

# PARASHAH THIRTY-NINE

Genesis 41:38–42:17; Isaiah 11:2–9; Luke 9:46–48

*Notes by Tim Hegg*

## *The “King” and His Brothers*

The path of Joseph’s life, moved and directed by the gracious hand of the Almighty, has led him from prison to the palace of Pharaoh. Endowed with the wisdom of God, Joseph has given the divine interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream, and has therefore gained favor with the King of Egypt. Pharaoh recognized in Joseph the “spirit of God” and therefore appointed him to oversee the gathering of food in preparation for the coming famine. In so doing, he gave to Joseph his own royal ring, the instrument used for sealing the royal edicts, along with royal robes and a golden necklace, and as such, has given Joseph supreme authority within his kingdom. The title “Royal Seal-Bearer” is well attested in the Egyptian archives.

A public ceremony in which Joseph is paraded throughout the royal city confirmed his appointment to the populace. Interestingly, the announcement that preceded his chariot was (v. 43) “make way” (NIV) or “bow the knee.” But the word in the Hebrew is interesting, used only here: אֲבִירָא (*avreich*). Our English translations take it from the verb בָּרַךְ, “to bend the knee” (as does Ibn Ezra), but if so, it is in the 1st person singular, which is not the normal form for a command (imperative). The Sages suggest two alternative meanings: אב (father, i.e., counselor) + רכה (Aramaic “king”), and thus “counselor of the king” or אב (“father=owner of wisdom”) + רך (“tender”), yielding the meaning “father (owner) of wisdom, but tender in years” (cf. Mid. Rab. Gen xc.3). The Syriac Peshitta has “father and ruler.” Regardless of the exact etymology of the word, it is used here to show Joseph’s enthronement: he is vice-regent to the Pharaoh, and therefore is accorded a level of royalty himself: the prisoner has become a “king.”

Consider the options that lay before Joseph: he had power and authority second only to Pharaoh, and he thus had access to all of the wealth of Egypt. Yet it becomes clear that Joseph had learned to trust in God whether in poverty and prison, or lavished with wealth and authority. In some ways, both extremes offer their own temptations to sin. Loving God in the midst of riches is difficult—maybe the most difficult. Did not Yeshua Himself declare that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom (Matt 19:23)? But it is also difficult to love God in the midst of pain and poverty. Riches cause a person to forget God out of selfishness and pride. Poverty does so out of bitterness and anger. But both are two sides of the same coin: self-centeredness. Both are declarations of “I don’t need God.” One says I can do everything myself (“I don’t need Him—I’m doing just fine by myself”) and the other says I don’t want Him (“He’s fickle and unreliable—I can’t trust Him any more”). Both attitudes, though at opposite ends of the economic scale, flow from self-reliance and pride. How wise the words of Solomon: “Keep deception and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is my portion, lest I be full and deny You and say, “Who is Adonai?” Or lest I be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God.” (Prov 30:8-9).

What amazes us is that Joseph has maintained his faith and integrity in poverty, and he will also maintain it in wealth and power. That is because true faith is not changed by one’s circumstances. Paul had also learned this lesson (Phil 4:11). True faith and trust in God prepares a person to meet each circumstance and to do so with an immovable allegiance to God’s way of living.

We might consider what would have been our first official act had we been in Joseph's sandals. What might have been our perspective toward the cup bearer who remained silent for two years, leaving Joseph rotting in prison? And what about Potiphar's wife, and those who may have actively or passively supported her false accusations? Yet revenge is not Joseph's perspective. He had so fully committed himself to God's sovereign care that practical forgiveness had become a normal way of life. Such a faith leaves no room for bitterness, for when one is committed to the firm belief that God controls all things, then He may be trusted even for the events of life that are unjust and uncomfortable. God is able to use even the evil acts of men to bring about His purpose.

Joseph, the Hebrew, now takes on the appearance of an Egyptian. Besides the royal Egyptian robes that he wears, and the jewelry of royal authority, Joseph is given an Egyptian name. Naming ceremonies bespeak a significant change in one's life. In the court of Pharaoh, Joseph would be known as Zaphenat-Paneach (צָפְנָת פַּנְיָח). The meaning of the name is variously understood. If from Hebrew, it would mean "revealer of hidden things" (cf. Rashi). The Midrash considers the name an abbreviation (each letter standing for a word): Zofeh (seer), podeh (redeemer), nabi (prophet), tomek (supporter), pother (interpreter), 'arom (skilled), nabon (understanding), and chozeh (seer). But the name would most likely have been Egyptian, not Hebrew. Some have therefore suggested "God speaks; he lives." The Lxx has  $\Psi\omicron\upsilon\theta\omicron\mu\phi\alpha\nu\eta\chi$  which might represent a Late Egyptian word meaning "creator or sustainer of life." The primary point is that Joseph is given a name equal to his new position of authority.

