

## 5780 - Genesis 41-44 – Miketz (At the end)

*Miketz* is dominated by two of the great encounters in the Torah. The first is the reversal in Joseph's fortunes. Forgotten and abandoned in prison, he is brought out to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, which he does with ease. Having told Pharaoh that the dreams portend eventual drought and famine, he then articulates a solution to the problem. Pharaoh, impressed, appoints Joseph to high office in Egypt, second only to himself.

The second occurs when Joseph's brothers, driven by famine in Canaan, come to Egypt to buy food. They come before Joseph, but fail to recognise him as their brother, though he recognises them. Joseph, without disclosing his identity, sets in motion a complex scenario, designed to test his brothers, that reaches a climax in the next parasha.

The first two of the following studies look at the subtle interplay between human choice and divine intervention, traced more delicately and deeply in the Joseph story than anywhere else in Tanakh. The third explores the themes of particularity and universality in Judaism, as exemplified in the conversation between Pharaoh and Joseph. The fourth sets the meeting between Joseph and his brothers in the context of three other narratives of recognition and non-recognition in Genesis. This turns out to be one of Genesis's major themes: appearance and reality in human interaction, the difference between who we seem to be and who we are.

These three tensions (freewill vs. providence, particular vs. universal, and appearance vs. reality) lie at the heart of Judaism, and they reach their fullest exposition in the story of Joseph.

### *Man Proposes, God Disposes*<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays we think of Genesis as a book, something we read in our own time, at our own pace, possibly in a single session. Listening to Torah in the synagogue, though, is a different kind of experience, and involves a different relationship to the text. There, the reading is public, not private. The words are sung, not spoken. **We encounter the text through the listening ear more than through the seeing eye.** And we do so section by section (each called a *parasha*), in weekly instalments. Genesis is divided into twelve such sections. **The point at which Jewish custom makes the break is sometimes significant, and contributes to our understanding of the text.**

1. We encounter the text **through the listening ear more than through the seeing eye.**

a. In Hebrew, to "hear" is to "do."

1) Deuteronomy 5:1

<sup>1</sup>Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws **I declare in your hearing** (lit., **that I speak into your ears**) ... be sure to **follow them**.

2) Luke 8:20-21

<sup>21</sup>He replied, "My mother and brothers are those **who hear** God's word **and put it into practice**."

3) Numbers Rabbah XIV:10

Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, choose them? Because all the nations rejected the Torah and refused to accept it, but Israel gladly chose the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Torah ... They all declared: All that the Lord hath spoken **will we do**, and **hear** (Ex. XXIV, 7), **thus undertaking the study of the Torah as well as its performance**.

b. Things are not always as they appear.

1) Genesis 3:6-7

<sup>6</sup>**When the woman saw** that the fruit of the tree was good for food **and pleasing to the eye**, and **also desirable for gaining wisdom**, she took some and ate it.

2) 1 Samuel 16:6-7

<sup>7</sup>**The LORD does not look at the things people look at.** People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

3) 1 John 2:15-17

<sup>16</sup>For **everything in the world (system)—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life**—comes not from the Father but from the world.

Rarely is a break more subtle and suggestive than the one between *Vayeshev* (and he settled) and *Miketz* (at the end). *Vayeshev* ends with Joseph's bid for freedom. Having correctly interpreted the chief steward's dream—that in three days he would be restored to his position—Joseph pleads with him:

"When all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon." (40:14–15)

The chief steward fails to do so. The last line of *Vayeshev* underlines the point by repeating it: "The chief steward, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him." On that dispiriting note, *Vayeshev* ends, and in the days before printing and the widespread availability of books, those who did not know the story had to wait a full week before discovering what happens next. **The break is calculated to maximise suspense.**

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Genesis*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 273-277.

The opening words of *Miketz* are, “At the end of two full years.” Our suspense, it now turns out, mirrors Joseph’s. **We have waited a week, he had to wait two years, his hope of release seemingly dashed.** Then something happens to prompt the memory of the chief steward. Pharaoh dreams. Intuitively he senses that the dreams are significant, and he asks his *chartumim* (magicians, interpreters of mysteries, [soothsayers]) what they mean. Their explanations fail to satisfy him. **Only then does the chief steward remember Joseph, who had so accurately interpreted his own dream two years earlier.**

Joseph is then taken from jail, washed, dressed and brought before Pharaoh. He interprets the dreams, proposes a solution to the problem they foretell—seven years of famine, after seven years of plenty—and is made Viceroy of Egypt, second in authority only to Pharaoh himself. The darkness of the last *parasha* ends, and from tragedy we move towards a fairy-tale ending.

