# Issues in Miketz

### Joseph and the Risks of Power: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, זצ״ל

Miketz represents the most sudden and radical transformation in the Torah. Joseph, in a single day, moves from zero to hero, from a forgotten, languishing prisoner to viceroy of Egypt, the most powerful man in the land, in control of the nation’s economy.

Until now, Joseph has rarely been the author of events. He has been the done-to rather than the one doing; passive rather than active; object rather than subject. First his father, then his brothers, then the Midianites and Ishmaelites, then Potiphar and his wife, then the prison warden—all have directed his life. Among the most important things in that life had been dreams, but dreams are things that happened to you, not things you choose.

What is decisive is the way the previous parashah ended. Having given a favorable interpretation to the dream of the chief butler, predicting that he would be restored to office, and realizing that he would soon be in a position to have Joseph’s case re-examined and Joseph himself set free, the butler “did not remember Joseph, and forgot him.” Joseph’s most determined attempt to change the direction of fate comes to nothing. Despite being center-stage for much of the time, Joseph was not in control.

Suddenly this changes, totally and definitively. Joseph has been asked to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams. But he does far more than that: he maps the dreams onto reality. These were not just dreams. They are about the Egyptian economy in the course of the next 14 years. And they are about to become true now.

Then, having made this prediction, he diagnoses the problem. The people will starve during the seven years of famine. Next, with a stroke of sheer genius, he solves the problem. Store a fifth of the produce during the years of plenty, and it will then be available to stave off starvation during the lean years.

Margaret Thatcher was reported as having said, of another Jewish adviser, Lord (David) Young, “Other people bring me problems, David brings me solutions.”[[1]](#footnote-1) That was magnificently true in the case of Joseph, and we have no difficulty understanding the response of the Egyptian court: “The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, ‘Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?’”

At the age of 30, Joseph is the most powerful man in the region, and his administrative competence is total. He travels round the country, arranges for collection of the grain, and ensures that it is stored safely. There is so much grain that, in the Torah’s words, he stops keeping records because it is beyond measure. When the years of plenty are over, his position becomes even more powerful. Everyone turns to him for food. Pharaoh himself commands the people, “Go to Joseph and do what he tells you.”

So far, so good. And at this point the narrative shifts from Joseph, viceroy of Egypt, controller of its economy, to Joseph, son of Jacob, and his relationship with the brothers who, 22 years earlier, had sold him as a slave. It is this story that will dominate the next few chapters, rising to a climax in Judah’s speech at the beginning of the next parashah, Vayigash.

One effect of this is that it tends to move Joseph’s political and administrative activity into the background. But if we read it carefully—not just how it begins, but how it continues—we discover something quite disturbing. The story is taken up in next week’s parashah in chapter 47. It describes an extraordinary sequence of events.

It begins when the Egyptians have used up all their money buying grain. They come to Joseph asking for food, telling him they will die without it, and he replies by telling them he will sell it to them in exchange for ownership of their livestock. They willingly do so: They bring their horses, donkeys, sheep and cattle. The next year, he sells them grain in exchange for their land. The result of these transactions is that within a short period of time—seemingly a mere three years—he has transferred to Pharaoh’s ownership all the money, livestock and private land, with the exception of the land of the Priests, which he allowed them to retain.

Not only this, but the Torah tells us that Joseph “removed the population town by town, from one end of Egypt’s border to the other”—a policy of enforced resettlement that would eventually be used against Israel by the Assyrians.

The question is: Was Joseph right to do this? Seemingly, he did it of his own accord. He was not asked to do so by Pharaoh. The result, however, of all these policies is that unprecedented wealth and power were now concentrated in Pharaoh’s hand—power that would eventually be used against the Israelites. More seriously, twice we encounter the phrase *avadim le-Faro,* “slaves to Pharaoh”—one of the key phrases in the Exodus account and in the answer to the questions of the child in the Seder service. With this difference: *It was said, not by the Israelites, but by the Egyptians.*

During the famine itself, the Egyptians say to Joseph (in the next parashah), “Buy us and our land in exchange for food, and *we with our land will be slaves to Pharaoh….*Thus Joseph acquired all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh, for every Egyptian sold their field…and the land became Pharaoh’s.”

This entire passage, which begins in our parashah and continues into the next one raises a most serious question. We tend to assume that the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt was a consequence of, and punishment for, the brothers selling Joseph as a slave. But Joseph himself turned the Egyptians into a nation of slaves. What is more, he created the highly centralized power that would eventually be used against his people.

