



The Majesty of Restraint
Or: Joseph's Shining Moment
Rabbi Shai Held

Judaism generally urges us to be agents, to be active rather than passive, to take responsibility for our lives and for the world. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik goes so far as to insist that “the peak of religious ethical perfection to which Judaism aspires is man as creator.”¹ This means that we are often asked to use the power at our disposal both to better our lives and to achieve holy ends.



But sometimes we are challenged to do just the opposite, to know when it is inappropriate to exercise our power. Although Soloveitchik (rightly) emphasizes the dignity of action, it is often no less important to learn the dignity of restraint.

Hurt and humiliated by her maidservant Hagar, Sarah “oppresses” her (Genesis 16:6). Although some traditional commentators defend Sarah’s actions,² others forcefully accuse her of sin and moral failure. Rabbi David Kimhi (known as Radak, 1160-1235) explains that Sarah’s failure lies in the fact that she exercises her capacity to afflict someone vulnerable: “It

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is not appropriate,” he says, “for a person to do everything she can with what is under her power.” Radak cites the poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol: “How beautiful is forgiveness at the moment one has power.” The terribly painful story of Sarah and Hagar is included

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (English translation, 1983), p. 101.

² See, e.g. the comments of R. Obadiah Seforno (c. 1475-1550) to Genesis 16:6.



in the Torah, Radak teaches, precisely so that we learn from Sarah's mistakes.

Joseph starts out following in Sarah's path. At first, it seems, he really wants to make his brothers suffer. But over time, something shifts in him—and in them—and that makes possible one of the most moving and remarkable moments of transformation in the Torah.

When we first hear of Joseph's tortured relations with his brothers—of Jacob's favoritism and of Joseph's habit of bringing bad reports about his brothers to his father—Genesis tells us that his brothers “could not speak a friendly word to him” (*velo yakhlū dabro leshalom*) (Genesis 37:2-4). Years later, when the brothers arrive in Egypt in search of food during a famine, Joseph, by now second-in-command to Pharaoh, recognizes them, although they do not recognize him. Right away, the text informs us that Joseph “spoke harshly to them” (*vayedaber itam kashot*) (42:7). Just as they, long ago, could not find a kind word for him, now he will not trouble himself to find one for them.

In what follows, Joseph appears to take revenge. Joseph's brothers had followed Judah's lead and sold him into slavery (37:26-28), unleashing the process that led to his imprisonment on false charges (39:17-20). Now, with his brothers in his sights, what does Joseph do? He falsely and repeatedly accuses them of being spies, and confines them to the guardhouse (42:9-17). Just as Potiphar imprisoned Joseph for a crime he did not commit, so now he falsely imprisons his brothers.

There is a certain literary elegance to the next stage of Joseph's treatment of his brothers. In that fateful moment when they had decided to finally rid themselves of him, Joseph's brothers had sold him for money (37:28). Now, years later, Joseph orders his brothers' bags filled with grain and provisions, but also with the very money they have used to pay for what they need (42:25). Bible scholar Matthew Schlimm notes: “Joseph's brothers once sold him into slavery for financial gain. In an act of symmetrical retribution, Joseph strikes fear into their hearts by giving them silver that they do not deserve and should not rightfully



possess.”³ Money had played a key role when they hurt him; now money serves as his method of revenge.

And Joseph is still not done. Once, his brothers had sold him for “twenty pieces of silver” (37:28). On their next visit to Egypt, Joseph further confounds his brothers, setting (one of) them up again: Joseph commands his steward to place his silver divination cup in Benjamin’s bag and then has him exposed as a thief (44:1-13). The repeated invocation of silver is revealing: Joseph had already tormented his brothers by surreptitiously returning their silver to them (42:25,28,35), and now he furtively plants his silver cup with his younger brother (44:2). Bible scholar Thomas Broadie astutely explains that “the silver is the symbol of the still-unresolved betrayal,” and comments: “Ever since [that betrayal], the silver seems to stick to [Joseph’s brothers]. Like Lady Macbeth, unable to get the blood of the murdered king off her hands, they cannot get away from the bloody silver.”⁴

Accused of theft, Joseph’s brothers return to Egypt, where he confronts them: “What is this deed that you have done?” (*mah ha-ma’aseh asher asitem*) (44:15). On the surface, of course, he appears to be asking about the (purportedly) stolen silver cup. But as Schlimm points out, the question has a deeper and more fundamental resonance. Recall God’s words to Eve after she and Adam eat of the forbidden fruit in Eden: “What is this you have done?!” (*mah zot asit*) (3:13), and to Cain after he slays his brother: “What have you done?!” (*meh asita*) (4:10). Like God’s words in those two foundational stories, “Joseph’s question is a call for reflection on all that has transpired, both in the immediate and in the distant past.” That

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³ Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis* (2011), p. 173. While I do not agree with him on every point, and while the conclusion I will draw is different, my interpretation of the dynamics between Joseph and his brothers is heavily indebted to Schlimm’s fine analysis.

