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SOME ASPECTS OF THE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT OF JOSEPH  
AS SEEN IN THE RABBINIC LITERATURE

JEFFREY ELSON

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

1975

Referee: Prof. Edward Goldman

to my parents  
brother  
sisters  
nephew

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\* thomas mann



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## DIGEST

This paper presents the midrashic commentaries dealing with the character of Joseph. The texts have been arranged in a chronological order following the sequence of events found in the Joseph story as related in chapters thirty-seven and thirty-nine through fifty of Genesis. This paper has been divided into sections by common topics which became apparent during the organization of the material. These sections vary greatly in length, depending upon the wealth or dearth of commentaries found dealing with that particular topic.

The development and change in the character of Joseph from that of a young, reckless dreamer to an interpreter of dreams and ultimately ruler, virtually, of a great nation was a profound one. It certainly provided considerable area for speculation and examination for the rabbinic commentators and exegetes. This paper presents the commentaries to show how the midrashic authors reacted to and understood these changes. Most of the material is taken from Tannaitic and Amoraic sources, though these are not used exclusively.

The basic question underlying this paper is how the midrashic authors used the Joseph of the Genesis story in their exegeses. Have they been faithful to the scriptural story, or have they merely used it as a foundation for building a totally new story or character of Joseph? This writer concludes on the basis of the material presented that the rabbis were, on the whole, true to the scriptural text. But at the same time, the boundless scope and imagination of the rabbinic mind as it fills out the personality of Joseph, thus making him one of the most

credible of biblical individuals, cannot be underrated or denied.

## INTRODUCTION

Think of some of the most richly and thoroughly portrayed personalities of the Bible and the name of Joseph is certain to appear. The scriptural text narrates his story from his teens to his death at the age of one hundred and ten. And what a rich story it is! It contains elements of parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, jealousy, frustrated passion, undeserved punishment, devotion, suspense and revenge among many others. In thirteen chapters, we have a story whose wealth finds little parallel elsewhere in literature.

The purpose of this paper is to present the midrashic commentaries on Joseph as he is portrayed in chapters thirty-seven and thirty-nine through fifty of Genesis. With such a rich personality and story at their disposal, how did the rabbinic authors respond to it? What kinds of lessons or explanations were they able to draw from it? These were the questions to which I addressed myself as I approached the topic.

The first step in locating the material was the use of such guides as Gross' אוצר האגדה and אישי החנ"ך by ישי"י חסידה . These, along with תורה הכתובה והמסורה , תורה שלמה , Kasher's Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, and Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews, served to direct me to a multitude of primary texts.

For the most part, research was in texts of the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods, though occasionally later material was also included. In those cases where a scientific edition of a midrashic text was available, I also used its index of scriptural verses.

English translations of texts were used when available, after comparing them to the original Hebrew or Aramaic editions. Changes were made in these translations for the sake of clarity where I felt it necessary or helpful.

In those instances where no translations were available, I composed my own. This was done with full understanding that any translation cannot be completely removed from interpretation, and that other versions besides my own may be equally correct.

A problem involving translation also arose in connection with scriptural passages. In the majority of instances, the translations of passages from Genesis have been taken from the new Jewish Publication Society edition of The Torah. But here again, in those specific instances when the midrashic material demanded, I have substituted other translations.

Once the material had been gathered from all the various sources, it was organized by common themes in an order closely resembling that of the original Joseph story itself. The comparative wealth or dearth of material on certain themes is reflected in the varying lengths of the paper's sections, which range from one to well over twenty pages.

A basic question underlying this paper was how the Joseph of the Genesis story was used by the midrashic authors in their exegeses. When writing a commentary, the temptation is often great to inject so many new elements into a character or a story, that the original text and its content become lost. Does this happen in the case of Joseph? Is his story merely a starting point for the rabbis to graft onto him new qualities and incidents totally unrelated to the scriptural account?

Based upon the material that follows, I have concluded that the rab-

bis were, on the whole, true to the biblical Joseph. But at the same time, we cannot deny the limitless imagination and scope of the rabbinic mind. For it is precisely this rabbinic mind that serves not to obscure, but, rather, to fill out Joseph's personality and to make him one of the most three-dimensional and credible biblical individuals.

A brief word on mechanics: I have employed brackets in this paper (1) to enclose parenthetical matter coming within a parenthesis and (2) to enclose any interpolations of my own in a quotation or a paraphrase.



### THE DEEDS OF JOSEPH

Two arks were with the children of Israel in the wilderness, one the Ark of Him who lives for ever, and the other containing Joseph's remains. The nations of the earth kept asking Israel: What is the significance of these arks? And Israel replied: This is the ark of one who is dead, and this is the Ark of Him who lives for ever. Then the nations of the earth would say: But how is it that an ark in which there is a dead man should accompany the Ark of Him who lives for ever? And Israel used to reply: The dead man in the ark was the one who observed all the commandments that are written and laid away in the other Ark.<sup>1</sup>

Here, indeed, is a sweeping characterization of Joseph! In effect it says that Joseph fulfilled what is written in the Torah.<sup>2</sup> How can such a statement be justified? Surely the best way would be to cite specific examples from Joseph's life.

'I am the Lord your God' (Ex. 20:2)--Joseph fulfilled this: 'Am I a substitute for God?' (Gen. 50:19).

'You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord' (Ex. 20:7)--Joseph fulfilled this: 'By Pharaoh' (Gen. 42:15).

'Remember the sabbath day' (Ex. 20:8)--Joseph fulfilled this: 'Slaughter and prepare ( שחט ) an animal' (Gen. 43:16). This can only refer to the Sabbath, as it says: But on the sixth day, when they prepare ( שחט ) what they have brought in...' (Ex. 16:5). 'Honor your father' (Ex. 20:12)--Joseph

fulfilled this: 'Israel said to Joseph: "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. (Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "I am ready")' (Gen. 37:13).

'You shall not murder' (Ex. 20:13)--Joseph fulfilled this: He ignored his master's wife (who apparently tried to instigate him) to kill Potiphar.

'You shall not commit adultery' (Ex. 20:13) Joseph fulfilled this: 'How then could I do this most wicked

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<sup>1</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 22:5.

<sup>2</sup>Leviticus Rabbah 2:10.

thing, and sin before God?' (Gen. 39:9). Why does Scripture say לֹאֲלֵהִים? To teach that he swore to his evil inclination, saying: By God, I will not do this thing.

'You shall not steal' (Ex. 20:13)--Joseph fulfilled this: 'Joseph gathered in all the money that was to be found...and brought the money into Pharaoh's palace' (Gen. 47:11).<sup>1</sup>

Besides being a guardian of the commandments, Joseph was also a student of Torah, a prophet and a sustainer of his brothers. How do we know all this?

A student of Torah for so it says: 'He was the child of his old age' (Gen. 37:3) and it says 'Ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you...' (Deut. 32:7). How do we know that he was a prophet? For it says: 'As a helper ( נֶעֱר ) to the sons of his father's wives' (Gen. 37:2) and it says: '...his attendant, Joshua son of Nun, a youth ( נֶעֱר )' (Ex. 33:11) and it says: 'The lad ( נֶעֱר ) Samuel grew' (I Sam. 2:21). How do we know that he sustained his brothers? For it says: 'Fear not, I will sustain you and your children' (Gen. 50:21).<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Joseph's role as sustainer was seen as so important as to have a major influence on Israel's final redemption.

Who brought them down to Egypt, if not Joseph? Who sustained them in Egypt, if not Joseph? The sea was split only due to Joseph's merit, as it says: 'The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you--they were afraid. The depths also were troubled' (Ps. 77:17). And it says: 'You have redeemed your people with strength, the sons of Jacob and Joseph' (Ps. 77:16). The Holy One, Praised be He, said: In this world, they were redeemed due to Joseph's merit. Also in the world to come, they will be redeemed solely due to Joseph's merit, as it says: 'Perhaps the Lord God of hosts will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph' (Amos 5:15).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, p. 131 (Ch. 26).

<sup>2</sup>Tanḥuma Buber תנ"ך 93b.

<sup>3</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 37:2; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 37:2.

We certainly would not want to cast any doubts upon Joseph's ability as a scholar. After all, he did frequent the **בית המדרש** until he was seventeen.<sup>1</sup> Still, he did have the discernment to know from whom one should not learn: Though Joseph grew up with two wicked people, Potiphar and his wife, he did not learn wickedness from their deeds.<sup>2</sup>

The deeds of Joseph were so fine that he was able to gain the birthright despite his being among the youngest of the sons of Jacob.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Targum Yerusalmi Genesis 37:2.

<sup>2</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.

<sup>3</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JACOB AND JOSEPH

The seemingly simple phrase: "These are the generations of Jacob: Joseph . . ." (Gen. 37:2) afforded the midrashic authors a golden opportunity to use their imaginations and their knowledge of Scriptures to draw a wealth of parallels between Joseph and his father Jacob.

Jacob and Joseph were...completely righteous and... like each other. It says: 'These are the generations of Jacob: Joseph.' The verse should have read: These are the generations of Jacob: Reuben, should it not? Why does it say 'Joseph'? To teach you that Joseph was like his father in everything.<sup>1</sup>

Both Joseph and Jacob were born circumcised.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Jacob's mother had been childless before his birth, so had Rachel, Joseph's mother, been childless before his birth.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of the former, the mother suffered acute pains from conception. In the latter, the mother suffered greatly at the time of delivery.<sup>3</sup>

The mothers of both Jacob and Joseph gave birth to two children.<sup>3</sup>

Jacob and Joseph were both hated by their sibling(s).<sup>3</sup>

Both Jacob and Joseph were hunted by their sibling(s)<sup>4</sup> who wanted

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<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:5.

<sup>2</sup>Tanḥuma פת 5; Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 18b Ch. 2; Midrash on Psalms 9:7; Numbers Rabbah 14:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>3</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>4</sup>Tanḥuma Buber וישב 90a.

to kill them.<sup>1</sup>

Both took their brother's birthright: "He sold his birthright to Jacob" (Gen. 25:33) (while) "His (Reuben's) birthright was given to Joseph" (1 Chron. 5:1).<sup>2</sup>

Jacob and Joseph were both shepherds.<sup>3</sup>

Both were persecuted.<sup>4</sup>

Jacob was a servant of Laban while Joseph was a servant in Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

They were both made servants due to a woman: "Israel served for the woman" (Hos. 12:13) while "His master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph" (Gen. 39:7).<sup>6</sup>

Both were hidden from their fathers for twenty-two years.<sup>7</sup>

Both were pursued by Satan.<sup>8</sup>

The word "stolen" is used twice with respect to each:

מִיָּדִי חֲבֵקֶשְׁנָה גִּנְבְּחִי יוֹם וּגְנֻבְחִי לַיְלָה (Gen. 31:39)  
and כִּי גִנַּב גִּנְבְּחִי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעֵבְרִי (Gen. 40:15).<sup>9</sup>

"Torn" is used with respect to each one: "I never brought a

<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 11:5.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 37:2.

<sup>3</sup>Numbers Rabbah 11:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>4</sup>Numbers Rabbah 11:5.

<sup>5</sup>Tanhuma Buber וִישַׁב 90a.

<sup>6</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 37:2.

<sup>7</sup>Tanhuma Buber וִישַׁב 90a.

<sup>8</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>9</sup>Numbers Rabbah 11:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6; Tanhuma Buber וִישַׁב 90a.

torn one to you" (Gen. 31:39) and "Joseph was torn by a beast" (Gen. 37:33).<sup>1</sup>

Both received ten blessings--Jacob: "So God give you the dew of heaven . . ." (Gen. 37:28 seq.) Joseph: "Blessed of the Lord be his land . . ." (Deut. 33:13 seq.). Both of these citations can be divided into ten.<sup>2</sup>

Jacob and Joseph both emigrated from the land.<sup>2</sup>

Both took a wife outside the land.<sup>3</sup>

Both begot children outside the land.<sup>4</sup>

Both were escorted by angels.<sup>4</sup>

One was assured of greatness through a dream and one rose through a dream.<sup>4</sup>

In both, the father-in-law's house was blessed on his account.<sup>4</sup>

Both went down to Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

Both ended a famine.<sup>4</sup>

Both were blessed with wealth. Jacob nourished Joseph for seventeen years and later Joseph nourished Jacob for seventeen years.<sup>5</sup>

One adjured his children and the other his brothers to be taken back to the land after his death.<sup>6</sup>

Both died in Egypt and were embalmed there.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 37:2.

<sup>2</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>4</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>5</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 37:2.

<sup>6</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

Both Jacob and Joseph were brought up from Egypt to Canaan.<sup>1</sup>

Still another source contends that אלה חולדות יעקב יוסף implies that Joseph, the first-born of Rachel, should also have been the first-born of Jacob.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph is also portrayed as possessing all the fine qualities of his brothers based upon this same text.

Reuben's birthright, as it says: 'As he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph' (1 Chron. 5:1); Judah's sovereignty, as it says: 'Joseph was vizier over the land' (Gen. 42:6); Levi's prophetic power, for 'as he interpreted for us, so it came to pass' (Gen. 41:13); Issachar's wisdom, for so he was told: 'There is none so wise and discerning as you' (Gen. 41:39)....<sup>3</sup> Hence, 'These are the generations of Jacob: Joseph.'<sup>3</sup>

Now then, how are we to understand Jacob's special regard for Joseph? What were the reasons for his being the favorite son?

'Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age...' (Gen. 37:3). Was he then the son of his old age? Was not Benjamin the son of his old age? But owing to the fact that (Jacob) saw by his prophetic power that (Joseph) would rule in the future, therefore he loved him more than all his sons.<sup>4</sup>

'...the child of his old age זקנים .'. R. Judah said: It means that his features זיו איקונים resembled his. R. Nehemiah said: It means that all the laws which Shem and Eber had handed down to Jacob, he transmitted to Joseph.<sup>5</sup>

And lest you think that Jacob was alone in his special affection

<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:5; Genesis Rabbah 84:6.

<sup>2</sup>Baba Batra 123a.

<sup>3</sup>Rabbenu Bahya Genesis 37:2.

<sup>4</sup>Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer 38.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:8.

for Joseph . . .

It should have read only, Israel loved Joseph....  
 Why then 'And Israel <sup>לְיוֹסֵף</sup> loved Joseph'? To  
 show that the Shechinah also loved Joseph.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Haneelam in Yalkut R'ubeni, cited in Kasher.



### JOSEPH THE YOUTH

Even during these early years, Joseph would display the qualities of an ideal son of a patriarch. However, this is not to say that his behaviour was completely without flaw.

'Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers' (Gen. 37:2)--means that he would give them good advice. Another interpretation: Joseph would learn halacha at one sitting from his father and then teach it to his brothers. He would direct them like a shepherd directs his flock.<sup>1</sup>

...Was he then a shepherd? Surely he studied in the Beit Hamidrash, as it says: 'Israel loved Joseph...because he was a disciple of his wisdom ( בן זקונים ).' However, he is called a shepherd while yet in his father's home since he was destined to provide for his brothers.<sup>2</sup>

'Joseph, being seventeen years old...' (Gen. 37:2). He was seventeen, yet you say, 'being still a lad ( נער )!' It means, however, that he behaved like a boy, pencilling his eyes, curling his hair and lifting his heel.<sup>3</sup>

These years were also the time when Joseph received the famous striped tunic from his father. We often freely speculate today as to how this garment might have contributed to the rivalry between Joseph and his siblings. And in doing so, we overlook how the gift itself was an act of prophecy on the part of Jacob. For "striped tunic" or

כְּחֹנֶה פָּסִים yields the phrase פֶּסַע --"edge of a sea" or "sea

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 37:2.

<sup>2</sup>Shir Hashirim Zuta 1, 15, 4, cited in Kashner.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:7.

divided in strips." And this, of course, recalls the fact that only due to Joseph's merit was the sea split for Israel, as it says: "The sea saw it (the coffin of Joseph borne by the Israelites) and fled" (Ps. 114:3).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Haḥadol Genesis 37:3.

## JOSEPH AND ESAU

Since he is so often thought of as a prime example of righteousness, it is no surprise that Joseph finds himself compared and contrasted to one of the favorite paradigms of evil in the midrashic literature: his own uncle, Esau. There is never any question, though, as to who will ultimately prevail at the resolution of this ancient rivalry.

Joseph is opposed to the kingdom of Edom.<sup>1</sup> Why was Esau to fall at the hand of Joseph? Because Joseph was the least in years, being 'the son of his old age' (Gen. 37:3), while of Esau it is said, 'Behold, I have made you least among the nations' (Ob. 1:2). Let Esau whom I call 'least,' be made to come and fall at the hand of Joseph who was least in years.<sup>2</sup> Esau will fall at the hands of the sons of Rachel, as it says: 'Surely the least of the flock will drag him away' (Jer. 49:20). Why are they called the least of the flock? Since they were the smallest of the tribes. Therefore Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose us out men' (Ex. 17:9) since he was a descendant of Joseph of whom it says '(He said) I fear God' (Gen. 42:18). But of Esau it says 'He did not fear God' (Deut. 25:18).<sup>3</sup> The one has horns and the other has horns. The one has horns: 'Like a firstling bull in his majesty, / He has horns like the horns of the wild-ox' (Deut. 33:17) and the other has horns: 'Concerning the ten horns that were on its head' (Dan. 7:20).<sup>28</sup> Esau grew up with two righteous people and did not learn from their actions. Joseph grew up with two wicked persons (Potiphar and his wife) and did not

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 99:2.

<sup>2</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 99:2; Tanhuma נצח 10; Tanhuma Buber נצח 22a; Pesikta de Rav Kahana 28a (51).

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 99:2.

learn from their actions.<sup>1</sup> Joseph guarded himself from lecherousness and bloodshed. Esau embraced and befouled himself in lechery and bloodshed.<sup>2</sup> Joseph received the birthright for his good deeds. Esau lost the birthright due to his evil deeds.<sup>3</sup> The one was scrupulous about his father's honor, while the other despised his father's honor.<sup>4</sup> Esau sought to slay his brother: 'Because he did pursue his brother with the sword' (Amos 1:11). But Joseph comforted his brothers, fed them and sustained them: 'He reassured them, speaking kindly to them: "I will sustain you and your children"' (Gen. 50:21).<sup>5</sup> Joseph offered his life for his mother's honor, as it says: 'Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed low' (Gen. 33:7). Esau sought to slay his mother, as it says: 'He cast off all pity' (Amos 1:11).<sup>6</sup> Joseph believed in the resurrection of the dead, as it says: 'God will surely take notice of you' (Gen. 50:24). Esau denied resurrection, as it says: 'I am about to die' (Gen. 25:32).<sup>7</sup> By whose hand will the kingdom of Edom fall? By the hand of one annointed for war, who will be descended from Joseph.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma נצנ 10; Tanhuma Buber נצנ 22a; Pesikta de Rav Kahana 28a (51).

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 99:2; Tanhuma נצנ 10.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma נצנ 10.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 99:2.

<sup>5</sup>Tanhuma נצנ 10; Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.

<sup>6</sup>Tanhuma נצנ 10.

<sup>7</sup>Genesis Rabbah 99:2.

## JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

From the fact that the brothers "could not speak a friendly word to him," the rabbis derived a quality of Joseph which remained with him throughout his life.

Joseph would come and ask his brothers' welfare but they would not answer him. Why? Because it was Joseph's habit to inquire of their welfare. Take for example a man: before he attains rulership, he asks of the people's welfare but once he attains rulership, his haughty spirit is upon him and he does not care about the citizens' welfare. But Joseph was not like this: although he (later) attained rulership, he was (still) of the habit of asking his brothers' welfare, as it says: 'He asked them of their welfare' (Gen. 43:27). The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: Joseph, in this world you would begin by asking your brothers' welfare and they used to hate you. But in the world to come, I will satisfy you all and cause their hate to pass, make tranquility return and make peace between you. So said David: 'Behold how good and how pleasant it is when brothers live in unity' (Ps. 133:1).<sup>1</sup>

And even though they did hate their brother, the tribal ancestors are praised for their consistency between emotion and behavior.

R. Abba bar Ze'era said: Even in the shortcomings of the tribes you discover their worth, for it is said of them 'They hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him' (Gen. 37:4)--that is, what was in their hearts was also on their tongues.<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite these hard feelings, Joseph was finally able to turn his brothers' hatred into love.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma Buber תנחומי 90b.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash on Psalms 28:1; Genesis Rabbah 81:9.

<sup>3</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 13:3.

### JOSEPH'S SLANDER OF HIS BROTHERS

Just like the other major biblical personalities, when Joseph commits a transgression, he is not spared severe castigation.

'I saw among the youths a young man void of understanding' (Prov. 7:7) alludes to Joseph. He was void of understanding in that he slandered his brothers--is there any greater lack of understanding than this?<sup>1</sup>

Scriptures never elaborate upon the "bad reports" (Gen. 37:2) which Joseph brought to his father. The rabbis, therefore, have a marvelous פתחון פה, another opportunity for imagination and speculation: Just what was it that Joseph had said about his brothers?

