What are the lessons of the Joseph story
for our own day and age?
Parashat Miketz, Motzaei Hanukkah
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If there's a subject that just about every rabbi thinks about, and many preach about, it's **assimilation**.

Assimilation is the process of acculturation; it's when people who've moved to a new place acquire the attributes of the host culture in which they are now living.

For example, when Jews first came to North America in large numbers at the beginning of the 20th century, they all spoke Yiddish. WIthin a generation, the number of native Yiddish speakers had declined dramatically. Within another generation, Yiddish had become a foreign language. When the Jewish immigrants arrived, they dressed a particular way and had unique mannerisms. Over time, these changed. The Jews who had come to America ... became Americans who happened to be Jewish.

That's assimilation. It's happened in country after country in century after century. And usually, when rabbis have spoken about it, they have decried it. Because whenever and wherever Jews come to behave more like the host culture into which they assimilate, they naturally begin to lose their connections, their intimacy, their comfort with Jewish culture. That's bad for Jewish continuity; it's bad for the Jewish people; it's bad for Judaism.

But sometimes that simple -- simplistic? -- way of looking at the process of assimilation gets challenged.

For example, the great Jewish historian, Rabbi Gerson Cohen, once wrote a powerful essay entitled, "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History," in which he pointed out that throughout history, there have been plenty of cases in which Jews have adapted Judaism in fertile, productive ways, and that this has been good for Judaism.[1] But those are cases where Jews borrowed ideas from other cultures to advance Judaism; not cases where Jews sought to shed themselves of their Jewish identities.

There's another classic challenge to that narrative, and that is the story that we're smack in the middle of reading right now, namely, the **Joseph Story.** Because the Joseph story is about a "nice Jewish boy" (yes, I know that that is an anachronism!) who, though born and raised in a Jewish milieu, back in the Land of Canaan -- in what was for him, the "Old Country" -- comes to live in Egypt, which is about as foreign a place as the Bible can imagine. As he does, he takes on many of the attributes of Egyptians; and that process is seen as, well, *positive* -- or, at least. not negative.

Let's take a look:

This week's *parashah* begins with Joseph in a very low state. He is an imprisoned slave. He was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. And he ended up in prison because of the lust and spite of his master's wife. But then, amazing things happen, and they happen because various Egyptian officials, including Pharaoh himself, are "benign and even helpful" to him.

The Pharaoh to whom we are introduced in Genesis 41 is "thoughtful and rational."[2] He calls on a young imprisoned Hebrew to interpret his dreams. He appreciates Joseph, even though he's a foreigner, and gives him an

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[1] This essay was delivered as the commencement address at the Hebrew Teacher's College (now known as Hebrew College) in June 1966. See: JEWISH HISTORY JEWISH DESTINY .

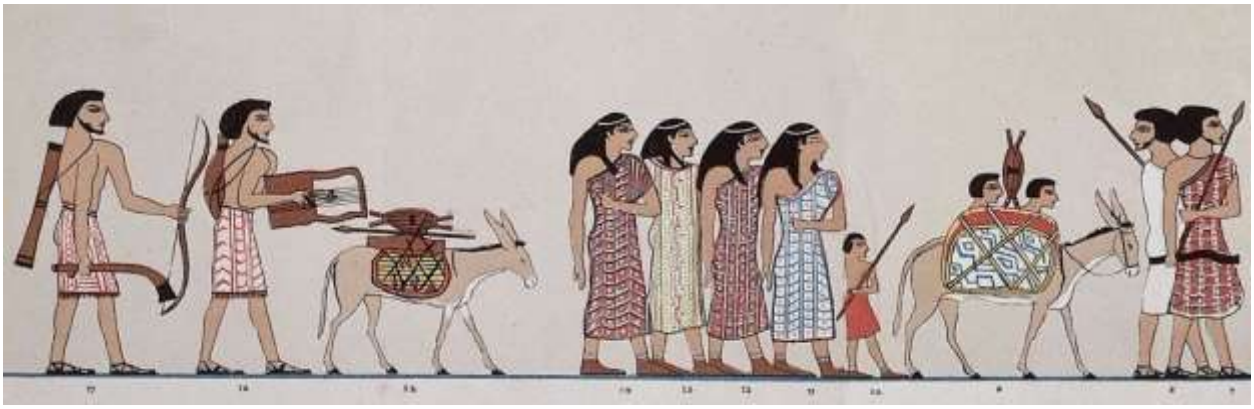
[2] All unattributed quotations are from Susan Niditch, "Why the Joseph Story Portrays Egypt Positively," TheTorah.com, 2018, 2020.

important position in his administration. Later, he generously "welcome[s] Joseph's family to settle in Egypt."

