

*Short Comments on Parashat Mikketz*  
*Rabbi Eliot Malomet December 4, 2021 30 Kislev 5782 Shabbat Hanukkah*

בראשית מ"א:ל"ד **יעשה פרעה** ויפקד פקדים על־הארץ ותמש את־ארץ מצרים בשבע שגני השבע:

**Genesis 41:34** *And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty.* Having interpreted the dream satisfactorily, Joseph now provides advice for the administration of the state. In this scene Joseph moves into the orbit of Pharaoh. Pharaoh becomes Joseph's surrogate father. Here, the Hebrew *son* gives administrative advice to his Gentile *father*. In Exodus, a Gentile *father* (Yitro) will give administrative advice to his Hebrew *son* (Moses).

מ"א:ל"ח ויאמר פרעה אל־עבדיו הנמצא כזה איש אשר רוח אלקים בו:

**41:38** *And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, "Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?"* The progression of terms used for Joseph throughout the story makes an interesting study. *lad*-נער, *boy*-ילד, *man*-איש, *slave*-עבד, *he-she*-השליט and *provider*-המשביר. Here he is an *איש*. It does seem odd for Pharaoh to state that Joseph possesses *the spirit of God*. But recall that Joseph has already mentioned *God*-אלוהים five times in front of Pharaoh. Pharaoh's reaction, while not a theological affirmation of God's supremacy, is a bemused recognition that this *man* may have some extra special godly power.

מ"א:מ' אמה תהיה עלי־ביתו ועל־פיו ישק כל־עמי רק הפסא אגדל ממך:

**41:40** *You shall be in charge of my house, and by your command shall all my people be directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you.* When the cup-bearer reported to Pharaoh that *there was a Hebrew lad with us in jail* he mentioned that this lad was also slave to the *שר הטבחים*. This must have jogged Pharaoh's memory. How could Pharaoh not have heard of the salacious scandal? Pharaoh knows he has a prodigious talent to run the palace and the state. But he also knows that he's got to neutralize his sexuality and construct a boundary around him to placing him off-limits to the other women in the household. So he marries him off, hence: ויתן־לו אשה *he gave him Asenath daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On as a*

wife and she will bear him two sons. Joseph enters the highest echelon of Egyptian society, but we note that Osnat is not a member of the royal household. Thus, Joseph will always be exploitable if not also disposable because, as a Hebrew, he will never be a part of the royal family.

מ"א:נ"ב ויקרא יוסף את־שם הבכור מנשה כי־נשני אלקים את־כל־עמלי ואת כל־בית אבי: ואת שם השני קרא אפרים כי־הפניני אלקים בארץ עניי:

**41:51-52** *Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction."* Unlike virtually every other character in Genesis, these boys are named by their father and not their mother. By giving them Hebrew names with specific meanings related to the odyssey of his life, Joseph adheres to his ancestral identity while living at the highest level of Egyptian society. Joseph becomes an exemplar of how an ethnic minority can straddle between two cultures.

מ"ב:ה' ויבאו בני ישראל לשבר בתוך הבאים כי־היה הרעב בארץ מצרים:

**42:5** *Thus the sons of Israel were among those who came to procure rations, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan.* This is a snapshot of a larger migration, like all great migrations in which teeming hordes and "huddled masses" pick up and leave their ancestral lands in search of sustenance. But some classical commentators saw this as a covert way for the brothers to enter Egypt indistinguishably.

מ"ב:ט' ויזכר יוסף את החלמות אשר חלם להם ויאמר אלהם מרגלים אתם לראות את־ערות הארץ באתם:

**42:9** *Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them, and said to them, "You are spies! You have come to see the land in its nakedness."* *Remembering* and *forgetting* is a key theme in the story. Joseph asked the cup-bearer to *remember* him but he conveniently *forgot* him. Joseph wants to put the trauma of his abduction and incarceration behind him, but can he really do that? The dreams were essential to his self-understanding. Could he have ever *forgotten* them? *He remembered* perhaps means that as the circumstances of his life changed, his relationship

to these dreams changed as well. He **remembers** them now as an adult, a parent, an immigrant, and as the second most powerful man in Egypt.

מ"ב:י"א-י"ג בָּלְנוּ בְּנֵי אִישׁ-אֶחָד גָּחְנוּ כְּנִים אֲנַחְנוּ לֹא-הָיוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ מִרְגְּלִים: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם לֹא כִּי-עָרַוְתָה הָאָרֶץ בְּאֵתָם לְרֵאוֹת: וַיֹּאמְרוּ שְׁנַיִם עֲשָׂרָה עֲבָדֶיךָ אֲתִים | אֲנַחְנוּ בְּנֵי אִישׁ-אֶחָד בְּאָרֶץ כְּנָעַן וְהִנֵּה הִקְטַן אֶת-אֲבִינוּ הַיּוֹם וְהָאֶחָד אֵינָנוּ:

