

# FIFTEEN VOICES

REFLECTIONS ON AN ANSHEI MITZVAH JOURNEY

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To Stacy Lubov, our steady guide  
and teacher throughout the  
journey. The road was long, the  
traveling hard, the twists and turns  
unforeseen. Your faith and  
guidance saw us through.

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# INTRODUCTION

JOHN JULL & CAROLYN JULL, EDITORS

Judea Reform Congregations's Anshei Mitzvah program is designed for those who have never had a Bar or Bat Mitzvah and wish to expand their Jewish knowledge and skills, increase their ritual observance and communal participation and connections, and learn about the prayers recited during worship services. Over the course of a year, participants deepen their connections with Judaism through study, practice, and service.

As the year drew to a close for the cohort of 2018, students reflected on Mikeitz (Genesis 41:1 – 44:17), the Torah portion corresponding to the completion of the program, and often on their larger experience with Judaism as well. We have collected those writings in this book.

In the course of compiling these essays, we have made minor editorial changes for consistency throughout. A more challenging decision was the consistent use of "God" or "G-d", as submissions included both usages. In this we deferred to the position of the Central Conference of American Rabbis that the prohibition applies only to the name of God when written in Hebrew and have used "God" throughout.

Should errors be found, the fault should be assumed with the editors and not the original texts.

# TRUTH IN DREAMS

LOIS BALLEEN

In the parashah Mikeitz, Pharaoh has a dream. The dream is striking enough to Pharaoh that he remembers it vividly and feels it is significant. Most of us remember dreams at least occasionally. Often, dreams clearly relate to recent daily events or feelings that occupied us in the preceding day. For example, instead of waking to void, we may dream of a running stream, or if we are troubled by an angry interaction the day before, we may dream of struggles. Some dreams feel more meaningful than the day-to-day experiences and seem to pertain to larger issues in our life. This latter type of dream is what concerns Pharaoh, leading him to seek out guidance and interpretation from Joseph.

What do we know of Joseph and his expertise with dream interpretation? We know that Joseph interpreted other dreams, both his own and other people's. As a young man, he dreamed about taking on the role of leader over his brothers, angering them. While languishing in prison in Egypt, he interpreted the dreams of two men who were also imprisoned.

Is Joseph able to see the future and utter prophecies? Does he have access to the occult? Does he exude such confidence that he engenders complete trust from others? Does he have special insights and intuitions? In this parashah, Joseph honored and listened to his thoughts and intuitions, saying that they came from God. Joseph credits God as the source of his ideas. "Not I - it is God who will account for Pharaoh's well-being." Joseph trusted his intuitions and thoughts about the dreams as a gift or message from God.

Joseph's confidence in the source of his intuitions may have made his interpretations more believable to the dreamers. We know that his interpretations certainly rang true to dreamers. Of particular importance in this parashah, the interpretation offered by Joseph rang true to Pharaoh. Joseph interprets the dream for Pharaoh with such clarity and confidence that Pharaoh accepts the meaning, and then follows Joseph's recommendations, as though Joseph's predicted meaning were true. He does this even though the dream will take more than a decade to fully

reveal itself, and even though Joseph is a foreigner rather than a known member of their society.

In the Mishna, Rashi proposes that Joseph's interpretation, instead of the interpretations of others, felt true to Pharaoh because Pharaoh viewed his dream as significant in his role as leader of Egypt, and not just as pertaining to his personal life. Pharaoh woke feeling that this dream was momentous, and related to all of Egypt. Additionally, Joseph's dream interpretation offered Pharaoh some action that could be taken to address the problem identified in the dream, rather than the passive acceptance of having seven daughters and burying them.<sup>1</sup>

So, can we, like Joseph, trust our intuitions and insights as gifts or a message from God? In my own life, when I trust my insights and intuitions as from a higher power, as a gift from God, I find myself having confidence in my beliefs and the action that seems needed. They "ring true," to me, just as the dream interpretation rang true to Pharaoh. There is great value in having faith that my intuitions come from a place other than my ego, my "self." A dream that is clearly about current daily life is easily understood. It is for the opaque dreams that having guidance for understanding can enhance my life. Having faith in my intuitions can enrich and deepen my life.

<sup>1</sup> <http://midreshetrachel.com/parshat-mikeitz-pharaohs-dream/>

# NEVER IN JOSEPH'S WILDEST DREAMS

PAM BARTH

When I read our class' portion of Mikeitz, what strikes me again and again is how I imagine Joseph might have felt. If he stopped to reflect, he might have thought, "My life... this is nothing like what I possibly could have imagined, even in my wildest dreams. How did I get here?"