This Pharaoh is nothing like the Pharaoh of the Exodus account. He's nothing like the Pharaoh of the earlier Biblical story who was duped by Avram.

Now, what about Joseph himself? How does he change in Egypt?

When he's informed that Pharaoh wants to see him, Pharaoh's courtiers rush him out of the dungeon. BUT, before he goes before Pharaoh, he takes care of two minor details. What are they? Well, take a look at the following photograph:



Take a look at this photo. According to Professor Gary Rendsburg, this depicts the arrival of a group of Semites in Egypt.[3] Note that the male Semites have beards. Native Egyptians didn't.

By the time Joseph was called hurriedly to Pharaoh's palace, he had apparently been in Egypt long enough to realize that it would do him well to look more like the Egyptians than like his fellow Hebrews. And so what did he do? Well, the first thing that he did was to shave.

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[3] See: Gary Rendsburg, "The Joseph Story: Ancient Literary Art at its Best," TheTorah.com, 2020. The caption on the photo in the article reads: "Arrival of some Semites in Egypt (note the bearded males)." (From Beni Hassan Plate XII. 1849)

As elsewhere in the Bible (Dan 4:30) and in other Near Eastern texts (Ahiqar 5), shaving is seen as a sign of emergence from prison to freedom. As scholars have noted, the beard that Joseph previously had marked his membership in a particular social group of foreigners, whereas removing his facial hair marked his separation from that identity and the need (and Joseph's willingness) to conform to that of his conquerors.[4]

Joseph obviously felt that he had to **conform** in order to succeed. Clearly, "for Joseph to become an "insider" -- and he does become the consummate insider without whom Pharaoh makes no decision -- he had to "shave and become like those who enslave[d] and dominate[d] him."

But he had to do something else. He had to change his clothing.

Changing clothes is a key motif in the Joseph story. Remember that the story begins with Joseph being given a coat of many colors. What happened then? The brothers, before throwing him into the pit, stripped him of his coat. What happened to that coat? The brothers killed a baby goat and smeared its blood all over the coat to suggest that Joseph had been murdered. The loss of that cloak symbolized Joseph's loss of status. The loss of a cloak happened all over again, when Potiphar's wife attempted to seduce Joseph. What happened? When Joseph refused her advances, she grabbed hold of his cloak, and when he ran away, she held onto it. She then brought that before her husband and used it as evidence that it was Joseph who had been the seducer.

Hence, it's not surprising that before going before Pharaoh, Joseph realizes that he has to put on fresh, clean clothing. This makes him presentable before Pharaoh.