42:11-13 **We are all of us sons of a single man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies!** And he said to them, "No! You have come to see the nakedness of the land!" And they replied, "Your servants are **twelve, we are brothers, sons of a single man** in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, **and one is no more.**" This is what makes the Bible great! In this excerpt we have all the information we need to experience the tension of this scene. By stating first that they are the **sons of a single man** Joseph can immediately perceive the fault lines and tension among them. By stating **we are honest men** we can feel Joseph's blood begin to boil: *Sure. Yeah. Right.* When he charges them with spying, they are taken aback and spill more of the truth that they have just concealed from him. **We are twelve.** That is, we *were* twelve. **We are brothers.** That is, *kind of.* We have a dark past. The youngest brother stayed home **and one is no more - kind of.**

מ"ב:י"ח וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף בְּיָוֵם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי זָאת עָשׂוּ וְהָיוּ אֶת-הָאֱלֹקִים אֲנִי יָרֵא:

42:18 **On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man.** This ought to have baffled them or at least signaled something strange to them. Who in Egypt fears God? Why would he grant them a temporary reprieve?

מ"ב:כ"א וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו אֲבֵל אֲשָׁמִים | אֲנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְקַנְנוּ אֵלָינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְנוּ עַל-כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלָינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת:

42:21 **They said to one another, "Alas, we are guilty on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us."** A case study of how memory of past events changes with age and how essential our need is to explain suffering. This moment kindles their moral reckoning, but their guilt has been simmering now for over 20 years.

מ"ב:כ"ב וַיַּעַזְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר אֲתָם לֹא-רְאוּבֵן אֶתְּמַרְתִּי אֵלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר אֶל-יַחֲזָקוּ אֶת-בְּנֵיךָ וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם וְגַם דָּמְוּ הֵגָה נִדְרָשׁ:

42:22 **Reuben answered them, saying: "Did I not**

**tell you, saying thus: 'Thou shalt not sin against the boy'? But you heard not. Thus, his blood is now sought!"** Reuben is the butt of the Torah's satire. Cloaked in piety and self-righteousness, (and pomposity!) first, he never said that! Second, by his failure to protect Joseph, he is the one most responsible for what happened! Filled with his first-born's sense of entitlement, Reuben casts himself as the moral compass of the family. Ludicrous! He slept with his step-mother!

מ"ב:כ"ג וְהֵם לֹא יָדְעוּ כִּי שָׁמַע יוֹסֵף כִּי הִמְלִיץ בֵּינָהֶם: 42:23 **They did not know that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between him and them.** A brilliant piece of biblical theatricality!

מ"ב:כ"ד וַיִּסָּב מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וַיִּבְרַךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב אֲלֵהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם וַיִּקְהַל מֵאֵתָם אֶת-שְׁמֵעוֹן וַיֹּאסֶר אֹתוֹ לְעֵינֵיהֶם:

42:24 **He turned away from them and wept. But he came back to them and spoke to them; and he took Simeon from among them and had him bound before their eyes.** Weeping runs in the family. Why Simeon? Conjecture: Simeon's very name recalls hate. **God heard that I was hated** is what Leah said when she named him. By incarcerating Simeon, Joseph telegraphs to the brothers that God heard that he, Joseph was hated.

מ"ג:ו וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל לָמָּה הִרְעַתְּם לִי לְהַגִּיד לְאִישׁ הַעֲוֹד לְכֶם אֵל: 43:6 **And Israel said, "Why did you serve me so ill as to tell the man that you had another brother?"** In his continuing grief, Jacob cannot step out of his own frame of reference. Devoid of empathy and expansive perspective, he can only relate events to **himself** and his own suffering.

מ"ג:ז וַיֹּאמֶר הַיְהוּדָה אֶל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיו שְׁלַחְתָּה הַגֹּעַר אֵתִי וְנִקְוַמָּה וְנִגְלָה וְנִחַיְתָה וְלֹא נָמוּת גַּם-אֲנַחְנוּ גַם-אַתָּה גַם-טַפְּנוּ:

43:8 **Then Judah said to his father Israel, "Send the lad with me, we will up and go, we will live and not die—we, you, and our children.** Since the sale of Joseph, the political center of the family has switched to Judah. Judah is the one who creates the larger frame for what is happening. Brilliantly, he honors his father by restating his father's objective. **we will live and not die.** (42:2)

מ"ג:כ"ד וַיָּבֵא הָאִישׁ אֶת-הָאֲנָשִׁים בֵּיתָה יוֹסֵף וַיִּתֶּן-מַלִּים וַיִּרְחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיהֶם וַיִּתֶּן מִסְפּוֹא לְחַמְרֵיהֶם:

43:24 **Then the man brought the men into Joseph's house; he gave them water to bathe their feet, and he provided feed for their asses.** Another anonymous **man** propels the story (see 37:15). Great theatricality: The final confrontation takes place in Joseph's **house.** But why...?

Shabbat Shalom!

שבת שלום!

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