Let's recap: Joseph grows up with a loving mother and father, yet his brothers leave him to die in a pit in the desert. Slave traders salvage him and sell him in Egypt, where his owner entrusts him with many household responsibilities. Then he is imprisoned for years, with no idea of when he might be released. All of a sudden, he is removed from jail, washed and fancied up, and appears in front of the Pharaoh himself, to interpret dreams that highly-ranked advisors have tried and failed to do. When Joseph succeeds at that, the Pharaoh names him overseer of the land of Egypt, in charge of protecting its peoples from famine.

There is, of course, much more to Joseph's story, but can anyone imagine not being at least a little unnerved by this dizzying series of 180-degree life changes?

In writing this d'var Torah, I have spent much time asking myself what specifically strikes me about Joseph's imagined reaction. What is it about Joseph that touches me? Is it that faith in God is what holds him together in times of joy and sorrow? Certainly, his faith drives and sustains his responses; and sometimes the "faith in God" answer can be used to palliate, and there is something deeper here that draws me.

Is it that his continued choices for an ethical life – I'm specifically thinking of Joseph refusing intimacy with Potiphar's wife – are rewarded in the long term? That can't be it, I reason – an ethical life is reward by itself. It is not that his story turns out well – so many people find themselves in similarly bewildering situations, and not all lives end happily-ever-after.

In the end, I discover that this story that Jews have been telling ourselves for centuries is more than the sum of faith and ethical choices: the unspoken subtext of Joseph's story is bravery. And that is an example I find inspiring.

# ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF TIKKUN OLAM

REBECCA ESSINGER-BOSWORTH

In Parashah Mikeitz, we learn that Pharaoh is troubled by his persistent dreams. Pharaoh tries unsuccessfully to find someone among his appointed leaders to decipher these dreams. One of Pharaoh's advisors relates to Pharaoh a first-hand experience of his own dream being interpreted and coming to fruition exactly as suggested by Joseph, a Hebrew prisoner. Upon hearing of Joseph's gift, Pharaoh sends for him. Pharaoh finds favor with Joseph's interpretation and bestows upon him the role of second in command of Egypt along with the spoils, riches and respect that accompany this title.

What struck me most about this Torah portion was how one man's life is changed completely upon his being recognized as possessing a gift. This gift had previously been overlooked, as had Joseph, reduced to a prisoner and seen solely from this vantage point. Upon witnessing first-hand Joseph's gift, Pharaoh is able to reimagine Joseph in a positive light: "since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you." As a Hebrew, Joseph was an "other." That classification came with negative connotations that served to further diminish Joseph and limit his potential. Is this not in fact, what many of us do in modern time, identifying whole groups of people as unworthy due to their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status and countless other labels? Stereotypes and unfounded beliefs serve to distance us from the "other" and perpetuate status quo. What would happen if in fact we suspended those judgements and delved deeper? Each of us has gifts that warrant discovery, and in their discovery, they afford us growth, enrichment and power.

Our group mitzvah project was supporting the efforts of End Hunger Durham, an organization focused on increasing the access of food and other resources to the hungry. This population is familiar with the many judgements that are imposed upon them solely because they are food insecure. By grouping them in this way, we gain distance and we protect

ourselves from the harsh realities of an uneven distribution of resources. Yet, in my interactions with individuals receiving support from End Hunger Durham, I witnessed boundless gifts there for the taking; kindness, appreciation, humility and grace. These gifts, much like Joseph's, are often overlooked, lost among the many assumptions people make about individuals who are hungry, homeless, destitute. Their hunger, homelessness and financial insecurity are their prison, not all that different or limiting than Joseph's prison. Joseph got a second chance when Pharaoh chose to see him anew, affording him the opportunity to make a difference in the world, live comfortably and experience freedom from limiting labels. The Talmud teaches us that while it is not our responsibility to solve all of the world's ills, we are not free to ignore them. Thus, my hope is that through Tikkun Olam, we will create a world in which we can free the "captive" from their prisons and see their gifts in all of their beauty.

# EPHRAIM AND MANASSEH

JOYCE GORDON

When we bless our children, the traditional blessing is, for girls, “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.” For boys: “May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.” I’ve cupped my own children’s heads in my hands and recited these blessings over them. When I bless my daughter, it’s easy for me to feel the meaning behind the blessing. I’m hoping that my daughter takes on some of the best qualities of our matriarchs – scrappy, wise, humorous, creative, and kind. The Torah stories of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah are well-known.