⁴ Thomas Broadie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, p. 387.



is why, Schlimm observes, Joseph speaks in the plural (the Hebrew *atem*, rather than *atah*), even though he claims he is only interested in the one brother who has acted wrongly in this instance.⁵

Joseph thus afflicts his brothers over a period of years, punishing them for what they had once done to him. But he does more than just mete out punishment. He also tries to shock them and shake them, to disorient them so much that they are forced to ask how they ended up in this horrific situation. The strategy seems to work. After being falsely accused of spying and told that they will have no choice but to bring their youngest brother down to Egypt, they begin to search themselves: “They said to one another, ‘Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why this distress has come upon us’” (42:21). Perhaps there is even more: perhaps Joseph jars and unsettles them in such extreme ways because he wants to see whether they have changed. Perhaps if they have let go of their hatred of him, he can forgive them. In a deeply poignant moment, as soon as he hears them express remorse, Joseph “turned away from them and wept” (42:23). The regret on the part of the culprits does not erase past injuries, but it does mitigate the severity of Joseph’s pain—or, at very least, it sets that process in motion.

Now, with the fulfillment of his grandiose dreams before him, he repudiates his dreams and embraces his brothers instead.

This slow, torturous tale now comes to an astonishing resolution. Faced with the impending unjust imprisonment of his youngest brother, Judah steps forward and insists that he should be incarcerated in Benjamin’s place. Having once hatched the

plan to sell Joseph into slavery (37:26), Judah is now willing to be enslaved rather than allow

⁵ Schlimm, 175.



a “recurrence of past evils.”⁶ Whereas he and his brothers once displayed brazen indifference to the pain their actions would cause their father, Judah now seems passionately concerned with Jacob’s well-being: “For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!” (44:34). Judah, it seems, is a changed man, a paragon of repentance. Joseph is so moved by this display that he can no longer contain himself—sobbing, he reveals his true identity to them (45:1-4). Stunningly, he encourages them to forgive themselves, averring that God had been working behind the scenes, sending Joseph to Egypt to “save life” and ensure his family’s survival in the face of prolonged famine (45:5-7).

In this moment, the text, in its quiet, subtle way, signals how much has really changed. Joseph embraces his brother Benjamin and they both weep. And then, Genesis tells us, “He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and afterwards his brothers spoke with him” (45:15). Recall how this long and harrowing saga began: Joseph’s brothers could not speak a friendly word to him (37:4). Now, finally, it seems, after all of the tribulations the family has endured, they do just that.

And then, in this week’s parashah, comes another exquisitely moving moment. Jacob dies, sending Joseph’s brothers into a panic. They again fear that Joseph still bears a grudge against them and will make them pay for their past crimes (50:15)—living testimony to just how difficult it can be to believe that those we have wronged have truly forgiven us. They beg for Joseph’s mercy and declare, “Here we are, slaves to you!” (50:18). But Joseph’s response demonstrates how profoundly he too has changed: “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God?” (50:19). We have already seen the depth of Judah’s repentance and transformation. Now look at Joseph. As a young man, he had dreamed of his brothers bowing down to him, of being lord over them (37:5-11). Now, with the fulfillment of his grandiose dreams before

⁶ Schlimm, 176.

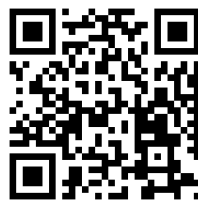


him, he repudiates his dreams and embraces his brothers instead. He makes unequivocally clear that he has no illusions of being God and no need for his brothers to be his servants or slaves. Where they fear he will enact vengeance upon them, he instead promises to support and care for them and their children. Joseph may well have harbored fantasies of hurting his brothers and exacting revenge—and here, finally, is his chance. But with his father dead and his brothers at his mercy, what does he do? He forgives them, insisting that punishment is God’s prerogative rather than his. And then, again, the poignant refrain: “He comforted them and spoke kindly to them (lit. spoke to their hearts)” (*vayedaber al libam*) (50:23). Joseph and his family have discovered the power of comforting speech.

Sarah’s failure is Joseph’s success; what she forgets, he at last remembers. Fully conscious of his power to wound those who have wounded him, Joseph instead heeds a commandment Moses will soon receive: not to take revenge or bear a grudge (Leviticus 19:18). Sometimes people achieve greatness through the use of power. But in this remarkable moment, Joseph models a different kind of greatness: the majesty of restraint.

Shabbat Shalom.

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