But the initial impression of this *parasha* is not the happy conclusion, but the delay: “At the end of two full years.” **Joseph sought his freedom and he obtained it—yet he did not obtain it because he sought it. The steward forgot. Joseph had to wait.** Something else—Pharaoh’s dreams—had to intervene. There was a break between cause and effect—a break emphasised experientially by the *parasha* division, forcing us to relive, as it were, something of Joseph’s sense of disappointment, of time passing, of the slow fading of hope. This, it transpires, is more than just a device of style, a way of maintaining the suspense. There is something more substantive at stake, **a coded message we must decipher if we are to understand the full depth of the story.**

## 2. The steward forgot. Joseph had to wait ...

### a. Genesis 15:1-6

<sup>4</sup>**a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.**

- 1) Abraham was 75 years old when he left Ur (Gen 12:4) and God promised that he would become the father of a “great nation” (Gen 12:2).
- 2) Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised (Gen 17:24) and the LORD “appeared to (him) near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day” (Gen 18:1).
- 3) Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. During their “visit” (mentioned above), God told Abraham that he would “return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son” (Gen 18:10).

The reason is that this is not the first time the Torah uses such a device in the Joseph narrative. Several chapters earlier there is an extremely em-

igmatic passage at the point where the brothers decide to sell Joseph into slavery:

Then they sat down to a meal. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead with camels laden with spices, balm and myrrh to be taken to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it to us if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” His brothers agreed. Then there passed by Midianite merchants, and **they** pulled Joseph up out of the pit and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt. (37:25–28)

It is a confusing episode. Who pulled Joseph from the pit? Who sold him to the Ishmaelites? Was it the brothers or the Midianites? The subject, “they,” is ambiguous.

The commentators offered many interpretations. Of these, the simplest is given by Rashbam,<sup>2</sup> who reads it as follows: The brothers, having thrown Joseph into the pit, sat down some distance away to eat. Reuben sneaked back to rescue Joseph, but found the pit empty and cried, “The boy is not! And I, where can I go?” Rashbam points out that **the brothers did not calm him by telling him they had sold Joseph. They seem as surprised as he was.** It follows that the brothers, having seen the Ishmaelites in the distance, decided to sell Joseph to them, but before they had the chance to do so, a second group of travellers, the Midianites, heard Joseph’s cries, saw the possibility of selling him to the Ishmaelites, and did so.

**In other words, the brothers intended to sell Joseph, and Joseph was sold, but not by the brothers.** They sought to do the deed, and the deed was done, but not by them.

### 3. Genesis 45:4

<sup>4</sup>**I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!**

#### a. John 4:1-2

<sup>1</sup>Now Yeshua learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining **and baptizing more disciples than John**—<sup>2</sup>although in fact **it was not Yeshua who baptized, but his disciples.**

**That is precisely what happened in the case of Joseph’s bid for freedom. He sought to be released from prison, and he was released from prison, but not in the way he planned. Two years had to pass.** Some further, unexpected event—Pharaoh’s dreams—had to happen. There is a break between cause and effect, between intention and outcome. **The pre-**

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2 Samuel ben Meir (c. 1085–c. 1158), after his death known as “Rashbam” (Rabbi Shmuel Ben Meir), was a leading French Tosafist and grandson of Shlomo Yitzhaki, “Rashi.”

cise parallel between these two passages—the sale of Joseph, and his release from prison—is too marked to be accidental. The Torah is signalling something to the attentive reader.

**It is telling us about the nature of divine providence.** In both episodes, between intention and outcome, there was an intervention—in the first case, the appearance of the Midianites, in the second, Pharaoh's dreams. The Torah is giving us a rare glimpse of the workings of providence in individual lives. **Nothing in the Joseph story happens by chance**—and where an event most looks like chance, that is where divine intervention is most evident in retrospect.

The Joseph story is written to be read at two levels. On the surface it is a story about human beings and their relationships. It is not a happy story. Brothers are prepared to sell their own flesh and blood into slavery. The chief steward, released from prison, immediately forgets his fellow prisoner, failing to intercede on his behalf. People betray people. Dreams are mere dreams. Hopes are destined to be dashed on the rocks of reality. That is the point at which *Vayeshev* ends.

But as events unfold in *Miketz* we realise that at a deeper level some other force has been at work all along. God has been monitoring the entire sequence of events, arranging the necessary strategic interventions to ensure that the outcome will be as planned. This is not obvious, as it is, for example, in the story of the Exodus. There the hand of God, in the form of the plagues and the division of the Sea, is manifest. Here it is concealed. It takes reflection and the ability to read beneath the surface to sense it at all. The Joseph story is more than a story about Joseph. It is a story about each of us, and the subtle interweaving of apparent happenstance and divinely-scripted destiny.