But who are Ephraim and Manasseh? Why does the traditional blessing for sons not reference the better-known patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob? We skip ahead two generations to Jacob’s grandsons, Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, born when Joseph is the regent in Egypt, in today’s Torah portion. The Torah tells us that Joseph gives his son Manasseh’s name to mean, “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” Ephraim means, “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.”

I can get behind blessing my son with Ephraim’s name. Sure, I hope he is productive and successful (and maybe one day has kids), if I consider the various meanings of “fertile.” But why am I blessing my son after Manasseh and hoping that he forgets his hardship and his parental home with me and with his father?

To be fair to Joseph, he had a lot to get over, and I can understand why he would want to forget being sold into slavery, losing his freedom, and enduring imprisonment. I can understand why he would want the painful memories of the loss of his home to lessen. But in blessing my own child after Joseph’s child, I, unlike Joseph, am not hoping that he forgets his family. I’m also not hoping that he forgets the things that he has to endure as he grows up; I believe that experiencing and overcoming adversity can truly benefit us in the long run.

I hope that Manasseh had a good childhood, playing outside, making friends, and enjoying the love of his family. I hope that this is what Joseph

meant when he named his son – that his own child would not have the pain and hardship that Joseph had to bear. When I think of Joseph creating a family of his own, and his own hopes and dreams for his newborn son: security, love, and never being separated from his own family, this is the blessing that I can support for my son.

In that spirit, may God make us all like Manasseh: secure in our family and our community, free of any hardship that our forebears had to endure. And may God make us like Ephraim: productive, fertile of mind, of heart, of generosity. Amen.

# FORGIVENESS

CORA HARRISON

In this week's Parashah, Mikeitz, we learn that Joseph, now in the lofty position of Pharaoh's right hand man, recognizes his ten brothers who are seeking his help to buy food to sustain Jacob's family during the famine. Joseph chooses not to reveal himself to his brothers. As the story goes, over the course of two encounters, the incognito Joseph tests the character and moral fiber of the brothers. Could the insidious feelings of jealousy that propelled the brothers to commit horrible acts against Joseph--selling him into slavery and bringing false evidence of his 'death' to their father Jacob--have vanished over time? Indeed, Joseph witnessed a beautiful demonstration of brotherly love. Joseph saw that the brothers united by offering themselves as slaves to Joseph if one of them actually stole the silver chalice. Following through, they were willing to do so, when Benjamin appeared to be the culprit. In another instance, Joseph overheard the brothers, while speaking amongst themselves, admitting to the heinous crimes of old against Joseph, expressing as one, a sense of guilt, remorse and even fear that their crimes would negatively affect their future. With these assurances of significant behavioral change, Joseph has the evidence he needs to eventually forgive the brothers for their past sins against him.

Really? Joseph could forgive his brothers for such horrible acts? This raises serious questions for me about what Jews believe about forgiveness and if there are limits?

Teachings on forgiveness can be found in the Tanakh.

"Do not hate your brother in your heart," (Leviticus 19:17)

"Who is a God like You, who forgives iniquity and passes over the transgressions of the remnant of His heritage: He does not maintain His anger forever, for He desires loving kindness." (Micah 7:18)

Forgiveness is a major teaching of the Jewish faith. It is a duty, an obligation, a mitzvah. We are asked to seek forgiveness from those who we have sinned against and, in return, we are encouraged to forgive those

who have sinned against us. This is what we are instructed to do in our personal preparation for Yom Kippur. But more than that, we are asked to be mindful of this every day of our lives. As Jews, we are born with good and bad tendencies. Ideally, through our mistakes, we learn to make good choices and to take responsibility for all our actions.

Another aspect of forgiveness as defined by our faith, is that it must be earned, it must be deserved, it must be requested, and, above all, it can be granted only by the offended person. This is what we see happening in Mikeitz. The now powerful Joseph strives to see his brothers demonstrate that they stand together and support one another, without question, and without the knowledge of Joseph's true identity. In the next Parashah, we read that Joseph reveals himself to his eleven brothers and they reunite with their father, Jacob, in forgiveness.

Joseph is the exemplar of how important it is for each of us to forgive those who have offended us.