Rabbi Meir said: (He told) Jacob: Your children are to be suspected of (eating) limbs torn from living animals. Rabbi Judah said: They insult the sons of the bondmaids and call them slaves. R. Simeon said: They cast their eyes upon the daughters of the country. R. Judah ben Simeon said: With respect to all three, 'A just balance and scale are the Lord's' (Prov. 16:11). The Holy One, praised be He, rebuked him: You said that they are to be suspected of eating a limb torn from a living animal; by your life, even at the time of their sin they will slaughter ritually, as it says: 'They slaughtered a kid' (Gen. 37:31). You said that they insult the bondmaids' sons and called them slaves. By this word you will be taken, so it says: 'Joseph was sold for a slave' (Ps. 105:17). You said that they cast their eyes upon the daughters of the land. I will incite a bear against you! as it says: 'His master's wife cast her eye upon Joseph' (Gen. 39:7).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:1.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:7, 87:3; Talmud Jerusalmi Peah Perek 1 Halacha 1 (3b); Tanhuma פ"ק 7.

He said that they were suspected of cutting limbs from living animals and eating them. The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: You spread rumors about the tribes! By your life, tomorrow you will go down to Egypt and you will invite them to dine with you. But they will not trust you with regard to ritual slaughter, as it says: 'They served him by himself' (Gen. 43:32). And since he spread rumors about them, his brothers were jealous of him and it happened that our fathers went down to Egypt and were enslaved there four hundred years.<sup>1</sup>

Amazingly enough, even Jacob himself is considered "guilty" with regard to Joseph's untruths.

Two righteous men, Jacob and Joseph, were punished on account of slander: Joseph was imprisoned for twelve years for speaking slander, and Jacob was denied the Holy Spirit twenty-two years for listening to slander. Thus the utterer of slander is punished once, and the listener is punished in double measure.<sup>2</sup>

The punishment for Joseph's slander did not end with himself.

When Moses asked God: Shall I appoint a High Priest for You out of the tribe of Joseph? God answered: No, 'Whoever slanders his neighbor in secret, him I will destroy' (Ps. 101:5). For Joseph slandered his brothers, as it is said: 'Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father' (Gen. 37:2).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tanḥuma י"ב 2; Tanḥuma Buber י"ב 90b.

<sup>2</sup>Pirke d'Rabbeinu Hakkadosh 4, 24, cited in Kasher.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash on Psalms 101:2.

### JOSEPH'S DREAMS

Taking into consideration his brothers' feelings toward him, why would Joseph want to risk further antagonizing them by telling them about his dreams? This question also seemed to puzzle the midrashic authors.

Since it already said 'Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers' (Gen. 37:5), why add that 'He said to them: Hear this dream...' (Gen. 37:6)? To teach that even though he knew that this would increase their hate, he did not refrain from telling them his dreams.<sup>1</sup>

Did Joseph want to deliberately fuel the flames of his brothers' hatred? Or did he want to be certain that they were aware of a dream that appeared to have a direct bearing upon their future? Was his action defiant or magnanimous? This question is left up to us. We are to formulate our own midrash.

But there is no question at all as to how the brothers received the story of Joseph's dream: "They hated him even more for his talk about his dreams" (Gen. 37:8).

'His brothers answered: Do you mean to reign over us?' (Gen. 37:8). R. Levi said: Because they answered him with an evil eye, [Joseph] therefore produced wicked men. R. Simeon said: Because they answered him with repetition, המלך המלך , therefore he produced kings.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph is credited with likening the Patriarchs and Matriarchs to the sun and moon in his story of his second dream.<sup>3</sup> But at the

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<sup>1</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 37:6.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 81:10.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash on Psalms 118:1.



same time, the rabbis wanted to caution their readers against putting too much faith in dreams. They warned that such incidents should be taken, as it were, with a grain of salt.

The truth is, said R. Johanan in the name of R. Simeon ben Yohai, that just as wheat cannot be without straw, so there cannot be a dream without some nonsense. R. Berekiah said: While a part of a dream may be fulfilled, the whole of it is never fulfilled. Whence do we know this? From Joseph, as it is written: '...the sun, the moon, (and eleven stars were bowing down to me)' and at that time his mother was not living.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Berachot 55a.

### JOSEPH'S MISSION TO HIS BROTHERS

Scriptures read that Joseph's brothers had gone to pasture the flock of their father at Shechem (Gen. 37:12). But the rabbis saw, in a peculiarity of the Hebrew text, an important addition to this seemingly simple statement: There are dots over the word **אָן** in the sentence, **וַיֵּלְכוּ אֶחָיו לְרֹעוֹת אָח צָאן אֶרְיָהֶם בַּשָּׂכֶם**. And this teaches that they did not go to feed the flock but to eat and drink and indulge in pleasures.<sup>1,2</sup>

Joseph was quick to obey his father's orders to see how his brothers were faring. Jacob, though, came to eventually regret his own command and Joseph's subsequent willingness to carry it out.

'Israel said to Joseph, Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem...' (Gen. 37:13).  
R. Tanhum said in R. Berekiah's name: He (Joseph) treated him with honor, in accordance with the reverence due to a father from his son.  
'He answered, I am ready.'--R. Hama b. R. Hanina said: Our ancestor (Jacob) was ever mindful of these words and was consumed with remorse.--I knew your brothers hated you, yet you answered me: 'I am ready.'<sup>2</sup>

And although Joseph was among the youngest of the tribal ancestors, yet three angels met him on his way, as it says: "... a man came upon him . . . the man asked him . . . the man said . . ." (Gen. 37:15ff.).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 30b (Ch. 12); Numbers Rabbah 3:13.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:13.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 75:4 and 84:14.

### THE SALE OF JOSEPH

When the brothers saw Joseph approaching from a distance, they looked upon him as a threat, saying to one another: "Here comes that dreamer!" (Gen. 37:19). The Rabbi said: They exclaimed, Behold, it is he, who is coming wrapt in his dreams! R. Levi said: They exclaimed that this one was to ensnare them into serving (foreign) overlords.<sup>1</sup>

Now perhaps if Joseph had approached his brothers in silence, their anger against him might have abated somewhat. But "when Joseph came up to his brothers . . ." (Gen. 37:23) R. Lazar said: He came full of praises.<sup>2</sup> Once again, we the readers are left with an obvious question: whom was Joseph praising? Could it have been himself? his brothers? his father? the Holy One, praised be He? Since he was immediately stripped of his tunic, I suggest that Joseph was probably bragging about himself. Otherwise maybe his brothers might not have been so quick to act.

The biblical narrative does not record any reaction by Joseph, verbal or otherwise, to his brothers' attack. The rabbis, however, are quick to provide us with suggestions for the missing details as with this example which is put into the mouth of Zebulun.

...Simon and Gad came against Joseph to kill him,  
and he said unto them with tears: Pity me, my  
brethren, have mercy upon the bowels of Jacob our  
father: lay not upon me your hands to shed inno-

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:14.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 84:16.

cent blood, for I have not sinned against you. And if indeed I have sinned, with chastening chastise me, my brethren, but lay not upon me your hand, for the sake of Jacob our father. And as he spoke these words, wailing as he did so, I was unable to bear his lamentations, and began to weep...And when Joseph saw me weeping with him, and them coming against him to slay him, he fled behind me, beseeching them. But meanwhile Reuben arose and said: Come, my brethren, let us not slay him...<sup>1</sup>

"The pit was empty; there was no water in it" (Gen. 37:24). Do not both of these phrases say precisely the same thing? Not if you accept one of the basic premises of the midrashic authors, that there are no superfluous words in Scriptures. There must be an additional bit of information that can be drawn from these phrases if only we know how to find it.

R. Kahana also said, R. Nathan ben Minyomi expounded in R. Tanhum's name: Why is it written 'The pit was empty; there was no water in it'? From the implication of... 'The pit was empty,' don't I know that 'there was no water in it'? There was no water, yet there were snakes and scorpions in it.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph's pleas for mercy continued even from within the pit itself.

Joseph was afraid of the snakes and scorpions in the pit and he cried aloud. God kept them in hiding in their clefts and holes so they would not come near him. From the depths of the pit Joseph appealed to his brothers: O my brothers, what have I done to you? Where is my sin? Why do you not fear God for your treatment of me? Am I not of your bone and your flesh? Is your father Jacob not also my father? Why do you treat me in this way? How will you be able to face Jacob? O Judah, Reuben, Simeon, Levi--my brothers--deliver me, I beg you, from the dark place where you have cast me. Though

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<sup>1</sup>Twelve Testaments, Zebulum 2.

<sup>2</sup>Shabbath 22a.

I did wrong against you, yet you are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who were compassionate to the orphans, fed the hungry and clothed the naked. How then can you not pity your own brother, your own flesh and bone? Though I sinned against you, yet hear my petition for my father's sake. O that my father knew what my brothers are doing to me and what they said to me!<sup>1</sup>

But the brothers ignored Joseph's plea. They debated among themselves what his fate should be while they sat down to a meal. How could anything positive be seen as coming from this cruel act?

R. Judah the Levite the son of R. Shallum said: That one act of sitting down, when the fathers of the tribes sat down and, taking counsel against Joseph, finally decided to sell him, benefited the entire world. For he was sold into Egypt and during the years of famine provided sustenance to the entire world. Accordingly 'They sat down to a meal' (Gen. 37:25) means: they made it possible for the entire world to eat a meal.<sup>2</sup>

So Joseph was sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites which was carrying gum, balm and ladanum to Egypt. Even an item like this cargo list presents an opportunity for a midrash.

'The Lord loves law and will not forsake His righteous ones' (Ps. 37:28). This speaks of Joseph and shows how very much the merit of the righteous is of help to them. Where did He protect him? 'When Midianite traders passed by...' (Gen. 37:28). What were they carrying? Is it not the usual for camels to be carrying itron (a resin used for lighting)? And if the beloved Joseph had had to go down to Egypt with an ordinary caravan, would not the terrible smell of the itron have killed him? Rather, the Holy One, praised be He, arranged for him sacks full of spices and good smelling balms that the wind might waft their fragrance to him. Thus 'The

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<sup>1</sup>Sefer Hayashar

<sup>2</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 10:13; Genesis Rabbah 84:17.

Lord...will not forsake His righteous ones.<sup>1,2</sup>

We, like the midrashic authors, know that although Joseph's future looks bleak at this particular instant, his situation will later be entirely reversed. Therefore it should come as no surprise that the rabbis would use the following as a passage of hope and comfort,

נחמנו , for exiled and scattered Israel.

R. Judan said: Israel are like Joseph. Just as Joseph was sold to the tents of Kedar, as it says, 'They sold Joseph...to the Ishmaelites' (Gen. 37:28) and he afterwards purchased his purchasers, 'So Joseph gained possession of all the land of Egypt' (Gen. 47:20), so Israel will take captive their captors.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael בשלח VI, 46; Mekhilta D'Rabbi Sim'on b. Jochai בשלח 14, 22; Genesis Rabbah 84:17.

<sup>2</sup>Tanhuma Buber וישב 93a.

<sup>3</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 1:5, 1.

### JACOB'S TEST OF JOSEPH'S REPORTED DEATH

Why was it that Jacob "refused to be comforted" (Gen. 37:35)?

Surely it was due to the deep sorrow of his grief. But perhaps there was another possible reason.

It was taught: What did our father Jacob do when his sons brought him the coat with blood? He did not believe them at all. Whence do we know this? 'He refused to be comforted,' because no consolations are acceptable for a living person. One, however, who is dead, passes naturally from the mind, as it says: 'I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind' (Ps. 31:13). What then did he do? He proceeded to make a test with sheaves, writing upon them the respective names of the tribes, their constellations and their months, and said to them: I order you to prostrate yourselves before Levi because he wears the Urim and Thummim. But they did not stand up. Before Judah who is king. But they did not stand up. But when he mentioned Joseph to them, they all stood up and bowed before Joseph. But it was not yet quite clear that he was alive. So Jacob went to the mountains, hewed twelve stones, arranged them in a row, and wrote on each the name of its tribe, its constellation and its month. On one he wrote: Reuben, lamb, Nisan; and similarly on every other stone. He began from Simeon and said to them: I order you to stand up for Reuben. But they did not stand up. For Simeon. But they did not stand up. For every tribe. But the stones did not stand up. As soon, however, as he mentioned the name of Joseph to them, they stood up at once and bowed before Joseph's stone. For this reason, all the tribes were written on Joseph's stone. Similarly all Israel are called by Joseph's name, as it says: 'Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, You who leads Joseph like a flock' (Ps. 80:2). So also all the heads of the families of the Priests and Levites--'Eleashib (the High Priest)' (Neh. 3:1) because of **להשיבנו אל** **אבינו** (Gen. 37:22). Elkanah because Potiphar had bought him, as it says: 'When Joseph was brought down to Egypt...Potiphar...

bought him' ( ויקנהו ) (Gen. 39:1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Soferim 43b (Ch. 21). These last two examples may be seen as an illustration of rabbinic creativity and whimsy involving plays on words and names. Joseph is called Elasheb ( אלישיב ) simply because of the similarity between the name of the High Priest and the occurrence of the verb "to return" ( להשיב ) with respect to Joseph. The connecting element here is that אלישיב and להשיב have the common root שוב . Similarly in the case following: Joseph receives the name of the father of the great prophet Samuel, Elkanah ( אלקנה ), since the youth had been purchased ( ויקנהו ) in Egypt. In this instance, אלקנה and ויקנהו have the common root קנה .



### JOSEPH IN POTIPHAR'S HOUSEHOLD

"When Joseph was taken down to Egypt . . ." (Gen. 39:1). Merely shifting this verb from a passive to an active form enabled the rabbis to comment on this phrase as foreshadowing.

...Do not read הורד , but rather הוריד , brought down, because he brought down Pharaoh's astrologers from their eminence.<sup>1</sup>

...This means, he subdued it, as it says: 'May he have dominion וירד also from sea to sea' (Ps. 72:8). He ruled over them (the Egyptians), as it says: 'For he had dominion רדה over all the region...' (1 Kings 5:4). He removed them (from their home towns) when he was governor over them, as it says: 'He scraped it out (removed it וירדהו ) into his hand' (Jud. 14:9).<sup>2</sup>

And since the text reads ויוסף הורד מצרימה , we may be certain that Joseph alone did not go down to Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Further proof that it was indeed the Shechinah which accompanied Joseph is found in the very next sentence: ויהי ה' את יוסף.<sup>4</sup>

This particular time, however, was looked upon as one of ease for Joseph. The rabbis were then eager to show that he was not deserted even in times of trouble.

...The text (Gen. 39:2) informs me that He was with him only in time of ease. How do we know

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<sup>1</sup>Sotah 13b.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 86:2.

<sup>3</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 39:1.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 86:2.

that He was with him also in distress? From 'The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him...' (Gen. 39:23).

Potiphar's purchase of Joseph is viewed both as detrimental and beneficial to the Egyptian.

...'But the seed of the wicked will be cut off' (Ps. 37:28). This is Potiphar who had not bought Joseph as a servant; rather, for another purpose. But Gabriel came and castrated him and then Gabriel came and mutilated him ( פִּרְעוֹ ), for originally his name was written פּוֹטִיפָר but afterwards פּוֹטִיפָרֶע . Thus 'the seed of the wicked will be cut off.'<sup>2</sup>

This indeed was a purchase worth making! ...All slaves are suspected of theft, but here, 'Joseph gathered in all the money...brought the money into Pharaoh's palace' (Gen. 47:14). All slaves are suspected of immorality, but this one, 'he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her' (Gen. 39:10).<sup>3</sup>

Joseph is described as being "a successful man" (Gen. 39:2).

Just why he was called an אִישׁ מַצְלִיחַ is a question answered by the rabbis.

His master would say to him: Mix me a cup of (something) hot and he did. Then he would say: Give me something cold. And he would give it to him in the same cup. His master would say: Give me some wine. And he would. Then he would say: Give me a diluted drink. And he would. And it was sweetened. So it says: 'He was a successful man.'

R. Berekiah said: This means that he rushed (away from moral danger), as it says: 'They

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<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:3; Midrash on Psalms 24:11; Tanhuma Buber רישב 93b.

<sup>2</sup>Sotah 13b; "Tanhuma Buber רישב 93a".

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 86:3.

<sup>4</sup>Tanhuma Buber רישב 93b.

rushed וַיָּרֹץ into the Jordan before the king' (2 Sam. 19:18). This may be compared to a she-bear standing in the street decked out with costly gems and precious stones. The people remarked: Whoever rushes upon her can take what she is wearing. But a wise man there answered them: You look at what she is wearing, but I look at her fangs! From that very she-bear he fled, said R. Berekiah, and can there be a greater flight than this.<sup>1</sup>

We might expect that such an anthropomorphic statement as "His master saw that the Lord was with him" (Gen. 29:3) would be at least toned down by the rabbis, if not totally ignored, due to potentially embarrassing theological questions. But on the contrary, several midrashic comments seem to accept this quotation quite literally.

R. Huna said in the name of R. Aha: He (Joseph) whispered (God's name) whenever he came in and whenever he went out...If his master told him: Mix me a drink of hot (liquor), lo! it was hot; Mix it for me lukewarm, lo! it was lukewarm. What means this, Joseph! he exclaimed. Would you bring straw to Afrayim, or pitchers to Kefar Hananiah, or fleeces to Damascus, or witchcraft to Egypt--witchcraft in a place of witchcraft! How long (did he suspect him of witchcraft)? R. Hunia said in the name of R. Aha: Until he saw the Shechinah standing over him. So it says: '(When) his master saw that the Lord was with him...he took a liking to Joseph' (Gen. 39:4).<sup>2</sup>

Joseph praised the Holy One, praised be He, and his master saw him whispering. He said to him: What are you saying? He replied: I am praising the Holy One, praised be He. His master said: I want to see Him. Joseph said to him: Look, the sun is only one of His many servants; you are not able to look at it, how much more so the glory of the Holy One, praised be He! The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: By your life, for your sake, I will be revealed to him, as it says: 'His master saw that the Lord was with him.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 86:4.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 86:5; Lekah Tov Genesis 39:3.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma נחמיה 30; Tanhuma Buber נחמיה 22b; Numbers Rabbah 14:3.

Potiphar apparently recognized Joseph's special qualities and accorded him due honor and respect.

When Potiphar saw that the Holy One, praised be He, was with Joseph, he no longer treated him like a servant; rather, as a free member of his household. He said: We do not array such a one as this like a slave but like a king.<sup>1</sup>

Usually a slave causes loss to the household of his master, but in the case of Joseph in Potiphar's household, "the Lord blessed his house for Joseph's sake" (Gen. 39:5).<sup>2</sup> And it was solely on account of Joseph that this blessing took place.<sup>3</sup> The rabbis also explain why it was that such favored status was given to the Egyptian household. Citing the text of Genesis 39:5, they tell us that "a blessing always enters the labors of a sage,"<sup>4</sup> "wherever the righteous go, a blessing follows them,"<sup>5</sup> and that "a blessing follows immediately upon (the entering of) scholars."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 39:3.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 86:3.

<sup>3</sup>Seder Eliyahu Rabbah p. 126 (Ch. 24); Sanhedrin 39b; Tosefta Sotah Ch. 10 Halacha 8.

<sup>4</sup>Seder Eliyahu Rabbah p. 113 (Ch. 20).

<sup>5</sup>Sifré 11:10 צדק ; Lekah Tov Genesis 39:4; Genesis Rabbah 73:8 and 86:6.

<sup>6</sup>Berachot 42a.

### JOSEPH AND POTIPHAR'S WIFE

The sparseness of this episode as it is presented in the Scriptures presents the midrashic authors with opportunities for extrapolations upon the story and the deriving of an almost limitless number of lessons. And the rabbis reply with a volume and variety that is without parallel anywhere else in the entire story of Joseph.

The following excerpt serves both as a transition from the previous material concerning Joseph in Potiphar's household and as an introduction to several of the themes which we will be examining in this section.

You find that when Joseph was in his master's house, 'The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man...his master saw that the Lord was with him' (Gen. 39:2f.). Can it be that the wicked Potiphar saw that the Holy One, praised be He, was with him? What then means 'the Lord was with him'? Rather, that Joseph never ceased praying to the Lord. When he entered to serve his master, he would whisper: Master of the World, You are my security and my guardian. Grant me grace, lovingkindness and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see me and in the eyes of my master Potiphar. And Potiphar would ask: What are you whispering? Are you casting a spell on me? He answered: No, I am only praying that I may please you. So it says: 'His master saw that the Lord was with him.' Then what means 'The Lord lent success to everything he undertook'? He would mix spiced wine for his master who would ask him: What are you mixing for me? He would say: Spiced wine. Potiphar would say: I want wormwood wine. And it was wormwood wine. He would say: I want regular wine. And it was regular wine. He would say I want boiled wine. And it was boiled. Likewise for water and for everything, as it says: 'The Lord lent success to everything he undertook.' When his master saw this, he tended him all his keys and turned everything over to him, for so it says: 'All that he owns he has placed in my hands' (Gen. 39:8). When Joseph saw himself thus,

he began to eat and drink and curl his hair and say: Praised be the Lord who had made me forget my father's house. The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: Your father mourns for you in sackcloth and ashes and you eat, drink and curl your hair?! Behold your mistress will be paired with you and trouble you. So it says: 'His master's wife cast her eyes...' (Gen. 39:7). 'But he refused' (Gen. 39:8). Why did he refuse? R. Judah b. Shalom said: He saw the image of his father who said to him: Joseph! In the future your brothers' names will be written on the stones of the ephod. Do you want your name to be lacking and for you to be known as an associate of harlots? Therefore he refused. 'He said to his master's wife, "Look, my master, having me, does not know what is in the house, and all that is his he has put into my hand"' (Gen. 39:8). He said to her: See, your master is available; since all men are equal. 'He is not greater in this house than I; neither has he kept back any thing from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great evil and sin before God?' (Gen. 39:9). I swear to God that I will not do this great evil. When she would approach to speak to him he would turn his face downward in order not to look at her. What did she do? R. Hazna bar Idi said: She made a fork of iron for him so that if he turned his face downward, the fork would injure him, as it says: 'His feet they bound in fetters...' (Ps. 105:18). Despite this, he ignored her. He said to her: Even your unmarried girls are forbidden to us, how much the more so a married woman! 'He did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her' (Gen. 39:10). To lie beside her--in this world; to be with her--in the world to come.<sup>1</sup>

Why did Joseph have to endure such a test of his self-restraint?

