

D”T Parashat Mikketz

Shabbat shalom!

Mikketz is the second parasha of the Joseph story, perhaps the longest narrative in the Torah excepting the Exodus. It consists of Vayeshev (last week’s reading), Mikketz, Vayigash, and finally Vayeshi. Last week, we saw Joseph as a callow youth, favored by his father, arrogant, and outraging his brothers and his father with his grandiose dreams. Importantly, Vayeshev ends with Joseph languishing in prison. Ellen Hochman, who gave this crash last year, emphasized Joseph’s sawtoothed pattern of life with his ups and downs.

In Mikketz, fortune smiles on him again, and he becomes viceroy of Egypt, second only in power to Pharaoh.

My approach to the Joseph story will be in the spirit of the “Bible as Literature.” My message is simply, the Joseph story, regardless of what else it is, is great literature.

Let’s look at 2 recurring themes. I emphasize “recurring” because they keep coming back to us, just like musical themes in a Mozart or Beethoven composition. The themes are 1. Dreams and 2. Memory.

DREAMS: In our modern times, we look on dreams in Freudian terms: they demonstrate wish fulfillment. In biblical times dreams were regarded as divine messages foretelling the future. So Joseph’s first dreams demonstrated his brothers and father bowing down to him. In this Parasha, we see that literally taking place. When he was imprisoned for the crime against Potiphar’s wife, he hears of a double dream from the butler and the baker. He interprets the dreams as predicting the return of the butler to Pharaoh’s service, and the baker, to be hung. And so it was. Now with Pharaoh’s dreams, we hear again a double pattern of analogous dreams, the fat and lean cows and then the fat and lean ears of corn. Joseph explains the dreams by 1. uniting them as one. and 2. explaining that they are predictive of the disaster that looms ahead.

“ It is just as I have told Pharaoh; Elohim has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.” (41:28)

But at this point, Joseph becomes very clever. As Ernie Rabinowicz Z”L taught, here he sketches a brief job description and a cogent action plan to deal with the imminent crisis.

“Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom and set him over the Land of Egypt” (41:33)

As the reading continues, we learn that he got the job, and that his interpretations, predictions, and action plan were accepted. (This is a model of a successful consultation.

There is a sidebar here that I wish to insert. It involves the frequent allusion to Elohim, especially from Joseph. When Pharaoh first meets Joseph, he imagines him as a man with magical powers of dream interpretation.

“I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it. Now I have heard it said of you, that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning.” (41:15)

But Joseph answered, “ Not I. Elohim will see to Pharaoh’s welfare.” (41:16)

But after the recitation of the double dream and Joseph’s interpretation and consultation, Pharaoh answers, “ Could we find another like him in whom is the spirit of Elohim? “ (41-38)

Pharaoh seems to have picked up the idea that Elohim has a lot to do with what is about to happen. Even tho in the entire Joseph narrative, there is no direct dialog between Joseph and Elohim, Joseph keeps bringing up his faith in God. When Joseph finally reveals himself (I’m skipping ahead) to his brothers in Vayigash, he explains “ Elohim has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival....” (45-7)

The narrative feels a bit like a puppet show, and Elohim is the puppeteer.

MEMORY: The second main theme is memory. The issue of memory begins at the end of Vayeshev, after Joseph explains to the butler that he’ll be restored to his former position as Pharaoh’s cup bearer. Please remember me, implores Joseph. But the last sentence of Vayeshev reads:

“ Yet the Chief Cupbearer did not think of Joseph; he forgot him” (40-25)

But 2 years later, as the drama and tension build in the Pharonic Court, and the Chartumei Mizrayim, the Wizards of Egypt fail to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh, the cup bearer finally remembers the Hebrew slave who got it exactly right. “I remember my errors today.” (41-9)

Another important scene where memory figures is in the encounter between the disguised Joseph and his brothers, those country bumpkin shepherds from Canaan. Standing before his brothers and seeing them bowing before him, he recalls those youthful and injurious dreams.

“ And he recalled the dreams that he dreamed about them.” (47-9)

As Joseph cranked up the pressure , accusing them of being spies, old and unpleasant memories returned to the brothers.

“They said to one another, alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on his anguish yet paid not heed as he pleaded with us.” (42-21)

This literary device, where Joseph recognizes them, and we the readers know his identity, but the brothers and even Jacob don’t know, is in the great tradition of disguise in literature.

Likewise, the building of dramatic tension, first surrounding Pharaoh’s insoluble dreams, and later the testing of the brothers by Joseph, builds up like a head of steam in an engine. Happily,

next week in Vayigash, Joseph is overcome with emotion and reveals himself. This is the denouement of the story, and it reads like all great literature.

So we have in Genesis a great story, inspiring to the Jewish people (Yoseph HaTzaddik) and perhaps to others. To quote Ernie again, Joseph is the biblical figure closest to us. He lives in a gentile society, and makes a great civic contribution, but retains his faith in Elohim. He serves as a technocrat, highly successful, but is still an outsider.

My only regret here as I read this majestic narrative, devoid of violence or real sex, is that the story was popularized for the Broadway stage as Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. Pharaoh is portrayed as Elvis Presley. In our Torah, Joseph begins as a twit, but matures into a most sympathetic character. Let's discuss some more.

Shabbat shalom!

Sid Kadish
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