*All this I understand. As a result of my studies, I have been reflecting on the difficulties and the joys of forgiving, especially when I consider lifelong relationships with family and friends. However, the recent event in Pittsburgh, where 11 Jews at Shabbat services were gunned down by a person with a deeply rooted hatred for our people, seems unforgivable. Is it our 'obligation' to forgive him? Taking lessons from Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's book, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People," forgiving is not the answer when it comes to a crime as hateful and destructive as this one. The question for each of us is "What do we do now?" What can we DO to educate an individual or group of people about the gifts of living in a tolerant, just and diverse society? This is, indeed, a difficult 'ask', but we are fortunate to live in a country where this is still possible. I remain hopeful.*

# LISTENING FOR GOD

KRIS HERFKENS

Mikeitz begins with Pharaoh having mystifying dreams, and Joseph languishing in slavery and prison. Joseph was imprisoned, in part, because he attracted the attention of the wife of a powerful man with his wisdom and Divine gifts. In prison, he had interpreted the dream of another prisoner, predicting his release from prison and elevation to Cupbearer in Pharaoh's court. Two years later, when the Cupbearer heard Pharaoh's request for help understanding his dreams, he recalled Joseph's skill and his promise to help Joseph. Joseph was asked to interpret Pharaoh's dream, a request that he fulfilled.

Why would Joseph do this? He landed in prison after his Divine gifts attracted the attention of Zelicha, wife of Potiphar. Of course, Joseph likely hoped he would be released from prison for his help, but he also knew that he could not ignore his insight. Joseph consistently described his ability to interpret dreams as from Adonai. Joseph knew this was not his skill, but rather something given to him by Adonai.

Joseph had to be brave to use his Divine-inspired insight to help Pharaoh. If Pharaoh did not appreciate his interpretation, it could have ended badly for Joseph. Yet, Joseph listened to God and did what he believed was the right action in that moment: giving Pharaoh information that could help to save Egypt. Ultimately, his bravery also helped to save his family and provided a path for reconciliation.

God calls us to listen and watch for signs of Divine presence. Lawrence Kushner said, "And so we understand that ordinary people are messengers of the Most High. They go about their tasks in holy anonymity, often, even unknown to themselves. Yet, if they had not been there, if they had not said what they said or did what they did, it would not be the way it is now. We would not be the way we are now. Never forget that you, too, yourself may be a messenger. Perhaps even one whose errand extends over several lifetimes." Our task is, like Joseph's, to be aware of the Divine all around and within us, to use the gifts we are given to solve problems, right wrongs,

reduce suffering, and to make the world a better place. If we listen for God, we also have a chance to be the messengers of the Most High.

# STRUGGLE AND TRIUMPH

CECELIA JOSEPH

When I was nine, I studied Hebrew for the first time. My grandfather mentored me giving me parts to read in the Siddur. I believe if my Grandfather had not died when I was ten, I would have had my Bat Mitzvah by now. Taking the Anshei Mitzvah class and learning Hebrew, as an older person, has been a struggle. I found myself at a deficit with computers.

As a teenager/young adult I moved away from Judaism and found other interests. I started my spiritual journey by practicing eastern philosophy. I joined a Unity church and then a Unitarian church. But there was still something missing and I started going to temple again. After some years of going to different synagogues I became a member of Judea Reform.

Since I always wanted to learn Hebrew, when this class became available, I joined. I had taken other languages when I was younger but had no idea how difficult learning Hebrew was going to be as a senior citizen. Learning Hebrew was so difficult that I thought of quitting more than once. But here I am this morning because I learned enough to be on the bimah. I was given two lines from Genesis to read. "Phew," I said, "just two lines." These are from Genesis and are about Joseph.

This excerpt from Genesis is about Joseph and the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh found Joseph wise and godly and wanted him to help rule his Kingdom. One thing we should know is that Joseph had this position before and lost it. He lost it because the Pharaoh's wife was attracted to him and wanted him to be her lover. He was very handsome and she kept trying to have a relationship with him. He did not have a relationship with her because he did not want to lose his job.

She became angry and told the Pharaoh that Joseph tried to force himself on her. So off to prison he went, but he did not lose heart. In prison, he became very good at interpreting dreams for others. When the Pharaoh had a troubling dream, he got Joseph out of jail so he could interpret the dream. He liked very much Joseph's prophecies and because of that made him second in command over his court.

I know that Joseph probably had some dark times while he was in prison. I had struggles learning Hebrew and the class. I believe the struggle was worth it for Joseph and for me. In the end, both of us have triumphed.