One answer says that since Joseph was considered a righteous person, it was fitting that God would try him, as it says: ,  
 "The Lord tries the righteous" (Ps. 11:5).<sup>2</sup> Another suggested response is that which is hinted at in our opening citation on page 29: Joseph's complacency in Potiphar's home prompted his temptation. Similar reason-

<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma 271 8.

<sup>2</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 2:16, 2.



ing is found elsewhere.

'After these things...' וְיֵהי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה (Gen. 39:7). After the thoughts of these things... What was Joseph thinking about? When I was home, he thought, my father would see which portion was best and give it to me. This made my brothers envious and they gave me bad wine. Now I thank You that I am at my ease and prospering. The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: Empty words! By your life, I will incite the she-bear against you.  
Another interpretation: What did Joseph think? He said: My father was tried and my grandfather was tried, but I am not to be put to the test. The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: By your life! I will try you even more than them.<sup>1</sup>

Potiphar's wife was attracted to Joseph due to his strikingly handsome appearance. יָפֶה תֹּאמַר refers to his height while יָפֶה is the form of his face.<sup>2</sup> As for the source of Joseph's good looks, the rabbis suggest that it was simply a case of "Like mother, like son."

'Joseph was well built and handsome' (Gen. 39:6). R. Isaac said: Throw a stick in the air and it falls back to its source. Thus, since it says: 'Rachel was shapely יָפֶה תֹּאמַר and beautiful יָפֶה מֵרָאָה (Gen. 29:17), therefore it says: 'Joseph was well built and handsome יָפֶה תֹּאמַר'.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Joseph's description, in verse six, is immediately followed by the fond gazes of Potiphar's wife, in verse seven, is treated as an echo of the challenge which Joseph is about to face.

It may be illustrated by a man who sat in the street, pencilling his eyes, curling his hair and lifting his heel, while he exclaimed: I am indeed a man. The bystanders retorted: If you

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:4; Lekah Tov Genesis 39:7.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 39:6.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 86:6.

are a man, here is a bear; up and attack it!<sup>1</sup>

Certainly it appears that Joseph will be tested severely. But the rabbis are quick to reassure us that in spite of the greatness of the temptation, "the rod of wickedness"--that is, Potiphar's wife, "will not rest upon the lot of the righteous" (Ps. 125:3)--that is, Joseph.<sup>2</sup>

Still, it is difficult to imagine how a young man such as Joseph would be able to refuse such a temptation. Perhaps Scriptures have not told us all the details of the story . . .

A matron asked R. Jose: Is it possible that Joseph, at seventeen years of age with all the hot blood of youth, could act this way? Therefore he produced the book of Genesis and read the stories of Reuben and Judah. If Scripture suppressed nothing in the case of those, who were older and in their father's house, how much the more in the case of Joseph who was younger and his own master.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore we may assume that Joseph is to be held above suspicion.

Let our master teach us: Who is most trustworthy? An unmarried man who lives in a neighborhood of harlots, and yet does not sin. So none was more trustworthy than Joseph: living among the Egyptians, of whom it says: 'Their flesh is as the flesh of asses' (Ezek. 23:20), seventeen years of age, he was nevertheless above suspicion of immorality.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph's conquest of his own inclination, his **יִצְרָ**, is praised and discussed in a variety of ways. For example, given the fact that **יִסְרָ פִיטְפִט בִּי־צָרָ**, Joseph conquered his desire,<sup>5</sup> we then learn

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:3.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:2.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:6.

<sup>4</sup>Y'lamdenu in Yalkut Talmud Torah, cited in Kasher.

<sup>5</sup>Baba Batra 109b.



that he was given the name פוטִיאל , Putiel and that the zealous פנחס was among his descendents.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph's mastery over his יצר was no easy victory. For a moment, the evil inclination appeared to be in command. How did Joseph respond?

R. Jose said: Three individuals found their evil inclination mastering them and they fortified themselves against it by taking an oath... Joseph... as it is written, 'How could I do this most wicked thing and sin against God?' (Gen. 39:9). R. Huna said in R. Idi's name: Is Scripture ever defective? It does not say 'and sin against the Lord' but 'and sin against God'; he swore to his evil inclination, saying: By God, I will not sin nor do this evil.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Joseph's accomplishment might even be described as a feat of strength.

'He will guard the feet of his righteous ones' (1 Sam. 2:9)... This is Joseph. And the wicked will be silent in darkness'... This is Potiphar's wife. 'For not by strength will man prevail.' As it is taught: Who is a mighty one? He who conquers his (evil) inclination. 'His bow abode in strength' (Gen. 49:24). R. Samuel bar Nachman said: The bow was drawn but it relaxed. So it says: 'His bow abode in strength and his arms were made strong.' R. Isaac said: His passion scattered and went out from between his fingernails.<sup>3</sup>

And who is the one who conquers his inclination?

He who does God's will. And who is this? Joseph, father of Manasseh, ancestor of Joshua b. Nun. What is written? 'After a time, his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph' (Gen. 39:7). But he refused, paying no attention to her. The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: You ignored her. By your

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<sup>1</sup>Sotah 43a.

<sup>2</sup>Ruth Rabbah 6:4; Leviticus Rabbah 23:11.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash Shemuel Ch. 5.

life, I will make you ruler over Egypt and everyone will obey your words, as it says: 'Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians: "Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do"' (Gen. 41:55). It also says: 'You shall be in charge of my court and by your command shall all my people be directed' (Gen. 41:40). So it says: 'Now Joseph was the vizier of the land; it was he who dispensed rations' (Gen. 42:6). For governing his inclination, he was made governor over the land; 'He was a successful man' (Gen. 39:2).<sup>1</sup>

Among the lessons derived from this text is how both good and bad deeds committed in עולם הזה are, in a sense, reviewed in עולם

הבא .

R. Samuel ben Nahmani in the name of Jonathan said: Every good deed that one does in this world precedes him and walks before him in the world to come--'Your righteousness will go before you' (Is. 58:8). Likewise every transgression that one commits clasps him and leads him on the day of judgement--'They clasp him in the course of their way' (Job 6:18). R. Eleazar said: It is tied on to him like a dog. '...he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her' (Gen. 39:10)--'to lie beside her' in this world, 'to be with her' in the world to come.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph, who guarded himself against lechery,<sup>3</sup> is often cited as a model of conduct, as when he shows that sometimes it is wise not to pay attention to what one hears.

Four hear: one hears and loses; one hears and gains; one does not hear and loses; and one does not hear and gains... Who does not hear and gains? This is Joseph: 'He paid no attention (did not listen) to her to lie beside her' (Gen. 39:10). How was he rewarded? 'Joseph was governor over the land; it was he

<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma NWJ 28; Tanhuma Buber NWJ 21b-22a.

<sup>2</sup>Avodah Zerah 5a; Sotah 3b.

<sup>3</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.

who dispensed rations to all the people of the land' (Gen. 42:6).<sup>1</sup>

He is also cited as "State's Evidence" in the heavenly court.

The poor, the rich and the sensual...come before the heavenly court... To the sensual person they would say: Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah? If he said: I was beautiful and upset by sensual passion, they would say to him: Were you by any chance more beautiful than Joseph? It was told of Joseph the virtuous that Potiphar's wife tried to entice him every day with words. The garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening; those she put on in the evening, she did not wear in the morning. She said to him: Yield to me! He said: No. She said: I'll have you put in prison. He said: 'The Lord releases the captives' (Ps. 146:7). She said: I'll bend your proud stature. He said: 'The Lord raises up those who are bowed down' (Ps. 146:8). She said: I will blind your eyes. He said: 'The Lord opens the eyes of the blind' (Ps. 146:8). She offered him one thousand silver talents to make him yield to her, 'to lie beside her, to be with her.' But he would not listen to her; not to 'lie beside her'--in this world; not to 'be with her'--in the world to come...<sup>2</sup> Thus Joseph the virtuous condemns the sensual.<sup>2</sup>

It was Joseph's dedication to his duty that enabled him to stand in the presence of the mighty.

'Do you see a man diligent in business? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure people' (Prov. 22:29). R. Judah said: This refers to Joseph. At the time he was sold into Egypt, he was 'diligent in business': 'He came into the house to do his work' (Gen. 39:11). 'He will stand before kings'--this is Joseph, as it says: 'Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt' (Gen. 41:46). 'He will not stand before obscure people'--this is Potiphar's wife.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pesikta de Rav Kahana 116b.

<sup>2</sup>Yoma 35b.

<sup>3</sup>Tanḥuma Buber נ"ן 16b.

Praiseworthy as Joseph's fortitude was, there are those who desire to place his strength in a proper perspective.

Joseph's one-time resistance to temptation was less meritorious than that of Boaz which was in turn less meritorious than that of Palti ben Lavish.<sup>1</sup>

Partisans of Joseph may respond, however, by saying that Joseph, too, resisted temptation many times. How do we know this? We derive it from the cantillation trope found over the word יָנֹס, "But he refused" (Gen. 39:8)--the wavering repeated note called shalshelet.<sup>2</sup>

Was the infatuation of Potiphar's wife for Joseph hers alone? Or was it shared by others?

Once the Egyptian women gathered and came to see the beauty of Joseph. What did Potiphar's wife do? She took ethropim and gave one to each one and gave each one a knife. Then she called Joseph and had him stand before them. When they saw his beauty, they would cut their hands. She said to them: You act like this when you see him for just one hour. How much more myself for I see him all day! And every day she would tempt him and appeal to his inclination.<sup>3</sup>

So we may be certain that her passion was not a quirk of her own nature or personality.

Joseph is credited with having given Potiphar's wife a number of reasons for his refusal. Many of these are derived from the phrase

717X 77 , sometimes translated as "Behold, my master" (Gen. 39:8).

'Behold my master'--He said to her: I am afraid

<sup>1</sup>Sanhedrin 19b; Joseph's greatest test of resistance covered only one incident while that of Boaz lasted an entire night. But Palti's resistance had a much longer duration, for he denied himself the pleasure of marital relations night after night for many years.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 39:8.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma וישב 5.

of the (incident involving) 'Behold the man has become...' (Gen. 3:22). Adam violated just a light commandment, for which he was banished from the Garden of Eden, how much more then for a grave offense.

'Behold my master'--I am afraid of my father. Because Reuben lay with Bilhah, he was deprived of the birthright and it was given to me. Shall I obey and be degraded from my birthright?

'Behold my master'--I am afraid of my master. She urged: Then I will kill him. He replied: It is not enough that I should be counted in the company of adulterers, but I am to be counted among murderers, too! Yet if you desire this thing, 'Behold my master'--there he is before you!<sup>1</sup>

He said to her: You desire intercourse. There is no difference between intercourse with a handsome man and with a repulsive man. The milk from white and black goats is the same. They both have one appearance and one taste.<sup>2</sup>

--I am afraid of the Holy One, praised be He, (said Joseph). But He is not here, she urged. 'Great is the Lord and highly to be praised' (Ps. 145:3) he answered. R. Abin said: She drove him from room to room until she brought him to her bed. Above it was an idol, which she covered with a sheet. (Joseph said:) You have covered its face (for shame); how much more then (should you be ashamed before) Him of whom it says: 'The eyes of the Lord, that run to and fro through the whole earth' (Zech. 4:10).<sup>1</sup>

He told her: It is the practice of the Holy One, praised be He, to choose the beloved of my father's house for a burnt-offering, as He told Abraham. 'Take now your son...' (Gen. 22:2). Shall I then listen to you? Perhaps I have been chosen for a burnt-offering, and I will become unfit (through this sin).

The Holy One, praised be He, is accustomed to appear to the beloved of my father's house at night... Shall I then obey you? Perhaps the Lord will reveal Himself to me and find me unclean.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph answered her (entreaties): I cannot, for when the Holy One, praised be He, created the world, it was not so that there be two men for one woman, but 'male and female He created

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:5; Lekah Tov Genesis 39:8, 9.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 39:8.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:5.

them' (Gen. 1:27). She proposed: Then let me kill him and then I will be permitted to you. He replied: How can I do this great evil, embracing murder and immorality, both of which are strictly forbidden? So he did not yield to her.<sup>1</sup>

And Joseph also had his justifications which he did not explicitly mention to Potiphar's wife.

Scripture teaches us that it was neither fear nor (the condemnation of) people that kept him from her, but only the desire to sanctify the Divine Name.<sup>2</sup>

From Genesis 39:9, "He has withheld nothing from me except yourself," is derived the statement that Joseph the righteous was a kind of guardian with regard to the sexual prohibitions.<sup>3</sup>

מכאן אמרו אין ממניו אפסורפוס על העריוח אפלו כיוסף הצדיק.

Interestingly enough, some of Joseph's excuses hint that he might have been willing to satisfy her desires if only it had not been for . . .

'He did not yield to her request to lie beside her' in this world; ('to be with her')--so that he should not be with her in the Gehenna, in the World to Come.<sup>4</sup>

That is, it was only Joseph's fear of Gehenna that kept him from Potiphar's wife. In another case, it was only direct divine intervention that stopped him.

'He paid no attention to her' (Gen. 39:10). Rabbi said: He did pay attention to her but the Holy One, praised be He, brought his father's face before him; filled with shame, he fled. He went in again to her, whereupon the Almighty took the Foundation Stone and said to him: If you touch her I will cast

<sup>1</sup>Midrash Abakir (MS), cited in Kasher.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 39:9.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 39:9.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:6.



this Stone away and lay the world waste.  
 This is the meaning of 'His arms were made feeble  
 --supple--by the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob,  
 from thence, from the Shepherd, the (Foundation)  
 Stone of Israel' (Gen. 49:24).<sup>1</sup>

Potiphar's wife certainly did not spare any words or actions in her efforts to win over Joseph. Precisely what she did provides another opening for rabbinic interpretation as demonstrated in these words which are supposedly attributed to Joseph.

She came again to me under the plea of instruction, that she might learn the word of God. And she said unto me: If thou wilt that I should leave my idols, lie with me, and I will persuade my husband to depart from his idols, and we will walk in the law of thy Lord. And I said unto her: The Lord willeth not that those who reverence Him should be in uncleanness, nor doth He take pleasure in them that commit adultery, but in those who approach Him with a pure heart and undefiled lips.<sup>2</sup>

There is even an opportunity for the creation of a dialogue between the two.

His mistress, Zuleika, pursued him every day with her amorous talk and flattery saying:  
 How fair is your appearance, how handsome!  
 I've never seen so well-favored a slave as you.  
 Joseph replied: God, who formed me in my mother's womb, has created all men.  
 Zuleika: How beautiful are your eyes, with which you have charmed all Egyptians, both men and women.  
 Joseph: Beautiful as they may be while I am alive, so ghastly will they be to look upon in the grave.  
 Zuleika: How lovely and how pleasant are your words! Please, take your harp, play and sing, that I may hear your words.  
 Joseph: Lovely and pleasant are my words when I proclaim the praise of my God.  
 Zuleika: How beautiful is your hair! Take this

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Abakir in Yalkut Shimoni 1, 145, cited in Kasher.

<sup>2</sup>Twelve Testaments Joseph 4.

golden comb and comb it.

Joseph: How long will you continue to speak to me like this? Enough! It were better for you to care for your household.

Zuleika: There is nothing in my house that I care for except you alone.<sup>1</sup>

She rushed unto me while her husband was yet without, and said unto me: I will hang myself, or cast myself over a cliff, if thou wilt not lie with me. And when I saw that [she was in great agitation], I prayed unto the Lord, and said unto her: Why, wretched woman, art thou troubled and disturbed, blinded through sins? Remember that if thou kill thyself, Asteho, the concubine of thy husband, thy rival, will beat thy children, and thou wilt destroy thy memorial from off the earth. And she said unto me: Lo, then thou lovest me; let this suffice me: only strive for my life and my children, and I expect that I shall enjoy my desire also. But she knew not that because of my lord I spake thus, and not because of her.<sup>2</sup>

If Joseph was able to observe the precepts of the Torah before it had even been given, which was the case as we have already considered, then there should certainly be nothing puzzling about having Joseph quote from the Psalms. After all, אין מוקדם ומאוחר בחוריה.

'He executes justice for the oppressed' (Ps. 146:7). This is Joseph the righteous whose mistress oppressed him, saying: If you do not obey me, I will cut your rations. He replied: 'He feeds the hungry' (Ps. 146:7).<sup>3</sup> She said: I'll have you put in chains in prison. He replied: 'The Lord frees the captive' (Ps. 146:7). She said: I'll have your eyes plucked out. He replied: 'The Lord opens the eyes of the blind' (Ps. 146:8).<sup>4</sup> She said:

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<sup>1</sup>Sefer Hayashar.

<sup>2</sup>Twelve Testaments Joseph 7.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma נצ"י 7.

<sup>4</sup>Tanhuma נצ"י 7; Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 24b Ch. 16; Pesikta de Rav Kahana 460-61; Lekah Tov Genesis 39:21.



I'll bend your stature. He replied: 'The Lord raises up those who are bowed down' (Ps. 146:11).<sup>1</sup> She said: I will accuse you of sin. He replied: 'The Lord loves the righteous' (Ps. 146:8).<sup>2</sup> She said: I will make you an exile,<sup>3</sup> an Aramean<sup>4</sup> i.e., a stranger.<sup>5</sup> He replied: 'The Lord guards the stranger' (Ps. 146:9) [Joseph's response to all three versions of the same threat].

The seemingly minor phrase, "One such day . . ." (Gen. 39:11) opens the account of Joseph's greatest trial, his acid test. But before examining Joseph's reactions to Potiphar's wife's strongest advances, the rabbis are still able to praise Joseph's devotion to his work by means of the sentence, "One such day, he came into the house to do his work."

'Do you see a man diligent in his work? He will stand before kings, he will not stand before obscure men' (Prov. 22:29). These words refer to Joseph as it says: 'One such day, he came into the house to do his work' (Gen. 39:11).<sup>6,7</sup> R. Judah and R. Nehemiah each has his own explanation of this.<sup>6</sup> The 'day,' according to R. Judah, was a fête for the Nile, when everyone would go out to the fetid (reflecting a play on זבול zebul--high abode and זבל zibbul--covering with dung) Nile, except for Joseph who went inside the house to do his work; according to R. Nehemiah, however, the 'day' was a day of entertainment in the theatre and the circus.<sup>7</sup> R. Phineas said in the name of R. Samuel ben Abba:

<sup>1</sup>Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 24b Ch. 16; Pesikta de Rav Kahana 460-61; Lekah Tov Genesis 39:21.

<sup>2</sup>Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 24b Ch. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Tanpuma נש"ל 7.

<sup>4</sup>Pesikta de Rav Kahana 460-61.

<sup>5</sup>Avot D'Rabbi Nathan 24b Ch. 16.

<sup>6</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 1:1, 1.

<sup>7</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 6:2.

Whoever serves his master as he should do eventually obtains his freedom. Whence do we know this? From Joseph; because he served his master properly, he obtained his freedom. Therefore: 'He shall stand before kings'; the king being Pharaoh, as it says: 'Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was rushed from the dungeon' (Gen. 41:14).<sup>1</sup> (Observing Joseph at his work,) the Holy One, praised be He, said: You are zealous in your work. As you live, I say, 'He will stand before kings.' 'Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt' (Gen. 41:46). 'He will not stand before Potiphar who was an obscure man'<sup>2</sup> because the Holy One, praised be He, made him a eunuch.<sup>1</sup>

But now with a view toward the passion of Joseph's mistress . . .

'One such day' R. Judah said: It was a festival day for the Nile. Everyone went to see, but Joseph did not. The Nile regularly overflows and the king and high officials go to celebrate in the river. But to Joseph it was just like an idolatrous feast day. 'He came into the house to do his work.'--He regularly examined the account records of his master...he conquered his inclination up to now and had not gone to the Nile festival.<sup>3</sup>

Once again we find a hint that at first, Joseph's own passion might have been directing his actions.

'One such day he came into the house to do his work' (Gen. 39:11). R. Johanan said: This teaches that both (Joseph and Potiphar's wife) intended to act immorally.<sup>4</sup> '...to do his work.' Our rabbis differ on this.<sup>5</sup> One said it really means to do his work; but the other said that he went to satisfy his desires.<sup>4</sup> Some say to do his need he entered<sup>5</sup> but that 'there was no man' (Gen. 39:11)--on examination

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<sup>1</sup>Song of Songs Rabban 1:1, 1.

<sup>2</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 6:2.

<sup>3</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 39:11.

<sup>4</sup>Sotah 36b.

