

A Dream Comes True

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"I Am Joseph" by Shoshannah Brombacher, NY 2008, chabad.org

Prayer of Illumination

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us.
In the midst of the multitude of words in our daily lives,
speak your eternal Word to us,
that we may respond to your gracious promises
with renewed faithfulness, service, and love.
Amen.

Background

We need some very important background before going to our morning's Scripture. According to the process of *teshuva* we looked at last week, Joseph takes his brothers through a second round of the difficult and painful road of repentance and change to help heal and free his brothers from their past. Again, they pass with flying colors. Particularly the brother Judah.

In Genesis 43 and 44, we see his newfound maturity displayed in his family dealings when he utters these beautiful words of devotion and sacrifice to the brother he previously wronged:

So please, my lord, let me stay here as a slave instead of the boy Benjamin, and let the boy return with his brothers. For how can I return to my father if the boy is not with me? I couldn't bear to see the anguish this would cause my father!

Judah has passed the test of *teshuva*. He's a new man. A true brother and son. He took ownership and responsibility. He didn't play the blame game. He was free. Judah is the first one in the Scriptures to repent of wrongdoing. In Judaism he is given the title "**Baal Teshuva**" which means "**Master of Return**." Judah learns from his past behavior and changes, returning to God by the grace of God.

The root of the name Judah means, "to thank." But it also can mean, "to admit, to acknowledge." The word "confession" can also be traced back to Judah's name. Rabbi Abbahu put it this way:

*"In the place where penitents stand,
even the perfectly righteous cannot stand."*

Better than being perfectly virtuous is the one who admits they are wrong and are open to change. And in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is Judah who shines as the best model for us.

The sons and daughters of Abraham are known by several names in history:

"**Hebrews**" which means "*strangers or nomads who wander from place to place.*"

They're also known as "**Israel**," the new name given to Jacob which means, "*one who struggles with God and humans and prevails.*"

But the most predominant name over history is "**Jews**" or in Hebrew "**Yehudim**" which is taken from the name Judah.

Israel's greatest king, David, came from the tribe of Judah. And then as Christians, one of the names of our Messiah, Jesus Christ is "**Lion of the Tribe of Judah**." And so it is by the name "**Judah**," not "Joseph," that God's chosen people are known. The one who was once callous toward his brother Joseph is now known for his care and compassion.

We now come the climax of the Joseph story. Everything has been leading up to this.

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Scripture Reading: Genesis 45:1-28 (NRSVue)

¹ Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me; do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there, since there are five more years of famine to come, so that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty.' ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him. ¹⁶ When the report was heard in Pharaoh's house, "Joseph's brothers have come," Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. ¹⁷ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Say to your brothers, 'Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. ¹⁸ Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land.' ¹⁹ You are further charged to say, 'Do this: take wagons from the land of Egypt for your little ones and for your wives, and bring your father, and come. ²⁰ Give no thought to your possessions, for the best of all the land of Egypt is yours.' " ²¹ The sons of Israel did so. Joseph gave them wagons according to the instruction of Pharaoh, and he gave them provisions for the journey. ²² To each one of them he gave a set of garments, but to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver and five sets of garments. ²³ To his father he sent the following: ten donkeys loaded with the good things of Egypt and ten female donkeys loaded with grain, bread, and provision for his father on the journey. ²⁴ Then he sent his brothers on their way, and as they were leaving he said to them, "Do not quarrel along the way." ²⁵ So they went up out of Egypt and came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. ²⁶ And they told him, "Joseph is still alive! He is even ruler over all the land of Egypt." He was stunned; he could not believe them.

²⁷ But when they told him all the words of Joseph that he had said to them, and when he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. ²⁸ Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I must go and see him before I die."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – "A Dream Comes True"

Joseph could no longer hold himself in check. The arduous task of teshuva was complete. He cleared everyone out. This was purely a family matter, between he and his brothers. He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it. Word traveled fast to Pharaoh.

"I am Joseph." [In Hebrew it's a two-word bombshell.]
"Is my father still alive?"

The brothers couldn't even answer because they were so thunderstruck by the revelation. In stunned silence, the brothers can only listen.

"Come close to me."

The life-long chasm between Joseph and his brothers is bridged by these beautiful words of reconciliation: **"Come close to me."**

It isn't only Judah and his brothers that have changed. Joseph changes too. He allows his story to be redeemed and reinterpreted by God. He's not fixated on the past. Forgiveness has freed him to inhabit a new future with his brothers: restored, healed, and bettered.

