

“I am Joseph your Brother”

“I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold to Egypt” (Genesis 45:4).

With these words, Joseph reveals his true identity to his estranged brothers. They have been apart for so long, ever since Joseph was betrayed by them and sold into slavery. But now the tables have turned... Joseph is the powerful one, having found a place of favour in Egypt’s royal court. Yet, as we see in this part of the story, Joseph’s memory of his family and Hebrew roots runs deep.

Read through the whole of this reconciliation scene in 44:18-45:15. Read it again, and aloud, with a friend. Place yourself in the drama of the narrative and the emotion of the characters. What stands out to each of you? How does God’s Word speak to the curiosity of your minds, to the movement of your hearts? As you ponder, let’s hear from some of the revered commentators of Jewish tradition... what do the Jewish sages of old find noteworthy in the text?

The sages were fascinated by Judah’s speech just prior to Joseph’s self-disclosure:

“My Lord, please give your servant a hearing and do not let your anger flare up at your servant—for you are like Pharaoh” (44:18).

How do you understand Judah’s words? Is he saying “You are merciful like Pharaoh”? or “You are cruel like Pharaoh”? Is Judah being politically wise, or risking foolhardy insolence? He certainly knows how to pull Joseph’s heartstrings by mentioning their aged and lonely father. The sages present a variety of views ranging from Judah’s absolute sincerity to his ability to gain the upper hand over Joseph. How do you view Judah’s approach to Joseph?

Note, too, the irony that Judah should beg to replace Benjamin as a slave to Joseph. Judah, who was the principal architect of the sale of Joseph into slavery, now proposes that he become Joseph’s slave!

In the face of Joseph’s revelation, his brothers are dumbfounded. *“They were unable to answer him—they recoiled in fear of him” (45:3).* A number of the sages remark on Joseph’s display of compassion. Rashi,¹ for instance, says that Joseph cries *“Send everyone away from me!”* because he could not bear having the Egyptians there, witnessing the humiliation of his brothers when his true identity was revealed. Says Rashi, Joseph calls his brothers to *“Come, draw near to me!” (45.4)* so as to speak to them gently, in Hebrew no less, and to prove his identity by showing that he is circumcised.

A striking aspect of this scene is Joseph’s willingness to forgive, even reassuring his brothers that the episode of their mistreatment of him was the work of God who directs all human destiny. *“For it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (45.5).* It takes maturity to exhibit such confidence in divine providence. It appears that Joseph’s past, filled with tragic events, has shaped him into a man of steadfast confidence. Do you agree?

“I am Joseph your brother” (45:4) is a line that holds meaning for interreligious dialogue today. At an historic meeting between Pope John XXIII and Jewish leaders at the time of Vatican II, Pope John (whose Christian name was Giuseppe, ‘Joseph’) opened his address with the words *“I am Joseph your brother,”* marking a new era of reconciliation in Catholic-Jewish relations.

Continue to discuss this Torah portion, seeking insights into the process of reconciliation.

1. Rashi: 11th century Torah commentator.

Bibliography: Goldstein, ed., *The Women’s Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, 2000); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York, 1994); Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate* (1965); *“I Am Joseph Your Brother”* (IRCC; ICJS, 2001).

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