But more troubling (at least to the Sages) is the fact that Joseph is given Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest of On (Potiphara), for a wife. The Sages understand Potiphara to be the same Potiphar who originally bought Joseph as a slave, and thus his willingness to give his daughter to Joseph vindicated him from the false accusations made against him by Potiphar's wife. Most commentators, however, consider Potiphara to be a different person from Potiphar. Though Asenath (אֲסֵנַת) is given as a Hebrew form, its Egyptian meaning would be "she who belongs to (the goddess) Neith."

The text gives us the specific age of Joseph at this time: he is 30 years old. This reminds us that it has been 13 years since that eventful day when he left his father to seek the welfare of his brothers. But it cannot be missed that 30 was considered the age of full strength by the Sages (*Avot* 5:21), and that it was, by some accounts, the age of Yeshua when He entered into His public ministry.

What are we to understand by this strange turn of events? How can Joseph possibly stand as a foreshadowing of the suffering Messiah, having taken a foreign wife? If we are looking at Joseph as a foreshadowing of Yeshua, then the picture is stunning! Like Joseph, Yeshua is forsaken by his own brothers. And during the period in which his brothers have turned away from him, Joseph takes a Gentile as his bride. We cannot help but parallel this to the ingathering of the Gentiles into the body of Messiah:

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:11–13)

Through Joseph, the family of Jacob would now include Gentiles, not as second-classed citizens, but as *bona fide* family members through the covenant of marriage. If, indeed, we are allowed to

take the Joseph story as a foreshadowing of Messiah and His Bride, then it is clear that the Bride of Messiah is a multi-ethnic community.

As our story continues, Joseph takes up his responsibilities as vice-regent of Egypt. He had traveled throughout Egypt to assess the lay of the land, and then implemented his plan to store up the grain during the years of plenty. At the beginning, the grain was carefully monitored, as v. 47 indicates: “In the seven years of plenty, the land brought forth by handfuls” (לְקַמְצִים). The rabbis take this to mean that at first the grain was carefully counted, even to the very handful, but in the end, the gathering was so abundant it was no longer necessary to be so scrupulously counted. Joseph’s plan was successful because God made it so.

God blessed Joseph not only with abundant grain in the land of Egypt, but also by giving him children. His first son by Asenath was Manasseh (מְנַשֶּׁה), a name built upon the Hebrew verb נָשַׁח, *nashah*, “to forget.” This does not mean that Joseph has forgotten his father and brothers. Rather, as the text plainly states, God had given Joseph the divine ability to forgive, allowing him not to dwell upon the evil done against him.

Here is a very important truth for us to glean: memory is a wonderful thing, but when owned by bitterness, it becomes a snare. Some people seem to have a particularly acute memory for all of the bad things that have happened to them. A forgiving heart, however, lets past offences lose their grip on one’s memory, and rather holds fast to all of the kindnesses given by God throughout one’s life. Beware—a memory that pinpoints all of life’s troubles is a friend to bitterness.

Joseph’s second son was named Ephraim (אֶפְרַיִם), apparently based on פָּרָה, *parah*, “corn-land,” and describes fertile soil in which abundance of food is grown. Metaphorically, Joseph realized that God had “planted” him in fertile ground whereby he would enjoy the abundance of God. In the future, the tribe of Ephraim would inhabit the land west of the Jordan in the central region, blessed with good soil and rainfall.

Chapter 41 concludes with the notice that the seven years of famine had begun. Pharaoh directed the people to Joseph, who gave the order to open the granaries and supply the Egyptians with food. Yet the famine was “strong through all the land,” meaning the surrounding regions as well. Thus, besides supply for the Egyptian population, Joseph has stored enough away to sell to surrounding nations as well, thus increasing Pharaoh’s wealth even in a time of famine.

Chapter 42 returns the scene to Jacob: in the famine stricken country of Canaan, news had come to him that food existed in Egypt. He prods his sons to stop “mopeing about,” and take action to get food from Egypt. Ten of them go on the journey, indicating most likely that grain was disbursed on a limited per capita basis, so that all ten were required to be in attendance in order to bring back sufficient grain for the family. That the ten are called the “brothers of Joseph” rather than the “sons of Jacob” is a portend of what is about to take place.

Jacob does not allow Benjamin to go since he feared misfortune might befall him on the journey. From his perspective, both Rachel and Joseph are gone, and Benjamin is all that remains. Moreover, both Rachel and Joseph were lost while traveling. Here, once again, the providence of God is at work in order to bring about His desired goal.

