

Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat – Parashat Vayeshev

Before there was Hamilton, there was Joseph – at least for the Tucker clan! As a child, regular road-trips from Boston to Philadelphia to visit my grandparents were invariably accompanied by our family singing loudly and a bit off-key to Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s joyful musical based on the Torah story we begin today. My parents loved the show and Scott and I came to as well; to this day we can recite the lyrics from start to finish practically by heart. So it was a no brainer when, as a final paper for Dr. Jeff Tigay’s class on the Book of Genesis while in college, I was asked to compare a contemporary work of art or literature to its Biblical analogue that I chose this piece for my analysis. The songs ran through my head for weeks!

As many of us know, Genesis 37-50, the section of the Torah dedicated to the Joseph story beginning with this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Vayeshev*, has all the makings of a good drama. These chapters include such extraordinary events as attempted fratricide, failed seduction, rising far above one’s station, and accurately foretelling the future while also exploring such universal human themes as jealousy, grief, forgiveness, and remorse. For this reason, it is not surprising that when Webber and Rice were commissioned by the Colet Court School in London in 1968 to write a short cantata for the annual school concert, they chose this section of the Bible as their inspiration. While the original performance lasted but 15 minutes, over the next many years the piece would be expanded to a concept album, a full musical, and even a straight-to-video film starring Donny Osmond. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* was first produced in London’s West End in 1973. It has been beloved ever since!

I will not bore you with a full, scholarly comparison of Genesis to *Joseph* (although it was sort of fun to pull out my yellowed paper from the file this past week and take a look!), but I do think that my essay’s

conclusion from all those years ago is interesting not merely as an academic exercise but also in terms of what it says to us today as people of faith. For what my paper found is that while Webber and Rice's production remains relatively faithful to the Biblical account, there are also significant deviations from *Sefer Bereshit* (the Book of Genesis), particularly when it comes to the role of the Divine. Webber and Rice's musical avoids reference to God, instead attributing Joseph's good fortune and success to more secular phenomena such as luck, intelligence, and hard work and locating the source of his morality with conscience rather than with religious ideals. On the contrary, the Torah repeatedly makes clear that Joseph's spectacular rise to fame – from his ability to interpret dreams to his ascendancy in Potiphar's household to his promotion to second in command over all of Egypt – is entirely due to God's beneficence and Joseph's unwavering faith. Webber and Rice may hint at vagaries of fate that perhaps help individuals to achieve so powerfully, but they ultimately conclude that human beings make their own destiny – "If you think it, want it, dream it then it's real. You are what you feel."¹ The Torah, on the other hand, sees even what might look like mundane luck or skill as being entirely suffused with the presence of God.

Interestingly enough, despite the repeated references to God assisting our protagonist along his journey in the Book of Genesis, the Joseph story is, according to Biblical scholar, Nahum Sarna, a largely secular tale. God never reveals the Divine Self to Joseph nor communicates with him directly as God did with the patriarchs and matriarchs; Joseph builds no altars nor offers words of prayer; he does not associate with any cultic centers. Joseph, in most respects, looks simply like an ordinary guy leading an ordinary life – his murderous band of brothers notwithstanding. At least at the outset, it is in no way clear how or why this man should become so vital to the story of the Jewish people.

¹ Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, MCA Records, MCAC 399, 1980, "You Are What You Feel."

And yet! Even before God's name is specifically connected to Joseph's tale of fame and success, the large number of coincidences and turns of good luck that characterize his tale are worth nothing. A mysterious, unnamed man shows up just in the nick of time to help Joseph find his brothers in Dothan; the Ishmaelites miraculously appear on the scene just at the moment when Joseph is supposed to be killed rather than sold into slavery; the cup-bearer whose dreams Joseph interpreted while in prison happens to be steward to none other than Pharaoh himself and is working on the very evening that Pharaoh has a nightmare. Much like the Divine name may be absent from the Book of Esther, yet the invisible hand of God still remains, one cannot help but feel that it is more than sheer happenstance that make all of these key events in Genesis fall right into place. God's presence is found in the story of Joseph even before the Divine is particularly acknowledged. And Joseph, himself, recognizes this fact – always being sure to attribute his luck, skill, and powers of dream interpretation back to the Divine Godself.

