

Pharaoh has had his dreams. Nobody can interpret them. His master cupbearer conveniently remembers that when he and the master baker were thrown in jail for whatever, there was this Hebrew kid in there with them, and that when he interpreted their dreams everything that subsequently happened to them had been correctly foreseen by Joseph's interpretations. With nary a nod to the cupbearer, Pharaoh sends for the boy, has him washed up, shaven, and clothed properly. When he tells Joseph his dreams, Joseph effortlessly interprets them, proving his prodigious talent while upstaging the crew of court magicians, soothsayers and sycophants. Pharaoh is enthralled by him and elevates Joseph to a position of power second only to himself. He gives him his ring, a set of new linen clothes, a golden collar; he parades him in public, and declares, *Without you no man shall raise hand or foot in all the land of Egypt* (Gen. 41:44). All of that happens in public. And then this:

וַיִּקְרָא פַרְעֹה שֵׁם יוֹסֵף **צִפְנָת פַּעֲנָח** וַיִּתֵּן לוֹ אֶת אֲסֵנַת בַּת פּוֹטִי פֶרֶעַ  
כֶּהֱן אֵן לֵאשָׁה וַיֵּצֵא יוֹסֵף עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

*And Pharaoh called Joseph's name: **Tzafenat Pane'ah/The God Speaks**, He Has Life, and he gave him Asenat, daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On, as a wife. And Joseph's [influence] went out over the land of Egypt.* (Gen. 41:45)

He gets a new name. He gets a new wife. The new name is a thoroughly Egyptian name,<sup>1</sup> and the new wife is a thoroughly Egyptian woman.<sup>2</sup> What is the significance of the name and the wife? Both are located on the boundary between public and private. Your name is your brand to the public, but it is also your private identity. Joseph's new name gives him a new public identity that is in conflict with his private identity. Similarly, his new wife. A marriage is a private bond, but it also plays itself out in the public sphere. Joseph marries Asenat. They have a private, intimate life. But they also have a public life. Joseph now occupies a place in the highest echelons of Egyptian society. The marriage makes Joseph and Asenat into an Egyptian "Power Couple." When we, in the audience, hear this development in the story, we have a reaction: *Who is Joseph now? Is he an Egyptian or is he still a Hebrew? What does this mean for him? What does this mean for us?* We wonder how an Israelite audience would have related to Joseph. Would they have identified with the new challenges to his identity? It seems obvious that later generations of Jews certainly would have identified with

that struggle. Indeed, that struggle animates diaspora Jews right until this day. Especially in the aftermath of this week's massacre in Australia. Who are we? What are we? To which culture do we belong? Can we live in both Jewish culture and the culture of the society around us? Or do we have to erect a boundary between those cultures? To what extent does the culture around us play out in our private lives, and to what extent does our private culture play out in our public lives?

Arguably, there is nothing that represents these questions more than the name we give our children. There is a social history of naming. Naming styles come and go.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary diaspora Judaism, the overwhelming practice is to give a child one set of names in English and another set in Hebrew, with large groups on both ends of the identity spectrum opting to give their children names either only in English or only in Hebrew. What will Joseph, now known publicly as **Tzafenat Pane'ah**, do when it comes to naming his children?

וַיִּוֹסֶף יֶלֶד שְׁנֵי בָנִים בְּטָרֵם תְּבוֹא שְׁנַת הָרָעָב אֲשֶׁר יִלְדָּה לוֹ אֲסֵנַת  
בַּת פּוֹטִי פֶרֶעַ כֶּהֱן אֵן. וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי וַיֹּשִׁי  
אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל עַמְלִי וְאֶת כָּל בֵּית אָבִי. וְאֶת שֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי קָרָא אֶפְרַיִם  
כִּי הִפְרִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֻרִי.

*Now two sons were born to Joseph, before the year of famine came, whom Asenat, daughter of Poti Fera, priest of On, bore to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn: **Menashe/He-Who-Makes-Forget**, meaning: **God has made-me-forget all my hardships, all my father's house**. And the name of the second he called: **Efrayim/Double-Fruit**, meaning: **God has made me bear fruit in the land of my affliction**. (Gen. 41:50-52)*

Here are three observations: **1. Language.** Joseph names them in Hebrew. While many attempts have been made to find similar sounding Egyptian equivalents for these names, the scholarly consensus is that these names are Hebrew names. (Unlike for example, Moses which is an Egyptian name. Moses is Egyptian for "born of."<sup>4</sup> Pinhas is also an Egyptian name. It means, "the Nubian.") Joseph deliberately chooses Hebrew names for his sons. Perhaps they also had Egyptian names, the same way many of us have English names. *Regardless, the very fact that he gives them Hebrew names means that he wants to intentionally keep his children differentiated from Egyptian society.* In that way he is indicating that he is still preserving part of his private life. **2. The Explanation of the Names.** What is Joseph trying to say here? After 40 chapters of Genesis,

<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding a consistent effort among commentators, Rashi and others to shoehorn it into Hebrew for the compelling, **One Who Reveals the Hidden**.

<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the extraordinary effort the rabbis make to identify her as the daughter of Dina, the child conceived by her when she was raped by Shechem, making her Joseph's half-niece. According to the midrash, Jacob gave her a neckplate engraved with God's name, and had her sent down to Egypt with

the angel Michael who took her to the house of Poti Fera whose wife was barren and elated to adopt her. (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 38:1-2).