# WHO DID PHARAOH FEED?

CAROLYN JULL

Politically, the last two years in the United States have been years of great stress and turbulence. We have within our borders groups that are divided as well as leaders or representatives who seem bent on dividing our country from within, and alienating it from many of its traditional allies. The leaders are not new to our shores but are here because they were born here. Some of their families have been here a generation or two, some for many. Often, they are particularly unaccepting of those who are new to our country, a land allegedly of plenty. Alas, they are also unaccepting of the descendants of those to whom the land belonged prior to European settlement, and to the descendants of those who were torn from their native lands in Africa hundreds of years ago.

Unfortunately, we are not the only country torn by strife. Some people who live in countries which are war-torn and much more divided than ours come to our borders seeking shelter and a better life for themselves and their children.

In my opinion, it would help our representatives, and those who need succor in this land, if the parashah of Mikeitz was more widely considered. Let's consider Mikeitz. Joseph, with God's help, correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dreams to mean that there would be seven years of abundance followed by seven years of hard times. During the seven years of abundance, under Joseph's direction, a savings plan was developed. Years later, when lean times came, there was enough to eat for all in the land. Not only that, there was enough to share with neighbors, who left their homes not in this case because of strife and violent danger, but because of the risk of starvation. Are those two reasons really very different? And don't we owe it to "love our neighbor as we love ourselves?" (Leviticus 19:18)

Learning with my peers in the Anshei Mitzvah program over the last year has solidified my beliefs about this topic. Our group project had to do with food security, an apt project to reflect Mikeitz. But also, one that reflects not only what is happening locally, but is occurring with our international

neighbors as well. What drives the violence in the lands they are trying hard to escape? Is it a lack of real estate? A lack of employment? Greed? Or is it food scarcity which could potentially be addressed by those coming from various “lands of plenty” simply being more generous? I am not suggesting that we as a nation can address each of these issues in every country, only that we consider the hunger needs of those who have so much less, both at home and abroad.

# WHERE DOES JOSEPH'S HELP COME FROM?

JOHN JULL

In Mikeitz we read of a time of famine, when Jacob sent his sons, except young Benjamin, to Egypt to buy food. They didn't recognize the Vizier of Egypt as their own lost brother Joseph, but he recognized them. Distrustful, but open to the possibility that they may have changed, Joseph devised a series of tests for his brothers. Eventually, Joseph accepted that the past was the past and revealed himself to his kin. Using his power as Vizier, he then brought his father and brothers and their households into Egypt, promising them "the best of all the land of Egypt."

When Joseph's brothers appeared before him, the traumatic world of his youth came tumbling back in on him. His estranged brothers were now shepherds and they had come to buy food from Joseph, Vizier of Egypt. Now Joseph had the upper hand.

When they were last together, his brothers sold him into slavery and reported his 'death' to their father. In effect, they had stripped him of his identity as a son of Jacob. He could have now done unto them and been done with it, but he did not. Understandably, he was distrustful. Initially, he imprisons them all as 'spies,' swearing "by Pharaoh" that they would remain prisoners if the missing Benjamin did not come down to Egypt and confirm their story (Genesis 42:15). However, after three days Joseph relented and agreed that a single brother should be held in bond for Benjamin, instructing the rest of his brothers to "go and take rations for (their) starving households" (42:19). Why the change of heart? Joseph himself said it was because he "is a God-fearing man" (42:18).

Joseph's identities had collided. Was he Zaphnath-Paaneah, Vizier of Egypt (41:45), whose power came from Pharaoh, or was he Joseph, best-loved son of Israel (37:3)? Or something else? In his initial moments of crisis, the Egyptian identity held sway. Reaching for power, he swore "by Pharaoh". And why not? After his brothers drove him from the tribe, he forged a new identity in a new land. Like many immigrant success stories, assimilation was the price of success. A Hebrew slave boy become Vizier, second only to Pharaoh? Only in Egypt, only in Egypt.

Three days, and perhaps three sleepless nights later, Joseph had a change of heart. He came to see beyond his issues with his brothers. Joseph's decisions would have broader impacts. If he held his brothers, as perhaps they deserved, their innocent families would starve. Joseph was empowered by Pharaoh to manage the distribution of food so that the people do not starve. Yes, it's not Pharaoh's guidance that Joseph cites now, but God's, and we can assume that this is the God of his youth, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph.

What can we learn from this? Although worldly power has many sources, the wisdom to apply power with compassion and mercy come from God.

# WANTED: GRAIN AND FORGIVENESS

DEANA KAYE

In this week's parashah, Mikeitz, Joseph has impressed the Pharaoh with the way that he has interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams. He tells Pharaoh that his dream of seven gaunt cows eating seven fat and healthy cows as well as his dream of seven thin and scorched ears of grain swallowing seven healthy ears of grain both mean that there will be seven years of abundance followed by seven years of scarcity. Joseph advised Pharaoh to conserve a portion of the harvest each year of the next seven years to provide enough for the seven years of the famine to follow. Thus, Joseph found favor with the Pharaoh and had much power in Egypt.

