausible and convincing, he tells the Egyptian vizier that he has undertaken to act as personal surety for Benjamin’s safe return to his father, and violation of this undertaking will never be forgiven him: “I shall stand guilty before my father forever” (v. 32). Besides his moral responsibility toward his father, he is also moved by compassion for him, and he concludes his speech with a rhetorical question, expressing his inability to see his father’s terrible grief over the loss of his favorite son: “For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!” (v. 34).

When Judah has finished, Joseph can no longer contain himself. While on the two previous occasions he was able to control his emotions and to turn aside in order to hide his weeping (42:24; 43:30–31), he now orders all his attendants out of the room and bursts into tears, shaken with sobs so loud that the Egyptians in nearby chambers can hear him, and the news of his breakdown quickly reaches Pharaoh’s palace (setting the stage for the monarch’s personal intervention, inviting Joseph’s brothers to settle in Egypt). What has created this double

reversal—from self-control to an emotional outburst, from acting as a stranger to making himself known? The point is that Judah, throughout his speech, has concentrated on Jacob’s suffering and his own determination to spare his father still further distress. He refers three times to “your servant my father” (vv. 24, 27, 30) and once more to “your servant our father” (v. 31), perhaps betraying through this polite phrase his muted protest at such brutal exploitation of the father’s absolute dependence on the cruel caprice of the official responsible for the Egyptian food stores. It is this attempt somehow to soften the Egyptian vizier’s heart and persuade him to exchange one slave for another that has broken Joseph’s heart, to the extent that he can no longer go on causing such distress to his father, as if he were his servant.

Combined with this emotional reaction is his moral awareness of the major metamorphosis in his brothers’ attitude to their father and their younger brother. The change is faithfully reflected by the double reversal of Judah’s behavior: the son who caused his father the sorrow of bereavement has become the son who is willing to sacrifice his whole future to spare his father the sorrow of parting; and the person who once sold his brother Joseph into slavery for twenty silver pieces is now about to redeem his brother Benjamin at the cost of his own freedom.

The moral evaluation of Judah’s noble plea is surely reinforced by our wonder at his new attitude to the very thing that had brought about his own—and his brothers’—cruelty to their younger brother and their father: Jacob’s great, demonstrative love for Rachel’s two sons. The powerful metaphor “his soul is bound up with his soul” (v. 30), which recurs again in the Bible in the description of the love of David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:1), expresses the intimate, profound, almost predestined (that is, involuntary and uncontrolled) relationship between the two persons. His father’s boundless love for another of his sons no longer arouses his rage and his aggression; he has come to accept it as a fact of life, indeed respecting it as an integral part of his father’s personality. Here, in the presence of his ten brothers, he is declaring that the fact of his father’s soul being “bound up” with that of Rachel’s son not only does not anger him, but in fact dictates that he take steps lest the imminent cruel sundering of that bond kill his father.

The Egyptian vizier's reaction to Judah's speech is strange, even alarming. Having sent out all his attendants and servants, he is left alone with the Hebrews come before him to judgment and then begins to sob uncontrollably. Pulling himself together, he makes the stunning admission—in their tongue!—"I am Joseph!" (45:3), then adding: "Is my father still alive?" (*ibid.*), which is more a declaration than a question, effectively saying: The man whom you have been calling "your servant our father" (44:31) is none other than my father, and his welfare is my foremost concern! Little wonder that his brothers, who in Canaan were so hostile that they "could not speak peaceably to him" (37:4), maintain their silence because of dread "But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him" (45:3). Moreover, their amazement is multiplied by terror at the sudden transformation from the false accusation of stealing the goblet to the true accusation of having stolen Joseph (as he himself had defined being sold into slavery: "I was indeed stolen from the land of the Hebrews" (40:15).

Joseph indeed finds it quite difficult to allay their fears and persuade them that, in making himself known to them, he is not about to intensify his persecution of them, but the very opposite. Before saying what he has to say, he invites them, with great sensitivity, to draw near, to reduce the physical distance between them: "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come forward to me.' And they came forward" (45:4). He then identifies himself a second time, in more detail: "I am your brother Joseph (your flesh and blood, not seeking to harm you), he whom you sold into Egypt (and that is how I came to be here)" (*ibid.*). Joseph could have told them that they had passed the difficult and painful test he had set for them with flying colors; that their sin toward him had been forgiven and their repentance was complete; that from now on, as far as he was concerned, they were like people with a new heart and a new spirit." But he says nothing of the sort, perhaps because their actions speak for themselves. Moreover, any such praise from his mouth would necessarily sound condescending and judgmental. Since he refrains from applauding and glorifying the developing events from the viewpoint of reward and punishment, he scrutinizes them from the standpoint of Divine Providence, pointing out that the brothers' action in

selling him, however harmful and morally deplorable in itself, was at the same time a necessary stage in the realization of the Divine plan: “Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you (through that very act of selling me)” (v. 5). The seven years of deadly famine, of which only two have passed, would have brought certain death to Jacob’s family, had God not sent him to Egypt and empowered him “to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in a great deliverance” (v. 7).

