

## D'var Torah – Vayeshev

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*By Rabbi Maurice Harris*

*Shabbat shalom.* This week we turn to the Torah portion called *Vayeishev*, which begins the final dramatic story of the book of Genesis. This is the famous saga of Joseph and his brothers, which we'll be reading from for the next four *Shabbatot*. It's a drama that includes everything you'd want if you were producing a mainstream Hollywood hit: bitter sibling rivalry, parental favoritism, a fake murder, a failed seduction, slave trading, prison intrigue, dream interpretation, and a grizzly execution. And that's all in the first 25 percent of the story!

Many of you already know the story. Jacob has long since settled in the land of Canaan, and is the father of 12 sons and one daughter. His wife, Leah, and his two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, remain alive with him, but Rachel – the woman he loved with his most ardent passion – has since died, leaving as her legacy the two sons she conceived with Jacob, Joseph and little Benjamin. Joseph would tend the flocks along with his brothers, and he would dream audacious dreams that seemed to predict and symbolize a future time when all his family, including the father and mothers of the family, would come to honor him. He would tell his brothers these dreams matter-of-factly, and they would respond with outrage. Whether Joseph was trying to get a rise out of them or whether he was just oblivious to social and emotional dynamics is left unclear by the text. What we do know is that Jacob loved him as a favorite among his kids, and that Jacob showed this special affection by gifting Joseph with an unusual, ornamented and colorful tunic.

The brothers were annoyed and their jealousy grew to the point that one day they decided they'd had enough. They conspired to kill Joseph out in the fields, but the eldest among them, Reuben, talked them out of murder. Instead they took Joseph's multi-colored coat and through the lad into a pit. While the brothers were eating a meal and considering their options, a caravan of slave merchants happened on the scene, and one of the brothers, Judah, suggested they sell Joseph to them. Once the deed was done, they slaughtered a goat and dipped Joseph's special garment in its blood, after which they returned to Jacob, their father, and asked, "Father, do you recognize this coat?" Jacob, believing his favorite son to be dead, fell into inconsolable grief.

The story then shifts to Joseph's life as a captive. The slave traders sell him to a powerful Egyptian named Potiphar, the chief of the guard among Pharaoh's elite officers. This is a story about steep descents and ascents, and no sooner are we through reading about Joseph languishing at the bottom of a pit then we find ourselves reading that Joseph has risen to the top of the ranks among Potiphar's servants. Potiphar in fact comes to love Joseph, and makes him overseer of his house.

It turns out that Potiphar's wife also has her eye on young Joseph, and she makes a pass at him. Joseph resists the temptation and refuses her advance, running from her after she takes hold of his garment. She is left holding the garment in her hand. Clothing is another major motif in the Joseph story – beginning with the coat of many colors, and coming up again in this moment, and as you'll find if you read through to the end of the saga, it'll keep on playing a pivotal role in the drama. Embarrassed and looking to get Joseph out of the household, she accuses Joseph of making advances towards her, and consequently Joseph undergoes another sudden descent – this time into the royal dungeon where he and other prisoners await their ultimate fate.

It turns out that whenever Joseph takes a descent, it's not too long before he starts making another ascent. The chief warden of the prison takes a liking to Joseph, and before long he appoints Joseph to a supervisory role over the other prisoners. Sometime thereafter, two of the prisoners – each of them a servant of Pharaoh's – come to tell Joseph about their dreams. They are the Pharaoh's chief wine steward and the Pharaoh's chief baker. As you may recall, God gives Joseph the ability to interpret each of their dreams. Joseph tells the wine steward that he will be released and restored to his old position, and Joseph asks him to put in a good word for him to the Pharaoh. Joseph tells the poor baker that the dream is a sign that he is to be hanged. The Torah portion ends with the narrating voice informing us that these things came to pass exactly as Joseph had predicted, but that the chief wine steward forgot his promise to tell the Pharaoh about Joseph.

As I mentioned a few moments ago, one of the striking elements of the story of Joseph is the way that he keeps going through series of descents down into a deep place of despair followed by ascents up into a place of privilege and power. Joseph is a symbol of not just the potentially dramatic ups and downs we sometimes face in life, but of the way that mystics of our tradition have understood the flow of divine energy to move from a Divine source above down to our material, earthly realm below, and back home to the Divine source above, and back down again to us.