When the predicted famine came to pass, Jacob, Joseph's father, and his other sons were affected. Jacob sent 10 out of 11 of his sons to Egypt in search of food for their families. Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Many years had passed, and they had no reason to suspect that he'd be serving as second in command to the Pharaoh of Egypt. After all, they had sold their brother into slavery.

Joseph did not reveal himself to his brothers. Instead he presented several challenges to determine whether they were worthy of forgiveness – testing their integrity and honor. Joseph filled his brothers' bags with grain, but he also hid the silver inside, which they were supposed to have paid for the grain. He also instructed them to leave one brother behind and go and bring back their missing brother. During this time, because he was able to understand their conversations amongst themselves without an interpreter, he overheard them declare their regret for how they'd treated their brother Joseph.

An important message in this parashah is not just forgiveness but seeking forgiveness. Before Joseph was willing to consider forgiving his brothers for their jealousy and resulting poor treatment of him, he needed to know that they were truly penitent. This is a universal theme. Although we as Jews focus much of our time and attention to forgiving others and asking for forgiveness as part of the preparation leading up to Yom Kippur, it is also something that we are encouraged to practice on a day-to-day basis.

In seeking forgiveness from others, we hope that they will trust that we sincerely regret having done something that angered or injured them. However, when others seek forgiveness from us, are we always as trusting and transparent? Are we quick to believe the best in others and believe that they truly hadn't meant to offend us? Or, like Joseph, do we prefer to see evidence of their penitence first, before we can forgive them?

In seeking to repair the world (tikkun olam) for the future to come, perhaps a place to start would be seeking forgiveness and willingness to forgive with a willing and open heart and without reservation or requirements from others.

# HERE I AM!

TATYANA MANTIS

I am writing my D'vrah Torah, presenting whom I have become. I am very excited and moved with my Parashat which is about the story of Joseph. Joseph's saga is both expansive and integral. His progression from a dreamer and dream interpreter to a Minister of Egypt is one of the most elaborate stories in the Torah.

During all of my life, I have been walking in the footsteps of Joseph, experiencing a series of feasts and famine! I was born on Sakhalin Island, Russia. When I was very young, I was moved to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in order to care for my elderly Grandmother. During the early years of my life on Sakhalin Island, I experienced abundance and plenty. After my move to Bishkek, in essence, my life became one of famine.

As part of the cycle of feasts, my son Roman was born which was a blessing in my life. During a time of feast, I was fortunate to receive a full scholarship to obtain a degree in electrical engineering. The famine occurred after graduation when there were no jobs and food and I could not support my son and grandmother.

As part of the ongoing cycle I met my husband. I have always been a big dreamer and by moving to the United States some of my dreams were fulfilled. As part of our feast, our daughter Sasha was born. The famine portions of the cycles are decreasing.

Being able to participate in the Anshei Mitzvah program is a feast for my heart and soul. It has answered the question of "Am I prepared?" not only for me but also my daughter and family. It has been a part of the preparation for my life goals that I have set forth including conversion and immersion to being Jewish, citizenship, voting, college for my son, growth and independence.

Because of my faith and direction of constantly moving forward, I have been able to more fully participate in and savor the feast. I have learned to adjust, cope and hold on to my faith and my firm belief in what the future holds.

My portion of Torah, Parashat Mikeitz teaches us about T'Shuvah, growing through forgiveness, creating family peace and provide hope during difficult times. We must dream big and take wise actions. By doing so we connect with others in order to help repair the world.

Due to the Anshei Mitzvah program I have made friends and further established myself as part of the Jewish community. How many of life's lessons have we learned through the life of Joseph? I have certainly learned "a few" that way!

# COMMUNITY VS. INDIVIDUALISM

ANALEMMA MCKEE-SCHWENKE

Mikeitz opens with Pharaoh's dream and Joseph's interpretation. What struck me as noteworthy is how God's plan for Joseph to save Egypt and the Jewish people contrasts with the individualistic tendencies that we see, for better or worse, in American culture.

Pharaoh's dream, modern edition: seven years of strong economy, then seven years of economic depression. Joseph's Solution: Heavy taxes during the good times, then distributing food as needed during the bad times.

