

Parshat Mikeitz – Devar Torah and Text Study  
*Seeing ourselves in Joseph's Search for Wisdom*

Shabbat Shalom.

The story of Joseph is one of the most well known stories of the Bible, and one of the most well constructed and dramatic narratives from our Torah tradition. This week's Torah portion is *Mikeitz*, which contains among many famous episodes the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams by Joseph.

For those who could use a refresher, Joseph is the second youngest of Jacob's twelve sons who is set apart from his brothers by being his father's favorite child. Joseph's brothers are jealous of his elevated status and are outraged when their father Jacob gives Joseph a luxurious striped and multi-colored coat. Joseph further aggravates his brothers' jealousy by telling his family of dreams in which his older brothers and parents will bow low before Joseph. After these events the older brothers turn on Joseph, and sell him to a band of traveling slave merchants. As a slave Joseph excels in the service of his master Potiphar, that is until he is betrayed by Potiphar's wife and thrown into the royal jail of Egypt. We find Joseph in this week's parsha sitting in the dark dungeons of Egypt, awaiting any opportunity to gain freedom and improve his status in the world.

When one closely studies the story of Joseph, one finds a sophisticated literary masterpiece on the level of Hemmingway's *Old Man and The Sea*, or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Yes, the biblical author of Joseph's saga matches these modern literary masters with a thoughtfully paced story that achieves a dramatic crescendo, all the while presenting a nuanced progression of Joseph's character development.

Dreams and dream-interpretation are a major theme of Joseph's story, and the Biblical author skilfully orients the key moments of Joseph's life around dream and dream-interpretation: two dreams of his childhood that lead to exile, two dreams in Pharaoh's prison that cause his restoration, and two dreams in Pharaoh's chambers that lead to promotion. In light of this sophisticated narrative structure, biblical scholars argue that the story of Joseph is most likely *literary* creation rather than a tale or legend passed down *orally*. In 1953 a famous biblical scholar named Gerhard von Rad put forth the hypothesis that the story of Joseph narrative was a part of an ancient genre of literature known as Wisdom novella. Biblical scholars like von Rad date the Joseph saga in its current form to the 5<sup>th</sup> century Persian era in the land of Israel.

The Wisdom Novella is a genre of ancient literature in which a character acquires wisdom through the course of several trials and tribulations. The genre makes a powerful statement about human life- hardship begets wisdom, or in other words, wisdom is the pay-off for bravely confronting life's challenges. The word *Mikeitz*, which is the title of this week's parsha, means "In the End" and is a clear indicator that in this parsha Joseph will acquire the wisdom that has eluded him as a precocious youth. Let us now read now together a few key passages of Mikeitz, and discuss the ways in which the text describes Joseph's transformation.

Text #1: Genesis 41:14-16

*Context:* Joseph is in the prison of Pharaoh. Pharaoh has two dreams, and Joseph is summoned into Pharaoh's chambers to interpret the dreams:

14 Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon. And he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh.

15 And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: 'I have dreamed a dream, and there is none that can interpret it; and I have heard say of thee, that when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it.'

16 And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying: 'It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace.'

*Task:* Reread the passage, and identify at least one descriptive detail.

Let's imagine Joseph in the prison of Pharaoh. He is un-shaved and dressed in tattered clothing. This is an incredible contrast to how Joseph is described earlier in the Novella- remember Joseph when he was a child... clothed in a luxuriant striped and multi-colored coat given to him by his father. Long gone are the days of that fancy coat, and now all Joseph has to his name are tattered, dirty clothes and the disheveled look of a slave and prisoner.

As readers, we can only sympathize with Joseph because he has been abandoned by his family and outcast by society. Yet in this moment of darkness, where most people may have simply given up on life, Joseph's spirit is not broken; in fact, prison becomes a transformative experience for Joseph. With a long beard and wearing tattered clothing, Joseph reaches a place where he is no longer distracted by the allure of possessions like his multi-colored coat, nor does he seek endless approval from his brothers and family. Prison is a transformative experience for Joseph because it removes the obstacle in his life, the haughtiness that made him such a difficult person to be around.

Within the dungeons of Egypt Joseph shed his outer exterior and reveals a more compassionate core of his personality that is more capable of relating to other people on a profound and positive level. This internal transformation in Joseph forecasts a change in his fortunes, as we read in the following passage:

Text #2: Genesis 41:37-41

*Context:* Joseph successfully interprets the dreams of Pharaoh. Pharaoh is impressed with the cogency of Joseph's interpretation and appoints him as minister.

37 And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of all his servants.

38 And Pharaoh said unto his servants: 'Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom the spirit of God is?'

39 And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: 'Forasmuch as God hath shown thee all this, there is none so discreet and wise as thou.

40 Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled; only in the throne will I be greater than thou.'

41 And Pharaoh said unto Joseph: 'See, I have set thee over all the land of Egypt.'

*Task:* Identify the specific words that Pharaoh uses to describe Joseph.

We have all heard, in some form or another, the story of Joseph. Sometimes it is important to go back to the original source, in this case the Torah itself, in order to discover the true meaning and purpose of this incredible tale. Our close reading of *parshat Mikeitz* shows that the essential point of this story is Joseph's search for wisdom. Together we discovered that Joseph acquires wisdom in the dungeons of Egypt by maintaining hope in the midst of despair and meeting extreme adversity with profound character development.

Each of us have issues that we are working on in our everyday lives. We learn from this week's Torah portion that one of our greatest ancestors, Joseph, also dealt with a challenging personality. It may be that some of us share the exact same challenges as Joseph, or maybe we can gain inspiration in our own self-improvement by studying Joseph's example. At the very least, may we study and enjoy this Torah portion so that we can appreciate and recognize this brilliant facet of our Jewish tradition, and its profound contributions to human culture and ideas.

Shabbat Shalom.