



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Joseph, Jacob, and a tragic misunderstanding

The story of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers is one of the great dramas of Genesis, and Judah's passionate speech (44:18-34) is a turning point. 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 almost his life? Judah's plea, declaring his willingness to give his own life in order to save their little brother Benjamin, brings the matter to a head. Joseph is deeply moved, and pronounces the words: *'I am Joseph your brother...'* (45:4).

Yet in this moment of revelation Joseph asks a puzzling question: *'Is my father still alive?'* (45:3). It is puzzling because he already knows his father is alive (42:13). Is there something else underlying his emotionally charged enquiry? 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 can we explain this omission?

Steeped in the creative interpretative traditions of Judaism, we find contemporary commentator Rabbi Jonathan Sacks with an intriguing

explanation as follows.¹ Joseph did not contact his father, says Rabbi Sacks, because 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 defenseless—to his older, hostile brothers that day, out in the fields, away from the public eye?

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

But why would Jacob want to endanger his favored son? Can the text support a reason? Rabbi Sacks points to 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—Reuben, Simeon and Levi—because of their wrongdoings. Even on his deathbed Jacob cannot bring himself to bless them (49:3-7).

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.

But now this false belief is shattered, for 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, says the text, Joseph breaks into a wail heard through the palace (45:2). His next question is about his father.

This Torah narrative presents a story of reconciliation at a number of levels. It certainly shows the importance of keeping communication lines open, even during times of conflict. If Joseph had reached out to contact his father, then this tragic misunderstanding might have been cleared up earlier. Fortunately there is still time for father and son to embrace. But what if the elderly Jacob had already died? Continue to ponder this story through the lens of your own life and the tasks of reconciliation in the world today. •

1. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009), 315-322.