Aaron Wildavsky in his book about Joseph, *Assimilation versus Separation*, says that Joseph “left the system into which he was elevated less humane than it was by making Pharaoh more powerful than he had been.” Leon Kass, in *The Beginning of Wisdom,* says about Joseph’s decision to make the people pay for food in the years of famine (food that they themselves had handed over during the years of plenty): “Joseph is saving life by making Pharaoh rich and, soon, all-powerful. While we may applaud Joseph’s forethought, we are rightly made uneasy by this man who profits from exercising his god-like power over life and death.”

It may be that the Torah intends no criticism of Joseph whatsoever. He was acting loyally to Pharaoh and judiciously to Egypt as a whole. Or it may be that there is an implied criticism of his character. As a child, he dreamt of power; as an adult he exercised it; but *Judaism is critical of power and those who seek it*. Another possibility: the Torah is warning us of the hazards and obscurities of politics. A policy that seems wise in one generation discloses itself as dangerous in the next. Or perhaps Leon Kass is right when he says, “Joseph’s sagacity is technical and managerial, not moral and political. He is long on forethought and planning but short on understanding the souls of men.”

What this entire passage represents is the first intrusion of politics into the life of the family of the covenant. From the beginning of Exodus to the end of Deuteronomy, politics will dominate the narrative. But this is our first introduction to it: Joseph’s appointment to a key position in the Egyptian court. And what it is telling us is the sheer ambiguity of power. On the one hand, you cannot create or sustain a society without it. On the other hand, it almost cries out to be abused. *Power is dangerous, even when used with the best of intentions by the best of people.* Joseph acted to strengthen the hand of a Pharaoh who had been generous to him, and would be likewise to the rest of his family. He could not have foreseen what that same power might make possible in the hands of a “new Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.”

Tradition called Joseph *ha-tzaddik*, the righteous. At the same time, the Talmud says that he died before his brothers, “because he assumed airs of authority.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Even a tzaddik with the best of intentions, when he or she enters politics and assumes airs of authority, can make mistakes.

**I believe the great challenge of politics is to keep policies humane and that politicians remain humble, so that power, always so dangerous, is not used for harm. That is an ongoing challenge, and tests even the best.**

### Sibling Rivalry: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, זצ״ל

There has been massive debate among our people in the past few years as to whether we should take a unified stance in our support of the State of Israel, or whether we should openly air our differences. It has been a noisy debate, a shrill debate, but it is the wrong debate, and it is deflecting us from the real issue.

And if we seek it we will find it in Miketz. Listen to these words. They are among the most fateful and reverberating in all of Jewish history: “Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.”

The Torah is a deep book. We make a great mistake if we think it can be understood on one superficial level.

On the surface, the story is simple. Envious of him, Joseph’s brothers initially planned to kill him. Eventually they sell into slavery. He is taken to Egypt. There, through a series of vicissitudes, he rises to become Prime Minister, second only, in rank and power, to Pharaoh.

It is now many years later. His brothers have come to Egypt to buy food. They come before Joseph, but he no longer looks like the man they knew many years before. Then, he was a 17-year-old called Joseph. Now he is 37 or 39, an Egyptian ruler called Tzaf’nat Paneach, dressed in official robes with a gold chain around his neck, who speaks Egyptian and uses an interpreter to communicate with these visitors from the land of Canaan. No wonder they did not recognize him, although he recognized them.

But that is only the surface meaning. Deep down the book of B’reishit is exploring the most profound source of conflict in history. Freud thought the great symbol of conflict was Laius and Oedipus, the tension between fathers and sons. B’reishit thinks otherwise. The root of human conflict is sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and now Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph has the misfortune of being the youngest. He symbolizes the Jewish condition. His brothers are older and stronger than he is. They resent his presence. They see him as a trouble maker. The fact that their father loves him only makes them angrier and more resentful. They want to kill him. In the end, they get rid of him in a way that allows them to feel a little less guilty. They concoct a story that they tell their father, and they settle down to life again. They can relax. There is no Joseph to disturb their peace any more.

And now they are facing a stranger in a strange land and it simply does not occur to them that this man may be Joseph. As far as they are concerned, there is no Joseph. They don’t recognize him now. They never did. *They never recognized him as one of them, as their father’s child, as their brother with an identity of his own and a right to be himself.*

Joseph is the Jewish people throughout history.

“Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.”