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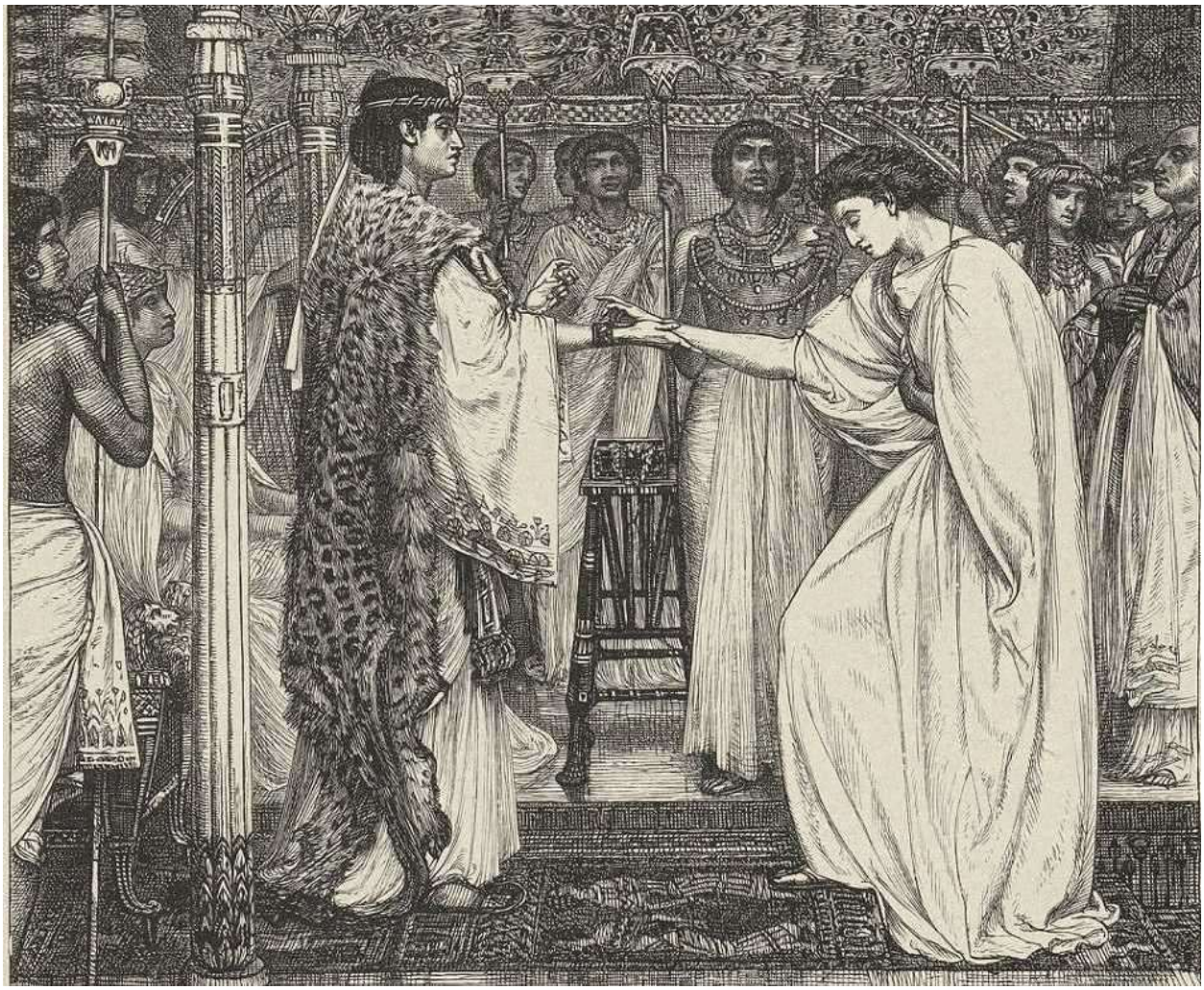
[4] See Gary Rendsburg, op cit.; and Joshua Berman, "Identity Politics in the Burial of Jacob (Genesis 50:1-14)" CBQ 68 (2006) (11-31).

He goes before Pharaoh, interprets his dream, and Pharaoh honors him by appointing him viceroy over all of Egypt. The Bible puts it this way: "Pharaoh put [his signet ring] on Joseph's hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and had a a gold chain placed around his neck." (41:42)

Here's a picture depicting that eventful encounter:



The caption reads: "Pharoah Honors Joseph, Dalziels' Bible Gallery 1864–81 Metmuseum.org."

Notice how pale and clean shaven Joseph looks. (Note that all of the figures in the picture are clean shaven.) Look also at how clean and white his outfit is.

Pharaoh is giving Joseph his signet ring. Also, note that immediately behind Joseph, just to the left of the image of his face in this picture, is an Egyptian courtier holding a gold necklace that Pharaoh is about to bestow upon him.

Immediately afterwards, Joseph receives a new Egyptian name ("Zaphenath-paneach"), and he marries an Egyptian woman: Osnat, the daughter of an Egyptian priest.

Interestingly, these developments -- which foreshadow the experience of generations of Jewish immigrants -- are presented in our text with no negative assessment.

There is also no criticism of Joseph, implicit or otherwise, when he he gives his two sons their names. He calls his first-born son, M'nasheh, which he understands to mean, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." And the second he calls Ephraim, because "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction."

Clearly, Joseph has embraced life in Egypt, among the Egyptians.

None of the signs of assimilation that are described in the text are criticized. There is no rationalization, no expression of concern.

As Professor Susan Niditch has written, all this shows the storyteller's positive evaluation of Joseph's full integration into Egyptian society: "**He shaves like an Egyptian, dresses like an Egyptian, takes an Egyptian name, and an Egyptian wife. The people he works for are kind and wise, recognizing Joseph's talent. This is especially true of Pharaoh, who quickly promotes Joseph to the role of the king's right hand. All this suggests that the author wishes to present Joseph's Egyptianizing as a positive, or at least not a negative trait."**

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What does it mean for us to read this *ba-yamim ha-elu, ba-zman ha-zeh,* at this time, and in this season, when we have now lived in America for almost four hundred years -- the length of time that the ancient Hebrews were said to have lived in Egypt? Does it suggest that we should feel more positive about our assimilation into American culture? Does it suggest that all the naysayers, including the many who have preached over the years about the dangers of assimilation, are wrong?