Humans have the well-documented tendency to assume things will continue as they have gone. We have a hard time planning for a future that looks radically different from the present. And yet here we see the recipe for society to survive bad times. The Mishnah elaborates that Joseph doubled the tax rate on all harvests from 10% to 20%. And they didn't have tax exemptions and deductions like we do; fewer than 3% of Americans pay this high of an effective rate.

To justify Joseph's high taxes Rashi explains that providing for those in need is an important task of governments for the common good, because "it is axiomatic" that people are more prone to antisocial behavior when their basic needs are not met.

Haim Cohn, who served on the Supreme Court of Israel, takes that even further. He wrote in his book *Human Rights in Jewish Law*, "It stands to reason that from the duty to assist and maintain the poor, a fundamental human right of every human to his livelihood may be inferred, as the fundamental right of life may justifiably be inferred from the prohibition of homicide." This means that everyone, whether they work a minimum wage job, or are disabled or sick, or can't work because they are caring for young or old family members, is entitled to having their basic needs met simply because they were born a human.

Humans are social creatures and anthropologists say that we owe our evolutionary success to our cooperation. We are here today because our ancestors looked after each other, in pre-history, and also in Jewish history.

Unlike Joseph and Pharaoh, we don't know exactly when hard times are coming, or for whom, or how long they will last, but we know we need to be prepared for them.

There have always been greedy people, but I would posit that the ideal of rugged individualism that we see in our culture is an unhealthy historical aberration and definitely not a Jewish value. We are, in fact, responsible for each other's well-being. What's more, there is even a Torah precedent for it being a legitimate and important role of government.

# RECONCILIATION

BETTY RIDER

Miketz continues the “Joseph Story.” As I study Torah, I often find it helpful to start by reading the ideas of others. Some of my favorite sources are contemporary Rabbis and poets.

Rachel Barenblatt has described Miketz as the biblical equivalent of soap opera that chronicles Joseph’s many inversions:

- Joseph interprets Pharaoh's two dreams and predicts seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine. (Genesis 41:1-32)
- Pharaoh places Joseph in charge of food collection and distribution. (41:37-49)
- Joseph marries Asenath, and they have two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. (41:50-52)
- When Joseph's brothers come to Egypt to buy food during the famine, Joseph accuses them of spying. He holds Simeon hostage while the rest of the brothers return to Canaan to retrieve Benjamin for him. (42:3-42:38)
- The brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin and for more food. Joseph continues the test, this time falsely accusing Benjamin of stealing and declaring that Benjamin must remain his slave. (43:1-44:17)

In her discussion of Mikeitz, Rabbi Suzanne Offit cited a poem by Yehuda Amichai, a poet I often turn to for a unique point of view on a Torah portion. Amachai writes:

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the spring.  
The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.  
But doubts and loves  
Dig up the world like a mole, a plow

And a whisper of will be heard in the place  
Where the ruined house once stood.

Rabbi Offit writes about Amichai pointing to a picture of conflict where being right outranks all other concerns, notes that growth is impossible, and notes that, “We cannot plant the seeds of reconciliation if demonstrating that we are correct is more important than seeing and hearing the pain and sorrow of ‘the other.’ Doubt and love can turn over the soil of division and isolation, creating the kind of ground on which healing is possible.” Joseph, like Amichai, is willing to reach beyond the wrongs that were done him to find a path to reconciliation with his family.

As I reflect on Mikeitz, it is this idea of reconciliation that most resonates. For me, Mikeitz offers hope that in this world where conflicts appear to be increasingly polarizing countries, peoples, and even families. Mikeitz tells us that there is a way to focus on healing rather than the harm that triggered the divisions between us.

# INVESTMENT

ANNE SHRAGO

“Let the food gathered for 7 years be a store for 7 years of famine so the land will not perish.” (Genesis 41:36)

I grew up in a stock broker’s home and was taught at an early age to invest my money. I am so grateful my father taught me the importance of investment for future needs. I am grateful because I have had some hard knocks, and if I had not invested, I honestly have no idea where I would be right now. I am blessed to have had the teachings of my father.

That is one way to invest. Another way to invest in yourself is to invest in others.

As a kid, I grew up in a cruel environment. After college, I wanted to be of service to others and worked as a medical technologist in hospitals. Rewarding work albeit very stressful. After graduate school, I worked for the government. My project was to assist in the protection of the environment. But mostly I got exposed to government lies and cover-up practices. Then I worked for the pharmaceutical industry for most of my career. All of my projects were discarded and, more significantly, the human resource eventually went from importance to unimportance with subsequent mergers. Only the bottom line was important.

