



# Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

## The new Joseph

*Pharaoh further said to Joseph, "See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 41:41).*

By the time we reach the end of Genesis 41 we can't help but be impressed by the dramatic reversal of Joseph's fortunes. From being a victimized adolescent, betrayed and sold into slavery by his own brothers, then unjustly thrown into an Egyptian prison, he has now risen to the heights of power in the Egyptian court, second only to Pharaoh.

As the story further unfolds he marries into Egyptian royal circles and fathers two sons. In his newfound social status, he has the upper hand over his brothers. And to top it off, he has discovered his beloved father, Jacob, to be alive. Surely things can't get better than this, the ultimate success story and happy ending!

But the Jewish sages, over millennia of reflection, caution us to consider the subtleties. Like dark clouds gathering in an otherwise blue sky, there are disturbing rumblings in the sacred text. Perhaps the most obvious is the dangerous 'cat and mouse' game Joseph plays with his brothers. Concealing his true identity, he threatens them, then holds out hope of saving them from famine, then threatens their lives, then saves again. Strategically he leaves

them perplexed, powerless, and very afraid. Meanwhile, his father, elderly and emotionally beaten, sits at home resigned to the worst possible outcome for his family.

And there are other rumblings too; such as the ambiguous passage where Joseph names his sons Manasseh and Ephraim (41:51-52). Each name has a meaning and we are left wondering whether his choice of names indicates Joseph to be acutely aware of his Hebrew origins, or doing his best to forget.

Nor can we help but notice that Joseph seems well assimilated into Egyptian society. By marrying a woman of Egypt, a polytheistic society, could Joseph be risking his faith in the God of his ancestors? This latter thought so alarmed the Jewish sages of old that an imaginative storytelling tradition was woven around the identity of Joseph's wife. According to the midrash, his wife was not an Egyptian at all, but rather his niece, the daughter of his sister Dinah, secretly adopted by an Egyptian family! Thus was Joseph married into his own people.<sup>1</sup>

Moving to contemporary commentary, one of the world's leading Jewish figures, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks,<sup>2</sup> observes that despite the success and towering influence of Joseph, it is not by his name that God's chosen people came to be identified in history. Rather, they are named after Jacob's new identity: 'Israel'. And

later the ancient Israelites came to be known as *Yehudim* ('Jews'), after the tribe of Judah. It is from Judah's lineage, not Joseph's, that King David (and the Messiah) descends.

Judah never equals the social status of his brother Joseph. Nor is he called *HaTzaddik* ('the righteous one') as Jewish tradition refers to Joseph. What, then, is Judah's outstanding quality upon which the Jewish nation is built? It is his willingness to repent, to return to the right path after sin. This is evident in Tamar's story (Genesis 38) and becomes increasingly clear as the Joseph saga proceeds.

Looking ahead to the epic events of Exodus, the bible reveals Joseph's rise to power to be a mixed blessing. For the day will come when Egypt will no longer be a safe haven for the Israelites. Despite Joseph's revered status, the Jewish sages are wary of embracing Joseph's fortunes without question. The scriptures draw us to ponder both the blessings and entrapments of riches, fame and sudden success. Have you a story to share along these lines? How does Joseph's 'success story' speak to you? •

1. Several midrashic sources carry this story. See Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1994), 550-551.

2. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009), 311-314.