

## **What Does the Joseph Story Have to Teach Us About Chanukah and Christmas?**

*Parashat Vayeshev*

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Today we began reading the “Joseph story” -- what amounts to the longest short story in the Bible. Stretching over 4 *parashiyot* (Torah portions), it takes us all the way to the end of the Book of Genesis.

Joseph is an important transitional figure: he takes us from the world of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, living in the Land of Canaan, to the world of Moses and the Children of Israel, living in Egypt.

We always read this story right around the Jewish holiday of Chanukah and the Christian holiday of Christmas. This coincidence raises a simple question: What does the Joseph story have to teach us about these two holidays? What might the Joseph story have to teach Christians celebrating Christmas, and what might the story have to teach Jews celebrating Hanukah?

First, to remind ourselves, let’s sum up the Joseph story: The young, favorite son of Jacob is hated by his brothers because of his dreams. They plot to kill him, finally agreeing instead to sell him into slavery for a few silver coins. He is tempted by Potiphar’s wife, falsely accused of molesting her, and thrown into prison. He remains a dreamer, and a skilled interpreter of dreams. In prison, he brilliantly and accurately interprets the dreams of Pharaoh’s chief baker and cupbearer. That allows him to be remembered when, two years later, Pharaoh has two dreams that greatly disturb him, and there is no one to interpret them. The cupbearer remembers Joseph, who is brought quickly from prison to the palace. He becomes second in command to Pharaoh, and therefore the one to whom, when famine comes to the land of Canaan, his brothers come to plead for food. Joseph puts them through a terrible ordeal, but ultimately, rather than punishing them for their terrible crime, he forgives them, saying that it was all God’s will.



And so the young man who had been mocked and scorned, the “stone that the builders rejected,” became the chief cornerstone, the source of redemption for the people of Israel. Without him, the people of Israel wouldn’t have survived. You could say, accurately, that he was the people’s savior.

I’m not making this up. In fact, the life of Joseph is explicitly seen by Christians to prefigure the life of Jesus as described in the New Testament and other Christian writings. As one scriptural source describes Joseph: “My brothers hated me but the Lord loved me. They wanted to kill me, but the God of my ancestors preserved me. Into a cistern they lowered me, but God raised me up.” (The Testament of Joseph 1:4-7). Those words describe Joseph; they also describe Jesus.

(Incidentally, we Jews would not say that Joseph, as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, *prefigures* Jesus; we would say that the story of Jesus consciously and deliberately picks up on many elements of the Joseph story -- even and including its language -- to describe Jesus as following in Joseph’s footsteps.)

In the New Testament, the disciples are described as “jealous” of Jesus, just like the way Joseph’s brothers are described as jealous of Joseph. Though rejected and condemned by his brothers, God raises Joseph up to be the judge of his brothers. The same could be said of Jesus.

Aphra’at the Persian, one of the Syrian Church Fathers, lists 18 different parallels between Joseph and Jesus. I will simply present ten common themes in their lives as recounted in Scripture (i.e., the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament):

- 1) Both (as mentioned above) were subject to jealousy.
- 2) Both were the victims of false testimony. Joseph was targeted by Potiphar’s wife. Jesus was the object of false witnesses before the Sanhedrin, and before Pontius Pilate.
- 3) Both men’s lives tell the story of salvation and empowerment. Cast into prison, Joseph is redeemed by God (as the story is interpreted). Jesus, too, is cast into prison, entombed in death, only eventually to be liberated by God.
- 4) Someone says to each of them, “Remember me!” when that person is in difficulty: the cupbearer to Joseph at the end of our parashah; the penitent thief to Jesus on the cross: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

- 5) Jacob is stunned with disbelief when his sons tell him that Joseph is alive. (Genesis 45:26) Similarly, the disciples don't believe it when, on the Sunday after Jesus' death, the women announce this to them (Luke 24:11).
- 6) When Jacob sees Joseph alive, he says: "Now I can die since I've seen you again." (Genesis 46:30). Simon the Elder says the same thing when he sees Jesus (Luke 2:29-30).
- 7) Joseph was 30 years old when Pharaoh appoints him (Genesis 41:46). So is Jesus when he begins his public life (Luke 3:23).
- 8) Forgiveness and Reconciliation: As Caesar of Arles, a Church Father, says: "He [Joseph] embraced his brothers one by one, and shed tears over each one of them. Watering the neck of those who feared him, he washed away the hate of his brothers by the tears of his love." (XL:4) (See Genesis 45:1-15.) It's the dramatic climax of the story. So too, Jesus on the cross says: "Father: forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) The mutual reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers remains a model for the reconciliation of Jesus with his brothers, i.e., those who have rejected him.
- 9) Incidentally, there are also parallels between Joseph, the son of Jacob, of the Hebrew Bible and, yes, Joseph the son of Jacob, of the New Testament (see Matthew 1:16), which are beyond the scope of this presentation.
- 10) Finally, just as, in Christian literature, Jesus is seen as a model for Christians to emulate, so too there are many references to Joseph as a model whom Christians should emulate: "Let us imitate blessed Joseph in perfect love and concern for chastity, refusing to return evil for evil to our enemies." (XC II:6) (Caesar of Arles) "That which Joseph accomplished with regard to his brothers, is that which we also should realize in relation to those who sin against us. It is not they but their sins we should detest, having the will to reprimand them according to the measure of their fault, and pardoning those who sin against us so that God will also pardon us all the times we sin against Him" (XC 1, 7) (Ibid.)

