

*Joseph, Hanukkah, and Us*

Parashat Vayeshev

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I heard a name on the news a few days ago that I literally have not heard in decades. I was listening to the radio, I believe it was NPR, when a reporter mentioned the name *Mikhail Gorbachev*. I was a bit embarrassed when I admitted to myself, “I didn’t realize Gorbachev was still alive.” Turns out the former Soviet premier is very much alive: He is 87 years old, and resides in Moscow surrounded by his daughter and granddaughters. (His wife Raisa died in 1999.) Gorbachev was a huge part of my childhood. At first, he was the embodiment of our mortal enemy, the dreaded Soviet Union. When we had nuclear attack drills in school, it was always his face, complete with that famous red birthmark atop his bald head, that I imagined pushing the launch button from a bunker in the Kremlin. Later, he was the embodiment of the Russian Refusnik issue. I was here in Washington, D.C. on a freezing cold December 6, 1987 for that massive march for Soviet Jews when Gorbachev came to the U.S. to meet with President Reagan. It was he who I imagined held the keys to the freedom of tens of thousands of my brothers and sisters who desperately wanted to leave Russia.

And still later, to borrow the phrase from the late Washington Post columnist David Broder, Mikhail Gorbachev was the “embodiment of change.”<sup>1</sup> Here was a man who was born in Stalinist Russia, who joined the Communist party in his youth, who was the 1<sup>st</sup> Secretary of the Supreme Soviet by the time he was 43, who became the 8<sup>th</sup> president of the Soviet Union; but he was also the one who introduced the English speaking world to the Russian words *glasnost*, openness, and *perestroika*, restructuring. He was not only the 8th president of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, he was the last president. He oversaw the reduction in the Cold War Nuclear Arsenal by 80%, and also the need for Russia to modernize and open itself up to reforms. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, and I distinctly remember how he was greeted by throngs of Israelis when he visited the Jewish state in 1992, donning a yarmulke and standing at the Kotel. Can you even imagine Stalin or Khrushchev doing that? Today he is a prominent voice, criticizing Vladimir Putin for backsliding on democratic reforms and for turning Russia toward a more confrontational, bellicose posture in the world. He is truly the embodiment of change; the embodiment of modern Russian and Soviet history; the embodiment of a great world leader even in his later years.

I am particularly moved by this embodiment idea because of words that are found in the second verse of this morning’s parasha. After informing us that our patriarch Jacob has

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/05/21/mikhail-gorbachev-embodiment-of-change/7eb1d31f-020e-4a9d-951c-18b19d3f7279/?utm\\_term=.d87cce0edee4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/05/21/mikhail-gorbachev-embodiment-of-change/7eb1d31f-020e-4a9d-951c-18b19d3f7279/?utm_term=.d87cce0edee4)

returned and resettled in the land of Israel, the Torah says...*Eileh Toldot Ya'akov, Yosef*...This is the lineage of Jacob, next word: Joseph.<sup>2</sup> It's as if to suggest that Jacob's entire legacy could be summed up by his favorite child Joseph! *V'Yisrael ahav et Yosef mikol-banav*, a few verses later the Torah tells us that indeed Jacob (Israel) loved Joseph more than his other children. And as the Etz Hayim notes, this is a prologue to a narrative that is overwhelmingly about Joseph. But our Sages have a fascination with the character of Joseph that is unlike most other personalities in the Torah. He too is the embodiment of something greater than himself. Joseph's life, his experiences, his challenges and triumphs seem to stand for something overarching and significant. In fact, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Halakhist and ethicist, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, also known as the Chofetz Chayim, said that Joseph is the embodiment of the Jewish people: His early life as a beloved, chosen child; his dreams and otherworldly thoughts; his conflict with his own kin; his near-death experiences; his encounter with the non-Jewish world, the Ishmaelites, the Egyptians, the House of Potiphar and all the challenges and temptations that placed before him; the dark days in the pit, in prison; the subject of rumors, speculation, and false accusation followed by the redemption, the reunification with family, the catapulting to a life of honor, respect and admiration. This is the life of Joseph, but it is also the life of Am Yisrael. We have traveled the same path, experienced the same trials and tribulations, and we have risen to similar heights.

Eleven chapters from where we are reading this morning, and three parashiyot later, we find Joseph by the side of his dying father. Jacob says to him: I am about to die, but God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your forefathers, *Elohim imachem, v'heishiv etchem el eretz avoteichem*.<sup>3</sup>

This week I was speaking with David Marcus about his memories of learning about Hanukkah as a boy growing up in Israel. He told me how important the Hanukkah narrative was in Zionist ideology. The few defeating the many; the message of Jewish sovereignty and self-determination; the devotion to the land and the heritage of the Jewish people. Remember what Jacob said to Joseph: *Heishiv etchem el eretz avoteichem*...The Jewish people have returned to the land of their ancestors. Hanukkah is also a part of how Joseph embodies the Jewish experience...the final promise of return to our ancestral homeland.

Joseph's life was far from easy. Even at the zenith of power, he still has to contend with being a stranger in a strange land—he does not want to be buried in Egypt—and a family that is still fragile after years of dissent and misunderstanding. Commenting on why the story of our people contains such anguishing chapters, my teacher Rabbi Ismar Schorsch wrote that “it is a necessary prelude to fulfilling the mission of God's chosen people. If the progeny of Abraham are to be a source of blessing for the nations of the

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 37:2

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 48:21

world, if they are to be a model of what is just and right, then they must have exposure to what is wrong in the world. To endure the insecurity of homelessness and the abasement of slavery is the requisite soil for creating a body politic imbued with principles of equality and justice.”<sup>4</sup>

As we reacquaint ourselves with the remarkable story of Joseph and as we celebrate the victories of the Hanukkah story, let us never forget that the real triumph, the ultimate triumph is for the Jewish people to kindle light not only in our own homes, but in every dark corner of the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Schorsch, Ismar. *Cannon Without Closure*, Torah Commentaries. Pages 183-184