

Joseph Stands His Ground

Have you ever been placed in a situation where your life, career or a relationship hung in the balance? A moment when your next choice of words or behaviour could have dire consequences?

That's the kind of moment that Joseph finds himself in Genesis 41. Sold into slavery by his brothers and imprisoned in an Egyptian dungeon, suddenly Joseph finds himself with a chance at freedom. His talent for dream-interpretation has been noticed, and he has been brought before Pharaoh to interpret a dream which has been troubling the Egyptian king.

There is no doubt that this is a critical moment for Joseph. So much is at risk! Will he find favour with Pharaoh and save his skin? Or will he be returned to jail? Read their interaction in Genesis 41:14-36. Can you sense the pressure of the moment?

Look carefully at Joseph's reply to Pharaoh in 41:16, 25-32. A recurring theme threads its way through the text. Repetition catches the attention of traditional Jewish interpreters who ponder its significance. In this case it leads some commentators to conclude that this is a fine moment in Joseph's life. Why? Because he stands in the midst of an antagonistic, pagan environment and courageously invokes the name of God. Can you pick the repetition?

Verse 16: "Not I," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "*God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer.*"

Verse 26: "*God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is going to do.*"

Verse 28: "*God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is going to do.*"

Verse 32: "...the event is already *determined by God, and God will shortly bring it about.*"

Clearly, for Joseph, God is active and centre-stage. God is the one who does, who *reveals*, who *determines* and who *brings to pass*.

But is Joseph displaying strong faith or simply being a smart strategist? If we delve a little further back into this story we find our thread of repetition in other situations as well:

To his master's wife who tries to seduce him Joseph says: "How could I do anything so wicked, and *sin against God?*" (39:9).

And to his fellow prisoners who are troubled by their dreams he says, "Are not interpretations *God's business?*" (40:8).

It can be argued, then, that Joseph is a God-fearing Israelite, who chooses to openly proclaim the God of his people in the presence of Pharaoh.

Fortunately for Joseph, his reply meets with Pharaoh's favour ("Can we find anyone else endowed with the spirit of God, like him?" 41:38). It even brings Pharaoh to a certain recognition of the God of Israel, for he now approaches Joseph not simply as an expert on dreams but as a collaborator with God. ("Since God has given you knowledge of all this..." 41:39). The king of Egypt for the first time defers to the King of kings.

Think about it:

- How difficult is it to bear witness to your faith, to your church, or simply to be true to yourself, in a potentially hostile environment?
- Share an experience where you were faced with a 'Joseph before Pharaoh' moment.
- What are some of the ordinary ways you 'invoke the name of God' in daily life? •

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994); Goldstein, ed., *The Women's Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, 2000). Scripture: NJB.

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