



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Did Joseph bring upon himself misfortune?

Have you ever seen a production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*? It tells, in song, dance, theatrical energy and raucous humor, a much loved bible story. You can read the story for yourself in Genesis, beginning with chapter 37.

It is a dark story, a story of envy, resentment, betrayal and murderous thoughts. It is also a story of hope, revelation and redemption. It is the story of a family: Jacob and his sons. Through the ancestry of our faith family, it is our story too.

Imagine you are part of the conversations of a circle of Jewish sages as they gather to explore this bible passage. What catches their attention? According to some traditional Jewish commentaries, Joseph is regarded as a perfectly righteous person, yet the rabbis also recognize in him human weakness. In fact the vices of Joseph's brothers are understood as having roots in Joseph's (and Jacob's) own weaknesses. What do you make of this claim? Does it surprise you?

The text gives us three reasons why Joseph's brothers hated him:

- (a) his father loved him more than they;
- (b) he told them of his dreams;

(c) he brought ill reports about his brothers to his father.

On the first point the Jewish sages criticize Jacob for showing favoritism for Joseph by clothing him in a special garment and so inciting the envy of his brothers. On the second, Joseph's dreams, there are differing opinions. Some suggest that Joseph secretly harbored the desire to lord it over his brothers. Others suggest that he lacked discretion in relating his dreams. On the third point, the sages have much to share from their fertile imaginations about the details of the 'ill reports' that Joseph gave concerning his brothers, from transgressions in ritual practices to eyes lusting after women!

What about you? When you— with your prayerful imagination— listen to this story of complex family dynamics, what do you hear? What insights complete the 'gaps' in the story? How does this story speak to us in our times? Here is how one person, a Canadian university chaplain, describes it:

"To say that Joseph came from a dysfunctional family is an understatement. Here we have a concrete example of a family fraught with favoritism, sibling rivalry, deceit, and emotional turbulence. Somehow, through all the trials and tribulations, Joseph the spoilt son grows up. If we look ahead to how the story of Joseph unfolds.... Yes, he was irritating

but he was only a boy, and God chose to favor him with the ability to dream dreams and interpret them. Maybe his time away from the affection of his doting father caused him to reflect and examine his actions. Perhaps Jacob could begin to understand the gifts of his other sons more clearly without the distraction of his favored son. The emotional pain caused by the concern for Joseph, the lost son, has a positive effect on his brothers. As we find out later in Genesis, the brothers are rehabilitated...they have learned compassion." [Source: www.batkol.info]

For reflection

On family tensions:

Every family has its tensions. Yet tensions can be a source of growth and heroic love. With which of the characters in the Joseph story do you most identify?

On dreams:

What role do dreams play in your life? Are we naturally suspicious of dreamers, living as they do on another plane? What lessons have you learned from the dreamers in your life?