The Hasidic movement developed this spiritual image into a concept known as ascent by means of descent. The *tzaddik* – the spiritual master of a particular Hasidic community – was sometimes seen as someone whose spirit was so illuminated and enlightened that under normal circumstances it would not be hanging around here, in a place of materialism and human folly, but rather it would be deeply embedded in the Divine realms beyond the material realm. But, out of loving compassion for the many souls yet to become fully enlightened, the *tzaddik's* spirit descends into our world of material existence and frequent wrongdoing, in order to serve as a guide and a conduit for the flow of God's healing and loving energy.

We've seen this concept in Eastern traditions in the form of the bodhisattva – the person who has attained nirvana and doesn't need to remain in this world of suffering and confusion, but who chooses to be here in order to help us. And perhaps, on some level, saints in Catholicism play this role too – people whose goodness is so illuminating, so selfless, so helpful to others on the path that their impact is profound.

What are we to make of these spiritual teachings from various religions that tell us there are saints, bodhisattvas, and *tzaddikim* among us? I can't answer that question definitively for myself, except to say that I'm quite certain I'm not one of them myself, nor have I played one on TV. I can say this – there are certain individuals whose love and radiance has touched me in a way that I have found to be delightful, disarming, and unexpected. I most recently experienced that sensation when Sister Helen Prejean was in town, speaking about her work with death row inmates and her efforts to overturn the death penalty. I had the good fortune to be at an interfaith gathering of clergy who were sharing a lunch with her and engaging her in a question-and-answer session. She started the session by asking everyone around the table to say their names and what religious tradition they represented. After the 20 or so clergy each did so, Sister Helen looked out at the group and, in her Louisiana drawl, said, "My name is Sister Helen Prejean and I'm a Roman Catholic, which is the one true religion, and I'm here to help you all." Then she smiled and, when the laughter died down, she added, "Because the church doesn't have any problems that it's dealing with these days."

That kind of gentle, self-mocking humor told me straight-away that this was a person who didn't take herself too seriously. During the course of the discussion we had, I happened to bring up something that had bothered me as a Jew over the years in interfaith settings in which clergy would discuss their religious take on the death penalty. I mentioned that I had on many occasions heard Christian clergy say that they opposed the death penalty because they felt that it was time to outgrow the Old Testament attitude of "an eye for an eye." I went on to explain that this comment bothered me because it reflected a misunderstanding of Jewish teaching on this verse, and that I often feel that the speaker is coming from a place of depicting Judaism as vengeful and barbaric, in contrast with a more enlightened and non-violent Christianity. I said that Judaism, after all, is not the religion of the Hebrew Bible (which Christian tradition calls the Old Testament), but rather, Judaism is the religion of centuries of rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. In the Talmud, the rabbis declare that "an eye for an eye" refers to monetary compensation, and nothing else. They discuss and debate questions of how to calculate the proper amount of money the guilty party should be made to pay the victim by the court. That's Judaism.

Not only did Sister Helen take in what I said, she insisted on including this correction of what is a common Christian misperception of Jewish teaching in the interfaith program she led later that night. She *wanted* to learn from others, and to grow from that knowledge.

Let's see – a life of service to people who are widely hated; a great sense of humor that includes the ability to laugh at herself; and a deep desire to learn wisdom from others... sounds like a pretty good recipe for a *tzaddik* to me. But if I told that to Sister Helen, she'd probably just respond with another Cajun wisecrack, so I'll just say it here, behind her back.

Joseph's many ascents and descents give us the opportunity to think about the roller coaster each of us rides on in our lives, and to look for the opportunities for connecting with the flow of Divine energy that permeates our world. Whether the world is filled with individual *tzaddikim*, or whether there's just *tzaddik* energy all over the place and we each have access and

opportunity to be that conduit for godly energy, may we be blessed this Shabbat with hope, serenity, and greater insight into the stories of our lives.

I dedicate this d'var Torah in loving memory to my father, William Harris, whose *yahrzeit* just passed. Although I am an only child, I treasured being his favorite. May his memory be a blessing.