Should we be less concerned about the high rate of intermarriage? Indeed, should we -- as some have suggested -- *celebrate* the fact that intermarriage has resulted in the unprecedented presence of Jews in the families of those occupying positions of great power and influence in our society. (As an example of that, we are probably all aware that all of the President-elect's children have married Jews, and the Vice President-elect is married to a Jewish man and has Jewish step-children.)

Before rushing to answer those questions, there is one additional, important aspect of the Joseph story that should be noted.

As we've seen, Joseph changed many things when he rose in Egyptian society. He changed his **dress**, his **appearance**, even the **language** that he spoke. But there was one important thing that he didn't change. As Susan Niditch puts it, "the one thing that Joseph doesn't change is his God."

Throughout the narrative, Joseph makes clear that he owes his success to God. He openly credits God with his ability to interpret dreams -- and he isn't afraid to say that to Pharaoh himself -- before he says anything else! Throughout the story, he states matter of factly that whatever success he has enjoyed came from God. The implication of this, according to Susan Niditch, is that it was his loyalty to God that made Joseph successful in his new land. "Joseph," she writes, was "able to remain fully pious while at the same time becoming almost fully Egyptian." I'd put it differently: Joseph could only become almost fully Egyptian by remaining true to himself, by remaining fully pious.

How do we understand the implications of the Joseph story for our own life stories? Perhaps we have to start by asking ourselves What is the role of religious identity in our Jewish identity?

Just the other day, there was a story in the *New York Times* written by someone raised by a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. She was raised celebrating one and only one Jewish holiday: Hanukkah. In the article, she writes that she and her partner have chosen not to observe Hanukkah with their daughters, because it wouldn't be authentic for them to do so. The author identifies as a "none" -- a term used by the Pew Foundation which studies the role of religion in American life to describe individuals who do not consider themselves to be affiliated with a religious tradition.[5]The Jewish equivalent is the term, "Jews of no religion." As of 2013, 22% of American Jews identified as "Jews of No Religion" and that percentage is only increasing. As more and more Jews identify as Jews of no religion, does it suggest that the Joseph story -- a person who clearly would not have been described as a Jew of no religion -- is less relevant than we might have thought?

There's yet another, obvious reason for us to hesitate to draw too many conclusions from Joseph's positive experiences in Egypt.

After all, what happened next? We all know what happened next: after Joseph died, within a few years, "a new king arose, who didn't know Joseph," and before you know it, the Jews became enslaved.

This outcome should be familiar to us.

As we know, in many European countries, Jews became assimilated -- only to learn, generations later, that though they had left Jewish appearance, Jewish garb, Jewish practice and even Jewish identification behind them, the "natives" among whom they had supposedly assimilated hadn't gotten the memo, and were continuing to relate to them as though they still were fully Jewish.

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[5] See: https://tinyurl.com/yc2aex4m .

Does, then, the Joseph story *support*, rather than *challenge* the prevailing narrative that assimilation is, all things considered, bad for the Jews?

I leave that question for you to reflect upon during the days ahead.

I always like it when Hanukkah doesn't overlap with Christmas. In this case, it gives us about a week between these two prominent winter holidays to contemplate where we are going.

We use the term, "The December Dilemma," to describe the challenge of remaining a distinct, proud minority during the Christmas season. But really, it's a year-round dilemma for all of us. For all of us have chosen to assimilate, in one form or another. Yes, there are Jews who reject any adoption of the practices of the gentiles among whom we live. That is not our way.

Can we, in this country -- as, I'm sure, we all hope -- continue to flourish as both Jews and Americans? What's the right balance for us of, on the one hand, identifiable Jewish behavior, appearance, loyalty and commitment and, on the other, *American* identity, behavior, loyalty and commitment? Are they in conflict? If so, how do we resolve that conflict?

How much do we want to stand out, as identifiably Jewish, in our society? How culturally assimilated can or should we become while still remaining, deep in our hearts, Jewish to the core? Can we have our feet firmly planted in Jewish culture and also in American culture? Is that inherently unstable? If so, how do we resolve it?

Let me wish everyone a healthy and a safe conclusion to the current secular year and a healthier and safer and more stable and secure 2022.

Shabbat shalom.