So what are we to make of this epic story, and what is the grand lesson that it is meant to teach us? Before I answer, we also want to note that tomorrow night begins the holiday of Chanukah – Judaism's bright and hopeful Festival of Lights. Particularly this year, which has been so dark in so many ways, the twin stories of a scrappy band of Maccabees finding victory over the powerful Assyrian-Greeks combined with a miraculous cruse of oil burning strong for eight straight nights remind us that things are often not quite as bleak as they seem and that ultimately right and good will prevail over forces of intolerance and hate. As some of us know, it is traditional to place *chanukiyot* in the front window of one's home in order to engage in the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *pirsumei nissa* – publicizing the miracle of the holiday. This year, more than ever, it seems important to assert our identity as proud Jews and our expectation that America will continue to be a land that allows us, and other minority groups, to live according to our values without coercion and fear.

When we further examine the two stories of this holiday, the military triumph of the Maccabees and the miracle of the single jar of oil, we notice that these tales reflect two different approaches to God's presence in the world, the same two approaches – in fact – contained within the Joseph story. The cruse of oil is overt, an act directly caused by God's mercy, much like God "being with" Joseph in prison or allowing him to correctly interpret dreams. On the other hand, the victory of Judah Maccabee and his compatriots is more similar to the subtle influence of God through the auspicious confluence of events in Joseph's life; it is possible to see these incidents as having been shaped by the Divine but it's just as easy to write them off as moments of extraordinary chance or good luck. It's worth remembering, of course, that while the story of the battle against the Assyrian-Greeks has historical validity, captured in the Apocrypha and corroborated by writers like Josephus, the miracle of the oil is most likely a rabbinic invention created by the sages of the Talmud. Perhaps they felt the story of the Maccabees too bloody and brutal, wishing to bring a celebration of spiritual significance to the holiday. Or perhaps they, like us, realized that it's far too easy to overlook God's presence in everyday acts of wonder but rather it takes a phenomenon of supernatural proportions in order to inspire true awe and gratitude.

I'd like to suggest that perhaps the message both of Joseph and of Chanukah is that there's more than one way to make a miracle – that God's power might be seen through the parting of seas and the casting of plagues, the planting of dreams that come true and the creation of oil that burns for eight nights, but that it should also be seen in the everyday occurrences we often tend to take for granted. My colleague, Rabbi Julie Roth, says that for Christians a miracle is when a baby is born to a virgin mother but for Jews a miracle is simply when a healthy child enters the world – full stop. Wondrous acts of nature, the power of falling in love, music that stirs our spirit, technological brilliance that makes our world safer – all these may not be supernatural but that doesn't make them any less extraordinary.

Miracles come in all different kinds of shapes and sizes – from the unexpected victory of a small band of soldiers to the wondrous burning of a flame that just wouldn't go out.

And so today we recall the story of a dreamer whose visions came true, the story of a heroic group of religious crusaders who fought assimilation with all their might, the story of a slick of oil that far exceeded expectations. We may sometimes wish to sit back and wait for God to miraculously cure the evils of our world – to make the many plagues of modern life disappear as if by fiat, just as God did in Biblical times. When we look more closely at the spectacular events recalled today, however, we notice that it's not just the hand of God but also the human hand that made these blessings come to be: Joseph's cleverness and faith, Judah Maccabee's courage and might, the Hasmoneans' resilience and optimism. The miracle, perhaps, is in being able to access our internal talents and resources, those God-given gifts that we, like Joseph, might just come to see as truly being given by God. Perhaps Webber and Rice were not so far off after all when they wrote, "If you think it, want it, dream it then it's real." The power to create change is firmly within our own grasp!

May the inspiring examples of Joseph, the Maccabees, and the oil remind us to think big, proudly defend our Jewish identity, and always retain hope that things might yet be better than they seem.

Wishing you *Chag Urim Sameach* – a very Happy Chanukkah!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Annie Tucker