Judaism was the world’s first monotheism, but not the last. Two others emerged claiming descent, literal or metaphorical, from Abraham—Christianity and Islam. It would be fair to call the relationship between the three Abrahamic monotheisms one of sibling rivalry. Far from being of mere antiquarian interest, the theme of B’reishit has been the *leitmotiv* of the better part of the last 2,000 years, with the Jewish people cast in the role of Joseph.

There were times—early medieval Spain was one—when Joseph and his brothers lived together in relative harmony, *convivencia* as they called it. But there were also times—the blood libels, the accusations of poisoning wells or spreading the plague—when they sought to kill him. And others—the expulsions that took place throughout Europe between the English in 1290 and the Spanish in 1492—when they simply wanted to get rid of him. Let him go and be a slave somewhere else, far from here.

Then came the Holocaust. Then came the State of Israel, the destination of the Jewish journey since the days of Abraham, the homeland of the Jewish people since the days of Joshua. No nation on earth, with the possible exception of the Chinese, has had such a long association with a land.

The day the State was born, May 14, 1948, David Ben Gurion, its prime minister, sought peace with its neighbors, and Israel has not ceased seeking peace from then until now.

But this is no ordinary conflict. Israel’s opponents—Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, are not engaged in a border dispute, these boundaries or those. They deny, as a matter of non-negotiable religious—not just political—principle, Israel’s right to exist within any boundaries whatsoever. There are today 56 Islamic states. But for many of Israel’s neighbors, a single Jewish state the size of Wales, is one too many.

“Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him.”

There is no State among the 192 member nations of the United Nations whose very existence is called into question this way. And while we as Jews argue among ourselves as to this policy or that, as if this were remotely relevant to the issue of peace, we fail to focus on the real issue, which is, so long as Joseph’s brothers do not recognize his right to be, there can be no peace, merely a series of staging posts on the way to a war that will not end until there is no Jewish state at all.

Until the sibling rivalry is over, until the Jewish people wins the right to be, until people—including we ourselves—realize that the threat Israel faces is ultimate and total, until Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah agree that Jews have a right to their land within any boundaries whatsoever, all other debate is mere distraction.

### Hearing the scream: Rabbi Eliezer Diamond

Perhaps no scream is more famous than the one portrayed in Edvard Munch’s painting popularly known simply as *The Scream*. The irony is that almost none of us is aware of the scream that Munch intended to portray.

A picture containing sitting, small, large, old

Description automatically generatedThe original full title of the painting is *Der Schrei der Natur*, *The Scream of Nature*. According to Munch, the scream comes from the blood-orange/red sky. He describes the inspiration for the painting as follows:

I was walking down the road with two friends when the sun set; suddenly, the sky turned as red as blood. I stopped and leaned against the fence, feeling unspeakably tired. Tongues of fire and blood stretched over the bluish black fjord. My friends went on walking, while I lagged behind, shivering with fear. Then I heard the enormous infinite scream of nature.

The figure who seems to be screaming is actually reacting to another scream, and he is striving not to hear without success—covering his ears in a vain attempt to block out the shrieks that assail him. His mouth is open wide with shock and terror. But though he can convey that sense of horror he cannot make his friends—or us—hear nature’s scream; he alone is trapped with it inside his own head, held in, as it were, by the same hands that struggle to fend it off. His cries must seem to others to be those of a madman, because they are oblivious to the cause of his terror. Munch brilliantly expresses this by using a visual medium to depict an aural event. We can imagine the scream, but we can never hear it; a wall of silence stands between us and the anguished figure in the foreground of the painting.

In Parashat Miketz we read of another cry that was not heard. Upon recognizing his brothers, Joseph accuses them of being spies. He first threatens to jail all but one of his brothers and send the remaining one to bring back Benjamin with him. He then relents and requires only one of them, Simeon, to remain as hostage while the others bring food to their families and then return with their youngest brother. After their release, the brothers ruminate on the cause of their adversities. “They said to one another, ‘Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked upon his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us. That is why his distress has come upon us.’”

“As he pleaded with us.” We are thunderstruck: We, like the brothers, never heard Joseph’s pleas. We accepted the narrative as it was recorded in Genesis 37; the brothers strip Joseph of his clothes, cast him into a pit, consider letting him die and finally sell him into slavery. We hear not a word from Joseph.