Having appealed to Providence to explain the events—an explanation which perhaps has not completely satisfied the brothers as to the possible real intentions behind his friendly words—Joseph firmly sets out the practical implications of what he has said. They are to hurry back to his father (and he does not mention something self-evident—that both Benjamin and Judah will go with them) and deliver his message: “Thus says your son Joseph, ‘God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me without delay’” (v. 9), for only in the land of Goshen will Joseph be able to provide adequate sustenance for him, his family and his possessions.

The brothers are evidently still uncertain as to the identity of the man who was tormenting them till a short while ago, but was now claiming that he had been elevated to his high position only to ensure their future. Joseph therefore concludes by appealing to their sense of reality, encouraging them to trust the evidence of their eyes as to both his identity and his rank: “You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin (who knows me more intimately) for himself, that it is indeed my mouth (not that of someone else) which is speaking to you. And you must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen (with your very eyes)” (vv. 12–13). Just as he began his address to them by inviting them to approach him, he now ends by approaching them, first openly showing his special affection for Benjamin: “With that he embraced his (maternal and paternal) brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his (other) brothers and wept upon them” (vv. 14–15). Indeed, what logical, spoken language could not do was thus accom-

plished by emotional, body language: “And after that his brothers talked to him” (v. 15).

Pharaoh and his courtiers confirm the invitation to Jacob’s family to settle in Egypt, thus placing the official, royal imprint on the familial action (a fact of paramount importance for the Israelites’ standing in Egypt). Joseph now sends the brothers on their way with rich gifts for his father (loaded on he- and she-asses), ample supplies for the journey (in both directions), wagons to bring the whole family to Egypt, and personal gifts to his eleven brothers. The point of these last gifts is to express the reunification of the family and Joseph’s obvious confidence that they will not be affected by the frank preference given to Benjamin: “To each of them (of the brothers who had stripped off his long-sleeved robe), moreover, he gave an outfit of clothing; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver (perhaps as compensation for the episode of the silver goblet) and five outfits of clothing (clearly expressing his special love for him)” (v. 22). His parting message is rather obscure; perhaps, in light of the inevitable task facing them when they meet their father—to give him the joyful news of Joseph’s survival, but at the same time to reveal the truth about his disappearance—he is encouraging them not to allow mutual recrimination to take them back to the dark past from which they have now escaped: “He told them, ‘Do not be quarrelsome on the way’” (v. 24, as explained by R. David Kimhi: “Do not quarrel with one another over selling me, each saying to the other: It was you who caused our brother to be sold”).

Jacob, deceived in the distant past to believe his sons’ report of Joseph’s death, now refuses to believe the astonishing news they have brought, which, far from strengthening his spirit as hoped, weakens him: “His heart went numb, for he did not believe them” (v. 26). Only when they tell him of Joseph’s insistence that he come down to Egypt with his whole family, and when he sees the wagons that Joseph has sent to bring him, is he convinced that he will indeed be reunited with his lost son: “The spirit of their father Jacob revived. ‘Enough! (cf. 2 Sam. 24:16)’ said Israel. ‘My son Joseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die’” (v. 28).

We have now reached the happy end of the story of Joseph and his

brothers; for our purposes, we need only briefly skim over the main events of this last chapter. Jacob and his family, now numbering seventy souls, come down to Egypt as enjoined by his son and confirmed by God (46:2–4). Upon arriving in the land of Goshen, the long-suffering father and his son, whom he had thought dead, have a highly emotional meeting (46:28–30). Joseph presents his brothers, and then also his father, to Pharaoh, so that their settling in Goshen and their sustenance during the famine years should not be based on their kinship with him but on an official royal command (46:31–47:10). Joseph sustains his father’s family in accordance with their needs, while the Egyptians themselves are groaning under the famine and obliged to pay Pharaoh full price for grain, finally giving up their personal freedom and their ownership of the land (47:11–27).<sup>17</sup> Before his death, Jacob makes Joseph swear to bury him not in Egypt but in his ancestral grave; to show his gratitude, he “bowed at the head of the bed,” not to his son (which would have been stated explicitly) but to God (as the aged David did after Solomon had been successfully anointed—1 Kgs. 1:47) (Gen. 47:28–31). Jacob again acts on the principle of preference of the younger which has guided him from birth to death: First, by adopting his two grandchildren—Joseph’s sons—as his sons, thus ensuring Joseph’s birthright by giving him a double portion of the inheritance; second, by transferring the birthright from Manasseh to Ephraim, over Joseph’s somewhat subdued objections, concerned lest this granting of a (verbal) long-sleeved robe should cast a shadow over the lives of the next generation as well (48:1–22). On deathbed, Jacob takes his leave of his twelve sons with predictions for the far future (when leadership will be entrusted to the tribes of Judah and Joseph), and repeats the instructions to inter him in the ancestral tomb in the Cave of Machpelah (49:1–53). Jacob’s death is recognized in Egypt as an event of public significance: the physicians embalm his body, Egypt declares seventy days of mourning, and Egyptian officials and dignitaries take part alongside Joseph and his brothers in the funeral procession to Canaan, which is moreover protected by a troop of chariots and horsemen (50:1–14).

---

<sup>17</sup> The highly problematic character of these measures is the subject of Chapter 4 in my book, *Seek Peace and Pursue It*, pp. 86–90.

When the funeral party returns to Egypt, the “happy end” of the story is suddenly shattered, as the sin of the selling of Joseph into slavery, which as the reader has understood up to now was forgiven and erased, comes back to threaten the unity of Jacob’s family. Joseph’s brothers are struck by fear that he hates them no less than before, and will now do to them what he had refrained from doing when his father was still alive only in order to avoid causing him grief. Communication between Joseph and his brothers is once again cut off; unable to face him and speak with him, they try to make their father speak from his grave by way of a last will and testament which is palpably and pathetically fictitious, and which they now send him. This supposed will does not ignore the severity of their offense, but expresses a double request that he forgive them for their sin, first, because that was the request of their father (who continues to be concerned for the integrity of his family) from his son, and, second, because they are his brothers, who worship the same God as he: “Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly. Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father” (50:17).

Joseph’s response to this plea is to sob wordlessly, for what could he possibly say upon realizing that, despite having clearly proved how much they have changed, they still harbor feelings of guilt? Despite all his reassurances and his efforts on their behalf, they are basically mistrustful of him, suspecting that he might have murderous designs upon them, like Esau who hated Jacob and said to himself, “Let but the mourning period of my father come, and I will kill my brother Jacob” (27:41). His weeping indeed convinces them more than any words could, and they come to him, again prostrate themselves before him (now, however, fully aware of his identity as their brother the dreamer) and repeat what they had said to him when the goblet was discovered in Benjamin’s bag—pleading with him to commute the death sentence that they deserve for stealing and selling him to a sentence of slavery: “We are prepared to be your slaves” (50:18, clearly referring back to 44:16).

Joseph now speaks to them gently and tries to calm them. He does not bring up the issue of Divine retribution, just as he did not do when he revealed his identity to them, but the reason for this seems to be

different, owing to the changed circumstances. In the past he had refrained from doing so because their actions spoke for themselves, more than any judgmental words could have done; now, however, he similarly refrains because, seeing their great fear, he clearly and painfully realizes the limits of moral change. Their repentance, though quite sincere, has left deep scars in their hearts, and his forgiveness, it too sincere, has not completely dispelled their suspicion of him. He therefore has no choice but, again, to speak on the level of Divine Providence; now, however, the emphasis is not on the fact that his sale was preparation for their deliverance, but that, as a tool of Providence, he could not possibly have acted against it. Instead of arguing that they no longer have to be punished, and that his own heart harbors no hatred of them, he points out that, even had he wished to pay them back, he could not have done so, as he was charged with the task of assuring their survival: “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? (Do not fear me, because I cannot place myself in God’s place and prefer my desires to His.) Besides, although you intended me harm (your plans for me were indeed harmful, but) God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children” (vv. 19–21). His humility and sincerity, his concern for their welfare and earnest desire to calm them, are clearly visible in his words, to which he also adds a further message of consolation and kindness, which is not cited: “And he reassured them, speaking kindly to them” (ibid.).

These words end the story of Joseph and his brothers; we are not told directly what influence his words, whether explicit or otherwise, had upon his agitated brothers. Perhaps this focus upon means rather than outcome, on Joseph rather than on his brothers, carries the message that forgiveness for injustice, building of trust and making peace (like any other human accomplishment) are never final and perfect; there will always be crises and setbacks, and these efforts will always have to be supported and cultivated. The “open-ended” conclusion to a story of change and reconciliation is its last lesson.

Joseph takes great care not to remind his brothers of his dreams. Only once, when they first come to him and bow down before him, we

are told that in his heart he remembered “the dreams that he had dreamed about them” (42:9). Nevertheless, the reader is constantly aware of them, as they gradually, amazingly, come true in the course of the plot development; it is quite likely that Joseph, too, was aware of them, as were his brothers after he revealed his true identity. Not unnaturally, the dreams had different meanings for Joseph in his father’s house, in the prison, when he was seated on the throne of Pharaoh’s viceroy, and finally when he returned from his father’s burial. Perhaps we are justified in supposing that the last meaning of the dream of the sheaves is implicit in his last words to his brothers: the brothers’ sheaves prostrate themselves before Joseph’s sheaf, which is standing upright in the center and offering them its grain, for Divine Providence brought him to Egypt in order to prepare food for his brothers, and placed him in high office in order to serve his subjects.