<sup>5</sup>Tanhuma **בש"י** 9.

he did not find himself a man.<sup>1</sup>

'None of the household being there inside'  
(Gen. 39:11.--Is it possible that there was no man in a great house like that of this wicked one! The school of R. Ishmael taught: That day was their feast day, and they had all gone to their idolatrous temple; but she had pretended to be ill because she thought, I shall not have an opportunity like today for Joseph to associate with me.<sup>2</sup>

'She caught hold of him by his coat...' (Gen. 39:12). He went up with her to the bed and examined himself and did not find (himself a man).<sup>3</sup> At that moment, his father's image appeared to him through a window.<sup>2</sup> It said: Joseph! In the future your brothers will be engraved on the stones of the onyx (ephod)<sup>2</sup> and you with them. Do you want your name to be eradicated from there<sup>4</sup> and be called an associate of harlots?<sup>2</sup> Immediately, 'His bow remained taut' (Gen. 49:24) meaning his strength returned to his bow<sup>4</sup> and his blood cooled.<sup>5</sup> R. Samuel said: The bow was drawn but it relaxed<sup>1</sup> so it says: 'His bow קשתו remained taut,' (Gen. 49:24) which means, his passion קשיוחו.<sup>5</sup> He fell upon the ground and thrust his fingers into the ground.<sup>3</sup> R. Isaac said: His seed was scattered and issued through his finger-nails, hence, 'The seed of his hands were scattered' (Gen. 49:24)<sup>1</sup> His passion flowed out from between his finger-nails.<sup>4</sup> R. Menahem said in R. Ammi's name: He saw his mother's face which cooled his blood.<sup>5</sup> '(He) fled outside' (Gen. 39:12). The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: You fled and went out. By your life, the sea will flee from before your coffin, as it says: 'The sea saw it and fled' (Ps. 114:3).<sup>3</sup>

A close call! But Joseph the righteous was able to escape.

'She caught hold of him by his coat and said,  
"Lie with me." Who ever pleases God will

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:7.

<sup>2</sup>Sotah 36b.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma וי 9.

<sup>4</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 49:24.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis Rabbah 98:20.

escape from her, for example, Joseph. But the sinner will be taken by her, i.e., Potiphar.<sup>1</sup>

But Potiphar's wife was determined to make Joseph suffer for his refusal to acquiesce to her. She told her husband a fabricated tale of how Joseph had assaulted her, citing the coat he had left behind as evidence. Potiphar believed his wife's words, the text would have us believe, and his reaction was immediate.

When Potiphar heard his wife's words, he ordered Joseph to be savagely beaten. As this was being done Joseph cried aloud, and looking toward heaven he exclaimed: Lord God! You know I am innocent of all these charges; why then should I die due to the lies of these wicked uncircumcised...? Potiphar's servants continued to beat him and he cried out even more.<sup>2</sup>

Even the name which Pharaoh later bestowed upon Joseph, צפנת פענח (Gen. 41:45), is traced back to this incident by means of an abbreviation. צדיק פספס נגד העבחו; פוטיפר ענה נפשו חנם.

(The righteous one defied his lust and Potiphar afflicted him without cause.)<sup>3</sup>

Other sources, however, claim that Potiphar's treatment of Joseph was due to circumstance and not his own volition.

'Joseph's master had him put in prison' (Gen. 39:20). He knew that the words (of his wife) were false<sup>4</sup> so he assured him: I know you are innocent but (I must do this) lest a stigma fall upon my children.<sup>5</sup>

Yet even in the royal prison, Joseph received preferential treatment.

<sup>1</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:26, 3.

<sup>2</sup>Sefer Hayashar.

<sup>3</sup>Imre Shafer, cited in Kasher.

<sup>4</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 39:20.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:9.

'The chief jailer did not supervise anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him' (Gen. 39:23). R. Huna said in R. Hana's name: His service was pleasing to his master (the prison keeper): whenever he went out, he would wash the cups, lay the tables and make the beds.<sup>1</sup>

Potiphar's wife, though, still troubled him.

She would taunt him; See how I've made you - suffer! By your life, I will persecute you in other ways too. He replied: '(The Lord) does justice to the persecuted' (Ps. 146:7).... How far did she go? R. Huna said in R. Aha's name: She went so far as to place an iron fork under his neck so that he would have to raise his eyes and look at her. Yet in spite of that he would not look at her. So it says: 'His feet they hurt with fetters, his person was laid in iron' (Ps. 105:18).<sup>1</sup>

Having endured this most difficult of tests, we would expect that Joseph's reward would be great indeed. And our expectations are fulfilled. Even God is described as testifying to Joseph's merit.

The Holy One, praised be He, said: Joseph was with Me and did My will, as it says: 'He did not yield to her request' (Gen. 39:10).<sup>2</sup>

R. Hana be Bezna said in the name of R. Samuel the pious: Because Joseph sanctified the heavenly name in private one letter was added to him from the name of the Holy One, praised be He....<sup>3</sup> When Joseph separated himself from Potiphar's wife...a "ה" was added to his name, as it says: 'He appointed it in יהוה' for a testimony' (Ps. 81:6). But was not his name Joseph? Why then is he called יהוה? The Lord testifies concerning him, that he did not have relations with Potiphar's wife.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph's reward will be having his merit counted toward the final

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:10.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Haseerot vi-Yeterot 1 Sam. 156.

<sup>3</sup>Sotah 36b.

<sup>4</sup>Midrash Haseerot vi-Yeterot Judg. 132.

redemption of Israel.

Joseph was rewarded by the Holy One, praised be He, for what he did. What does Scripture say? 'He left his coat in her hand and got away' (Gen. 39:12). The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: By your life, when the children of Israel go out of Egypt in the future, when the sea sees your coffin, it will flee, as it says: 'The sea saw it and fled' (Ps. 114:3). What did it see? That Joseph kept all the ten commandments. Simon of Kitron said: It saw the bones of Joseph. However, Joseph's coffin went before the Ark. The peoples of the world saw it and asked: What is the quality of this coffin that it accompanies the Ark of the Torah? The Israelites answered: This one kept all that is written within this Ark. As there are ten commandments, Joseph kept them all before they were given at Sinai. The Holy One, praised be He, said to Joseph: Although I rewarded you somewhat in this world, your horn will be exalted in the world to come. When Israel will be permanently redeemed, it will be due to the merit of Jacob and yourself!<sup>1</sup>

'And at that time Your people will be delivered' (Dan. 12:1). Through whose merit? Through the merit of Joseph. For what will the Holy One, praised be He, do? He will look among all the tribes, finding none like Joseph among them; for see, Joseph did not heed his master's wife....And the proof that the children of Israel are called by the name of Joseph: 'It may be that the Lord, the God of Hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph' (Amos 5:15).<sup>2</sup>

Joseph's progeny will be rewarded with special sacrificial privileges.

R. Azariah said: The Holy One, praised be He, said to Joseph: You kept the commandment: You shall not commit adultery, and observed the Torah before it was given. By your life, no tribe will separate the sacrificial offerings of your sons: Ephraim on the seventh day and

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma Buber NWJ 22b-23a.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash on Psalms 20:3.

Manasseh on the eighth.<sup>1</sup>

The righteous Joseph feared the Holy One, praised be He...and showed honor to...(Him) by refraining from touching her on account of his fear of Him. He said to him: By your life! I will repay your grandchild, for I will show him honor by granting him permission to present his offering on My holy day, and he will not suffer any harm from it.<sup>2</sup>

And the Red Sea will be divided for his sake.

The sea saw Joseph's casket come down into the water. The Holy One, praised be He, said: Let the sea flee from him who fled from transgression, he of whom it is said, 'He...fled outside' (Gen. 39:12). And so the sea fled from before Joseph, as it says, 'The sea saw it and fled' (Ps. 114:3).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma נשנ 28; Tanhuma Buber נשנ 22a.

<sup>2</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:3.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash on Psalms 114:9; similarly in Mekhilta D'Rabbi Sim'on b. Jochai כשלח 14, 15; Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Beshallah IV, 63; Genesis Rabbah 87:8.



### JOSEPH IN PRISON

The unjust imprisonment of this righteous person provided the rabbis with yet another opportunity to demonstrate the closeness of God's relationship to his people Israel.

Does God share in the affliction of the individual as well as that of the community? Scripture says 'Joseph's master had him put in prison' (Gen. 39:20). And what does it say then? 'But the Lord was with Joseph' (Gen. 39:21).<sup>1</sup>

Still, the midrashic authors were careful not to allow use of anthropomorphism to get out of hand.

You find that every time Israel is oppressed, the Shechinah, as it were, is oppressed with them, as it says, 'So Joseph's master had him put in prison...the Lord was with Joseph.'<sup>2</sup>

While in prison, Joseph met the chief cupbearer and the chief baker--servants of the Pharaoh himself. From his conversations with these two courtiers, the rabbis drew a proof text for one of the most cogent midrashim in the entire literature. For those looking for rabbinical commentary on the affirmation or denial of one's identity, it has much to say.

Moses said to God: Master of the universe, the bones of Joseph are entering the Land and am I not to enter the Land? The Holy One, praised be He, replied: He who acknowledged his native land is to be buried in that land but he who did not acknowledge his native land does not merit being buried in his land. How do we know that Joseph acknowledged his native land? His mistress said of him, 'Look, he had to bring us

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<sup>1</sup>Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Pisha XIV, 92.

<sup>2</sup>Sifré בהעלותך 10:35.



a Hebrew' (Gen. 39:14) and he did not deny it. In addition he said, 'I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews' (Gen. 40:15); he is to be buried in his native land. How do we know? 'The bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, were buried in Shechem' (Josh. 24:32). But you who did not acknowledge your native land will not be buried in that land. When was this? When Jethro's daughters said 'An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds' (Ex. 2:19) and Moses heard and kept silent; therefore he is not to be buried in his land.<sup>1</sup>

How long did Joseph have to stay in prison? At first it was decreed that Joseph should spend ten years in prison. And what was the reason for this sentence? For having slandered his brothers.<sup>2</sup> Yet eventually Joseph spent twelve years in confinement. The rabbis understood that the two additional years were due to a lack of proper faith on Joseph's part.

Joseph should have been in prison ten years. Why were two years added? The Holy One, praised be He, said: You cast off My security and sought that of the chief butler and mentioned to him two remembrances: 'But think of me...and do me the kindness of mentioning me' (Gen. 40:14). (Therefore) you will be forgotten two years in prison, so it says: 'After two years' time' (Gen. 41:1). Two years after the chief butler left the prison.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:8.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 40:14.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma דף 9; similarly in Exodus Rabbah 7:1; Genesis Rabbah 89:2; 89:3; Midrash Hagadol Genesis 40:14; Midrash on Psalms 105:6.

### JOSEPH'S DELIVERANCE FROM PRISON

The entire procedure of Joseph's rise from the depths of prison to the heights of governmental power was, of course, in the "hands" of God. This applies even to the earliest steps in the long process.

'Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers' (Gen. 40:2). R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Hanan quoted in R. Jonathan's name: 'Come and see the works of God' (Ps. 66:5). He incensed ... masters against their servants in order to confer greatness upon the righteous. Thus, 'Pharaoh was angry...' so that He might confer greatness upon Joseph.<sup>1</sup>

In another citation, the Holy One, praised be He, is said to have once caused a master to be angry at his servants in order to fulfill the desire of a righteous one.<sup>2</sup> We may assume here that this "desire" was Joseph's wish to be released.

Then two years later, another step in the sequence took place as the chief butler attempted to tell his master, Pharaoh, about the gifted prisoner the servant had once met. Although the Scripture text paints Joseph in a positive--or at least a neutral--light, the rabbis took the chief butler's words to be highly critical.

'The chief butler then spoke...There was with us a youth, a Hebrew, a slave to the captain of the guard' (Gen. 41:9, 12). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Accursed are the wicked, for they never do a kindness thoroughly. So he said: 'a youth'--i.e., a fool; 'a Hebrew'--meaning that he is different (from us); 'a slave'--for so it is written in Pharaoh's (Egypt's) laws, that a slave may neither wield authority nor

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 88:3; similarly in Esther Rabbah 6:13.

<sup>2</sup>Megillah 13b.

wear the badge of the hands.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that the rabbis wanted to show that no Egyptian could perform a thoroughly good deed, at least in a paradigmatic sense.

Even though he was eager to be sprung from his abode of a dozen years, when Joseph was summoned to appear before Pharaoh he still realized that it would never be proper to show himself to the king while still looking like a shabby prisoner. Accordingly "he had his hair cut and changed his clothes" (Gen. 41:14)--in order to render honor to kingship so he would not come before him befouled.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that Joseph's lot changed for the better following his act of shaving was a cause and effect relation that the rabbis were able to turn into a whimsical lesson.

If one dreams of shaving, he should rise early and say 'Joseph...had his hair cut and changed his clothes' (Gen. 41:14) before he thinks of 'If I be shaven, then my strength will go from me' (Jud. 16:17).<sup>3</sup>

When Pharaoh ascribed to Joseph the ability to interpret dreams, immediately Joseph replied "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare" (Gen. 41:16). He ascribed the greatness to its owner,<sup>4</sup> the Great One,<sup>5</sup> to Him to whom it belongs.<sup>6</sup> And in doing so, he also showed respect to royalty.<sup>7</sup> For his humility, Joseph received praise from both God

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 89:7.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 41:14; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 89:9.

<sup>3</sup>Berachot 56b.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 88:4.

<sup>5</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 41:16.

<sup>6</sup>Genesis Rabbah 89:9.

<sup>7</sup>Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Pisha XIII, 75; Tanhuma NI 7.

and from Pharaoh (although Pharaoh's comments were also in reaction to Joseph's interpretations).

'Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, "Not I! God will see to Pharaoh's welfare"' (Gen. 41:16). He ascribed the greatness to its master. The Holy One, praised be He, said: You did not desire to be made great yourself. By your life, due to this you will rise to greatness and kingship.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph minimized his own greatness, saying: 'It is not I,' and magnified God's, saying: 'God will see to Pharaoh's welfare.' He thus simultaneously paid honor to (Pharaoh's) majesty, in order that that wicked man might praise the Almighty and so magnify His glory. Pharaoh did, indeed, declare: 'Since God has made all this known to you...' (Gen. 41:39): thus he (Joseph) ascribed greatness to whom it rightly belonged (God). Therefore he acquired great repute for wisdom, as he (Pharaoh) said to him: 'There is no one as discerning and wise as you' (Gen. 41:39). His status was elevated by the greatness which he conferred upon him, as it says: 'I am Pharaoh, and without you...' (Gen. 41:44). Because he humbled himself with the word בלעדי (it is not in me), he received sovereignty with the same word-- ובלעדיך (without you).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma פקד 2.

<sup>2</sup>Tsrur Hamor.

### JOSEPH AS INTERPRETER OF DREAMS

Certainly the land of Egypt was not bereft of its own magicians and wise men! Why, then, were they unable to explain the Pharaoh's puzzling dreams? The rabbis rephrased this question, suggesting that it had been a deliberate act of God. He had deprived the Egyptian sages of their wisdom with an explicit purpose in mind.

So that Joseph might come at the end and be raised to high rank. Now the Holy One, praised be He, said: If Joseph comes at first and interprets the dream, he will gain no praise, for the magicians will be able to say to Pharaoh: Had you asked us, we would long ago have interpreted it for you. Therefore He waited until they were wearied and had exhausted Pharaoh's spirit, and then Joseph came and restored it. Concerning him Solomon said: 'A fool spends all his spirit' (Prov. 29:11)--which refers to Pharaoh's magicians; 'But a wise man quiets it within him' (Prov. 29:11) alludes to Joseph, as it says: 'There is none so discerning and wise as you' (Gen. 41:39).<sup>1</sup>

And just how was Joseph able to understand and explain Pharaoh's dreams? One source suggests that he had been tipped off beforehand and cites a proof text from Amos: "For God will not do anything without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).<sup>2</sup> Another replies that Joseph was able to do this since he had dreamed the same dreams simultaneously with Pharaoh.<sup>3</sup>

But the Egyptian monarch was uncertain about the skill of this youthful foreigner--at first.

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 89:6.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Shemuel Ch. 14.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash Hagadol I, 611.

When Pharaoh told his dream, he omitted some points and altered others in order to test Joseph's ability. But Joseph corrected him and retold the dreams accurately. Pharaoh was greatly amazed <sup>1</sup>

and, we may assume, convinced.

Pharaoh's praise of Joseph, who had finally been the one to calm his troubled mind, was lavish.

Pharaoh said: If we went from one end of the earth to the other, we would not find such a one as this,<sup>2</sup> as it says, 'For as much as God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you' (Gen. 41:39).<sup>3</sup>

Elaborating upon the Egyptian's words, the midrashic authors used Scripture verses to describe and praise Joseph's sagacity: "He gives wisdom to the wise" (Dan. 2:21)<sup>4</sup> and "They (the commandments) make me wiser than my enemies" (Ps. 119:98)<sup>5</sup> are examples.

Another method of citing separate verses of Scripture is to break up the citation and give each part a special meaning. This is also done with regard to Joseph.

BETTER IS A POOR CHILD--i.e., Joseph. AND WISE--because through his wisdom he saved the whole world in time of famine. THAN AN OLD AND FOOLISH KING--Potiphar--He is called foolish because he witnessed so many miracles done on Joseph's account, yet was not admonished (as he had believed his wife's accusations). FOR OUT OF PRISON HE CAME FORTH TO BE A KING--from Pharaoh's fortress he came out a king, as it is written: 'I am Pharaoh; yet without you, no man will lift up hand or foot in all the land of

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma YPD 2.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 41:38.

<sup>3</sup>Song of Songs Rabbah 6:9, 1.

<sup>4</sup>Seder Olam Rabbah Ch. 30; Seder Eliyahu Rabbah p. 85 (Ch. 17).

<sup>5</sup>Midrash on Psalms 119:42.

Egypt' (Gen. 41:44).<sup>1</sup>

NOW THERE WAS A SMALL CITY--i.e., Egypt.  
FEW MEN IN IT--Egyptians. A GREAT KING CAME  
AGAINST IT AND BESIEGED IT--the wicked Pharaoh.  
AND BUILT GREAT BULWARKS AGAINST IT--craft and  
trickery. NOW THERE WAS FOUND IN IT A MAN POOR  
AND WISE--the righteous Joseph. HE BY HIS WIS-  
DOM DELIVERED THE CITY--for he said to Pharaoh,  
'Let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers...'  
(Gen. 41:34). YET NO MAN REMEMBERED THAT SAME  
POOR MAN--the Holy One, praised be He, said to  
them: You have not remembered him but I will  
remember him as it is stated, 'Joseph was the  
vizier of the land' (Gen. 42:6).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:14, 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:14, 2.



### JOSEPH'S ELEVATION

All the numerous honors which Pharaoh bestowed upon Joseph were seen by the midrashic authors as having been well deserved. In other words, Joseph's rewards paralleled his deeds.

Joseph was given what was his. Since his mouth had not conferred a kiss ( קש ) in transgression, 'By your command shall all my people be directed ( קש ).' (Gen. 41:40). Since his neck had not been bowed to transgression, Pharaoh 'put a gold chain around his neck' (Gen. 41:42). As his hands had not manipulated anything in transgression, Pharaoh 'removing his signet ring from his hand, ...put it on Joseph's hand' (Gen. 41:42). As his body had not touched what was forbidden, 'He had him dressed in robes of fine linen' (Gen. 41:42).<sup>1</sup> As his feet did not walk in transgression, 'He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command' (Gen. 41:43). Let the thought which he had not entertained come and cry: Wisdom! 'They cried before him: Abrech' (Gen. 41:43).<sup>2</sup>

And while we are dealing with parallels, the elements of Joseph's elevation find a similarity in the case of another hero of Scripture: Mordecai.

The sons of Rachel underwent equal trials of severity and attained to equal greatness. They underwent equal trials: 'And much as she coaxed Joseph day after day' (Gen. 39:10)--'It happened that when they spoke to him every day' (Est. 3:4); 'He did not yield to her request' (Gen. 39:10)--'He did not pay attention to them' (Est. 3:4). They attained to equal greatness: 'And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand' (Gen. 41:42)--while it says, 'The king took off his ring, which he had taken from

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<sup>1</sup>Similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 41:40.

<sup>2</sup>Leviticus Rabbah 23:9; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 90:3; Tanhuma בראשית 12.



Haman, and gave it to Mordecai' (Est. 8:2);  
 'He had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and  
 put a gold chain about his neck' (Gen. 41:42)--  
 'And Mordecai left the king's presence in royal  
 apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown  
 of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple'  
 (Est. 8:15); 'He had him ride in the chariot of  
 his second-in-command' (Gen. 41:43)--'And cause  
 him (Mordecai) to ride on horseback through the  
 street of the city' (Est. 6:9); 'They cried be-  
 fore him, Abrech!' (Gen. 41:43)--'...and proclaimed  
 before him (Mordecai): This will be done to the man...'  
 (Est. 6:11).<sup>1</sup>

As Joseph was paraded through the streets, he was heralded with  
 the word אבך . Its meaning is a source of speculation on the part  
 of the rabbis. Some say that it applies to Joseph who was a father in  
 wisdom, אב בחכמה , and young in years, רך בשנים , for he was  
 only thirty years old at that time.<sup>2</sup> R. Jose b. Dormaskith said: Why  
 do you distort Scriptures? I call heaven and earth to witness that  
 אבך is connected with ברך (knee) and it means that everyone re-  
 quired his sanction, as it says: "He placed him over all the land of  
 Egypt."<sup>3</sup> Some suggest that it is connected to the word אפרכוס --  
 Governor--since everyone who saw him bowed down to him.<sup>4</sup> Others see a  
 derivation from רכא --royalty.<sup>5</sup> This would hint that אבך means  
 "Father of the King," perhaps in the sense of a special advisor.