And yet, if we think for a moment, we realize that, of course, Joseph must have spoken. He must have protested, screamed, begged, perhaps even cursed. Although rendered in the style of the omniscient narrator, the Genesis 37 narrative is, in fact, told from the brothers’ perspective. Joseph is a thorn in their side that needs to be removed. How? Sale? Murder? Slow death? No need to consult your prospective victim. And after casting him naked into a pit you can always decide upon his ultimate fate over a satisfying lunch—”then they sat down to a meal.” Joseph’s screams are just background noise for the brothers; they hear it but it does not stir them.

In Genesis 38, the brothers, after so many years have passed, finally open their ears to Joseph’s cries. It is as if the sounds have been frozen in time and now come rushing in to fill the brothers’ ears. The aural experience of hearing happened long ago; now  the listening begins. To truly hear those cries must have been unbearable for the brothers; in that act, they were acknowledging Joseph’s *humanity* and, therefore, their own *inhumanity* in being indifferent to his suffering.

And we finally hear Joseph’s screams, as well, inserting them into the narrative we know so well. And we acknowledge that we are co-conspirators in our willingness to imagine the story of Joseph’s sale without the inclusion of Joseph’s voice. And so, now, we must tell ourselves the story in a new way, one that includes Joseph’s heartrending cries. To tell the story this way is almost unbearable, and it helps us understand why the brothers had to edit Joseph’s screams out of their collective memory.

Some cries, like those of a child with loving parents, are heard at once. Some are resisted for a short time and then acknowledged, as when lovers quarrel. Some cries are left unheard for years, even decades, like those of Joseph. Some cries, like Munch’s scream, remain frozen in time, always being sounded, never being truly heard.

And yet it is Munch’s cry of nature that we most need to hear in this dangerous hour. Melting ice caps, bizarre weather—in so many ways the earth calls out to us, “You are killing me!” We may choose not to hear it. But I shudder when I think of the day upon which we will look at a devastated planet and say—if we are still alive to say it—”Alas, we are being punished because we looked upon our planet’s anguish, yet paid no heed as it pleaded with us.”

### Joseph, Chanukah, & the dilemmas of assimilation: Dr. Arnold Eisen

Ruminations about assimilation come naturally to Jews in North America during the winter holiday season.

How much should a parent insist that Chanukah is part of public school celebrations that give students a heavy dose of Christmas?

How often should one remind store clerks who innocently ask Jewish children which gifts they hope to receive from Santa this year that there are other faiths observed in our communities, and other holidays?

Intermarried couples are familiar with conversations about having a Christmas tree at home, or going to midnight mass, or allowing their kids to open gifts Christmas morning under the tree at their cousins’ home. The Chanukah story is the perfect stimulus for such reflections, especially when read, as some historians do, not as a conflict between Jews and a tyrannical government, but as a dispute among Jews themselves over which Greek customs are acceptable and which cross the line to assimilation or apostasy.

How much distinctiveness should Jews maintain in a society and culture like ours that offers unprecedented opportunity and freedom? How much distinctiveness can we maintain without putting our acceptance in jeopardy? And—perhaps the most difficult question on the communal agenda these days—how much distinctiveness can Jews afford to sacrifice without losing Jewish children and grandchildren to the ways and identity of the majority?

Joseph—the most important figure among the first generation of the children of Israel—struggles with a version of these same dilemmas as he rises from one prison-pit after another to the height of power at the court of Pharaoh.

Of all the dramatic moments in the gripping story of his reconciliation with the brothers who once betrayed him, none is more poignant, I think, than when Pharaoh tells Joseph that he will have absolute power limited only by the Pharaoh himself. The astute ruler had taken the measure of Joseph and realized immediately that this “shrewd and perceptive” Israelite was perfectly suited to the nasty work of gathering up all the grain of Egypt during the seven years of plenty, and selling it back to them during the seven years of famine.  He immediately gives Joseph two gifts that can be read as heart-wrenching examples of the price he will pay for that power. Joseph will have an Egyptian name, Tzaf’nat Paneach —”the sustainer of life”—and an Egyptian wife, As’nat, the daughter of a priest, Poti-Fera.