We are at best co-authors of our lives. **Not realizing it at the time, the very act the brothers did to prevent Joseph's dreams coming true was the first step in their coming true.** As for Joseph, unbeknown to him, his life was part of a larger story—revealed by God to Abraham generations earlier when He told him that his children would suffer slavery in a land not their own.

Sometimes we too catch a glimpse of the workings of fate in our lives. Many times, I have had prayers answered—but never when I expected, nor in the way I imagined. In many cases, the answer came after I had given up hope. Providence exists. In Shakespeare's words "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will."<sup>(1)</sup> But there is a pause, an intervention, a break in the sequence of cause and effect, which says: things do not happen merely because we wish them, but because they are part of the larger scheme of things.

What Joseph discovered in the hiatus between the two *parashot* is that, in addition to initiative and enterprise, we also need patience, humility and

trust. If our prayers are legitimate, God will answer them, but not necessarily when or how we think He will. That is the meaning of *Miketz*—"At the end of two full years." We must do our part, God will do His. Between them there is a gap, not just in time, but in consciousness. We learn that we are not sole masters of our fate. Sometimes it is only after many years that, looking back, we see the pattern in our life, and understand how Providence has shaped our destiny. *Miketz* is the space we make in our minds for the things not under our control. The name of that space is faith.

(1) *Hamlet*, act v, scene 2, 10-11.

4. *Nothing in the Joseph story happens by chance—and where an event most looks like chance, that is where divine intervention is most evident in retrospect.*

a. Isaiah 14:24

<sup>24</sup>"Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen.

b. Proverbs 19:21

Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

c. Ruth 2:1-7

<sup>3</sup>**As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.** <sup>4</sup>**Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem** and greeted the harvesters ...

d. Luke 2:1-7

<sup>4</sup>**So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.** <sup>5</sup>**He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.**

1) Micah 5:2

<sup>2</sup>"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, **out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel**, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

2) Targum Jonathan<sup>3</sup>/Micah 5:1

And you, O **Bethlehem Ephrathah**, you who were too small to be numbered among the thousands of the house of Judah, **from**

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3 Jonathan ben Uzziel was a student of Hillel. His Targum dates to the 1st cent. BCE. This Targum is a fusion of the Jerusalem Targums with that of Onkelos. Scholars have traced various strata in this text and have discovered elements dating back to the Hasmonean period and layers as late as the period of the Arab conquest. The Jerusalem Targums are interpretative and exegetical in nature. The translators sought to reflect the exegetical traditions of the Oral Torah and to introduce well-known Halachic and Aggadic interpretations of the verses—Noah Aminoah & Yosef Nitzan, *Torah, The Oral Tradition* (World Zionist Organization), pp. 24, 26.

**you shall come forth before Me the Messiah**, to exercise dominion over Israel, he whose name was mentioned from before, from the days of creation.

e. Acts 8:26-35

<sup>26</sup>Now **an** angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road ... that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." <sup>27</sup>So **he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official** in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup>and **on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah** the prophet.

f. Acts 17:16-17

<sup>17</sup>So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day **with those who happened to be there**.

g. Mark 11:1-3; Matthew 21:1

<sup>Mar 11:2</sup><sup>4</sup>"Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden ... <sup>Mat 21:4</sup>**This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:** <sup>5</sup>"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

1) Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, **your king comes to you**, righteous and victorious, **lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey**.

LXX—Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Sion; proclaim *it* aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, the King is coming to thee, just, and a Saviour; he is meek and riding on an ass, **AND** a young foal.

a) The citation here seems to be a composite—*Tell the daughter of Zion* is from Isa. 62.11, the beginning of Zech. 9.9 reads *Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem ...*<sup>4</sup>

b) The parallelism of the MT, i.e., humble and riding on an ass, on the colt, the foal of an ass, was misunderstood by the translator, who translated the *vav* or *ve'al* literally as "and" instead of omitting it or translating in as "even" ...<sup>5</sup>

c) Reference to this practice can be found in rabbinic literature. When Moses, according to legend, was proclaimed king of Kush, the people took off their garments and spread them out on the ground (Yalkut, Exodus, 168).<sup>6</sup>

h. John 18:28-32

<sup>31</sup>Pilate said, "Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law." "But **we have no right to execute anyone**," they objected. <sup>32</sup>**This took place to fulfill what Yeshua had said about the kind of death he was going to die** (i.e., "lifted up," "flogged and crucified" [John 3:14; Mat 20:19]).

i. See also Matthew 1:21-23; 2:13-15; 2:20-23; 9:1-6; 11:2-6; Luke 4:16-21; John 19:23-24;

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4 Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament*, (KTAV Publishing House, Inc.), p. 344.

5 Ibid.

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6 Ibid.