On top of all the other honors Joseph received from Pharaoh, he  
 also was given a new name. And as we might expect, the rabbis find in

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 87:6; similarly in Esther Rabbah 7:7.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 41:43.

<sup>3</sup>Sifre דברים 1:1.

<sup>4</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 41:43.

<sup>5</sup>Baba Batra 4a.

that name hidden meanings and qualities.

'Pharaoh then gave Joseph the name **צפנת פענח** (Gen. 41:45). R. Johanan said: The name connotes: He reveals things that are hidden and easily declares them-- **צפונת מופיע ונחות לו לאמר**.<sup>1</sup>

R. Judah b. R. Simon interpreted the name: With his knowledge he reveals things that are hidden and sets the minds of people at ease-- **צפונות מופיע בדעת**.  
**מניח רוחן של בריות בהן**.

The rabbis said (the name is an abbreviation and stands for): **צופה**--seer; **פודה**--redeemer; **פוחר**--prophet; **חומך**--supporter; **נבא**--interpreter; **ערום**--skilled; **נבוא**--understanding; **חזזה**--seer.<sup>2</sup>

Though he was doubtless pleased with his new exceptional advisor, Pharaoh was careful to caution Joseph against the abuse of his newly appointed position of power.

'Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh; yet without you..." (Gen. 41:44). What is implied by 'I am Pharaoh'? This is what Pharaoh told Joseph: Although I said to you 'You shall be in charge of my court' (Gen. 41:40), thus appointing you as king over all, take care that you show me respect and consider me as king over you. That is why he said: 'I am Pharaoh,' as much as to say: the dread of my sovereign state must be upon you.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 90:4.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 41:45.

<sup>3</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:6.

### JOSEPH'S LINGUISTIC MASTERY

We may be tempted to believe that Joseph was warmly received when he was appointed ruler in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> But Pharaoh's new appointment did not go completely unchallenged. Joseph was obliged to prove himself even further than his ability to interpret dreams. He had to show that he was master of languages.

At the time Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Yet without you, no one shall lift up hand or foot' (Gen. 41:44), Pharaoh's astrologers said: Will you set over us a slave whom his master bought for twenty pieces of silver!? He replied, I see royal qualities in him. If so, they answered, he must know the seventy languages (for such was the law of kingship, that the king of Egypt must know the seventy languages<sup>2</sup>). Gabriel came and taught Joseph the seventy languages but he could not learn them. Then (Gabriel) added to Joseph's name a letter from the Name of the Holy One, praised be He, and he learned them, as it is said, 'He appointed it in Joseph שְׁמִי' for a testimony, when he went out over the land of Egypt, where I (Joseph) heard a language I did not know' (Ps. 81:6). The next day, in whatever language Pharaoh conversed in, he replied; but when Joseph spoke the Holy Tongue to him, he did not understand what he said. So he asked Joseph to teach it to him; he did but he could not learn it. (Pharaoh) said to him: Swear to me that you will not reveal this. And he did. When (Joseph) later said to him, 'My father made me swear, saying, "I am about to die. Be sure to bury me in the grave which I made ready for myself in the land of Canaan"' (Gen. 50:5), (Pharaoh said,) Go ask (release from) your oath. Joseph replied, I'll also ask (release) concerning you. So even though it was displeasing to him, (Pharaoh) said to him, 'Go up and bury your father as he made you promise on oath' (Gen. 50:6).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus Rabbah 18:6.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 41:40.

<sup>3</sup>Sotah 36b; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 41:40 and 50:5; Numbers Rabbah 14:5.

In many references, the above story is introduced by a play on words. The rabbis call Joseph כלכל, which was the name of one of the great sages to whose wisdom the sagacity of King Solomon was favorably compared (1 Kings 5:11). Why did they select כלכל? Since "Joseph sustained (ויכלכל) his father and his brothers . . . ." (Gen. 47:12).<sup>1</sup>

Later in his official government capacity, Joseph was able to put his linguistic skill to good use.

All the nations came to Joseph to purchase food... And Joseph spoke to each people according to their different tongue. And he knew what they were speaking. Therefore his name was called יִהְיוֹנִי.... Moreover, when he went to the market place, he saw the people forming themselves into various companies and groups, and each would speak in his own tongue, and he knew what they were saying...<sup>2</sup> therefore was his name called Turgeman....<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Mishlei Buber 20b; Pesikta Rabbati 14:9; Pesikta de Rav Kahana 34b (61-62); Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:23, 1; Tanhuma Buber חקק 56a; Numbers Rabbah 19:3.

<sup>2</sup>Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer 39.

<sup>3</sup>Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer 39.

### JOSEPH'S REACTION TO HIS CHANGE OF FORTUNE

Joseph was well aware that his rise to power was a part of God's plan.

'The king made him governor of his house' (Ps. 105:20). R. Levi taught in the name of R. Berechiah who taught in the name of R. Johanan ben Saul, that Joseph had said to them: Do you think that the Holy One, praised be He, is not with me? When my grandfather blessed my father Jacob, saying 'Let peoples serve you and nations bow down to you' (Gen. 27:29), it was thereby established that 'Joseph (would be) the vizier of the land' (Gen. 42:6). Hence, '(God) the King made him governor over his (Pharaoh's) house' (Ps. 105:20).<sup>1</sup>

In light of this awareness, his gratitude and praise were abundant.

Joseph said: Master of the universe, I will be glad and rejoice in Your lovingkindness which You have done for me; if You had exacted punishment on my behalf from the wife of Potiphar and not given me sovereign power I would still have had cause for gladness and joy; but now that I possess sovereign power, 'I will be glad and rejoice in Your lovingkindness....For You have seen my affliction' (Ps. 31:8). 'And You have not given me over to the power of the enemy'--this refers to Potiphar. 'You have set my feet in a broad place'--this refers to the fact that God made him ruler over all Egypt. How do we know this? 'Joseph was the vizier of the land' (Gen. 42:6).<sup>2</sup>

Joseph also knew that the approaching years of famine would mean specific kinds of restraint would be necessary.

When the world is in a time of trouble and destruction, a man is forbidden intercourse for procreation such that the Holy One, praised be He, is occupied in destruction and he (the man) is building. Thus did Joseph: he was intimate with his

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash on Psalms 105:7.

<sup>2</sup>Deuteronomy Rabbah 4:7.

wife only before the years of trouble, as it says:  
'Before the years of famine came, Joseph became  
the father of two sons' (Gen. 41:50).<sup>1</sup>

And even in the naming of his two sons, Joseph was ever the צדיק.

It is the custom of the righteous to name their children from some event which has occurred. What about Joseph's case? 'Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget completely ( שָׁוִי ) my hardship and my parental home." And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile ( פֶּרִי ) in the land of my affliction" (Gen. 41:51). So that he should always be mindful of the miracles God had done to him.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma 71 11; similarly in Ta'anit 11a; Tanhuma Buber 71 21b.

<sup>2</sup>Exodus Rabbah 1:33.

## JOSEPH AS הַמְשָׁכִיר

Joseph, who as הַמְשָׁכִיר was the dispenser of rations in Egypt, received a blessing as is proved by the citation in Proverbs: "He that withholds food, the people will curse; but blessing will be upon the one who sells it ( וְכִרְכָּה לְרֹאשׁ מִשְׁכִּיר )" (Prov. 11:26).<sup>1</sup>

Although Joseph's position as dispenser was a major one, he did not appoint another person to share the duty's burdens with him. Instead, he did all the work himself. Yet there was a reason in Joseph's mind for this: he knew that in the future his brothers would come to Egypt, and by being the sole person in charge of food distribution, he would know his siblings when they came.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, so extensive was Joseph's power as הַמְשָׁכִיר that he was described as being, in effect, a ruler over the entire world.

Ten kings ruled from one end of the world to the other....The third (of these ten) was Joseph... as it says? 'All the world came to Joseph' (Gen. 41:57). It is not written here, 'Egypt came,' but 'All the world came to Joseph in Egypt,' for they brought their tribute and their gifts to Joseph to buy (food); for forty years he was second to the king....<sup>3</sup>

He was even able to exert control over certain natural forces.

Joseph commanded and they (the Egyptians) built treasure-houses in each city, and he gathered all the produce of the lands into the treasure-houses. The Egyptians were scoffing at him

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<sup>1</sup>Sanhedrin 92a.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 42:6.

<sup>3</sup>Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer 11; similarly in Midrash Sheloshah Ve'Arba'ah 60.



saying: Now the worms will eat the stores of Joseph. But no worm had any power over them; neither did the (stores) diminish until the day of his death.<sup>1</sup>

But Joseph was also aware that in his position, he could impose his will upon the entire population. And in some instances, he did not hesitate to do so. After all, who could refuse to obey him and still hope to survive the famine?

'He that withholds food, the people will curse; but blessing will be upon the one who sells it' (Prov. 11:26). To whom did Solomon allude? To Pharaoh and Joseph. 'He that withholds food' alludes to Pharaoh, who stored food in the years of famine and refused to sell, so that everyone cursed him. 'But blessing will be upon the one who sells it' alludes to the righteous Joseph, who fed the world like a shepherd. Concerning him, David said: 'Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, lead Your flock like Joseph' (Ps. 80:2). What means 'Lead Your flock like Joseph?' When famine came in the days of David he beseeched the Holy One, praised be He, for compassion in this manner: Sovereign of the Universe! Lead Your flock like Joseph who led (provided for) the world and sustained it in years of famine. For when the famine in Egypt became severe, the Egyptians went to him, crying: Give us bread! He exclaimed: Woe to me that I must feed the uncircumcised.

(Other versions of the same story have Joseph answering with different words to the hungry Egyptians' pleas. In one, he responds: God does not feed the uncircumcised.<sup>2</sup> In another, he urges them to convert: Renounce your error and say: Praised be He who gives food to all flesh. But the Egyptians answered: We will not renounce our errors. . . .<sup>3</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup>Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer 39.

<sup>2</sup>Tanhuma YPD 7.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 41:55.

Go and circumcise yourselves! So they went to Pharaoh and cried before him. He told them: Go to Joseph. They answered: We have gone to him and he bids us circumcise ourselves. Did we not tell you at first that he is a Hebrew and it is not fitting for a Hebrew to wield authority over us? Pharaoh retorted: Fools! Did not a herald continually proclaim before him during the seven years of plenty: A famine is coming; a famine is coming! Why then did you not keep in reserve the produce of a year or two? Bursting into tears, they replied: Even the food which we have left at home is rotted. Pharaoh asked: Has no flour been left over from yesterday and the day before? They told him: Even the bread in our baskets has gone mouldy. He answered: You fools! If the food rots at his decree, what if he decrees against us and we die! Instead, go to him, and even if he tells you to cut off something of your flesh, obey him and do all that he tells you.<sup>1</sup>

Still, some effort is made to avoid portraying Joseph as a cruel blackmailer, using his food supplies as a means of carrying out forced conversions. These other sources say that the Egyptians' conversion was voluntary.

R. Abba b. Kahana said: Joseph inspired them with a longing to be circumcised. R. Samuel said: It does not say *החיתנו*, rather *החיתנו* -- 'You have saved our lives' (Gen. 47:25)--which means, you have given us life in this world and in the world to come.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph also established a system of taxation throughout the land, taking one-fifth of the yield for Pharaoh, as it says: "When harvest comes, you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be yours" (Gen. 47:24).<sup>3</sup>

The rabbis state that Joseph gathered and brought into Egypt all the gold and silver in the world. How do we know this? "Joseph gathered

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 91:5.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 90:6 and 95 Vatican Manuscript Codex 30.

<sup>3</sup>Pesikta de Rav Kahana (462).

in all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan" (Gen. 47:14). But this only speaks of these two lands, what then about the other countries? "So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations" (Gen. 41:57).<sup>1</sup>

Joseph's own personal wealth increased during this time but the midrashic authors are quick to point out that any such gains were made honestly and not by means of violence or injustice.<sup>2</sup> The wealth Joseph acquired by the sales of food was lawful gain, for the prices were raised not by him, the rabbis claim, but by the Egyptians themselves.<sup>3</sup> He then stands as an example of the text which declares that "A faithful man will abound with blessing" (Prov. 28:20).<sup>4</sup>

However, though being a just and fair ruler, Joseph was also shrewd enough to know when a false plea was before him.

'And when the money gave out in the land...Joseph said, "Bring your livestock..."' (Gen. 47:15f.).  
R. Isaac said: Are not your horses before me,  
(said Joseph,) that (you maintain that) the  
onion is peeled!<sup>5</sup>

In summation then

Joseph ruled over all the land of Egypt, and all the princes of Pharaoh, all his servants, and all who did the king's business loved him, for he walked in uprightness; for he was without pride and arrogance, and he had no respect of (great) persons, nor did he accept gifts, but judged uprightly all the people of the land.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pesachim 119a.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 47:14.

<sup>3</sup>Midrash Hagadol I, 694.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 95 Vatican Manuscript Codex 30.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis Rabbah 95 Vatican Manuscript Codex 30.

<sup>6</sup>Jubilees 40:8.

### THE BROTHERS' FIRST JOURNEY INTO EGYPT

Before considering the specifics which the midrashic authors derived from this episode, here is a general account.

'So ten of Joseph's brothers went down...'  
(Gen. 42:3). R. Judah b. R. Simon said: Joseph... knew that his brothers were coming down to Egypt. What did he do? He set guards at ten gates and ordered them to record the names of all who entered. In the evening they brought him their lists. One read, Reuben the son of Jacob; another Simeon the son of Jacob; a third, Levi the son of Jacob and so on. Joseph ordered: Close all the store houses but leave one open. He gave their names to the official in charge of that storehouse, instructing him: When these men listed here come, bring them to me. Several days passed but they did not come. He sent for them and found them in the street of harlots. What were they doing there? They thought, maybe since Joseph was of handsome appearance he was set in a harlot's tent. They were arrested and brought to Joseph. 'When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them....' (Gen. 42:7). That is, he made himself a stranger to them. He took his cup, struck it, and exclaimed: 'You are spies!' (Gen. 42:9). They replied: 'We are honest men' (Gen. 42:11). If so, why did you not enter all at one gate? They replied: Our father told us to do this (because of the [evil] eye<sup>1</sup>). What was your business in the street of harlots?--We have lost something and were searching for it.--I see in my cup that two of you destroyed a great city and that you sold your brother to the Arabs, he told them. They were immediately seized with trembling and exclaimed: We are twelve!--Then where are the other two?--One is dead and the other is with our father.--Then go and bring him to me, he ordered them. He took Simeon and bound him before their eyes, because it was he who had pushed him into the pit. He separated him from Levi, lest they should devise a plot against him. Simeon said to his brothers: So you did to Joseph and so you want to

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<sup>1</sup> Tanhuma Buber YPD 101b-102a.

do to me. They replied: What can we do? Are the members of our household to die of famine? He told them: Do as you want; now I will see who will put me in prison. Joseph then sent Pharaoh a request: Send me seventy of your mighty men, for I have found robbers and desire to put them in chains. When he sent them, Joseph's brothers looked to see what he would do. Joseph ordered them: Throw this man into prison! But as they approached him, Simeon cried out aloud at them; on hearing his voice they fell on their faces and their teeth were broken, as it says: 'When the lion roars and the fierce lion howls, the young lions' teeth are broken' (Job 4:10). Now Manasseh had been sitting before his father. His father said to him: Rise. Manasseh immediately arose, gave him one blow, threw him into prison and bound him.... Joseph then said to them: He will stay in prison until you bring your brother and your statement is verified. Then, 'Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain' (Gen. 42:25). Then they went to their father and told him all that had happened to them. He demanded: Where is Simeon? They replied: He was taken in pledge for us.--He chided them: You have added to my sorrows. 'Their father Jacob said to them: "It is always me that you bereave...!" Then Reuben said to his father: "You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you"' (Gen. 42:36f.). He exclaimed: Are not your sons my sons? Judah counselled them: Wait for this... until there is no more food in the house. When there was no more food, Judah urged him: If Benjamin goes, he may or may not be seized; but if he does not go with us, we must all die. It is not good to avoid a doubtful evil and plunge into a certain one. Jacob demanded: Then who will go surety for him?--I [Judah] am surety: 'I myself will be surety for him....' (Gen. 43:9). He sent him immediately and when Joseph saw him he rejoiced, because he was like his mother.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph was well aware of the famine's severity and extent. Surely it would not be long before his brethren in Canaan would be obliged to purchase food in Egypt. Therefore he devised a plan by which he would know when this was happening. Joseph promulgated three new laws dealing with entry into Egypt: 1) That no slave could enter it (Another source

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 91:6; similarly in Tanhuma *ṭṭ* 8.

substitutes here: That two brothers could not enter two gates<sup>1</sup>);

2) That a man should not enter with more than one ass; and 3) That no man should enter without furnishing the names of his father and grandfather. It was Manasseh's special duty to collect these lists of names.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Joseph was able to know when his brothers had crossed the border. As we read above, he then resorted to other special measures which finally resulted in the ten brothers being brought before him.

We may ask, why were Joseph's brothers not able to recognize their long lost sibling immediately? The rabbis anticipate our question by telling us that when Joseph was originally sold, he did not have a beard. But now, many years later, he had a full beard and even his own brothers did not know who he was!<sup>3</sup>

For his part, however, Joseph had no such problem. He recognized his brothers as soon as he had set eyes upon them. But how was he to react to them? How did his memories conflict with his emotions? One source suggests that his first reaction was to be merciful toward his brothers.<sup>4</sup> But another text claims that this emotion did not endure due to outside influence.

When he saw them he felt mercy toward them, as it says: 'Joseph recognized them...He turned away from them and wept' (Gen. 42:8, 24). Immediately the angel (the same angel that had been dispatched earlier by the Holy One, praised be He, to protect the wandering Joseph, as it says: 'A certain man found him' [Gen. 37:15]) descended and appeared to

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<sup>1</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 42:7.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 91:4.

<sup>3</sup>Yebamot 88a; similarly in Baba Metzia 39b; Ketuboth 27b.

<sup>4</sup>Tanhuma TPZ 6.



Joseph in the form of a man and said to him:  
 Would you have mercy on such as these? Do you  
 not recall all the trouble they caused you;  
 throwing you into the pit and selling you...?  
 Thus he denounced them before Joseph so that  
 instantly 'he acted like a stranger toward them'  
 (Gen. 42:7).<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, he made himself a stranger to them.<sup>2</sup>

But even after such prompting, Joseph's recollection of his brothers' acts was still influenced by his feelings of mercy. His memory was only selective.

He remembered that he was destined to rule over them, but not that they had desired to kill him; he remembered that they had not spoken peaceably to him, but not that they had sold him for a slave. So he, too, did not speak peaceably to them but accused them of being spies.<sup>3</sup>

That is to say, it was with words that he acted like a stranger; but heaven forbid that he should do any evil toward them!<sup>4</sup>

So Joseph questioned his ten brothers, demanding explanations for their behavior in entering the many gates separately and in their search in the street of the harlots.<sup>5</sup> And it was during this questioning that Joseph learned of his brothers' strong resolve to find and redeem their lost sibling.

'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' (Gen. 42:13). Joseph demanded: Then where

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<sup>1</sup>Agadat Bereshit Ch. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 91:7.

<sup>3</sup>Bereshit Rabbathi 203.

<sup>4</sup>Lekah Tov Gen. 42:7.

<sup>5</sup>Lekah Tov Gen. 42:7.



is he? They replied: We sold him.--For how much?--For five selas, they replied. Now if one said to you: Give me five selas and I will restore him to you, would you do so, he asked. They answered: Yes. And if he demanded twice as much, would you do so?--Yes.--But if he said to you: No matter how much you give, I will not restore him to you, what would you do?--We have indeed come down with that purpose--to be killed or to kill.<sup>1</sup>

Or in a comparable citation:

He asked: If you found him in someone's possession, what would you give for him?--We would give everything that we have.--And if he did not want to give him to you, what would you do?--That is why we came: to kill or be killed!--It is as I said then, you are spies.<sup>2</sup>

One cannot help but admire the brothers' action: not only did they freely confess the heinous act that they had committed so many years before, in effect, admitting that it had been evil; but they also showed the lengths to which they would go to correct that act. They would do so even at the cost of their lives.

He asked: Why were you wandering all over the area? They replied: We had a brother and we sold him as a servant. Ever since we sold him our father has been mourning him. We have come down with money so that wherever we find him we can redeem him. Joseph asked: A man who sells an object can regain it? (They replied:) That is why we are here and we have the means to redeem him.... Joseph asked: What if his owner does not want to sell him? They said: Even if we must perish for him, we will not move until we have redeemed him....<sup>3</sup>

How seriously did Joseph consider his own accusations against his brothers? The midrashic authors say that in his choice of words, we may find the answer. For whenever Joseph desired to swear falsely, they

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 91:7.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 42:13.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma Buber תנחומא 101b-102a.

claim, he would say, "By Pharaoh."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since Joseph used the phrase twice: once in reference to never letting his brothers leave Egypt unless they brought back Benjamin with them (Gen. 42:15), and once when referring to his brothers as spies (Gen. 42:16), we may assume that Joseph's harsh words were spoken solely for effect and that he himself took neither his threat nor his charge seriously.