Joseph has the power for vengeance, but instead he chooses **generosity of spirit**. With the God of hope, we can find and hold on to the good.

"You intended to do harm; God intended it for good."

A terrible situation is totally reframed and renewed. Don't be dismayed. Don't be angry with yourselves.

God has sent me to preserve life.

God sent me to preserve a remnant of hope.

It was not you that sent me into slavery, but **God** sent me to be a ruler.

God has plans of flourishing for our family, even with five more years of famine yet to come.

God has created newness and Joseph has embraced it, and so should we.

I love how Walter Brueggemann puts it:

...this "point is a central one in the biblical faith:
The power to create newness [*comes from*]
risky, self-disclosing engagement."

Like Joseph, we're emboldened to put our heart out there for restoration.

Hear the good news Immanuel: Self-recrimination and fear are washed away. Grief is resolved. We are a people who speak life, not judgment. God is at work among us. And God is a God who graciously wills and works for life for his people, for us. God does his own work AND God honors the work of his people toward peace and healing. By the sovereign grace of God, he works with us hand in hand—reconciling the past, renewing the present, and redefining the future. It's a mystery how God does it. We don't know how, but he does. This fills us with reverence and gratitude. You see, Genesis is about sibling rivalry, **and** the hope of reconciliation. **Cain and Abel** ended in murder. But it changed after that. **Isaac and Ishmael** were freed to bury their father Abraham, together. **Jacob and Esau** embraced after all the hurt of stolen birth rights and blessings. Now **Joseph and his brothers** reconcile and live in peace together. It was not the brothers' hate, but God's loving hand that brought Joseph to Egypt to bring life.

This is the message of Genesis for us today:

When we can't forgive, we can't resolve conflicts ...
Whether it be in the family, the church, or in society ...
And we have to forgive ourselves, too.

By the grace of God, we are a forgiven and forgiving people. That's why we pray every Sunday, "forgive us our debts, *as what?*... we forgive our debtors. Ethicist Lewis Smedes puts it this way,

"You can reverse your future only by
releasing other people from their pasts."

It's in our own best interest to forgive. And we believe, behind it all, the unseen hand of God is refashioning and transforming human bad decisions into good purposes. Genesis reminds us God is in the business of saving and redeeming.

- Noah and the flood with the ark.
- Lot saved from destruction of Sodom.
- And Joseph, and Israel, experiencing an extraordinary deliverance from catastrophe.

It's the same today, disaster is not the last word. **Life**, not death, is the last word. God can also bring together fathers and sons, mothers, and daughters. Jacob comes down to see Joseph, not in Sheol (the grave), but down to Egypt.

Joseph tells us:

Come down and dwell with me in the land of Goshen and be close to me.
I will sustain you and provide for you, in the rich soil of the Delta Nile.
Even in a time of famine.
Tell our father of my glory in Egypt, hurry and bring my father here.

There's an important detail in the story for all of us:

Let it go.

To enter into this newness, you're going to have to let go of some things from your past. Some treasured things. It would be too much baggage to carry with them all their stuff into their new lives in Egypt. Let it go.

You will have new, different, and better provisions ahead of you. Regret not your belongings. Leave them behind. The best of Egypt is yours. Let the past go. Look to the future.

Let it go.

The brothers embrace, kiss, and weep together. It was only after this display of affection the brothers could find words to share with Joseph.

This time the brothers don't complain about Joseph's favoring of Benjamin. They can live with it with grace and goodwill. Joseph was stripped of his garments, but Benjamin would be given an abundant supply of garments. What once was a symbol of deception and harm, is now a symbol of restoration and healing.

The silver given to them was a restitution for the silver the brothers took for Joseph. Pharaoh seconded Joseph's plan to bring his family with him. And remember, "don't fight on your journey back to father. Be at peace."

When the brothers and their retinue arrived, they came to their care-worn father. The man who lifted the huge stone and wrestled with an angel, is now an old man, carrying the deep wounds



Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph

of a broken heart. Jacob's heart nearly stops at the good news. It seemed just *too good* to be true. For twenty-two years he thought Joseph was dead. But the spirit of their father Jacob revived—came back to life. And Israel said, "let me go see Joseph before I die." In a sense, both Joseph and Jacob came back to life. This is a beautiful foreshadowing of resurrection, of Christ coming back to life to give us new life and hope.

To quote Smedes again,

"After a hurt, we make our new beginnings, not where we used to be or where we wish we could be, but only where we are and with what we have at hand."

With God's unseen hand and the living hope of Christ, we can experience the healing of forgiveness for a meaningful future, no matter our past.

Amen.

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