

Vayiggash 5778

But what about Joseph?!

A couple of weeks ago we read the central part of the story of Judah. If you were here that Shabbat, you may remember that I suggested that it while Joseph is the protagonist of the story we are reading in the Torah at the moment, Judah is its hero. He is the one who grows, who learns, who changes, who sacrifices. And it is he who leaves a legacy.

Which begs the question - where does that leave Joseph?

I suggest that if we are going to measure a hero by their ability to change, as Judah does, Joseph doesn't make the grade. He is arrogant at the outset of the story; he remains so when, in the same breath, he informs butler and baker that God interprets dreams and therefore they should tell their dreams to him; he is quick to suggest to Pharaoh that he is the perfect second-in-command, echoing his management role with Potiphar; and even in his revealing himself to his brothers, he does not fail to mention his improved status:

*It was not you who sent me here, but God
and he has made me a father to Pharaoh
lord of all his household
and ruler of the whole land of Egypt.*

Judah grows; but somehow all the events that happen to Joseph don't appear to affect his innermost self.

And the more closely we scrutinize Joseph, the more we see other things that don't seem to add up. He's gorgeous on the outside; the Torah takes care to tell us that he, like his mother, is *yefe toar* - nicely made - and *yefe mareh* - nice to look at. His clothes - when he manages to keep them on - are luxurious, the striped tunic, managerial garb from Potiphar, Pharaoh's ring, linen, gold chains.

But there is a curious kind of vacancy under that splendid exterior. I suggest that all those physical attributes - the clothes, the good looks - operate rather like the bandages on the invisible man - to give Joseph a presence in the story which, absent the clothes, he might not have.

We first encounter him through his dreams. They are unforgettable - the sheaves, the stars, the bowing. Dreams will frame his life and guide his destiny - flowering vines, delicious bread, fat and thin cows and ears of corn, flourishing and decay. And yet, we all know that dreams aren't real, don't we? - His brothers even call him *Ba'al ha-halomot*, the dream-meister, preferring it to his real name.

And while we are on the subject, we should look at Joseph's name. It means *give me another* - the phrase desperately uttered by his exhausted mother after finally giving birth to the son she had dreamed of for so long. The baby she has so longed for is right there, but in that moment she does not see him. It's as if he doesn't exist. He is an absence. *Yosef!* she pants, already on to the next thing.

Indeed, Joseph is strangely forgettable. The minute he is not center stage, it's as if he ceases to exist altogether. He's got no object permanence. His story is bisected entirely by Judah's long adventure with Tamar. And when he returns, only to succeed in Potiphar's house and then be thrown into jail, he is once again forgotten, this time by the butler, by the very man whose life he saves and with whom he pleads to remember him. But no: the Torah even underlines the point for us:

Yet the butler did not remember Joseph: he forgot him.

Even after the ostensibly happy ending of the story, Joseph is overlooked. He has two names now - his own and the grandiose one given to him by Pharaoh. No matter. Jacob is brought before Pharaoh only to complain how short and bitter *his* life has been - not a single mention of the son who saved his sorry Canaanite life (we might imagine Pharaoh's bafflement). In blessing Joseph's children, Jacob overrides Joseph's wishes, crossing his hands.

As for leaving a legacy: there will be no tribe of Joseph. He will disappear even earlier than his brother Shimon, who at least gets to enter the land. Two clans of Israelites will be named for his children, but Joseph's name - the essence of himself - that will vanish.

And what happens to Joseph's beautiful body is curious. He is embalmed after his death according to the Egyptian fashion, and placed in a coffin in Egypt. We are given this information in the final verse of the book of Bereishit, its final, lingering shot fading to dark. Unlike the other tribes, he will play no role in the Exodus narrative, the central story of our people. His only presence in it will be as the dessicated remnants of his once glorious self - his bones - which will be brought out of Egypt at the Exodus. And that is all that will be left of him.

So beautiful, so splendid, Joseph is - and yet, it's as if a puff of wind could blow him away.

I believe his father knew the difference between Joseph and Judah. If we look at how he blessed them at the end of his life - the passage we will read next week - the imagery for Judah is fierce, noble and concrete - a lion's whelp, a sceptre, even some solid physical attributes - eyes dark as wine and teeth whiter than milk. By comparison, the Joseph blessing is vague and mysterious. Listen:

*“Joseph is a fruitful bough,
a fruitful bough by a spring;
his branches run over the wall.
23 The archers bitterly attacked him,
shot at him, and harassed him severely,
24 yet his bow remained unmoved;
his arms were made agile
by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob
(from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),
25 by the God of your father who will help you,
by the Almighty who will bless you
with blessings of heaven above,
blessings of the deep that crouches beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.
26 The blessings of your father
are mighty beyond the blessings of my parents,
up to the bounties of the everlasting hills.
May they be on the head of Joseph,
and on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.”*

It is this blessing, together with everything else we have discussed, guides us to Joseph's true function in the story of which he is protagonist but not hero. Because nothing I have said is intended to disparage him, though it might sound as though I wish to. On the contrary.

Joseph is not a Judah, his arc is not that of the typical hero, he is there and he is gone. But I think that is precisely the point. Because the quality that Joseph embodies can never last. Because Joseph is the paradigm of beauty.

It is impossible for human beings fully to live without beauty. We are born with an instinct for what is rhythmic, harmonious, balanced. Our ideals of beauty are based on proportions that please us - the golden rectangle, the regularity of patterns, the symmetry of faces. Beauty awakens and evokes profound emotions in us. In its presence we may gasp, laugh, weep. The memory of a single moment of beauty can sustain us through the darkest times of our lives.

Isn't this what Joseph is really about? His gorgeousness, the splendor of his clothing, the rainbow of colors that seem to surround him, the blessing that speaks of the extraordinary, the feminine, the sublime; his apparent amorality, his unchanging character, the way he flickers in and out of the story somehow avoiding definition, there, then gone, then there again - everything about him bespeaks beauty.

And beauty has to die. It is in its nature to be ephemeral. The tombstone of the English poet John Keats who died of tuberculosis at the tragically early age of 26 in a villa on the Spanish Steps in Rome, reads, at his own wish, *Here lies one whose name was writ in water*. Here is Keats on beauty:

*He dwells with Beauty - Beauty that must die
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu...*

Joseph, too, is *writ in water* - the water of the crouching, primordial deep. He doesn't fully inhabit the world - rather, he dreams it. And that makes perfect sense. It doesn't matter that the dreamer is himself ephemeral; it doesn't matter that he's not quite real, not as real as Judah, who is going to march forward carrying our destiny on his back. Permanence is not the point for Joseph: rather,

he is there to inspire, to make us catch our breath, to bring tears to our eyes and hope to our tired hearts. And that, I believe, is the true significance of why his bones are brought out of Egypt. Because the memory of what has once been beautiful still has the power to move us, long after it has decayed.

For where is there a human being who can live without beauty? And who can really live without a dream to sustain them?

Shabbat shalom.