Discouraged? Yes! Discouraged in humanity. I could always depend on my horses. People, not so much. I began to drift away from mainstream society and live my own non-conformist life.

Then I joined JRC with my father. This community and the AM class has softened me and allowed me to reconsider humanity.

צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים

Creation in God’s Image – one of the concepts to which I was introduced in AM class. In my mind, all of nature, earth and sky were a reflection of divine energy. I would say – that is God right there, on 4 legs grazing in the pasture. And to me, the horses move my soul. The whole earth is a miracle. How did we get here? What are we doing here? When we

discussed this concept in class, it was focused on humans only. This disturbed me. I asked the Rabbi – what about nature and animals and all that is beautiful? He replied – good question – at the time this was conceptualized, it was only for humankind. All humans are created in the image of God. Every human life is sacred. Respect human life. Value diversity. Show human decency. I thought about it.

## תיקון עולם

When we began to practice tikkun olam, which modernly means to repair the world by assisting others, for our AM project with End Hunger Durham, the tzelem elohim began to sink in. Our world is inherently broken and it is our duty as Jews to help repair this world. We should try to help those in need with decency and justice. We should care for everyone.

I see in a new light. I had an epiphany for my personal self. God is people. God is Love. God is people believing in people. We \*are\* God. I now know what God is, for me.

Something as simple as installing a doorbell on an elderly lady's home and seeing her eyes light up with such joy that it brightens the sky, just so she can hear when Meals on Wheels delivers her meals – THAT is the investment! Performing this small act of kindness, seeing her joy, made my heart sing. That is the investment for which I long.

Tikkun Olam is tzelem elohim in action. Repairing and reducing suffering starts with being kind to others. Just be kind to those around you. Just performing spontaneous mitzvot for others makes my heart sing and that is the investment in myself.

Invest in your hearts by investing in others!

# WHAT TORAH TEACHES US AROUND HUMILITY

JAIME STEIN

In addition to the many relevant and important themes to explore in this parashah, what was most striking to me was the response Joseph gave to Pharaoh following Pharaoh's request for Joseph to interpret two dreams. In a single moment between Joseph and Pharaoh a choice arises – Joseph can simply appease Pharaoh, tell him what he wants to hear, or instead Joseph can say what's true in his heart. This "moment of truth" resonated with me as we navigate each and every day in our relationships. For example, do we say what others want to hear or do we stay true to ourselves and say what's in our heart? For Joseph it seems like doing whatever it takes to appease the most powerful ruler would be the obvious choice. However, the lesson I'm taking from this exchange is much more complex and leads to me to an interesting exploration of faith, trust and humility.

Looking at the text Pharaoh said to Joseph, *"I dreamt a dream and there is no one to interpret it; but I have heard about you"* (Genesis 41:15). Joseph, who has been summoned from his enslavement and standing before Pharaoh is at a precipice of choice. Does he simply say, "Yes, I can interpret your dreams?" Initially that seems like the best response and will appease Pharaoh. As the text unfolds, we see that Joseph does agree to help Pharaoh and at the same time takes one additional step. Instead of a simple "yes," Joseph bravely says to Pharaoh, *"not I – it is God who will account for Pharaoh's well-being."*

This is a pivotal moment. In this very instance, Joseph could easily say "yes" and take full credit for his abilities and his special gift to interpret dreams. This opens the door to several questions: what if Joseph had stepped down this path of taking complete responsibility for being gifted? What if he believed and conveyed his talents were innate? How would this story have turned out differently? When studying this parashah, I saw this as a powerful cross-roads. Pharaoh is ready to give all that credit and power to Joseph. Joseph stands before Pharaoh with his freedom and to some

degree, his life on the line, and chooses faith and humility. As Shmeul Rabinowitz wrote in his analysis, it's actually in this moment that Joseph "stands tall." Joseph chooses to express that his wisdom is merely the expression of what God intends, that his foresight is actually a gift from God. This paradoxical shift from self-preservation at all costs to one of humility captures and illustrates the deep expression of faith, trust and the power of being true to oneself.

This moment for Joseph is rich with lessons for all us. In this delicate shift of "I" (Joseph claiming his intrinsic talent) to "I and Thou" (Joseph's profound relationship with God) is inspiring, particularly in light of our world today. This important teaching illustrates the power of standing tall, being a proud Jew, particularly in a time when the ground feels unsteady and in the shadow of the recent, horrific violence against Jews. In this single moment for Joseph, we get to witness the immense power of faith, trust and humility, and this is the kind of shining light we need today in our world.



