

Jacob's Decision

In this week's Torah portion Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food while their own land is in the grip of famine. However he does not send Benjamin. Having already lost his son Joseph, Jacob is determined to protect Benjamin, his youngest.

In Egypt the brothers meet Joseph (although they do not recognize him) who is now in a position of power. Joseph taunts them in a dangerous game, demanding that they fetch Benjamin in return for protection and food. Is Jacob's heart about to be broken all over again? Read the story in 42:1-43:14, with particular attention to the character of Jacob.

Having read the story in Gen. 42:1-43:14, share some initial reactions to the text. In particular, which verses reveal something of Jacob's inner anguish? E.g., read 42:4 in the light of the preceding verses. See, too, 42:36-38. The family is desperate for food, but still Jacob will not part with Benjamin. What does this suggest about the family dynamics?

Attuned to the rabbinic sensitivity to detail, let us now undertake an even closer reading of the text. Compare 42:2 ("Go down that way and buy us provisions from there, that we may live and not die") with Jacob's instruction in 43:2 ("Go back and buy us a bit of food"). Did you notice the qualification "a bit"? There is nothing to suggest the famine has eased. On the contrary, "the famine bore heavily on the land" (43:1) and their supplies are depleted. Why would Jacob say, "a bit of food"?

In this tiny textual inclusion did you hear the deeper pathos of the scene? Jacob, say some Jewish Torah commentators, is clutching at straws. Perhaps if his family asks for little, the powerful man in Egypt will likewise lower his cruel expectations and spare Benjamin. Judah, however, confronts his father with the cold hard facts of the situation. Re-read Judah's reply in 43:3-5.

Reflect on his angry statement in 43:6-7. What point is there in apportioning blame? What good can a family row about past events possibly achieve? It changes nothing of their grim predicament and only postpones the one choice that has any hope of saving them all from death by starvation. Notice how a careful reading of the text reveals the Torah's emotional intensity.

Did you note, too, how the text suddenly switches to using Jacob's 'other' name: Israel? (Recall Gen.32:29: "No more shall you be called Jacob, but Israel...for you have wrestled with God and with human beings, and you have prevailed.") Why might it do this?

After another intervention by Judah, Jacob (Israel) ends his procrastination and gives the order for Benjamin's departure to Egypt. He is decisive, and yet... can we still hear strains of desperation resounding in 43:11-14?

Ponder the human complexities When Joseph eventually meets Benjamin, the Torah tells us: "*He looked up and saw his [full] brother Benjamin, his mother's son*" (43:29). We are reminded that Rachel was the mother of both Benjamin and Joseph. Rachel, who died in Gen.35:19, was Jacob's great love. (Revisit their love story in Genesis 29.) Perhaps this is part of the reason why Jacob's heart clung to Joseph and Benjamin.

By contrast, little concern seems to be shown for Simeon who is being held in Egyptian captivity while Jacob procrastinates!

Think about the difficult, even heart-breaking decisions which must be made at times in family life. In what way does this Torah portion speak to your life? •

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994). Scripture quotations: Chaim Stern (trans., 1999) in Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York, 2008).

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