

Parashah Forty-One

Genesis 43:24–44:17; Jer 42:7–17; 43:8-14; Matt 6:19–24

Notes by Tim Hegg

For where your treasure is ...

Our text this week has Joseph weaving a web which will inevitably snare his brothers and force his father, Jacob, to eventually come to Egypt as well. But the trap into which Joseph's brothers fall has an additional purpose: Joseph wants to see if his brothers have changed. In the past, the sibling rivalry had produced a hatred strong enough to envision murder. As far as they were concerned, getting rid of Joseph was a political move that eliminated the family heir and put them in the place of inheritance. Now the scenario would be presented to them in which they could just as easily get rid of Benjamin. How they would react to this opportunity would be a true test of their hearts.

Their scheduled lunch meal with Joseph in his own quarters is prepared, and the brothers are lead by Joseph's steward to the banquet. Throughout the Ancient Near East, eating together marked status within a culture, and even bore signs of covenant significance. The Egyptians, according to the historian Herodotus (*Histories*, 2.41), considered the cow taboo, and as a result refused even contact with the Greeks who considered the cow a source for common food. Since the Hebrews also raised cows for food, along with sheep (which were likewise considered unfit for food by the Egyptians), they were looked down upon by the "superior Egyptians." In short, the Egyptians viewed the Hebrews as racially and religiously inferior, and strictly unclean for social interaction. And even though Joseph was in a place of authority, it still seems possible he was considered a "Hebrew." One can only imagine the talk that might have gone on behind his back (though his marriage to an Egyptian may have changed his status somewhat in the eyes of his peers). Regardless, Joseph eats at his own table, with his brothers at a separate table, and the Egyptian servants and court aids at yet another table.

Here begins a most interesting and important turnabout. At the beginning of the Joseph narrative, his brothers leave him in the pit and prepare a meal for themselves to eat. Just the opposite has happened here: Joseph prepares a meal for his brothers who had acted as his enemies. Psalm 23:5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" rings in our ears.

The brothers have carefully prepared their gift for Joseph and lay it out in anticipation of Joseph's arrival. Yet in the narrative, Joseph never mentions the gift—he is far more interested in the welfare of his father. His first words are actually a bit backwards: "Is your old father well, of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" One would expect him first to ask if their father was alive, and then inquire as to his welfare (literally, "shalom"). Obviously, if he was well, then he was also alive! The manner in which the questions are asked betrays Joseph's anxious emotions.

Casting his eyes upon Benjamin, however, raises Joseph's emotions beyond containment. Joseph was "overcome with feeling," literally, "his mercies were heated up" (43:30, cf. 1Ki 3:26), and only tears could bring relief. He therefore hurries out of the room to weep privately.

Once again our narrative gives us a picture of Joseph's inner self. Through all of the hardship, he remains a man of mercy. His heart was not hardened by the evil done against him, but remained capable of genuine compassion and love. In our modern society, manliness is characterized as stoic, unmoved, and unemotional. Tears do not become a true man. Yet the opposite is actually true: the man of depth and maturity is a man strong enough to weep—a man able to display genuine compassion.

We see this same manly strength in our Master. Overcome by the death of His friend Lazarus, He wept (John 11:35). As men, we must dismiss the false picture of manliness presented to us by our upside-down society, and re-establish men like Joseph and Yeshua as our heroes to follow. Tender compassion that evidences itself in genuine emotion is a very manly thing. Conversely, the anger that seems to characterize many men in our society is actually a weakness for it evidences a puny self-centeredness easily exploited by Satan.

In our story, Joseph needed to cry privately because he could not yet reveal his identity. His hour had not yet come. So after washing his face and regaining his composure, he returns to the place where lunch was being served and gave the command to begin the meal. Obviously, he had instructed the servants regarding the order in which his brothers were to be seated. They immediately recognized that they were seated in birth order, and that puzzled them. Who could have known their ages? Had they pondered that more deeply, they would have found something to fear indeed! The brother they had hated was actually in control!

But not only should the seating order have been an important clue, so also the portions given to Benjamin should have alerted them to what was afoot. He is given five times the portions allotted to any of the others. Here, again, Joseph is testing his brothers. Would they envy Benjamin for the abundance given to him?

The narrative quickly shifts to the time when Joseph's brothers would depart with the food they had come to buy. Once again, Joseph instructs the steward to return the money in each man's sack, but adds something more: his silver cup was to be placed in the sack of Benjamin. Some have read this as though Joseph had actually succumbed to the Egyptian occult and that he had delved into the dark arts of the demonic crafts. But the text is clearly against this. Surely our narrative has made it clear that Joseph retained his faith and allegiance to the God of his father, Jacob. Moreover, the sacred text never indicates that Joseph actually practised divination. But in concealing his identity as a *bona fide* Egyptian, this piece of superstition played well into the scheme he had constructed. His brothers had sold him for 20 pieces of silver. Now a silver cup would be their undoing.

