

Judah and Joseph: Healing a Family Together, an Original Midrash

Shabbat Vayyigash 5785

January 3, 2025

Rabbi Barry H. Block

My name is Judah. I am one of the many middle children in a family of thirteen children, twelve sons and a daughter. That's a lot of people to consider in succession planning—you know, when the older generation needs to make provisions for who will run the family business one day.

Dad did not make any of that easy. He disregarded Dinah, excluding her from the business. He played favorites, doting on Joseph and Benjamin, the children of his second wife, who died in childbirth. Dad sent me out to work at a young age, as he did with all my brothers, except those two youngest. Yaakov's Shepherds was successful, providing for our family, but it would have to grow to feed a dozen families going forward. We ten older brothers worked long, hard, hot hours in the sun. We got along well, though, and were happy being together, faithfully serving our father, and planning for a future that could sustain us all.

We didn't have a beef with Benjamin—he was not only the youngest, but his mom died in childbirth, so we felt sorry for him. He also stayed out of our way. Joseph was another matter altogether. He was such a big-headed brat! Dad always bought him the nicest cars and fanciest clothes. Dad would hint, none too subtly, that Joseph would take over the business when the time came, which made absolutely no sense, since we older brothers did all the work and knew the company inside and out. Joseph, meanwhile, never stopped bragging that he would be our boss one day. He didn't work a day in his life. Dad said that Joseph was made for management, not labor.

One day, Dad got it in his head that Joseph should come out to inspect **our** work, which he didn't begin to understand. He didn't even know where to look for us. When finally directed, he found us rather late in the day, during our siesta. We had been out since 5am, after all. The sheep had been sheered and watered, and they were out to pasture. Down time for us.

Joseph went home and told Dad that we were a bunch of lazy bums. Dad knew better, and he didn't act on Joe's malicious report, but still. We were **mad**. Some of my brothers even wanted to kill Joseph. They couldn't come up with another plan to get him out of the way, and we really did have to do that if we weren't to be subjected to his tyrannical, untrained leadership.

Only later did I find out that I wasn't the only one who was uncomfortable about the murderous plot. Reuben's plan wasn't too swift, though. Hiding Joseph

in the barn behind tall stacks of hay would have at best delayed the fratricide. I had a different idea. Joseph wanted to be in management, so let him be in management! I found a good job for him, far enough away that we might not ever hear from him again. Egypt isn't so distant from Israel if you have trains, planes, and automobiles; but if your fastest vehicle is a camel, it's far!

I had never met Potiphar, our biggest customer, but I had often spoken with the crew that would come each year to pick up bale after bale of wool for him. I did know that Potiphar was a shrewd business owner, married, but without children to take over the family business. I had just the man for him!

As it happened, Potiphar's buyers came through just about the time my brothers wanted to murder Joseph. I had to work fast. First, I needed to convince Joseph that the management position at Potiphar's Fine Woven Woolens would be outstanding training for the leadership of Yaakov's Shepherds one day. Second, I had to convince our brothers that shipping him off to Egypt, while potentially just a temporary solution, would give us time to solidify our position with Dad.

But how to convince Dad? Realizing that even I could not accomplish that, I told Joseph a little white lie: Getting Joseph trained at Potiphar's Fine Woven Woolens was all Dad's idea, but he was too emotional to send Joseph off in person. Persuading my brothers that we should tell Dad that Joseph had gone missing proved easier. Dad's worried tears were unnerving, but not as distressing as being subservient to that pompous, lazy little brother of ours for the rest of our lives!

Over the years, Potiphar's crew would regale us with news of our bratty brother's success in Egypt. He made Potiphar a very rich man, even more than he was already. Potiphar was mostly retired by the time his workers told us that Joseph had tried to seduce the old man's wife and been thrown in prison for attempted rape. As bad as Joseph was, that didn't sound like him; but at least he wasn't our problem any longer.

Years passed. Then, along came a drought, which killed off most of our sheep. When Potiphar's buyers came, they realized we had almost nothing to sell them, and that we brothers were almost as emaciated as our dying sheep. They suggested that we come to Egypt. No food shortage there. Dad was all too eager for the ten of us to go. Even if we never came back, he would only have to feed himself and Benjamin.

Arriving in Thebes, we were directed to a palace drawing room, where we would meet the man responsible for doling out rations to foreigners. I recognized Joseph immediately, but he pretended not to recognize us, so I did the same. He was nasty and rude, high and mighty, just as Joseph had always been. He called us

liars and spies, demanded that we come back to Egypt with our youngest brother, and threw my brother Simeon into prison as a hostage in the meantime. Inexplicably, he was also generous, loading us down with as much food as we could carry for the trip home.

When we came back with Benjamin, Joseph was no nicer, but he did free Simeon and give us lots more food. As we turned to leave, Joseph cried out that somebody had stolen his silver goblet. Not being so royal, we didn't even know what a goblet was, but Joseph's guards found it in Benjamin's sack.

Benjamin was a lot of things—spoiled, mostly—but he was not a thief. That much I knew. I did not know what Joseph was up to, exactly, but I was beginning to suspect that he knew who we were and was taking revenge on us for pawning him off on Potiphar all those years ago. Seemed to me that he should be thanking us. He was clearly a very wealthy man, silver goblet or none.

I was done pretending. I approached Joseph, prepared to reveal our identities. Much to my surprise, Joseph beat me to it. “I am Joseph,” he declared, “Come, draw near to me.”ⁱ

As we talked, I learned that Joseph, too, had recognized us from the moment he saw us. Neither of us trusted the other, so each of us tested the other. All that fixation on Benjamin, making us bring him to Egypt only to see him arrested for theft, was the sign. Maybe Joseph wanted us to know if we would stand up for Dad's new favorite, Joseph's only full brother from the same mom. Joseph failed my test, intended to ascertain if he would be kind, or at least I thought he was cruel, until I learned that Joseph never intended to harm Benjamin, and that Simeon had been “imprisoned” in luxury during our absence.

Building trust takes time, as does overcoming lifelong resentment. Many families are plagued with that. Joseph and I both needed to get at least some hint that the other had grown and matured with age. Drawing close and unmasking ourselves to one another, we took a first step. Perhaps together, we can heal our all-too-broken family. Maybe our example will help others to do the same.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 45:3-4.