The story that follows reads differently because of those moves by the king to forcibly integrate Joseph into Egyptian society and culture. Joseph himself testifies to the pain of his situation as the highest outsider in the land. When “two sons were born to [him] by As’nat the daughter of Poti-Fera, the priest of On, Joseph called the first-born M’nasheh, because ‘God has made me forget completely my hardship and the house of my father.’ And Joseph called the second son Efrayim, because ‘God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.’” We will soon learn that he has *not* forgotten the pain suffered in his father’s house. When the brothers arrive to purchase grain, he at once recognizes them and—seeing them bow before him—remembers the dream in which they symbolically had done exactly that. He has not forgotten his father either: When the brothers return home empty-handed, having left Simeon behind as a hostage, they tell Jacob that the man in charge of distributing grain had asked them if their father was still alive—and, in Vayigash, when Joseph finally breaks down in tears and reveals himself to his brothers, the very first question out of his mouth will be, “Is my father still alive?”

Consider the irony: the survival of the children of Israel is secured by this child of Israel who, married to the daughter of a pagan priest, brings his family down to Egypt, where he and they loyally serve the Pharaoh. The survival of the Children of Israel in a later generation will be secured by another Israelite, that one from the tribe of Levi, also married to the daughter of a pagan priest, who will lead a rebellion that liberates his people from Pharaoh’s service/slavery. (The Hebrew word for “slavery” and “service” is the same.) Had Joseph and Moses *not* been at home at Pharaoh’s court, wise in the ways of ministers and kings, skillful at magic arts beyond the capacity of Pharaoh’s magicians (dream interpretation and the working of miracles), and gifted with the right word at the right time and inside knowledge of Egyptian society and culture; and had they not, despite all this, retained a strong sense of divine mission and purpose—they would not have been able to perform the redemptive tasks assigned them.

We might say, in contemporary terms, that a certain measure of assimilation was required for their success, as was a measure of resistance to assimilation. Contemporary Jews know from experience that the balance is difficult to calibrate correctly. That has been all the more true of the Jews who have served non-Jewish kings and courts over the centuries—and by so doing, served their people and their God. From the poet and general Shmuel Hanagid at the Spanish court to Henry Kissinger at the Nixon White House to the many humble tax collectors in Polish domains populated by Ukrainian peasants, the Joseph story has time after time repeated itself.

Gerson Cohen, chancellor of JTS from 1972 to 1986 and a magisterial historian of Jewish societies and cultures in many eras on many continents, probed these dilemmas 50 years ago in a brilliant essay entitled “The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History.” Cohen took issue with the well-known midrash that attributes Jewish survival to the fact that our ancestors did not change their names, abandon their ancestral language, or stop wearing distinctive clothing. He notes that this generalization did not hold for Jacob’s grandchildren in Egypt (who according to the Torah took Egyptian names such as Aaron and Moses), or for the later generations who adopted Greek names like those of the ambassadors whom Judah Maccabee sent to Rome, Jason and Eupolemos. Nor did Jews refrain from writing and giving sermons in other languages than Hebrew, or (when permitted to do so) from dressing like their non-Jewish neighbors. (The author of this Torah commentary, written in English, of course bears the name Arnold, and happens to be wearing slacks and a V-neck sweater.)

Cohen forcefully disputed the claim that Jews survived only by remaining utterly distinct from the cultures that surrounded them. Rather, “a frank appraisal of the periods in which Judaism flourished will indicate that not only did a certain amount of assimilation and acculturation not impede Jewish continuity, but that in a profound sense, this assimilation and acculturation was a stimulus to original thinking and expression, a source or renewed vitality.” (Jewish History and Jewish Destiny, 151)

The lesson of Chanukah, then, or of the Joseph story, or of countless episodes in the long history of Jewish encounter with non-Jewish ways, is that if Jews assimilate completely to those ways, we lose our own way, and Jewish continuity is lost with it, but if we don’t wish to “ghettoize” ourselves, or allow Judaism to become “fossilized,” we will need “to assimilate—at least to some extent.” (ibid.,152)

That has meant learning to speak new languages, and to have Torah speak in those languages. We have adapted customs and laws to new circumstances and found latent meanings in classical texts that previous generations had not seen there. We continue to draw lines that are at times squiggly or blurred, and at other times razor-sharp—and to argue with one another about which kind of boundary is required, and how to maintain it.

And thanks to the cycle of weekly Torah readings, Joseph is here with us each year to guide us through the complexities of this holiday season.

### The Return of the Assimilated Jew: Pinchas Peli, ז״ל

“When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he pretended to be a stranger, and spoke harshly to them .... For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him.”

Many of the Torah commentators were bothered with the obvious question: How come they did not recognize their brother? It’s true that some years had passed since they last saw him, yet they should have recognized him, especially since they could have had a reasonable hunch that their long-lost brother might be in Egypt.

