



5 insights

into Jacob's household

Exactly what were the events that fuelled the tensions between Jacob and his children? Drawing on Genesis and the reflections of the sages, here is a brief overview:

1. Simeon & Levi. These two sons led the massacre at Shechem out of revenge for their sister's rape. Jacob condemns their bloodthirsty vigilante activity (Gen. 34:30), and on his deathbed refuses to bless these two sons. (Gen. 49:5-7)

2. Reuben. Jacob likewise refuses to bless his eldest, Reuben, whom he believes to have slept with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine (35:22).

3. Dinah. The Torah is silent on Jacob's response to his daughter Dinah after her rape (Gen.34). However the midrash (e.g., *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 38) takes up the story by telling how Jacob resolved

the 'problem' of the presence of a defiled daughter by sending her and her child away from his household.

4. Joseph. Joseph's recount of his dream suggests that his father and mother will pay homage to him (37:9). This is doubly wounding to Jacob: it implies disrespect to him as father, and it negatively invokes the memory of his deceased wife Rachel, Jacob's great love.

5. Judah. Remember the tense discussion between Judah and his father over the decision to return to Egypt (Gen.43)? The reader can't help but wonder if it represents another conflict brewing between Jacob and his sons.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

As Christians how do we juggle both a Torah-reading schedule according to the Jewish calendar and our own Church calendar? For instance, do we keep to our Torah reading schedule even during the Christmas season?

Certainly, our Christian liturgical priority is clear. At the same time, our Torah reading can continue to find its place in our week as a rich reminder of the gift of the Hebrew Scriptures without which the readings and celebrations of the Christmas season would make no sense at all.

Our Torah reading can make us particularly attentive to 'the Word made flesh' in Jesus the Jew, to the Jewishness of Mary and Joseph, and to the powerful Torah-infused traditions into which Jesus was born and which shaped him as he grew from infancy to manhood.

Thus our love for Torah can deepen our love for Jesus and his Jewish people. It can help us to respond with wonder and gratitude to the irreplaceable witness of Judaism which gave rise to our own Christian story, and which continues as a living, evolving tradition to this day.



Genesis 44:18—47:27

Vayigash:
'he approached'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 44:18–47:27

Our Torah portion opens with Judah's speech (44:18-34), a turning point for Joseph. Until now Joseph has concealed his true identity from his brothers while putting them through a test of character. Have they changed? Or are they still the same brothers who once robbed him of his freedom, and nearly cost him his life?

Judah's plea, declaring his willingness to give his own life in order to bring Benjamin home to their father, brings the matter to a head. Joseph is deeply moved, and reveals himself with the words: *'I am Joseph your brother...'* (45:4).

Tasting Torah

"I am Joseph—is my father [really] alive?" (Genesis 45:3).

Joseph's question is puzzling. He already knows his father to be alive (42:13). Is there something else underlying his emotionally charged enquiry about Jacob? Which raises another question: Why has Joseph made no attempt to contact his father all this time? At best it is surprising; at worst it seems cruel. How do you explain this omission?

Touching Torah

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks¹ offers an intriguing explanation. Joseph, he says, did not trust his father; for it was Jacob who sent Joseph to his brothers in the fields on that fateful day of his betrayal (37:13-14).

Think about it: Jacob *must* have been aware of his sons' hostility toward Joseph. Jacob himself knew the wrath of a brother, even fleeing for his life from Esau. Twenty years later, he still feared Esau might kill him. Why then did he send young Joseph—alone and defenceless—to his older, hostile brothers that day, out in the fields, away from the public eye?

But, you may object, surely Jacob was not knowingly sending Joseph to his death! As readers we are privy to the fact that Jacob is inconsolable since losing Joseph. *But does Joseph know this?* Brooding in an Egyptian prison, might Joseph have imagined his father to have deliberately put him in harm's way?

Depthing Torah

But why would Jacob want to endanger his favored son? Can the text support a reason? Look at the verses immediately preceding Jacob's sending of Joseph. Joseph's dream (37:9-11) angers his brothers and earns the rebuke of his father *'who kept the matter in mind'* (v.11). From previous events in Genesis we can presume that Joseph knows the force of his father's anger. He would have seen that Jacob is capable of virtually terminating his relationship with his three eldest sons because of their transgressions. [See overleaf.]

Could it be that a tragic misunderstanding is at work: that Joseph actually believes his father to be so angry as to cast him off and wish him dead? No wonder he did not contact Jacob when he had the chance.

But now the error is exposed. Judah's speech contains vital information: that their father has mourned Joseph all these years (44:27-29). A terrible weight is lifted from Joseph. To his inner question, *Did my father really love me?* he can answer, *Yes!!* Thus Joseph breaks into a wail heard through the palace (45:2). His next question is not about Judah or Benjamin; it is about his father.

Doing Torah

Do you find R. Sacks' view convincing? Can you suggest a different reason as to why Joseph didn't contact his father? Might it have called into question his loyalty to Pharaoh? Was Joseph 'playing it safe'? Continue to ponder the text.



Faith & Life

If Joseph, from his position of good fortune, had reached out to contact his father, then this terrible misunderstanding could have been cleared up much earlier. Fortunately there is still time for father and son to embrace. But what if Jacob had already died? This story of reconciliation shows the importance of keeping communication lines open, even during times of pain and conflict. How does this point resonate in your own life, and in the world today?

1. Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, 1991-2013.

Bibliography: Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006); Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem, 2009). Scripture: Plaut.