Early the next morning, the men depart for home with their animals laden with grain. Having gone only a short distance, the trap is sprung. Joseph instructs his steward to overtake his brothers and charge them with the heinous crime of repaying good with evil. That, of course, has been their crime all along. When Joseph first expressed the divine revelation given to him by the Almighty, they responded with evil. In this case, the axiom comes true: "be sure your sins will find you out."

The brothers are dumbfounded. The accusations of the steward are incredible and clearly mistaken. They take an oath: "whichever of your servants it is found with shall die." The noose now tightens. Benjamin will be in the mercies of an Egyptian lord. The steward softens the oath by reminding them that justice will be served by enslaving only the guilty one—the rest could go free. Here, once again, the integrity of the brothers is tested. Would they leave Benjamin in a "pit" the way they had abandoned Joseph? Apparently not. Rather than abandoning Benjamin, all of the brothers return to await the verdict of their deeds. They know they are innocent of the charges, but they have no power to prove it. Instead, they admit guilt.

Now the tables are turned once again: when Joseph had been brought from the prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream, he gives full credit to God for the revelation. Here, Joseph plays his role as an Egyptian perfectly: "Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?" In other words, how could they have reasoned that their crime could remain hidden to one who sees the concealed?

But Judah's response is: "God has uncovered the crime of your servants" (44:16). That which is hidden can only be revealed by God. Indeed! God has uncovered far more than they know. Yet Joseph had to be very pleased with their final response: "Here we are, then, slaves of my lord, the rest of us as much as he in whose possession the goblet was found." Here was corporate solidarity—true family, true community. If one was to suffer, all would suffer. Love and loyalty to their father had overcome their self-centeredness, and given them the ability to act with integrity toward Benjamin.

But Joseph gives one more tug on the rope: "Far be it from me to do this. The man in whose possession the cup has been found, he shall be my slave; but as for you, go up in peace to your father." He gives them one more chance for self preservation at the expense of Benjamin. Had they really changed? Would they portray a heart of hatred or love? Words are cheap; actions reveal the truth.

Judah, spokesman for the brothers, will remain firm in his oath to Jacob: he will be surety for Benjamin regardless of the cost. Something has changed in the years Joseph has been gone. His brothers now consider the welfare of Benjamin as more important than their own. The unity of the sons of Jacob was being forged as the foundation of a nation, to be comprised of thirteen tribes, the twelve sons of Jacob with Joseph represented by his two sons. It would be this tribal confederation that God would describe as His "son, His first born" (Ex 4:22).

Our *haftarah* paints a broader picture. Not only will Jacob and his family descend to Egypt, but the nation formed from his family will eventually be birthed from the Land through the power of God's almighty redemption. Yet Egypt herself will fall to the power of Babylon. Indeed, Israel will be called upon to decide between trusting in God's power to save, or serving Nebuchadnezzar, God's servant to bring destruction. We know the history of this prophetic word: Israel relied upon man rather than God, and was sold into slavery, exiled to Babylon. But even as God was with Joseph in Egypt, so He was with His people in Babylon, just as He promised. Israel's faithlessness could not change God's steadfast love. He would bring about His purposes for Israel just as He had planned. Surely the picture of "descending to Egypt" ties the *haftarah* to our Torah portion, for eventually Jacob and all of his family will have followed Joseph to that place. But even more, the fact that God is in control of history is clear in both portions. From the famine brought by His hand in the time of Joseph, to the control of a world leader like Nebuchadnezzar, the flow of history is not random—it is the Lord who is in charge.

The Apostolic portion was chosen to highlight what our Torah portion teaches about the treasure of one's heart. Joseph stands before us as a supreme example of one who treasured the ways of God over the grasping of power and wealth. Surely Joseph could have had it all—he was second in command of the largest and wealthiest nation in his time. Yet power and wealth was not this first delight. He treasured the ways of his God. As such, blessing beyond his imagination was his, for he laid hold of an eternal treasure where moths and rust do no corrupt, and thieves do not break in a steal. He had chosen to serve the Almighty, both in poverty and in wealth. As such, he had gained great treasure.

Perhaps there is no greater treasure than purity of heart. A clear conscience before the Almighty allows one fully to enjoy the pleasures of this life, with the unfading hope of joy in the world to come. Joseph had learned to forgive, and thus had won the battle over bitterness. He had learned the great value of contentment, a commodity available only to those who willingly place themselves by faith in the hands of the sovereign and merciful God of Israel.