Joseph's attribute of being a God-fearing person is clearly demonstrated during his brothers' first journey. We can prove this using Joseph's own words, "For I fear God" (Gen. 42:18).<sup>2</sup> The rabbis point out that for Joseph to make such a statement while in a position of great power was highly admirable. After all, any person can have respect and fear God while in a menial state--a state such as Joseph's while he was a servant of Potiphar and he was certainly God-fearing then: "How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?" (Gen. 39:9). But it requires a person of true piety to declare himself God-fearing when he has been elevated to a position second only to Pharaoh himself.<sup>3</sup>

Some claim that it was precisely for this trait that Joseph was placed in his high office.

'My son, fear the Lord and the king...' (Prov. 14:21). What is the force of 'and the king'? Joseph who feared Me, of whom it is written, 'For I fear God'--did I not proclaim him as king in the world--Joseph was governor over the land' (Gen. 42:6).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 42:15; Genesis Rabbah 91:7.

<sup>2</sup>Pesikta de Rav Kahana 28b (51).

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma NWJ 28; Tanhuma Buber NWJ 22a-22b.

<sup>4</sup>Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:33.

Joseph's reward for his piety will include not only himself but also his children.

'What man is he that fears the Lord' (Ps. 25:12). This man is Joseph who said 'For I fear God' (Gen. 42:18). 'Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose' (Ps. 25:12)--again this man is Joseph.... 'His soul shall dwell at ease' (Ps. 25:13) alludes to Joseph in his grave. 'And his seed will inherit the land' (Ps. 25:13) alludes to Joseph, of whose children's children it is said: 'The children of Machir, the son of Manasseh, went to Gilead and took it' (Num. 32:39).<sup>1</sup>

And certainly it would be fitting for one who is God-fearing to punish the evil deeds of one who does not fear God.

Joseph declared: 'I fear God' (Gen. 42:18) but this one, Amalek, of him Scriptures state: 'He did not fear God' (Deut. 25:18). So let Joshua, a son of the son [descendent] of Joseph who feared God, come and requite Amalek who did not fear Him.<sup>2</sup>

After confining Simeon, Joseph ordered the sales officials to fill his brothers' bags with grain. He also told his son, Manasseh, to "return each one's money to his sack, and give them provisions for the journey" (Gen. 42:25)--without payment. Why this sudden act of generosity after arresting Simeon? Joseph explained to Manasseh: The distress that I have caused them is quite sufficient. Manasseh then carried out his father's instructions.<sup>3</sup>

Surely the brothers were concerned about their sibling Simeon once it became clear that they would have to leave him behind in Egypt. How great would their surprise have been had they been able to see what happened to Simeon following their departure. For Joseph had Simeon bound

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash on Psalms 25:12.

<sup>2</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 12:5; similarly in Exodus Rabbah 26:3.

<sup>3</sup>Bereshit Rabbathi 204.

as a prisoner only while the remaining brothers were still present. But once they had departed, Joseph brought out his brother, fed him, gave him drink, and bathed and annointed him.<sup>1</sup> This was quite a reversal of the treatment that Joseph had received at Simeon's hands so many years before.

Simeon told his brothers to throw large stones at Joseph when he was in the pit. In his later dealings with Simeon, Joseph showed all the forgiving charitableness of his nature. When Simeon was held as a prisoner in Egypt, Joseph, so far from bearing him a grudge, ordered stuffed poultry to be set before him at all his meals.<sup>2</sup>

(I hope that Simeon had an unquenchable craving for fowl. Otherwise, Joseph's steady diet for his brother might have been a means of getting even after all!)

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<sup>1</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 42:24; Genesis Rabbah 91:8.

<sup>2</sup>Tanhuma Buber I, 184.

### THE BROTHERS' SECOND JOURNEY INTO EGYPT

We know that Joseph must have had a considerable amount of time after his brothers' first journey to Egypt during which he could reconsider his generous and merciful attitude toward his siblings. Perhaps he had even thought of reversing himself and avenging himself against them for their cruel treatment of him. Therefore, a feeling of tension is still present when the sons of Jacob return for the second time, bringing Benjamin with them. How would Joseph react this time? His brothers had done so many evil things to him! But when he saw them, and especially his full brother Benjamin, he could not subdue his feelings of compassion; in fact, his eyes streamed tears because of them. Joseph was unable to restrain himself, "for he was overcome with feeling toward his brothers and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there" (Gen. 43:30).<sup>1</sup>

Immediately after this, Joseph ordered that a meal be served. He wanted to sit beside Benjamin, so he devised a clever plan by which he could carry out his desire. He would pretend to use his so-called magic cup to practice divination.

He took his cup and struck it. He said to them: I had thought that Judah was the first-born since he speaks first, (but) I see that Reuben is the firstborn and Judah is a speaker. He set Reuben first. Again he took and struck his cup. He said: Simeon! He came up and placed himself.... And so on with Levi, Judah and all of them in order of their births. Again he took and struck his cup. He said: I see in the cup that you are the sons of

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<sup>1</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 13:3.

one father but your father has several wives. He began to call to Dan and Naphtali, saying: Come up and arrange yourselves in order of birth. Benjamin remained. Joseph said: I see that he has a brother but was separated from him and that he has no mother. I, too, had a brother who was separated from me and I, too, have no mother. Let him come and sit by me. And so he did. So it says: 'They were seated by his direction, from the oldest in order of his seniority to the youngest in the order of his youth' (Gen. 43:33).<sup>1</sup>

But Joseph was still determined to test his brothers one more time. Therefore he had his goblet placed in Benjamin's grain bag. He wanted to see if his brothers would show love for Benjamin and lay down their lives for him.<sup>2</sup> That was when Judah, the speaker, proved his devotion to his young brother. And for that devotion, he receives praise. (If the following citation seems familiar, it is because the same verse from Ecclesiastes was used above on page 55 to describe Joseph. Here the structure is repeated with Judah as the subject.)

NOW THERE WAS A SMALL CITY--Egypt. FEW MEN IN IT--Joseph's brothers, as it says, 'Joseph's ten brothers went down to buy grain' (Gen. 42:3). AND THERE CAME A GREAT KING AGAINST IT AND BESIEGED IT--Joseph. AND BUILT GREAT BULWARKS AGAINST IT--this refers to the three decrees which he enacted, i.e., No slave might enter Egypt; No one could enter with two asses; No one might enter without writing his name and the name of his father, grandfather and grandmother. NOW THERE WAS FOUND IN IT A MAN POOR AND WISE--Judah. AND BY HIS WISDOM DELIVERED THE CITY--because he said (to his father with regard to Benjamin), 'I will be surety for him' (Gen. 43:9) and further because he said to Joseph, 'Now, therefore, let your servant, I pray you, stay instead of the lad...' (Gen. 44:33). YET NO ONE REMEMBERED THAT SAME POOR MAN--the Holy One, praised be He, said: You have not re-

<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma וד' 4; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 43:33.

<sup>2</sup>Ts'ror Hamor.



membered him but I will remember him, as it is stated, 'He sent Judah before him to Joseph' (Gen. 46:28).<sup>1</sup>

Though Joseph desired to test his brothers, he did not want to see them humiliated in the presence of the Egyptians.

'When Judah and his brothers re-entered the house of Joseph, who was still there...' (Gen. 44:14). But was it Joseph's habit to stay in his house? Did he not go out each day to the platform of judgment? But that day only he did not go out. He said: I shall not shame my brothers before the Egyptians.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph knew that conflict with his brothers would be unwise.<sup>3</sup> And after hearing the beautifully eloquent plea of Judah, he knew that the moment for him to reveal his identity had arrived. His brothers had proved their devotion. Still, he took precautions not to embarrass his brothers in the Egyptians' presence, even at a risk.

'Have everyone withdraw from me!' (Gen. 45:1). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Joseph ran a great risk, for had his brothers killed him, none in the world would have known it. Why then did he order everyone to leave the chamber? Because he resolved: Rather let me be killed than shame my brothers in the presence of the Egyptians.<sup>4</sup>

Did Joseph act prudently? The argument might go either way.

R. Hama b. R. Hanina and R. Samuel b. Nahmani discussed this. R. Hama b. R. Hanina said: Joseph did not act prudently, for had one of them kicked him, he would have died on the spot. R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: He acted rightly and

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<sup>1</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9:15, 3.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 44:14.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma פלג 4.

<sup>4</sup>Tanhuma פלג 5.



prudently. He knew the righteousness of his brothers and reasoned: Heaven forbid! My brothers are not to be suspected of bloodshed.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph was confident about his brothers' behaviour as is reflected in this conversation.

Joseph said to them: You said this lad's [Benjamin's] brother is dead. Did you yourselves see him dead before you?

They answered: Yes!

Joseph: Did you stand beside his grave?

The brothers: Yes!

Joseph: Did you throw clods of earth on his corpse?

The brothers: No.

Then Joseph thought: My brothers are as pious as before, and they do not lie. They said I was dead, because when they abandoned me, I was poor, and 'a poor man is like a dead man.' They stood beside my grave, that is the pit into which they cast me; but they did not say they had shoveled earth upon me, for that would have been a lie.<sup>2</sup>

But the rabbis do not permit Joseph simply to tell his brothers his real identity. They have Joseph exploit the situation with almost excruciating dramatic effect and power.

When Joseph saw that they [his brothers] agreed on destroying the Egyptians, he said to himself: Better that I identify myself to them and they not devastate the Egyptians. Joseph said to them: Did you not say this; that this one's brother is dead. I bought him. I will call him and he will come to you. He began to call: Joseph son of Jacob, come to me! Joseph son of Jacob, come to me! Speak to your brothers who sold you! They looked in the four corners of the house. Joseph said to them: Why do you look here and there? 'I am your brother Joseph' (Gen. 45:4). Instantly, they grew faint and were unable to answer him.... They did not believe him until he exposed himself and showed that he was circumcised.<sup>3</sup> This was why he said: 'Come forward to me' (Gen. 45:4).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:9.

<sup>2</sup>Tanhuma Buber Introduction 131-32.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma 71'7 5; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 93:8.

<sup>4</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 45:4; Genesis Rabbah 93:10.

So here was Joseph, among the youngest of the tribal ancestors, and yet none of his brothers was able to stand his rebuke, as it says: "His brothers could not answer him" (Gen. 45:3).<sup>1</sup> Yet even at this supreme moment of tension, the rabbis are able to derive a lesson: Now if the rebuke of flesh and blood is such [that Joseph's brothers were unable to answer him], how much more so the rebuke of the Holy One, praised be He!<sup>2</sup>

Though it is not so complimentary as the motives given above, we must, in fairness, consider the following minority report as to the real reason why Joseph decided to reveal himself when he did.

When Joseph felt that Judah's anger was rising, he feared lest he be shamed before the Egyptians. He immediately said to his brothers: 'I am Joseph your brother....' (Gen. 45:4).<sup>3</sup>

The Egyptians were not the only ones kept from witnessing the entirety of this reunion scene.

'Come forward to me' (Gen. 45:4). To tell them that they had sold him, which it was not fitting to disclose in the hearing of the Egyptians. He did not wish to speak in Benjamin's presence, lest he reveal it to Jacob. Therefore he motioned Benjamin aside and asked his brothers to come forward to him.<sup>4</sup>

Later, when Joseph was able to speak to Benjamin alone, he again deliberately kept his brother ignorant as to what had really happened to him.

Joseph secretly asked Benjamin: What did my brothers tell our father when I was stolen from you? He told him how they had brought his tunic

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:10.

<sup>2</sup>Hagigah 4b.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma 72'1 3.

<sup>4</sup>Ts'ror Hamor.

dipped in blood and pretended to have found it. Then Joseph told him what had happened to him: Wicked men seized and stripped me of my clothes; one of them went to hide my tunic in a cave, but a lion ate him. His companions brought and sold me here. See Joseph's righteousness: he would not divulge even to Benjamin who had really sold him.<sup>1</sup>

The brothers' feelings of guilt for their past crime must have been virtually unendurable at this moment. Joseph, aware of this, explained that his coming to Egypt had been entirely the plan of God.

'Now, do not be distressed...' (Gen. 45:5). Do not be sorrowful in your hearts that you sold me. 'Or reproach yourselves' (Gen. 45:5)--that I am a king. 'It was to save life that God sent me ahead of you' (Gen. 45:5). God sent me, not you. God made me king; it was not because I am greater than you....<sup>2</sup>

Joseph said to them: There were three 'causes' for my coming to Egypt: the colored tunic, the dream of the sheaves and the dream of the sun and moon. Therefore he said שְׁלֹשׁ three times: 'God sent ( אֱלֹהֵי ) me ahead of you' (Gen. 45:5); 'God has sent ( אֱלֹהֵי ) me' (Gen. 45:7); 'It was not you who sent ( אֲנִי ) me here, but God' (Gen. 45:8). He made them recall his dreams; that they were not from his heart but from God.<sup>3</sup>

Even from Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, the rabbis derive a lesson directed straight at us.

R. Issachar of Kfar Mundi said: Joseph was forgiving and said: 'It was not you who sent me here, but God' (Gen. 45:8) and yet see how far that offense cast its shadow, for until the days of Mordecai the penalty for Joseph's sale was still due. How much more so then with one who is not forgiving!<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Daath Z'kenim, cited in Kasher.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 45:5.

<sup>3</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 45:8.

<sup>4</sup>Esther Rabbah 7:25; similarly in Midrash on Psalms 10:3.

Many years later, we know that the children of Israel endured bitter years of slavery. But eventually they were redeemed and one of the reasons given for their redemption was the fact that they had never lost their identity. The evidence cited states that the Israelites never changed their language and Joseph himself is the source of the proof text: "It is my mouth [i.e., my language, Hebrew] that speaks to you" (Gen. 45:12). This proves that Joseph also retained his identity as a son of Jacob despite his many years in Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph's retention of his Hebrew mother tongue is also seen as proof which he presented to his brothers to affirm his identity as their long lost sibling.<sup>2</sup> For as we saw above on page 59, Hebrew was a language which even the Pharaoh of Egypt did not know.

So total and complete was Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers that he held them all as innocent as Benjamin.

R. Eleazar said: He said to them, Just as I bear no malice against my brother Benjamin who had no part in my selling, so I have no malice against you.<sup>3</sup>

Or did he? For even when telling his brothers to return to their father Jacob and to relate to him all that they had seen, he still could not help mentioning the past.

'You must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen...' (Gen. 45:13)--the great wealth entrusted to my care, and the success, with God's help, of everything I do....

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<sup>1</sup>Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Pisha V, 35; similarly in Pesikta de Rav Kahana 83b (182).

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 45:12; Genesis Rabbah 93:10; Song of Songs Rabbah 4:12, 1; Leviticus Rabbah 32:5; Tanhuma W1'1 5.

<sup>3</sup>Megillah 16b; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 45:12.

Tell him that when I walk through the streets of Egypt, a herald precedes me and cries out: Make way! I wear royal clothes, with the collar of gold and the ring of state. All the nobles of Egypt desire audience with me, and the king does nothing without my consent. But when I was with you, you would not even answer my greetings, as it says: 'They could not speak a friendly word to him' (Gen. 37:4); and even my father scolded me, as it says: 'His father berated him' (Gen. 37:10).<sup>1</sup>

When Joseph embraced his brother Benjamin, he fell upon his younger brother's neck. In the Hebrew text, however, there is a curiosity in that the words צוֹרָרִי בְנִימִן (Gen. 45:14)--"Benjamin's necks" are used. How can we explain away this oddity?

How many necks had Benjamin? R. Eleazar said: He wept for the two Temples destined to be in the territory of Benjamin and to be destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason suggested for Joseph's weeping is that his prophetic spirit showed him the descendents of his brothers enslaved by the nations.<sup>3</sup>

"And Benjamin wept on his neck" (Gen. 45:14). Also for a good reason: He saw that the Tabernacle of Shiloh would be built in Joseph's portion and would be destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

"He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them"--to pacify them--  
"Only then were his brothers able to talk to him" (Gen. 45:15).<sup>5</sup>

Joseph instructed his brothers to bring their father down to Egypt and when he sent them on their way back to Canaan, he had them take with

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Hahefetz, cited in Kasher.

<sup>2</sup>Megillah 16b; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 93:10; Lekah Tov Genesis 45:12.

<sup>3</sup>Targum Yerusalmi Genesis 45:15.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:12.

<sup>5</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 45:15.

them "the best things in Egypt" (Gen. 45:23). What might these "best things" have been? R. Benjamin ben Japhet said in the name of R. Eleazar: He sent him (old) wine which old men find very comforting.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph had used a similar phrase when instructing his brothers: "Never mind your belongings, for the best of all the land of Egypt shall be yours" (Gen. 45:20).

Joseph (unconsciously) prophesied, without knowing what he was prophesying, when he said this, viz. that one day they would take away the Egyptians' wealth [see Ex. 2:36].<sup>2</sup>

His brothers' appearance was also of concern to Joseph. He would not let them be seen in shabby clothing.

Joseph gave all his brothers two changes of clothes, one for use on the ordinary days of the week and one for use on the Sabbath, for, when the cup was found with Benjamin, they had torn their clothes, and Joseph would not have his brothers go about in torn garments.<sup>3</sup>

But Joseph's generosity, especially that toward Benjamin, was clearly an object of concern for the rabbis. It appeared that Joseph was repeating the act of favoritism which Jacob had originally done toward him.

'To each of them, moreover, he gave a change of clothing; but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five changes of clothing' (Gen. 45:22). Is it possible that that righteous man should fall into the same mistake from which he himself had suffered? For Rabab Mehasia said in the name of R. Hami ben Givua who said it in the name of Rab: Through two selas weight of fine silk which Jacob gave to Joseph over what he gave to his brothers, a ball was set rolling and our ances-

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<sup>1</sup>Megillah 16b.

<sup>2</sup>Avot D'Rabbi Nathan Codex B, 43.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma Buber Introduction 132.



tors eventually went down to Egypt!<sup>1</sup>

Joseph's last minute instructions to his brothers as he saw them off makes one wonder just how well they all were able to get along together: "As he sent his brothers off, he told them, 'Do not be quarrelsome on the way'" (Gen. 45:24). The rabbis, however, soften the implication that the brothers were prone to arguments by supplementing Joseph's words with other bits of advice: Take long strides, he told them, do not refrain from religious studies, and enter the city by day.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Megillah 16a.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 94:2.



### ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS UPON JOSEPH FROM HIS BROTHERS' VISITS

From a commentary dealing with the righteousness of Joseph's brothers, we can ultimately derive information concerning Joseph himself.

Although it may have been the misfortune of the tribal ancestors that they become responsible for the selling of Joseph, do you suppose that they would never have become so [ir]responsible unless they had been wicked in other matters too? That is not so, but they were absolutely righteous and no other sin was ever committed by them except that one, as is proved by 'We are certainly guilty concerning our brother' (Gen. 42:21) which implies that they examined their conscience to discover why the Egyptian imprisonment came upon them but could find no other reason except this one, and so incidentally, while revealing their disgrace, Scriptures record their praise, that is, that they had committed no other iniquity but that one alone. Now, since the selling of Joseph was for his own good, seeing that it was the means that led to his being a ruler, and it was for the good of his brothers and for the whole house of his father, seeing that he provided them with food during the years of famine, he was on that account sold by them, for a meritorious act is brought about through the agency of a worthy person.<sup>1</sup>

A typical reason why Joseph was considered "a worthy person" may be this one which is also derived from his behaviour during his brothers' visits.

'Whoever has anticipated Me I will repay him' (Job 41:3) speaks of Joseph who early observed the Sabbath before it was given, as may be inferred from 'Kill the beasts and prepare ( **וַהֲכֵן** )' (Gen. 43:16). That day, said R. Johanan, was erev Shabbat and the word **וַהֲכֵן** is used primarily to express preparation for the Sabbath--as may be inferred from 'It shall happen that on the sixth

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<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 13:18.

day they will prepare ( וְהָכִינוּ )...' (Ex. 16:5). The Holy One, praised be He, therefore said to him: Joseph, you observed the Sabbath before the Torah was given. By your life! I shall repay your grandson by allowing him to present his offering on the Sabbath, an offering which an individual is otherwise not permitted to bring, and I [will] undertake to accept his offering with favor.<sup>1</sup>

The midrashic authors are able to deduce information about the drinking habits of both Joseph and his brothers from this unlikely source. The key to understanding their play on words is to know that a person who took upon himself the vow of the Nazir was not permitted to drink wine or any liquor.

R. Melai also said in the name of R. Isaac of Magdala: From the day that Joseph departed from his brothers he did not taste wine, for it is written, '(The blessings of thy father...shall be on the head of Joseph,) And on the crown of the head of him that was separate ( נָזִיר ) from his brothers' (Gen. 49:26).

[The rabbis reinterpreted the final part of this verse as 'And on the crown of the head of him who was a Nazirite (since his departure from his brothers).' They looked upon Joseph as having, in effect, taken the oath of the Nazir. Therefore he did not drink any wine during all the years that he was separated from his brothers.]

R. Jose ben R. Hanina said: They too did not taste wine, for it is written, 'They drank and drank largely ( וַיִּשְׁתּוּ וַיִּשְׁכְּרוּ ) with him' (Gen. 43:34) which implies (that they did) not (drink) until then. And the other? [Why did Melai omit the brothers?] There was no extensive drinking [no drunkenness during the period of separation] yet there was (moderate) drinking [on the part of the brothers].<sup>2</sup>

And from Joseph's conversations with his brothers, the rabbis were able to draw instruction about the proper and improper uses of authority.