To sum up, it's actually a nice coincidence that Christmas always falls during the weeks that we read the Joseph story. It reminds all of us, Jew and Christian alike, how much Christianity owes to its Jewish origins. It reminds us that, as much as we have many beliefs and practices that divide us, there is much in our shared heritage that unites us.

Now, onto Hanukkah!

There are, of course, the trivial connections. Here are two:

1. Today's *parashah*, Parashat Vayeshev, which begins the Joseph story, has a curious feature to it. Almost every verse begins with the letter *vav*. Why is this? Well, the letter *vav* is considered a sad letter. It alludes to "vay" which (like "oy" in Yiddish) is an expression of woe. Indeed, Vayeshev is a sad *parashah* describing a series of falls and declines. Joseph is thrown into a pit, he's brought down to Egypt, he is seduced, he's thrown into prison, etc. What do we have to say? "Oy!" Or, in Hebrew, "Vay!" And thus almost all of the 112 verses in the *parashah* begin with the letter *vav*. How many don't? Nine. This equals the number of candles on the Hanukkiyah, and it symbolizes hope in the face of declines and setbacks.
2. Also, in Genesis 46:28, we are told that when Jacob headed down to Egypt to join Joseph, Jacob sent forth his son Judah to point the way to where Joseph lived in Goshen. "He had sent Judah ahead to Joseph to point *the way to Goshen*." In Hebrew, the word for "*the way to Goshen*" is "*Goshnah*" (pronounced, with a long, accented "o", "GOSH-nah). *Goshnah* consists of four Hebrew letters: gimel, shin, nun and heh. I hope that they are familiar: they are the same four Hebrew letters found on a dreidel! The sum of the numerical values of these four letters is 358. It shouldn't be surprising (to anyone who dabbles in gematria) that that number is also the numerical equivalent to the word *mashiach* (messiah). For Judah is the ancestor of King David and hence the messiah (*mashiach ben david*). It is also the sum of the numerical equivalents of the phrase, "*Adonai melech, Adonai malach, Adonai yimloch*." "God reigns, God has (always) reigned, and God shall (always) reign."

These numerical hints are intriguing, but to me, the key connection between the Joseph story and Chanukah has to do with the challenge that Joseph faced living as a member of a minority group in the presence of an alien culture: being faithful to his father, and his father's way of life, even amongst those who would despise it.

Joseph, like Moses after him, is thrown into a world in which he can "pass," yet he decides to reveal himself and ally himself with his people and save them.

Joseph, like Moses after him, prefigures a certain kind of a Jew in gentile society: the Jew who can, and thus might very much want to -- indeed, the Jew who does, for a time -- **pass**—but who eventually steps up to the plate and takes his rightful place among his brothers.

In Joseph's case, it's easy: he has amazing charm. Think of it: to be placed by Potiphar in charge of his household, in a position to be attracted to and seduced by his wife? How is that even possible? And then, after being thrown into prison, for him to have the presence of mind, the self-confidence, the charm, to attract the attention of and win over the trust of the jailkeeper? And then to win over Pharaoh himself?

And so Joseph has immense talent—*yet he doesn't forget where he comes from*. At a crucial moment, he realizes that blood is thicker than water. He reveals himself to his brothers. He embraces them. He tells them: we're all in this together. I will no longer eat separate from you. I'm with you!

And this, it seems to me, is one of the key themes of Hanukkah. It would have been very easy for Mattathias and his sons to simply go along with all of the Hellenizing going on around them. It would have been easy to adopt the cultural norms of the Hellenized Jews among them. But instead they took a stand for Judaism. And because of that stand, we are here today.

*Mi yimalel gvurot yisrael, otan mi yimneh?*

*Hen b'chol dor yakum ha-gibor, goel ha-am.*

*Who can retell the heroic feats of the Jewish people, who can recount them?*

*Indeed, in every generation, a hero arises, a redeemer of the people.*

So Hanukkah also, like Christmas, and like the Joseph story with which we began, focuses on someone becoming a savior or redeemer when we least expect it. Someone willing to stand up and be counted, willing to risk his life and go against the grain, and to say and do what is right.

If Joseph was willing to do that, when the price he might have had to pay was death, if Mattathias and his sons were willing to do that, when the price they might have had to pay was death, ... can we do less?

We too should stand up for our people, for our principles, for our way of life.

Fortunately, we live in a free country. We don't have to simply become part of the homogenized, secular, commercial world in which we live.

We can be emboldened and encouraged by the Joseph story and also by the Hanukkah story -- just as our Christian friends and neighbors can be inspired by the Christmas story—to stand up and be counted, to do what is right, to take risks, and be willing to pay the price for remaining true to ourselves, our faith, and our people.

*Shabbat Shalom v'Hag Urim Sameach!*

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah!