

The “Joseph Saga” Begins

A D’var Torah on *Parashat Vayeishev* (Gen. 37:1 – 40:23)

By Sarah B. Schweitz

“Vayeishev Yaakov b’erets m’gurei aviv b’erets K’naan.”
“Jacob settled in the land where his father had resided, the land of Canaan.”

The last part of the book of Genesis¹ begins with the “line of Jacob”. Isaac is dead and Jacob is now the leading figure. Jacob, our Patriarch, fades into the background, but his life provides the framework for the Joseph Saga.

The effective impact of Joseph’s biography is created by a device called by Aristotle “dramatic reversal.” It is considered important to good drama and is found in Greek writing. Fate thwarts the will of man by turning the effect of his actions to its own purposes rather than to his. Joseph is sold by his brothers so that they may be rid of the dreamer, yet the dreams come true. The slave becomes master, hatred turns to love, and the rejected one saves his brother’s lives. Man cannot change the overriding purposes of divine power.

The prominence of Joseph should not let us forget the tragedy of Jacob. Jacob, who chased after the birthright and secured its blessings in a deceitful way, pays dearly for the privilege. His own children will deceive him, causing him anxiety and agony, and he will end his life in exile, living under the shadow of his famous son Joseph.

Parashat Vayeishev begins the Joseph saga. The parashah contains three important themes:

- Suspicion and hostility among children
- Parental favoritism
- Assuming responsibility for what we promise, refusing to demean and embarrass others

What went wrong between Joseph and his brothers? So far we have seen in the Torah the results of hatred and jealousy between Cain and Abel, and between Jacob and Esau. Now in *Parashat Vayeishev* we see the hostility between Joseph and his brothers. Problems of parental favoritism and sibling rivalry occur in every family and in every generation. The Torah emphasizes the importance of dealing directly and honestly with all the troubling aspects. We see something of ourselves and our families in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Why did the brothers feel such anger

¹ Genesis 37:2

toward Joseph? What did he do to make them want to kill him? What role did Jacob play in this sad drama?

Elie Wiesel writes on Joseph's character in *Messengers of God*: "Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. His father gave him everything. He owned the most beautiful clothes because he liked to be regarded as graceful and elegant. He craved attention. He knew he was the favorite son and often boasted of it. He was given to whims and frequently was impertinent, arrogant, vain, and insensitive to other people's feelings. He said whatever was on his mind." We know the consequences: Joseph was hated, mistreated, and finally was sold by his brothers, who in truth were ready to kill him.

Joseph was spoiled by his father who gave him everything he wanted, including a coat of many colors. Because of his father's favoritism, Joseph believed he was superior to his brothers. Some commentators emphasize Joseph's immaturity. He was seventeen years old, a self-centered young boy. He used special brushes and pencils to color around his eyes, and he curled his hair.² According to the Rabbis, Joseph made up stories about his brothers and then told them to his father.

Rashi claims that Joseph took advantage of every opportunity to gossip about his brothers to his father. He slandered their intentions and their accomplishments. For this reason, his brothers mistrusted and hated him.

Why did Jacob favor Joseph so much? Rabbi Judah believed that Jacob favored Joseph because father and son looked alike. Rabbi Nehemiah explains that Jacob spent more time with Joseph because he was more intelligent and receptive than his brothers. Because of this, Jacob taught him the fundamentals of our tradition more than he taught the other sons.

Writer Elie Wiesel comments: "the brothers should have felt sorry for their orphan brother whose mother Rachel died tragically. She was the beloved wife of Jacob. He has to work seven additional years to marry her. The brothers made Joseph feel unwanted, an outsider. Jacob loved him because he was unhappy. The Midrash tells us that Joseph spoke to them but they did not respond. To them he was a stranger, an intruder to be driven away."

Elie Wiesel's interpretation does not excuse Joseph's bad behavior, but it explains it. The brothers hated him especially after he told them his dreams of how they would bow down to be ruled by him.

So, what went wrong between Joseph and his brothers, and how did Jacob's actions combine to spell tragedy? It is called parental favoritism, and Jacob must bear the guilt. The irony is this: After all that happened to Jacob

² From Genesis Rabbah

caused by his mother's favoritism toward him, and the rivalry that he experienced with his twin brother Esau, one wonders how he could let the same thing happen to Joseph. Familial patterns of deception continue from generation to generation not only in the Torah but in "real life" as well.

When we read the story of Joseph, it is also our story. It is the story of a father's favorite son being sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers, imprisoned as a result of false charges, being freed, being exalted to a high position in the court of Egypt, and ultimately bringing his family to a place of honor.

This story in many ways foreshadows the journey of the Israelites from slavery to freedom. If Joseph had not gone to Egypt, his brothers would not have ended there, and we would not have become slaves. The story of Joseph shows us how the brothers evolve from men ready to kill Joseph into men ready to lead a new nation.

It is the slavery that allows us to be redeemed by God, who then reveals the Torah to us at Sinai. We must first descend to the depths of despair before we can be exalted to the heights. This is a recurring theme within Jewish history, and it all begins with Joseph being cast into the pit and being sold into slavery.

There are many lessons that we can learn from this parashah and the remainder of the Joseph saga, for it is not a microcosm of the Jewish journey to Egypt, but of the journey that we must all take if we are to become free human beings.