

# Does Joseph Forgive His Brothers?

## *A Discussion*

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Back in the day, when I was starting college there was a wildly popular movie called Love Story, based on Eric Siegel best selling novel. Love Story was the story of two star-crossed college student who fall in love despite differences and parental opposition. The story ends in tragedy when pregnant Jenny is diagnosed with cancer and dies in Oliver's arms. You may remember that the tag line of the movie was "Love means never having to say you're sorry."

Every so often I think about Love Story and its famous by-line: I don't know that any statement is farther from the truth. If I were writing a novel or a movie called Love Story, the tag line would be: "Love means being able to say you're sorry." Or better yet, it would be "Love means knowing how to admit you're wrong."

I thought about *Love Story* this week as I read the climax of the Joseph saga. Having hidden his identity and played a cruel game of cat and mouse with his from his brothers, Joseph is overcome with remorse when he hears Judah's impassioned plea on behalf of Benjamin. Judah reminds Joseph of the events that have led to this moment: how the brothers came in search of food for their family; how the viceroy questioned them and insisted that they bring Benjamin to Egypt; how their father could not bear to lose his youngest son. Finally, in the climax of his speech, Judah offers to remain behind as a slave to Joseph rather than cause their father any more pain. Overcome with emotion, the viceroy of Egypt sends his servants from the room and cries out: "I'm Joseph! Is MY father still well?"

Imagine, for a moment, how the brothers must have felt. This was their worst nightmare – Joseph, the brother who they tried to kill and who they sold into slavery, is the most powerful man in Egypt and they are at his mercy! What could they possibly say? The brothers are so terrified that they can't even speak.

But Joseph goes on: Come forward to me...I'm your brother WHO YOU SOLD INTO EGYPT! Now don't be distressed or reproach yourself because YOU SOLD ME HITHER! It was to save life that GOD SENT ME ahead of you... So now it is not you who SENT ME HERE BUT GOD."

Joseph instructs his brothers to go home and inform their father that he's alive. They are to tell Jacob: "YOU (*this is important: the verb is second person singular. Joseph is only talking to his dad*) YOU will dwell in the land of Goshen where YOU will be near me – YOU and your children and your grandchildren, your flocks and your herds and all that is yours. THERE I WILL PROVIDE FOR YOU (again, Jacob)... You must tell MY FATHER everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen. And bring MY FATHER here with all speed."

As I read Joseph's story this year, I began to see it in a different light than I had ever seen it before. No where does Joseph actually forgive. He comes up with an explanation (or maybe an excuse) for his brothers' bad behavior and why everything happened the way it did was part of God's plan. Does

Joseph simply let go of his anger so easily? Was this a matter of ‘forgive and forget?’ Or was this an example, to quote Love Story, of “love means never having to say you’re sorry?”

For that matter, nowhere do the brothers admit their wrong or forgive Joseph for the cruel test through which he has just put them. Granted, Joseph had every reason not to trust his brothers, but did that justify his actions or his twenty year absence from Canaan. Joseph allowed his father to grieve for twenty long years.

So I’m troubled by this story. It’s too simple: Joseph reveals his identity; he tells his brothers that it was all God’s doing and everyone lives happily ever after..

Well, sort of. When Jacob dies (in next week’s parshah) the brothers turn to one another and say: “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for the wrong we did to him?” They then go to Joseph and ramble on about how their father said: Forgive, I urge you, all the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you harshly...” Of course, Jacob never said any of this.

Hearing his brothers’ fib, Joseph cries; he realizes that there has been no quid pro quo between them. The old resentments and fears are still present. And the truth is, I am not convinced that Joseph has forgiven them: He says: “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Although you intended me harm and God intended it for good... Notice the zinger. Joseph says, “**Although you intended me harm...**” Joseph never lets his brothers forget what they did. So does Joseph forgive? Do the brothers ever admit that they were wrong? Does it matter? Can there be healing with out forgiveness and a sincere acknowledgement of wrongdoing?

I’d like to end with the words of Moses Maimonides. He writes: “With regard to all the precepts of the Torah, both positive and negative, if a person transgresses, either willfully or in error, when he repents and turns away from his sin, he is under a duty to confess before God.” Maimonides suggests that there are three parts to such a confession: 1) acknowledgment of sin (“*I have sinned, I have acted perversely, I have transgressed*’); 2) remorse (“*I am contrite and ashamed of my deeds*’); 3) resolution for the future (“*I will never do this again*’).

Maimonides also suggests that forgiveness must be part of this process: It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not grant pardon. Rather, one should easily forgive and not easily grow angry, and when the offender requests forgiveness he should forgive with a full heart and generous spirit. Even if he caused him distress and committed many offenses against him, he shall not exact revenge or bear a grudge. This is the way of the Israelite people and their principled heart.

Let me end where I began: Does love mean, ‘never having to say your sorry?’ Did Joseph forgive his brothers? And do the brothers acknowledge their wrong doing? Or is this a story of let bygones be bygones?

How important is it to say, “I forgive you?” or to acknowledge when one is wrong? And if it is, what are we to make of the story of Joseph. This story seems to contradict Maimonides’ understanding of *Teshuvah*? Is there another way to read this story?

I suspect that there isn’t a person here who doesn’t bear a grudge – at least a small one – against someone: family or friend, neighbor or co-worker. How do we repair relationships when they are broken? Sometimes we bear grudges against the very people we care about the most. Shouldn’t ‘forgive and forget’ be enough if you really love someone?

Here is an interesting tidbit I came across on line: in Eric Siegel's novel the tag line at the end of the book was: "Love is not ever having to say you're sorry." Not quite the same as the movie – I wonder if that changes the lesson of this movie. No one has to say you're sorry – but it is a good thing to do. I suspect that is a better ending to the story of Joseph!! So tell me what do you think?

Shabbat Shalom