<sup>3</sup> The top 5 names in 2025. Girls: Olivia, Amelia, Sophia, Emma, Isabella. Boys: Noah, Liam, Oliver, Elijah, and Mateo. In 1975 they were: Jennifer, Amy, Heather, Melissa, Angela; Michael, Jason, Christopher, James, David.

<sup>4</sup> Thutmose means born of Thoth; Ramose means born of Ra.

we are familiar with plenty of naming stories. Quite often a name is chosen as an encapsulation of a sentiment or a prayer. Here Joseph (whose own name, by the way, has two etymologies)<sup>5</sup> names his two sons with two seemingly contradictory sentiments:

מְנַשֶּׁה	נַשְׁחִי	God made me forget	all my hardships, all my father's house.
Menashe	nashani		
אֶפְרַיִם	הִפְרָנִי	God made me be bear fruit	in the land of my affliction.
Efrayim	hifrani		

**3. The Difficulty with Menashe's Name.** Of the two names, Menashe's is the more problematic. For openers, it makes no sense to name your child in honor of forgetting something. *In every single one of the naming stories in Genesis the name functions as a reminder of some extraordinary thing!* We do that to this day when we name our children! When we name our children after someone, every time we say their name, even in the most trivial of circumstances, we are consciously or unconsciously remembering who they were named for. Of course, at some point these children grow up and "own" their names themselves. Nevertheless, their names will always encode some memory of the person they were named for. *It simply does not make sense that Joseph would choose a name for his firstborn that invokes the idea of forgetting.* It is actually quite ironic! Everytime he says the name "Menashe," he will be thinking about his desire to forget his past, and, as a result, he will instead be remembering it! Could there be an alternate explanation for Menashe's name? The answer is, yes! According to Ibn Ezra and Rashbam, נַשְׁחִי-nashani, comes from the root נ.ש.ח. That root means something like "graciousness." Thus, according to them, when Joseph named Menashe he meant to say *God was gracious to me from all my hardships and my father's household.* Robert Alter introduces yet a third alternative. He writes: *The naming pun is on the verbal stem: נ.ש.ח. The virtually universal construal of this term here is "made me forget," but it must be said that the root in that sense occurs only five times in the biblical corpus, and at least two or three of those are doubtful. It is also*

*somewhat odd that Joseph should celebrate God for having made him forget his father's house. But a very common usage of נ.ש.ח. is "to hold in debt," and a natural meaning of that stem in the pi'el conjugation, as here, would be "to relieve from the condition of debt." Such an unambiguously positive verb is a better parallel to "made me fruitful" in the next verse. Translation: The majority of classic commentators and modern translators think that Menashe means, *he made me forget.* That's what it means in the few other places we find it. But because it's a very rare word it's not clear what it means in all cases. There is however, another way to translate this word. It has to do with debt. Thus, according to Robert Alter the explanation of Menashe's name is: *God has released me of all the debt of my hardship and of all my father's house.* That's actually a very compelling alternative interpretation. Joseph construes his years of hardship as years of debt that he has had to pay off in order to be free, similar to the way his own father had to pay off a debt through labor. Joseph's elevation from being a prisoner to Pharaoh's second in command is similar to an emancipation from indentured servitude. Now that Joseph is free, he is no longer in debt for his past. He's his own man.*

Traditional Interpretation	Robert Alter's Interpretation
Menashe:	Menashe:
God made me forget	God released me of debt
The Diaspora Jew	The guy who made it.

Why then does the tradition (and most translators) opt for *God made me forget* as opposed to *God has released me from debt*? I believe the answer lies in how the tradition views Joseph. *Because Joseph will forever be the outsider striving to have a place on the inside; because Joseph is always trying to figure out who he is; because Joseph will always wonder whether or not he fits into Egyptian society, Joseph will always be the archetype for the diaspora Jew.* Therefore, the way he names his son has to conform to our archetype of a diaspora Jew. On the other hand, Alter's Joseph is simply a guy who is thankful for being free. There are no struggles here - at least for now. They will certainly come. But having been brought out of jail, elevated to the second most powerful position in the land, having just gotten married to a beautiful woman from an elite family, and having just had his first child, what's not to be thankful for? We don't need to project on him - at least for now, that is - any of our own conflicts and struggles about living with complicated identities as a minority. Just let him enjoy his achievement. We know the conflicts and struggles will come. They surely will. Shabbat Shalom.

**In memory of the fifteen victims of the Sydney Hanukkah shooting (only fourteen shown here): top row (left to right) - Reuven Morrison, Rabbi Yaakov Levitan, Dan Elkayam, Alex Kleytman, Rabbi Eli Schlanger; middle row (left to right) - Edith Brutman, Peter Meagher, Tibor Weitzen, Marika Pogany, Matilda [last name withheld]; bottom row (left to right) - Boris Tetleroyd, Adam Smyth, Sofia and Boris Gurman. May their memories be a blessing.**  
**REMEBERING RAN GVILI.**  
**MAY HIS BODY BE RETURNED.**



<sup>5</sup> Rachel named him saying, *Yosef hashem, May God grant me an additional son.* (Gen. 30:24), and *Asaf Elohim, God has removed my reproach* (Gen. 30:23)