

## Vayeshev 5777

### The Outside And The Inside

Let me begin with a question. What has the Joseph story to do with Hannukah? And since rabbis, like attorneys, never ask a question without having an answer prepared, let me offer you one version of an answer.

Many of you met my sister Judith the musician when she visited last week, and quite a few years ago now, she wrote a song. It's called 'Judging the Book by the Cover' and in the middle she sings:

*It would be so easy  
If the outside matched the inside  
If the words went with the actions  
If the beautiful were truly good  
If the surface were a mirror for our hearts...*

I think about that song a lot when I look at Joseph. Because, really, what are we supposed to do with the narcissistic, egotistical, spoilt young man with whom the story begins? Joseph at the beginning of the story is, frankly, not nice. This is the young man who tells tales on his brothers, who can't resist saying – not once, but twice! – that he has dreams of his whole family bowing down to him. I have always felt that his brothers had some justification for being mad.

But let's take a closer look at him. There's a tension between the outside Joseph and the inside Joseph. At the start of the story, Joseph has a gorgeous outside – the multicolored coat – but he's entirely dominated by his inside. How else do we explain his total lack of tact and *derekh eretz* - basic courtesy? He has no editing mechanism, he can't empathize with how others might feel. Blurt, blurt – out come the rumors, out come the dreams. He can't help it, apparently, he just has to let it all out, regardless of the consequences.

Of course, it gets him into trouble, and what's interesting is the way that Joseph is systematically stripped over the course of the story. First his brothers take his coat and throw him in a pit.

Then, during the incident with Mrs Potiphar, he loses his clothes again because she grabs them and he runs away (indeed, one wonders what he was left with, given that he was a house slave at the time).

So off he goes – probably naked - to jail. All we know about jail is that God was with Joseph, because the Torah takes care to tell us so.

And we notice a change, of sorts – when the butler and the baker have their dreams, Joseph says, ‘Aren’t the interpretations of dreams a matter for God?’ Ah, we think, maybe he is learning a little humility?

But no – the next thing he says is, ‘Why don’t you tell me what you dreamed?’ Blurt! Maybe that’s why he has to stay put in jail, forgotten about, for the next two years.

He’s a lot wiser when he gets to be in front of Pharaoh. This time he gives credit where it’s due – ‘It is not in me. God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.’

And notice that his outside changes too – we are going to read that he is shaved and given a new set of clothes.

Joseph, it seems, has finally shifted – or at least, he’s stopped blurting.

And then he shifts again. Pharaoh promotes him, gives him the king’s signet ring and – guess what? – a change of clothes.

And it is this new Joseph, under the name of Zaphenath-Paneah (‘the one who furnishes the nourishment of life’), who goes about seeing Egypt through the famine –and we don’t hear him taking any personal credit for it, either.

No more blurting. Joseph’s outside and inside are beginning to line up.

And when he finally does see his brothers, he can’t restrain himself from weeping. He does it a lot – every time he sees them, in fact. That’s the Joseph we recognize, the one with no editing mechanism. But this time what comes out is different.

These are the tears which wash away the last of Joseph’s artifice. ‘I am Joseph your brother’ he will cry, next week, ‘is my father still alive?’

At last, here is a person who is putting other people’s feelings first. His fine clothes are an appropriate mirror for the new qualities of his soul.

The beautiful has become truly good.

And what does all of that have to do with Hannukah?

Well, it's a bit of a cliffhanger. I want to suggest that the answer is in next week's Haftarah, which you will be reading in my absence.

The first part of the Haftarah talks about the mysterious figure of 'Joshua the High Priest', who is clothed in dirty garments and conversing with an angel and with Satan (one of this character's only appearances in the whole of Tanakh).

You'll read it for yourselves in due course, but notice that once again we have a change of garments, with the angel announcing, 'I have removed your iniquity from you'. Once again the change of clothes connotes a change of self.

But I think the real key is in the second part, which recounts Zechariah's vision of a gold Menorah – the one item in the Temple which was all of a piece, beaten out of a single solid gold ingot. The Menorah's outside is the same as its inside – all gold, all the way through.

And the lesson it is there to teach Zechariah is a powerful one – 'Not by might, and not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of Hosts'.

We talk a lot about might and power on Hannukah, but there is an inner meaning to the festival as well.

We could say that the message of Hannukah is in the military story of the victory of the many over the few, but that would be to miss its quieter voice. It seems to me that the message of Hannukah – its angel, if you will - resides, rather, in the story of the miracle. When the Menorah was re-lit on the first day the Temple was rededicated, there was no guarantee any more oil would come.

But they lit it anyway, and, like the changes of clothing, that action is symbolic of re-integration – the outside of the newly rededicated Temple matching its inside, the eternal flame which is never extinguished.

Not might: not power: spirit.

My prayer for us this Hannukah is that we find the way to match our outsides with our insides, our words with our actions, so that the surface is a mirror of our hearts.

Shabbat shalom and happy Hannukah.