<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:2; similarly in Tanhuma NW] 28; Tanhuma Buber NW] 22a-22b; Lekah Tov Genesis 43:16; Genesis Rabbah 92:4.

<sup>2</sup>Shabbath 139a; similarly in Midrash Mishlei Buber 23b; Lekah Tov Genesis 43:34: 49:26; Genesis Rabbah 92:5; 93:7; 98:20.

Did Joseph ever abuse his authority? Surprisingly enough, yes.

'A man's pride will bring him low' (Prov. 29:23) applies to Joseph who ostentatiously displayed his authority, for when his brothers said to him, 'Thy servant our father,' (Gen. 44:24) he kept silent, and for that reason he was described as 'bones' during his lifetime; for it says: 'You will carry up my bones from here' (Gen. 50:25).<sup>1</sup>

Other sources say that Joseph's punishment was much greater than mere words.

Why did Joseph die before his brothers? Because he gave himself superior airs.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi and the Rabbis disagree. Rabbi said: Because he embalmed his father. The Holy One, praised be He, said to him: Could I not guard my righteous ones? Did I not say to him, 'Fear not the worm Jacob' (Is. 41:14)--meaning, Fear not, O Jacob, the worm. The Rabbis say: It was he (Jacob) who charged them to embalm him, as it says: 'His sons did for him as he had instructed them' (Gen. 50:12). Now on Rabbi's view there is no difficulty. But on the view of the Rabbis (the reason for his dying first was): Five times did Judah say 'Your servant, our father,' (Gen. 44:24, 27, 30, 31; 43:28) yet he heard it and kept silent.<sup>3</sup> [In other words, Joseph offended his father's honor five times. Since his words were being translated for his brothers, Joseph 'spoke' ten times and therefore ten years were taken away from his life resulting in his death at the age of one hundred and ten.]

Still another source says that Joseph died prior to his siblings not for having offended his father's honor but God's.

'I will sustain you and your children' (Gen. 50:21). But he should not have said this, for surely it is the Holy One, praised be He, who sustains all living creatures, all the denizens of the earth. For this presumption he died

<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 13:3; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 50:22; Sotah 13b.

<sup>2</sup>Sotah 13b; similarly in Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer 197.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 100:3; similarly in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 39; Lekah Tov Genesis 44:27.

before all his brothers.<sup>1</sup>

In sharp contrast to Joseph's haughtiness is the humility shown by his brother Judah.

'He that is of a lowly spirit shall attain to honor' (Prov. 29:23) applies to Judah who humbled himself before Joseph for Benjamin's sake, saying: 'Oh my lord, let your servant, I pray, speak a word' (Gen. 44:18)... 'For your servant became surety for the lad' (Gen. 44:32)... 'Now therefore let your servant stay...' (Gen. 44:33). The Holy One, praised be He, said: Judah! You've humbled yourself before your brother who is younger than you. By your life! When the Tabernacle will be set up and the representatives of the tribes will come to present their offerings, none will take precedence over you in presenting his offering, but they will pay honor to you and you will be the one to offer first.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sechel Tov.

<sup>2</sup>Numbers Rabbah 13:3.

### THE SONS OF BENJAMIN

A reader with a close familiarity with the Joseph story as it appears in Genesis might be puzzled as to just what connection there could possibly be between Jacob's most famous son and the children of Benjamin. This curiosity could well remain unsatisfied if the reader did not go beyond the original story into the rabbinical elaborations. For here is an example of the enormous scope of the rabbis' imaginations. From a single sentence consisting solely of a list of names, they are able to derive a lesson on fraternal devotion. This teaching is presented after Judah has made his eloquent plea as part of his efforts to secure Benjamin's freedom.

When Judah saw that Joseph was not appeased, he began to say to his brothers: What shall we do? We started with this and we will end up with Pharaoh! But they did not know that Joseph understood them.... When Joseph saw this, he began to speak reassuringly to them, with gentle words. He said: I only want to know who advised this Benjamin to steal the cup in case any of you told him to. When Benjamin heard this he said: They did not tell me to do it and I did not touch the cup! Joseph said to him: Swear it to me. He began to do so. And what did he swear by? By my brother Joseph's absence from me, I did not touch it. By the hurling of the arrows against him, as it says: 'Archers...shot at him' (Gen. 49:23). And by their stripping of him, as it says: 'They stripped Joseph of his tunic' (Gen. 37:23). And by his being cast into the pit, as it says: 'And cast him into the pit' (Gen. 37:23). By his being sold to the Ishmaelites; by their dipping his tunic in the blood; that they did not advise me and I did not touch the cup. Joseph replied: Who can corroborate for me that you are swearing by your brother truthfully? He replied: By the names of my sons you will be able to know how dear he is to me, for I derived their names from what happened to him. Joseph asked: What are your sons' names? He replied: 'Bela and Becher; Ashbel, Gera

and Naaman; Ahi and Rosh, Muppim, Huppim and Ard' (Gen. 46:21). Joseph asked: Why Bela?<sup>1</sup> Bela signifies that he was swallowed up בלע (or נבלע<sup>2</sup>) from me<sup>3</sup> among the nations<sup>4</sup> and I do not know where he has gone;<sup>5</sup> Becher, that he was first born בכור of my mother;<sup>6</sup> Ashbel, that he was taken away captive נשבה from me<sup>7</sup> (another explanation: Ashbel since God sent Joseph into captivity אל שבאר<sup>8</sup>); Gera, that he became a stranger גר in a strange country;<sup>9</sup> Naaman, that his actions were seemly נעים and pleasant נעימים<sup>10</sup> (another explanation: Naaman, that he was sweet נעים to his father and his mother.<sup>11</sup> Another explanation: Naaman, since he was especially beloved נעים<sup>12</sup>); Ahi, since he was indeed my brother אחי and I have no other;<sup>13</sup> Rosh, since he was my superior ראש<sup>14</sup> and was indeed superior;<sup>15</sup> Muppim [signifies] that he was very handsome מופה<sup>16</sup> טו in all matters<sup>16</sup> (another explanation:

<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma Buber פג"ו 103b-104a.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7; 94:8.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma Buber פג"ו 103b-104a; Genesis Rabbah 93:7.

<sup>4</sup>Sotah 36b; Genesis Rabbah 93:7; 94:8.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7.

<sup>6</sup>Tanhuma Buber פג"ו 103b-104a; similarly in Sotah 36b.

<sup>7</sup>Tanhuma Buber פג"ו 103b-104a; Genesis Rabbah 93:7; 94:8.

<sup>8</sup>Sotah 36b.

<sup>9</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7; 94:8.

<sup>10</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7; 94:8; similarly in Tanhuma Buber פג"ו 103b-104a.

<sup>11</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7.

<sup>12</sup>Sotah 36b.

<sup>13</sup>Tanhuma Buber פג"ו 103b-104a.

<sup>14</sup>Tanhuma Buber פג"ו 103b-104a; Genesis Rabbah 93:7.

<sup>15</sup>Genesis Rabbah 94:8.

<sup>16</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7.



Muppim, since he learned Torah from the mouth פ' of my father and would teach it to me. And while his brothers were tending flocks, he sat with my father and learned all that my father had received from Shem and Eber<sup>1</sup>); Huppim, since I did not see his marriage canopy חפ' and he did not see mine<sup>2</sup> (another explanation: Huppim, since he has been hidden חתופ' until this day.<sup>3</sup> Another explanation: Since the day he was exiled I have not bathed יחפ' nor combed my hair but have been like a mourner.<sup>4</sup> Another explanation: Huppim, because since then I have been in mourning for him and have gone about barefooted יח' .<sup>5</sup> Another explanation: Muppim and Huppim [signify] that his head is covered יחפ' among the idolators<sup>6</sup>); and Ard, because Joseph descended יר' among the peoples<sup>7</sup> (another explanation: Ard, since his face was like a rose bloom יר' .<sup>8</sup> Another explanation: Ard, since he brought us all down יר' here. Another explanation: Ard, because [of Jacob's words:] 'I will go down יר' mourning to my son' [Gen. 37:35].<sup>9</sup>)

<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma Buber ש"י 103b-104a.

<sup>2</sup>Tanhuma Buber ש"י 103b-104a; Genesis Rabbah 93:7; 94:8.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma Buber ש"י 103b-104a.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7.

<sup>5</sup>Tanhuma Buber ש"י 103b-104a.

<sup>6</sup>Genesis Rabbah 93:7.

<sup>7</sup>Sotah 36b; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 93:7.

<sup>8</sup>Sotah 36b; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 93:7; 94:8.

<sup>9</sup>Tanhuma Buber ש"י 103b-104a.



### JACOB'S REACTION TO THE NEWS ABOUT JOSEPH

When the eleven brothers returned home and told their father Jacob the wondrous news about Joseph, the aged patriarch reacted with stunned disbelief. Joseph alive? How could this be so? Jacob insisted upon reliable proof before accepting his sons' words as true.

When Joseph left his home, Jacob knew what section he was teaching him. When Joseph's brothers returned and told him: "Joseph is still alive...." His heart went numb, for he did not believe them' (Gen. 45:26). Jacob recalled during what chapter Joseph was taken away. He said to them: Did Joseph indicate to you in what section he had been taken away? Jacob thought to himself: I know it was the section of the heifer הַלֵּל. He continued: Tell me which section it was, then I will believe you. But Joseph also remembered during which section he had been taken away. What did Joseph do? He gave them wagons אֲרָבָה, as it says: 'Joseph gave them wagons' (Gen. 45:21). This shows that wherever he went, he was busy with Torah, just like his fathers, and the Torah had not yet been given!<sup>1</sup>

These wagons, this time without resorting to a play on words, play the crucial role in another version of how Jacob was finally convinced that his sons' words were factual.

They recounted all that Joseph had said to them' (Gen. 45:27) and Jacob still did not believe them until he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him. He said: Surely, no wagons leave Egypt except with the permission of the king. Then he believed them.<sup>2</sup>

Now that he had been convinced, Jacob could express his awe and

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<sup>1</sup>Tanpuma וְלֵךְ 11; Tanpuma Buber וְלֵךְ 106a; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 94:3; 95:3.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 45:27.

praise of his son's great fortitude.

'Israel said: " גד It is much; my son Joseph is still alive" (Gen. 45:28). Great גד is the (moral) strength of my son who has experienced many misfortunes and yet adheres to his righteousness.<sup>1</sup> Great is Joseph's strength that he suffered all these troubles and is still alive!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 94:3.

<sup>2</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 45:28.

### JOSEPH PREPARES TO MEET HIS FATHER

Besides being able to dwell with the members of his own family again, Joseph had yet another reason to be happy when his father and brothers came down to Egypt to settle.

Why was Joseph happy (when his father and brothers came to Egypt)? The Egyptians would say: A servant rules us. Now that his father and brothers were coming, he was pleased and said: Now they will know my origin; that I am a free man and of a fine lineage.<sup>1</sup>

When the time came for Joseph to ride out and meet his father, the loyal son was so overjoyed at the prospect that he even performed the menial task of hitching up his own chariot himself.

Love upsets all rules.<sup>2</sup> 'Joseph hitched his chariot' (Gen. 46:29) with joy.<sup>3</sup> Yet surely Joseph had plenty of slaves!<sup>4</sup> But love is blind<sup>5</sup> and upsets the natural order.<sup>6</sup>

Though secure in his position of power, Joseph still accorded his father full and proper honor.

'Joseph went up to meet his father' (Gen. 46:29). Why does it say 'his father'? The text tells you that he did not go up as Joseph the governor but rather as a son honoring a father.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 46:29.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 95 Vatican Manuscript Codex 30.

<sup>3</sup>Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Beshallah II, 164.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis Rabbah 55:8.

<sup>5</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 46:29.

<sup>6</sup>Genesis Rabbah 55:8.

<sup>7</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 46:29.

Joseph heard that his father had come to the border of Egypt, so he took all the men who were with him and he went to meet his father. All the people go forth to meet the king, but the king does not go forth to meet any person. But this teaches you that the father of any person is like their king.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Joseph was careful not to appear before his father with his entire entourage all at once. He did not wish to startle excessively the elderly Jacob.

He did not appear to him himself at first but sent five horses before him under his first son. Jacob said: Perhaps that is he. He sent ahead of him five more horses under his second son. Jacob said: Perhaps that is he. Then he appeared to him. Why? So as not to fatally shock his father.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pirḳê de Rabbi Eliezer 39.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Hagadol Genesis 46:29.

### JOSEPH'S EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF HIS FAMILY

Joseph went to considerable lengths to assure the welfare of his newly arrived family. Scriptures tell us of his generosity with the words: "Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father's household with bread, down to the little ones" (Gen. 47:12). He was hardly a stingy person.<sup>1</sup> But Joseph's efforts went well beyond fulfilling his family's material needs. He also took special actions to make sure that Jacob's clan would not be ridiculed by the native Egyptian population.

What is the purpose of telling us: 'And he removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt's border to the other' (Gen. 47:21)? (He did this) so that they (the Egyptians) should not taunt the Israelites and say to them: Are you not a people of wanderers and nomads? Therefore he took them from one place and set them elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Sheloshah Ve'Arba'ah, cited in Kasher.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 95 Vatican Manuscript Codex 30; similarly in Hullin 60b; Lekah Tov Genesis 47:21; Tanhuma Buber 93b.

### JACOB'S HIGH REGARD FOR HIS SON

Earlier, we considered Jacob's affection for his son Joseph. Now we see that the patriarch's esteem had not waned with the passing of years. In fact, knowing of Joseph's accomplishments in Egypt, Jacob's respect for his son even increased! For example, when Jacob realized that the time of his death was approaching and he wanted to express his desire to be buried in the land of Canaan,

'He summoned his son Joseph' (Gen. 47:29). Why did he not call Reuben or Judah? Reuben was the firstborn and Judah was king, yet he disregarded them and called Joseph. Why was this? Because Joseph had the means of fulfilling (his wishes). Therefore 'He summoned his son Joseph.'<sup>1</sup>

Another source gives a different answer expressed in words spoken to Joseph by his father: You are more beloved to me than all of them. For I came down here for your sake . . . .<sup>2</sup>

And of course Joseph accorded his father great honor.

'Some time afterward, Joseph was told, "Your father is ill"' (Gen. 48:1). Is this the sum of Joseph's excellence, that he carried to excess the honor due his father and refrained from visiting him at all hours, so that if others had not come and told him that his father was sick he would not have known? Not at all! Scriptures would have you know the full extent of Joseph's righteousness: He did not wish to remain alone with his father, lest his father say to him: How could your brothers have done such a thing to you, and then proceed to curse them. Joseph said: I know my father's righteousness is such that all

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<sup>1</sup>Tanhuma Buber ית"י 107a; Genesis Rabbah 96:5; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 47:29.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 96 Vatican Manuscript Codex 30.

his words have the force of decrees. Because he said to Laban, 'Whomever you find possessing your gods will not live' (Gen. 31:32), my mother died. And so if I chanced to say something which would give him cause to curse my brothers, he would curse them, with the result that I would have destroyed the whole world, which was created only for the sake of the Tribes.<sup>1</sup>

Jacob knew that by honoring his son, he was only seconding the honor shown to Joseph by God. Yet the patriarch still did so in order that others, and especially Joseph's brothers, would likewise respect him.

'Your son Joseph has come to see you' (Gen. 48:2). At once 'Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed' (Gen. 48:2). Why did he make the effort? According to R. Joshua ben Levi, by sitting up erect he showed his respect for Joseph, for he said: The Holy One, praised be He, has made my son ruler of the world, and I, shall I not show him honor? Another explanation: Why did he make the effort? In order that the Tribes should see how he regarded Joseph--sitting up erect before him even when ill--so that they would also show Joseph honor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 3:4.

<sup>2</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 3:4; similarly in Genesis Rabbah 97 Vatican Manuscript Codex 30.



### JACOB'S BLESSING OF JOSEPH

The rabbis use these five verses (Gen. 49:22-26) to review and expound upon many of the highlights of Joseph's distinguished career. And the subjects, as we might expect, have great variety. One of the most famous of these lessons deals with the evil eye.

The evil eye has no power over the seed of Joseph, as it is written: 'Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine above the eye ( עַל עֵינַי )' (Gen. 49:22). And R. Abbahu said with regard to this: Do not read עַל עֵינַי but עַל עֵינַי , rising above the (power of the) eye.<sup>1</sup>

If a man entering a town fears the evil eye, let him say: I am...son of Joseph over whom the evil eye has no power, [as it says:] 'Let them grow ( יִגְדְּלוּ ) into a multitude in the midst of the earth' (Ten. 48:16). Just as the fish ( דָּגִים ) in the sea are covered by waters and the evil eye has no power over them, so the evil eye has no power over the seed of Joseph.<sup>2</sup>

Variations on the translation of Jacob's blessing lend themselves to different rabbinic expositions.

When he was riding in the chariot, and passed through all the borders of the land of Egypt, the Egyptian girls were climbing up the walls for his sake.<sup>3</sup> [Further, they would] throw bracelets, necklets, ear-rings and finger-rings at him, so that he might look up at them; yet he did not look up at them [as it says: 'Joseph is a fruit-

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<sup>1</sup>Berachot 20; similarly in Sotah 36b; Baba Metzia 84a; Lekah Tov Genesis 49:22; Aggadat Bereshit Ch. 82; Genesis Rabbah 97 New Version of Genesis Rabbah on the Blessing of the Patriarch Jacob, Ch. 2 (appended to the Vilna edition of Genesis Rabbah).

<sup>2</sup>Berachot 55b; similarly in Baba Batra 118a; Baba Metzia 84a; Genesis Rabbah 97:3.

<sup>3</sup>Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer 39.

ful bough...his daughters run over the wall'  
(Gen. 49:22)]. The Holy One, praised be He, said  
to him: You did not look up at them. By your life,  
I will give your daughters an ornament in the Torah.  
What is this ornament? A section.<sup>1</sup>

The same verse from Scriptures is used to justify the status of  
Ephraim and Manasseh: Joseph was worthy of the inheritance of two tribes  
--"a fruitful bough whose branches run over the wall (Gen. 49:22).<sup>2</sup>

Plays on words are not to be ignored either.

'Joseph is a fruitful vine בן פֶּרֶה '  
(Gen. 49:22). Did then Porath beget Joseph?  
What then is the meaning of Ben-Porath? That  
he became great through cattle פֶּרוֹחַ .<sup>3</sup>

One of Joseph's rewards is also to be derived from this verse.

'Joseph is a fruitful bough; a fruitful bough  
through the eye...' (Gen. 49:22). Let the eye  
which would not feed upon and enjoy that which  
did not belong to it, be privileged to eat (of  
sacrifices) as far as it can see.<sup>4</sup>

The rabbis are even able to derive a story about Joseph that ante-  
dates what is usually considered the starting point of the Joseph story:  
Chapter thirty-seven of Genesis.

'And lastly, Joseph and Rachel came forward,'  
(Gen. 33:7) not Rachel and Joseph, but 'Joseph  
and Rachel.' Why so? Because Joseph thought  
to himself: No woman is as beautiful as my  
mother--and this wicked Esau is suspected of  
lecherous doings. [Therefore,] Joseph put him-  
self ahead of his mother, standing in front of

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 98:18. The reward for Joseph's daughters is under-  
stood to be the inheritance rights for a daughter which are described in  
Numbers 27:6-11; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 49:22; Tanhuma NẖJ 30;  
Tanhuma Buber NẖJ 22b.

<sup>2</sup>Baba Kama 17a.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis Rabbah 99:12.

<sup>4</sup>Zevachim 118b.

her so that Esau should not see her. With regard to this act, Joseph's father praised him: 'A son to be rewarded is Joseph, a son to be rewarded because of the eye' (Gen. 49:22). What can the expression 'because of the eye' mean? It means that Jacob said: Because you did veil the eye of that wicked one from your mother.<sup>1</sup>

We find a reference back to Joseph's original elevation by Pharaoh in another verse. It seemed that Potiphera had objected to his servant's promotion.

'They shot at him and harried him' (Gen. 49:23)-- This alludes to Potiphera. When he saw Pharaoh ordering Joseph to ride in the chariot of the second-in-command, he protested: Why have you made my servant a ruler, a man whom I bought for twenty pieces of silver? Joseph immediately answered him: You deserved death when you bought me, for only a descendent of Canaan may be bought as a slave, as it says: 'Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers' (Gen. 9:25); whereas I am a descendent of Shem. Furthermore, I am of noble lineage. For Pharaoh had a likeness of my ancestress made: Bring the likeness; if it does not resemble me, your complaint is just. This was done and his visage was seen to resemble Sarah's.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 12:5; similarly in Pesikta Rabbati 12:13; Genesis Rabbah 78:10; 90:4.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Aggadah.

### THE BURIAL OF JACOB

Following the death of Jacob, Joseph sought to carry out his father's wish to be buried with his ancestors in the land of Canaan. This Joseph did although the midrashic authors would have us believe that he was not necessarily obliged to do so.

When Jacob died in Egypt, who should have attended to him? Surely the Holy One, praised be He, for He had said: 'I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back' (Gen. 46:4). But Joseph came and eagerly seized the opportunity of performing this act of filial piety, as it says: 'Joseph went up to bury his father' (Gen. 50:7).<sup>1</sup>

Of all the twelve sons, Joseph was the most worthy to carry out this act of reverence.

