

Torah Table Talk

Joseph: A Messenger from God?

Parshat Vayigash

Genesis Chapter 44:18 - 47:27



The story of Joseph reaches its climax as Joseph breaks down and reveals his true identity to his brothers. Deeply moved by Judah's speech in defense of Benjamin, Joseph bursts into tears and says, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" His brothers, overwhelmed and terrified, stand before their estranged brother unsure of how he will now react. Whatever anger Joseph may have felt quickly turns to forgiveness and reconciliation. He sends his brothers home with ample food to tell their father the good news that his favored son is still alive. All is forgotten. Joseph invites them to return and to remain in Egypt as long as the famine lasts. In a moment of transformation, Joseph reassesses the events of his life. Resentment turns to forgiveness. In a moment of insight he comes to understand that God has a special plan for him.

Genesis 45: 4-8

"I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither, it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been a famine in the land and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. God sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on the earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not you who sent me here but God..."

1. You may remember that Joseph's arrogance was got him into trouble as a young man. Has Joseph changed or is he still as arrogant as he was when he was a youngster? Is it presumptuous of him to assume God sent him to save his family?
2. Do you think Joseph offered this explanation as a way of assuaging his brothers' guilt and sorrow over selling him into slavery, or did he really believe that he was part of a divine plan?
3. How is Joseph's experience of God different from that of his father and grandfather? How are we more like Joseph than we are like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
4. President Bush has repeatedly said that he believes he was chosen by God to lead America. How are the President's statements different from Joseph's comments to his brothers when he finally revealed his true identity to them?

Isaac Abarbanel

How come Joseph says, "Surely it was not you who sent me here but God"? Surely they deliberately and knowingly sold him to harm him. The fact that by a fluke the sale turned out well did not mitigate the offence. A person is not judged by the accidental results of his deeds but by his intent. The accidental results are irrelevant to the moral dimension.

1. What bothered Abarbanel about Joseph's statement to his brothers? How would you answer Abarbanel's question?
2. A thief breaks into a house to rob it. While he is there a fire breaks out and he manages to drag all the inhabitants to safety. Is the man guilty of theft or not? Does it matter whether or not he actually took anything from the house in the end? To what extent is intent the grounds for judging others?

Genesis: The Beginning of Desire

by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

Joseph's strategy is essentially to reveal to his brothers a Joseph empathic with their inner conflicts. The main thrust of his speech serves to show them his loving interpretation of his own history: the sale was for the sake of his life, his cruel experience was, in fact, a mission to save his family from starvation in the famine years. God's plot is the only level of the narrative that matters to him, he tells them. And ultimately, the purpose of his speech is to provide them with a narrative to tell their father, to diffuse the shame of their situation...

This is the central point: Joseph's speech of reassurance is full of references to God—unlike Judah's speech. It seems replete with theological propositions. But in fact, Joseph is not making sententious theoretical statements; he is talking about his own life, and he is doing so in order to provide his brothers with the only stratagem that will help them to scotch their own shame. He gives them a story to tell their father, to ground the electric furies of their own humiliation...

1. According to Zornberg, why does Joseph invent an elaborate story of why he was sold into slavery? Is Joseph really convinced by his own argument that he has been chosen by God to perform some mission?
2. How are Judah's and Joseph's speeches different from one another? Whose story comes closer to the reality of the situation?
3. What does Joseph's reaction to his brothers say about forgiveness? Does it suggest "Forgive and forget," or does Joseph still harbor anger and hurt because of the way his brothers have treated him?
4. How does Joseph frame the truth for his own purposes? Do you think it is correct to do this? Do we sometimes 'squeeze' the truth in order to appease others?

Glossary

Don Isaac Abarbanel: Fifteenth century Jewish Bible commentator. He was also the treasurer to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle of Spain just before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

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