What we would like to know, however, even more than how come they did not recognize him, is why Joseph chose to remain a stranger to his brothers, whom he identified accurately?

To aggravate this question, let me add another, which has troubled me ever since my childhood: Jacob and his sons did not know all those years where Joseph was. All Jacob could do was to mourn the loss of his beloved son. The brothers, too, knew that they could not turn the wheel back on what they had done. Joseph, on the other hand, knew all along where his father was.

In the first years after he was sold by his brothers, he was still under the shock of what had been done to him and found himself in miserable circumstances of slavery and imprisonment which might have prevented him from contacting his folks: But why didn’t he do so when he rose to power and riches?

Surely it wasn’t too difficult for him to imagine the ag­ony suffered by his father on account of his absence. Couldn’t he, in all those years, find an opportunity to communicate with his aged father?

The great medieval Bible commentator Ramban (Nachmanides) goes to great lengths to explain Joseph’s be­havior as part of a premeditated scheme aimed at bringing about the gradual fulfillment of his dreams.

“If we do not see it this way,” says Ramban, “we would have to say that Joseph committed a grave sin in hurting his father over such a long period….Even if he did not care for his brothers, he certainly should have had com­passion for his aged father.”

Ramban is right. He should, but he did not. If we may offer a reason different from that of Nachmanides, it is that he really did not care about his folks back home. He may have wanted to cut himself off from them and preferred to forget their existence.

The trauma he experienced when his brothers sold him to the Midianites and, even more the events that followed, effected a radical change in Joseph. With the changes which took place in his career, his personality was also transformed: Joseph the dreamer of dreams about himself and his kin turns into an interpreter of the dreams of another—those of Pharaoh. The former dreamer appears now as a most practical person, securing for himself, in a very dip­lomatic way, one of the top jobs in the country.

Joseph seems to like his new role as well as his “robes of fine linen” and the gold chain Pharaoh puts around his neck. It does not take long for the ex-prisoner to get used to the luxurious chariot he gets as part of his new job as second-in-command in the implementation of his New Economic Plan.

He does not want to be looked upon as a “court Jew,” and does all he can to become an “insider.” He welcomes the change of his name from the Hebrew Joseph to the Egyptian Tzaf’nat-Paneach and marries into “high soci­ety.” As’nat, the daughter of Poti-phera, priest of On, is probably not the daughter-in-law Jacob-Israel would have chosen if he had a say in the matter.

The handsome 30-year-old prince travels throughout Egypt. He feels very much at home in the country. He moves in the right circles. When his first son is born, he names him M’nasheh. “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” The second son he names Efrayim, “because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”

Joseph does not think, *indeed does not want to think*, of the past, of the old country and the folks back home. His assimilation into Egyptian society is complete, flaw­less. He has no qualms about it.

This process could have gone on unobstructed. Joseph and his family might have been lost for good in Egypt, had not the appearance of his brothers suddenly thrown him back into the world he may have preferred to forget.

“And Joseph recognized his brothers...and recalled the dreams that he dreamed about them,” (In an unexpected turn of events, the interpreter in the service of others was reminded that he was a dreamer himself, and his dreams concerned his own brothers. This is the pre­cise turning point in the biblical narrative. From this mo­ment on, the story assumes a new momentum, leading the hero from assimilation back to his own people and its dreams.

More than a thousand years later: All the oil in the Temple of Jerusalem becomes contaminated when the tide of a foreign culture (this time Hellenistic, not Egyptian) sweeps over the Jewish people. Those in high office wel­come assimilation into the great culture of Hellas; their own dreams as Jews are almost forgotten.

But a chain of events, starting with the act of one man in the village of Modi’in, leads to a new dedication of the Temple. This has been marked for nearly 2,200 years by the festival of Chanukah, during which the story of Joseph, the first assim­ilated Jew to return to his people, is usually read.

1. In actual fact, the accurate quote was: “other people come to me with their problems. David comes to me with his achievements.” But in journalistic retellings it has been modified to give context. See Financial Times, 24 November 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BT B’rachot 55a: [Regarding] one who conducts himself with [an air of] superiority, as Rabbi Chama, son of Rabbi Chanina, said: “Why did Joseph die before his brothers, [as evidenced by the order in Exodus 1:6]: “And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation”]? Because he conducted himself with [an air of] superiority[, and those who did not serve in a leadership role lived on after he died.] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)