Joseph earned merit by burying his father and there was none among his brothers greater than he; as it is said, 'Joseph went up to bury his father... Chariots, too, and horsemen went up with him; it was a very large troop' (Gen. 50:7-9).<sup>2</sup>

Joseph's high office, however, did demand that he receive some type of preferential treatment. Therefore, he was not allowed to help carry the bier of his father since Joseph was a king and had to be shown proper respect.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Joseph's brothers allowed him to lead the funeral procession of their father in order to increase their sibling's honor.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:2, 1.

<sup>2</sup>Sotah 9b; similarly in Talmud Jerusalmi Sotah, Perek 1, Halacha 10, 7a; Sifré בְּהַעֲלוֹתָ 12:14; Tanhuma בְּשֵׁלַח 2.

<sup>3</sup>Tanhuma Buber בְּמִדְבָּר 6a; Tanhuma בְּמִדְבָּר 12; similarly in Numbers Rabbah 2:8.

<sup>4</sup>Sotah 13a.

The mourning which was held at Goren ha-Atad (Gen. 50:10) shows the extent of Joseph's wisdom even at this sad and solemn time.

'They held there a very great and solemn lamentation...' (Gen. 50:10). This was due to Joseph's wisdom. He said: If we do not observe a period of mourning outside the border (of Canaan), the Canaanites will say: They have come to take our country, and they will fight us. So 'they held there a very great and solemn lamentation.' When the Canaanites saw them, they said: 'This is a solemn mourning on the part of the Egyptians' (Gen. 50:11).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Hahefetz, cited in Kasher.

### JOSEPH'S RECONCILIATION WITH HIS BROTHERS

With Jacob their father dead, Joseph's brothers feared that their powerful sibling might take revenge against them. This suspicion was further enhanced by some unusual actions they had seen Joseph doing.

'When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us..." (Gen. 50:15). R. Levi said: (They feared this) because he did not invite them to dine with him. R. Tanhuma said: His motive was indeed a noble one, for he reasoned: Formerly my father placed me above Reuben, who is the first-born; but now it is not right for me to sit above them. They, however, did not speak thus, but, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us.'<sup>1</sup>

What did they see that frightened them? When they returned from their father's burial they saw Joseph go to pray at the very same pit into which they had thrown him. He prayed there as one is obliged to pray at a place where a miracle was done for him: Praised be the Lord who made a miracle for me in this place. When they saw this, they said: Now that our father is dead Joseph will hate us and return to us all the evil we caused him.<sup>2</sup>

The brothers decided to throw themselves upon Joseph's mercy with the assistance of a fabricated story.

'So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers...' (Gen. 50:16f.). We have searched and have not found that Jacob commanded this. But come and see how great is the power of peace; that the Holy One, praised be He wrote in His Torah these [false] words for the

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis Rabbah 100:8.

<sup>2</sup>Tanhuma י"ג 17; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 50:15f.

sake of peace.<sup>1</sup> [Therefore, how] great is peace--  
for an untrue statement may be made for its sake.<sup>2</sup>

How tempting this opportunity would have been for one less noble than Joseph! His brothers had sinned against him in that they hated him; and they supposed that in return he would detest them. But Joseph did not deal with them in this way: instead he requited them with good deeds for their evil ones.<sup>3</sup> And Joseph himself comforted them as it says: "He reassured them speaking kindly to them" (Gen. 50:21).<sup>4</sup>

'Oh that you were like a brother to me' (Song 8:1)...  
How like a brother? ...like Joseph to his brothers.  
After all the evil things they did to him, what,  
according to Scriptures, do you find him saying:  
'And so, fear not' (Gen. 50:21). He said to them--  
so taught R. Simlai--You are the head and I the  
body. Once the head is removed from the body, what  
good [is] the body? He went on to say: You, the  
tribes of Israel, have been likened (in number) to  
the dust of the earth, the sand of the sea and the  
stars in heaven. Would I wage war against the dust  
of the earth? If I could prevail against the dust  
of the earth, I might then hope to prevail against  
you. He continued: Shall I set myself as my fa-  
ther's adversary? What he begot, am I to bury?  
Or as adversary to the Holy One, praised be He?  
What He blesses, am I to cut down with the sword?  
He went on: You, my brothers, are part of the  
order of the universe--twelve hours in a day,  
twelve hours in a night, twelve Tribes of Israel,  
twelve signs in the zodiac, twelve months in the  
year--dare I presume to annihilate my brothers who  
belong to the order of the universe? He said  
further: Before you came to Egypt, the Egyptians  
treated me like a slave. But once you came down  
here to Egypt, you made known my honorable lineage.  
If I kill you now, the Egyptians will say, Joseph

<sup>1</sup>Tanḥuma ויחי 17; similarly in Perek Hashshalom 59b (Ch. 1);  
Tanḥuma שופטים 18; צו 7; חולדות 1; Genesis Rabbah 100:18;  
Deuteronomy Rabbah 5:15; Tanḥuma Buber צו 9b.

<sup>2</sup>Leviticus Rabbah 9:9; similarly in Lekah Tov Genesis 50:15f.;  
Yebamot 65b.

<sup>3</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 13:3; similarly in Pesikta de Rav Kahana (462).

<sup>4</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 30:4.



chanced upon some gang of young men and declared, these are my brothers. You can see for yourself that Joseph lied, since after a short time he rose up against them and killed them. Joseph went on to reassure his brothers still more: Besides if I kill you now, the Egyptians will say: Joseph did not keep faith with his brothers. How much less likely is he to keep faith with others!<sup>1</sup> Another interpretation: He said, You are ten and you could not conquer me. I am one. How can I conquer ten?<sup>2</sup> Another interpretation: [Joseph said,] Jacob, our father, blessed each of us according to his blessing; if one of them is nullified, all are nullified.<sup>3</sup> Another interpretation: He said to them, I could have had you executed when I recognized you and you failed to recognize me (Gen. 42:8). And had I wanted to kill you then, no one would have objected, for I arrested you as spies (Gen. 42:17). Nor would my father have condemned me in anger for he did not know if Joseph was alive or dead. And at that time I did not touch you.<sup>4</sup> When they heard these truthful words, they were calmed.<sup>5</sup>

So Joseph finally was wholly reconciled with his brothers. And for his righteous behaviour of sustaining his brothers, he was duly rewarded.

'The hoary head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness' (Prov. 16:31). If you see a man occupied with Torah, good deeds of lovingkindness, in the future he will merit a crown of glory--therefore it says: 'It is found in the way of righteousness.' ...Come and learn from Joseph the righteous: While raising and strengthening the honor of his father in Egypt, he merited a crown of glory, as it says: 'Joseph

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<sup>1</sup>Pesikta Rabbati 29/30A:6; similarly in Pesikta de Rav Kahana 126a (270-271); Genesis Rabbah 100:9.

<sup>2</sup>Tanhuma Buber נלמך lb; similarly in Pesikta Rabbati 29/30B:1.

<sup>3</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 50:21.

<sup>4</sup>Bereshit Rabbati 260.

<sup>5</sup>Lekah Tov Genesis 50:21.

lived to see children of the third generation of Ephraim; the children of Machir son of Manasseh were likewise born upon Joseph's knees' (Gen. 50:23). How do we know that Joseph did righteously? 'Joseph sustained his father and his brothers...' (Gen. 47:12).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Midrash Mishlei Buber 42a.

### THE FINAL JOURNEY OF JOSEPH

When Joseph became aware that the time of his own death was near, he sought to make sure that his body would eventually be returned to the land of Canaan. He finally received assurances of this both from his brothers and from God.

'So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here"' (Gen. 50:25). R. Hanina said: There must be an inner meaning here. For why would Joseph, who knew well that he was a righteous man in every way and, since the dead outside the land will also be resurrected, trouble his brothers with a journey of four hundred parasangs? Because he might possibly be [deemed] unworthy to [roll through] the cavities [underground and thus be denied the honor of being resurrected in the land].<sup>1</sup>

During the entire forty years' wandering in the wilderness, the bones of Joseph travelled with them. God had said to Joseph: Because you said, 'I will sustain you' (Gen. 50:21) to your brothers, I assure you that when you are dead, your bones will journey with them for forty years in the wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

Whom do we have greater than Joseph for whose burial no less than Moses occupied himself.<sup>3</sup>

MOSES TOOK THE BONES OF JOSEPH WITH HIM (Ex. 13:19)  
--How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? It was told that Sarah, the daughter of Asher, survived from that generation and she showed Moses the grave of Joseph. She said to him: The Egyptians put him into a metal coffin which they sunk

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<sup>1</sup>Ketuboth 111a.

<sup>2</sup>Exodus Rabbah 20:19.

<sup>3</sup>Talmud Jerusalmi Sotah, Perek 1, Halacha 10, 7a; similarly in Sifré ביהעליוחך 12:14; Tanhuma בשלח 2.

in the Nile. So Moses went and stood by the Nile. He took a table of gold on which he engraved the Tetragrammaton, and, throwing it into the Nile, he cried out saying: Joseph, son of Jacob! The oath to redeem his children, which God swore to our father Abraham, has reached its fulfillment. If you come up, well and good. But if not, we shall be guiltless of your oath. Immediately Joseph's coffin came to the surface and Moses took it. ...R. Nathan said: They had buried him in the capital of Egypt in the mausoleum of the kings, as it says, 'He was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt' (Gen. 50:26). And how did Moses know which was Joseph's coffin? Moses went and stood among the coffins. He cried out saying: Joseph, Joseph! The oath to redeem his children which God swore to our father Abraham has reached its fulfillment, etc. Immediately Joseph's coffin began to move and Moses took it and went his way.... Joseph, than whom none of his brothers was greater, acted meritoriously in burying his father.... With Joseph there went up the ark, the Shekinah, the Priests, the Levites, all Israel and the seven clouds of glory. Furthermore, the coffin of Joseph went alongside of the ark of the Eternal. And the nations would say to the Israelites: What are these two chests? And the Israelites would say to them: The one is the ark of the Eternal, and the other is a coffin with a body in it. The nations then would say: What is the importance of this coffin that it should go alongside of the ark of the Eternal? The Israelites would say to them: The one lying in the coffin has fulfilled that which is written on what is in the ark. On the tablets lying in the ark is written 'I am the Lord your God' (Ex. 20:2), and of Joseph, it is written: 'For am I a substitute for God?' (Gen. 50:19). On the tablets in this ark is written: 'You shall have no other gods beside Me' (Ex. 20:3), and of Joseph, it is written: 'For I fear God' (Gen. 42:18). It is written: 'You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God' (Ex. 20:7), and of Joseph, it is written: 'By Pharaoh' (Gen. 42:15). It is written: 'Remember the Sabbath day' (Ex. 20:8), and of Joseph, it is written: 'Kill the beasts and prepare' (Gen. 43:16), which can only mean preparing for the Sabbath, as it says: 'It shall come to pass that on the sixth day they shall prepare...' (Ex. 16:5). It is written, 'Honor your father' (Ex. 20:12), and of Joseph, it is written: 'Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing in Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "I am ready"' (Gen. 37:13)--he knew that his brothers

hated him, yet he would not disobey his father's orders. It is written: 'You shall not murder' (Ex. 20:13), and Joseph did not murder Potiphera. It is written, 'You shall not commit adultery' (Ex. 20:13)--he did not commit adultery with Potiphera's wife. It is written: 'You shall not steal' (Ex. 20:13)--he did not steal, as it is written: 'Joseph gathered all the money that was to be found in the land of Egypt...and brought the money into Pharaoh's palace' (Gen. 47:14). It is written, 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor' (Ex. 20:13) and Joseph never told his father what his brothers had done to him. Now to reason by the method of kal v'chomer, if he would not tell his father even things that were true about his brothers, how much less would he tell against them what was false! It is said: 'You shall not covet' (Ex. 20:14)--he did not covet Potiphera's wife. It is written: 'You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart' (Lev. 19:17), and of Joseph, it says, 'He reassured them, speaking kindly to them' (Gen. 50:21). It is written, 'You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge' (Lev. 19:18), and of Joseph, it is written, 'Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good' (Gen. 50:20). It is written: 'Let him live by your side as your brother' (Lev. 25:36), and of Joseph, it is written, 'Joseph sustained his father and his brothers' (Gen. 47:12).<sup>1</sup>

A slightly more exotic version of how Moses was able to locate the remains of Joseph is found in the following commentaries on Song of Songs.

Joseph's body emitted a pleasant smell. It was so agreeable and pervasive that the road along which he travelled was redolent of it, and on his arrival in Egypt the perfume of his body spread over the whole land, and the royal princesses, following the sweet scent to its source, reached the place where Joseph was.<sup>2</sup>

Even after his death the same fragrance was spread abroad by his bones, enabling Moses to distinguish Joseph's remains from all others, and keep the oath of the children of Israel, to inter them in the Holy Land.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael Beshallah I, p. 86ff; similarly in Mekhilta D'Rabbi Sim'on b. Jochai פ"ק 13:19; Exodus Rabbah 20:19.

<sup>2</sup>Midrash Shir ha-Shirim 3a.

<sup>3</sup>Aggadat Shir ha-Shirim 1, 3.

With the return of Joseph's remains to the same area from which he had been stolen, his story is brought to an end.

'And the bones of Joseph which the children of Israel brought out of Egypt they buried in Shechem' (Josh. 24:32). ...The Holy One, praised be He, said to the tribes: You sold Joseph (from Shechem)<sup>1</sup> --return his bones to their place.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sanhedrin 102a; Sotah 13b.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis Rabbah 85:3.

### A RABBINIC SUMMATION

The following excerpt is the longest and most elaborate passage on Joseph and his many accomplishments that I have found in the midrashic literature. I have placed it here to serve as a compendium of many, though by no means all, of the interpretations and elaborations which we have considered. Whether interpreting an unclear point in the text, teaching a major point of law or even providing whimsical and entertaining elaborations on the Scriptures, the resourcefulness of the rabbinic mind can never cease to amaze us.

'I...keep the king's command' (Eccl. 8:2)<sup>1</sup> speaks of the righteous Joseph who was mindful of the 'I' which Pharaoh addressed to him. 'Pharaoh said to Joseph: "I am Pharaoh"' (Gen. 41:44), never having rebelled against his command. 'Supreme is the king's command' (Eccl. 8:2) implies that although he had become invested with all that greatness he did not shake off the yoke of heaven, but feared the Holy One, praised be He, 'I fear God' (Gen. 42:18). ...Moreover he was on his guard in taking an oath, for he did not swear by the formula 'as the Lord lives' but 'As Pharaoh lives, you will not leave here' (Gen. 42:15). This explains 'the oath of' (Eccl. 8:2). What is implied by 'the commandment וְכִרְחַם of' (Eccl. 8:2)? That he hedged himself about against unchastity עֲרוּלָה. This is suggested by 'that He see no unseemly thing עֲרוּלָה דָּבָר in you' (Deut. 23:15) which is supported by 'The girl, because עַל דָּבָר she cried not, being in the city...' (Deut. 23:24).

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<sup>1</sup>The scriptural text on which this passage is based is taken from Ecclesiastes 8:2-5: "I counsel you to keep the king's command, and that in regard of the oath of God. Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not in an evil thing; for he does whatever pleases him. Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say to him, what do you do? Whoever keeps the commandment will know no evil thing: and a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgement." אֲנִי פִי מֶלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר וְעַל דְּבַר שְׂבוּעַת אֱלֹהִים. אֵל חֲבֹהֵל מִפְּנֵי חֹלֶךְ אֵל חֲעֻמֵּד בְּדִבְרֵי רָע כִּי כָל אֲשֶׁר יַחְפֹּץ יַעֲשֶׂה. בְּאִשֶּׁר דָּבָר מֶלֶךְ שִׁלְטוֹן וּמִי יֹאמֵר לוֹ מֶה תַּעֲשֶׂה. שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹה לֹא יִדַּע דְּבַר רָע וְעַתָּה וּמִשְׁפָּט יִדַּע לֵב חָכָם.



Accordingly it says, 'His master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, saying, "Lie with me"' (Gen. 39:7). What is written in this connection? 'But he refused. He said to his master's wife...' (Gen. 39:8). This, then, is the reason why it says 'Supreme is the commandment of **דברך**' (Eccl. 8:2), as is supported by 'As she spoke **כדברה** to Joseph every day, that he ignored her' (Gen. 39:10).

'Do not be afraid of his face **מפניו**' (Eccl. 8:3). This is the occasion when he entered the house to do his work and the house was empty **פניו**, no one being present to watch him--'One such day, he came into the house to do his work. None of the household being there inside...' (Gen. 39:11) she advanced and caught hold of his garment, urging him to lie with her; he nevertheless was not terrified by her actions and went out--'She caught hold of him by his coat and said, "Lie with me!" But he left his coat in her hand and got away and fled outside' (Gen. 39:12). That is why it says 'Do not be afraid **מפניו**' (Eccl. 8:3) for he was not afraid of the house's emptiness, but fled and got away, although she told him that if he did not lie with her she would tell her husband that he had wanted to violate her and her husband would kill him and there would be no one to prevent him since he was a slave. In spite of this he did not stay to minister to her desire for the sake of that evil thing which she threatened to do to him. On this account it says: 'Do not stand in an evil thing; for he does whatever pleases him' (Eccl. 8:3). How do you know she threatened him in this manner? From the final words; for when she saw that she did not succeed in her devices, note what she did: 'She called out to her servants...then she told him (her husband) the same story...' (Gen. 39:14ff.).

'For as much as the king's word has power **שלטון**' (Eccl. 8:4). What reward did the Holy One, praised be He, give him for this? **השליטן** He made him ruler over Egypt. So it is written: 'For as much as the king's word' (Eccl. 8:4) which corresponds to 'Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: "In my dream..."' (Gen. 41:17). **שלטון** --Power corresponds to 'Joseph was governor **שליט** over the land' (Gen. 42:6).

'Who may say to him: What do you do?' (Eccl. 8:4) corresponds to 'Go to Joseph. Whatever he tells you, you shall do' (Gen. 41:55). Why did he receive such an honor? Because he observed the commandments. This tallies with 'Whoever keeps the commandments will know no evil thing' (Eccl. 8:5). What is the bearing of 'shall know no evil thing'? It applies to the evil thing which the chief butler spoke:

'There was with us there a young man, a Hebrew, a servant to the captain of the guard' (Gen. 41:12). He mentioned in the passage three things to Joseph's discredit: 1) 'a נַעַר --young man'; conveying the impression that he was foolish. 2) 'a Hebrew'; as much as to say: an enemy. 3) 'a servant'; and therefore unfit for rulership. Yet in spite of all this, Joseph did not know of that 'evil thing'; in other words, the thing did not affect him, for he became a ruler. 'A wise man's heart discerns time and judgement' (Eccl. 8:5). This applies to Joseph, who was called wise--'There is none so discreet and wise as you' (Gen. 41:39), and knew that he would have to give an account of his action if he touched Potiphera's wife, so he kept away from her. So it is written, 'He paid no attention to lie with her' --in this world, 'or to be with her' (Gen. 39:10) --in the next world.

Another exposition is that the text 'A wise man's heart discerns time and judgement' (Eccl. 8:5) applies to the Holy One, praised be He--'He is wise in heart and mighty in strength' (Job 9:4) and who produced an occasion in which to pay Joseph the reward in justice due him, measure for measure. How was this done? Joseph governed his passions and did not touch her. He was accordingly made governor --'Joseph was governor over the land' (Gen. 42:6). He ignored her. Accordingly the Holy One, praised be He, made him ruler over all Egypt and everyone paid attention to (obeyed) him--'Whatever he tells you, you shall do' (Gen. 41:55). His mouth had not kissed פִּי in forbidden circumstances; so 'according to your word will all my people be ruled פִּי' (Gen. 41:40). He had not caught hold of her but she had caught hold of him with her hands; so 'Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand' (Gen. 41:42). He had left his garment in her hand; Pharaoh, therefore, 'dressed him in vestures of fine linen' (Gen. 41:42). He had not bowed his neck to commit a transgression; Pharaoh, therefore, 'put a gold chain about his neck' (Gen. 41:42). He had not ridden רָכַב upon her; so Pharaoh 'made him ride רָכַב in the second chariot which he had' (Gen. 41:43). She had on that account called to the men of her house; so 'They called before him: "Abrech!"' (Gen. 41:43). He was put לְכַבְּדוֹ into prison for that (Gen. 39:20); therefore 'He set לְכַבְּדוֹ him over all the land of Egypt' (Gen. 41:43). He had not set his eyes upon her, nor, when he became a ruler, upon the other Egyptian women, as is inferred from 'Joseph is a fruitful vine... עַל עֵץ' (Gen. 49:22)--implying that he turned away his eye עַל עֵץ

from Potiphar's wife and the other Egyptian women. R. Azariah said: The Holy One, praised be He, said to Joseph: You have kept the precept: Do not commit adultery, the seventh commandment. And you have kept the precept: Do not steal, the eighth commandment. ...A time will come when I will requite you for your deeds. In the future, when the princes will come to bring their offerings at the dedication of the altar, the princes of the tribes of your two sons will have the distinction of presenting their offerings, one on the seventh day and the other on the eighth, and no other tribe will intervene between your two sons, just as you allowed nothing to intervene between the commandments....<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Numbers Rabbah 14:6.

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