

Parashat Shemot 5777, 2017:

Joseph's Life: A Message for Our Time

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first five *pasukim* (verses) of our *parasha* present the names of the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel that came to Egypt:

And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt; with Jacob, each man and his household came: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin. Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. Now all those descended from Jacob were seventy souls, and Joseph was in Egypt. (*Sefer Shemot* 1:1-5, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) asks two midrashically-based questions on the phrase, “and Joseph was in Egypt:” “Did we not know that he [Joseph] was in Egypt?” and “What, then, does this teach us?”

The first question is rhetorical in nature, whereas the second is an authentic query. Rav Hezekiah ben Manoach (b. 1250) answers Rashi’s latter question in a straightforward manner that demonstrates a very careful reading of our passage:

And Joseph was in Egypt: Regarding the other brothers the Torah employs the words, “*habayim mitzraimah*” (“those that came to Egypt”). Joseph, however, was not among them, since he was there before they came; nonetheless, he is counted in their assemblage. This, therefore, is the rationale as to why the Torah states, “and Joseph was in Egypt.” (*Chizkuni al HaTorah, Sefer Bereishit* 1:5, translation my own)

Rashi’s response to this question is midrashically-infused:

But [this clause comes] to inform you of Joseph's righteousness. The Joseph who tended his father's flocks is the selfsame Joseph who was in Egypt and became a king, wherein he maintained his righteousness. (Rashi translation with my emendations)

While Rashi stresses Joseph's continued righteousness in the face of a pleasure-seeking Egyptian society, *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* focuses upon his unparalleled humility:

And Joseph was in Egypt: Even though Joseph merited the kingship, he never lorded this over his brethren and his father's house. Instead, just as he was initially insignificant in his own eyes when he was a slave in Egypt, so, too, did his self-perception remain after he became the king [of Egypt]. (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, based upon the combined readings of the *Midrashim* and Rashi, the Joseph who ascended the throne of the most powerful nation in the ancient world remained steadfast in his *tziddkut* (righteousness) and his *anivut* (humility).

In his *Kedushat Levi*, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1810, known as "the Berdichever") notes the ostensibly superfluous nature of the word "Egypt" in our phrase "and Joseph was in Egypt." After all, we have read chapter after chapter in the latter part of *Sefer Bereishit* wherein this was incontrovertibly the case. The Berdichever, therefore, suggests:

One needs to be particularly exact in determining why the text wrote "in Egypt," when, instead, it should have written, "and Joseph was there." It appears to me that the proper understanding is that **Joseph** was in Egypt – i.e. he never changed his name. This was the case even though Pharaoh gave him the new name "Tzafnat Paneach." (41:45) Nonetheless, he never called himself anything other than Joseph, as is subsequently proven when Pharaoh, himself, declared, "Go to Joseph for he will tell you what to do." (41:55) The principle that the Jews never changed their names is one of the three reasons why they were ultimately redeemed from Egypt. This, therefore, is the meaning of "and **Joseph** was in Egypt." (Translation, underlining and bolding my own)

In the Berdichever's view, therefore, Joseph's refusal to change his name is reflective of his unwavering refusal to assimilate into the powerful and beguiling Egyptian culture that surrounded him.

In his analysis of Joseph's insistence upon being buried in the Land of Israel, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, underscores Rav Levi Yitzchak's conceptualization regarding Joseph's unwillingness to change his name:

He [Joseph] did not ask a favor from his brothers, but he demanded it from the people as a community, as a nation. He wanted to be buried in Canaan like Jacob before him. He wanted to demonstrate the truth that no matter how high an office a Jew might hold in Egypt, no matter how famous and powerful and prominent the Jew is in the general society, his spiritual identity does not change. He belongs to the covenantal community. (This, and the following passages, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, edited by David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, pages 67-68, underlining my own)

At this juncture, the Rav emphasizes that an individual's thoroughgoing commitment to Judaism does not impede his ability or desire to serve his host country to the very best of his ability. At the same time, however, the nation that he serves must ever grant his right to pursue his Jewish identity: "Of course, his steadfastness as a son of the covenant does not conflict with his political loyalty to the state he serves. But on the other hand, the state itself cannot demand from him that he give up his Jewish identity."

Rav Soloveitchik now proceeds to elaborate upon the enduring trans-historical message that Joseph bequeathed to all Jews living in the pre-Messianic era:

We believe we can commit ourselves at a political level to the state or the society in which we live and to the people among whom we live. We can commit ourselves to discharge our duty in the most perfect manner while not sacrificing our Jewish identity. Joseph had shown that. But at the same time that he was very loyal and steadfast as a citizen, his devotion as a citizen did not conflict with his determination to retain his Jewish identity.

In a very real sense, the Rav is teaching us that Joseph's ability to integrate into the highest echelons of Egyptian government and society, while simultaneously maintaining an unswerving loyalty to his Jewish identity, is, in fact, a roadmap to authentic Jewish living in our time. With the Almighty's help, may we ever continue to hearken to Joseph's message and remain strong in

our Torah commitment and observance, while striving to contribute as citizens of the countries wherein we reside. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther*, may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.