Joseph’s ability to “forget” his misfortunes, and to dwell on the goodness of God’s provision, could not have erased the memory of his dream, and the knowledge that sometime in his life his brothers would bow before him. That part of the dream was about to take place. His brothers come, and were required to make their request for grain directly to Joseph. Perhaps all foreigners were required to make special request for provisions.

The plot of the story is quickened when we realize that Joseph's brothers do not recognize him, but he immediately knows who they are! How true to the reality this story foreshadows! Yeshua came to His own, but they did not recognize Him for who He truly was. He appeared as a foreigner to them, outside of their preconceived ideas of what a Messiah should be. Yet Yeshua fully recognized the "lost sheep of Israel" (Matt 15:24).

When the brothers approach Joseph, they bow to the ground. What else would one do before a foreign king who held the power of life and death? Joseph plays his concealed role perfectly. He asks from where they have come, and they answer that they have come from Canaan to buy food. But the dream of Joseph was clear in his mind, and it entailed not merely 10 brothers, but also his father. More needed to be accomplished before the revelation of the dream could be realized. He therefore, with very quick thinking, employs a plan to bring Jacob there as well: he accuses his brothers of being spies. That scenario would seem reasonable. After all, Egypt was the only government with food, and she was therefore a prime target for attack by foreign armies.

The protest of the brothers is telling (42:10–11)! "No, my lord, but your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men, your servants are not spies." Their words are true in one respect: they were, indeed, all brothers, and they had come for food. In this regard they were being honest, for they were not spies. Yet the Hebrew phrase translated "we are honest men" (נְהַנְנוּ בְּנִים) could be translated "we are 'yes men,'" for בְּנִים is apparently from the same root as the word "so" or "yes" (כֵּן). Perhaps in a subtle way, their words conveyed a deeper truth: they were willing to agree to anything if it suited their designs.

But Joseph pushes the accusation further. He accuses them of coming to spy upon Egypt during a period of weakness, when the land was devastated by famine. Again, the brothers protest, and this time they add more information (42:13): "Your servants are twelve brothers in all, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan; and behold, the youngest is with our father today, and one is no longer alive." By this Joseph immediately knew that his father was still alive along with his younger brother, Benjamin. But their report that "one is no longer alive" (literally, "is no more," וְהָאָחִד אֵינְנוּ) must have been particularly poignant to Joseph. There he sat, as a ruler in Egypt, and his brothers believe him to have vanished into oblivion! I cannot help but use this as an illustration of Israel's current position: for her, the beloved Son of the Father has all but vanished from her sight, and in her estimation, "He is no more." But one day (may it be soon), they will recognize Him!

Joseph has set the trap, and now he is ready to spring it. He offers a test of his brother's sincerity. If all is as they say, then producing the younger brother would be sufficient proof. Considering the scenario, they really did not have much choice. As long as the "vice-regent of Egypt" thought they might be spies, they would not receive any food, and would die in the famine. Moreover, if they could not prove the true nature of their journey, they would doubtlessly be executed as enemies of Egypt. Their only hope of survival would be to prove their innocence by bringing Benjamin. They would have some jail time to think through all of the possibilities: Joseph confines them for three days.

The wisdom of Joseph is seen by the Sages as a foreshadow of the character of Messiah, and thus the *haftarah* of Isaiah 11:2–9 was chosen to accompany this Torah *parashah*. Even as Joseph was wise in handling the administration of the famine, and even wiser in handling his brothers, so we are constantly amazed at the wisdom of Yeshua. Even when His brothers attempt to trap Him with their words, the response of the Master is always penetrating, insightful, and eminently wise.

In His interaction with those who sought to humiliate Him, He constantly shows Himself to be full of wisdom and truth.

Our Apostolic portion (Luke 9:46–48) is an example of the profound wisdom taught by our Master. In the midst of arguments among the learned men of His time, He points to a child as an example of genuine faith and trust. A child intuitively turns to his mother or father in any moment of distress. There is no need for mental calculations—he knows the ones he can trust.

And so it must be for us. Has not God proven Himself over and over again to be a faithful and loving Father? Then if we have this child-like trust, we turn to Him without hesitation, knowing that “He cares for us.” But such faith requires an abandonment of self-strength, and a full and complete reliance upon His faithfulness. It is only when we recognize our weakness that we realize how strong He is.

One cannot help but believe that Joseph had such faith. Throughout the difficult journey of his life, he continued to turn to the God of his father, Jacob, Who had proven Himself faithful to His word. And in this life of trust, he had conquered the enemy of bitterness and revenge, and had learned to rest in the sovereign hand of his King. May such a faith characterize our walk in Yeshua!