

## **This Week in Torah *V'yashev***

**Rabbi Matt Cutler**

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The poet Linda Ellis penned words about looking at a headstone in a cemetery. She said, "...first came the date of birth and spoke of the following date with tears, but what mattered most of all was the dash between those years. For that dash represents all the time they spent alive on earth and now only those who loved them know what that little line is worth. For it matters not, how much we own, the cars... the house... the cash. What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash." That dash is a legacy; it is the time we spend living. It is all the memories, stories, the sacred encounters. It is the good/bad/ugly of living as well as the beautiful moments of the mundane. That dash - a space between numbers - is a symbol that mere words cannot capture. It is the hyphen of life that gives the greatest opportunity to have a sense of *shlemut*, wholeness to our days.

*Chazal*—wise sages whose names have been lost over time but whose teachings endure as a legacy—are recorded by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik as saying there is a spiritual hyphen in this week's *parasha*. In Genesis 37:2, the text reads: "This, then, is the line of Jacob - Joseph was seventeen years of age as he tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father." The hyphen in the text is added by me but exists in a spiritual realm as if it was written. Rabbi Soloveitchik pointed out a unique metaphysical relationship implied by the text; an ethereal unity that also occurred with the relationship between Jacob and Benjamin in Genesis 44:10 as their souls intertwined into one with two separate senses of the self. It was all captured by a hyphen and a dash that did not have to be written; it was implied. Jacob's "I"-awareness included both Joseph and Benjamin; although Jacob loved his other sons—these two were special as if they were a part of him.

The implied hyphen or the spiritual dash is a license to link these generations together. Just like Abraham-Isaac or Isaac-Jacob, the symbol between the names Jacob and Joseph [the Jacob-Joseph bond] implied a vehicle of transmitting a legacy as if it was an umbilical cord between the generations. The merits of one generation nurturing the next; the younger generation getting the authority to own the legacy with legitimacy that cannot be put into words. But it also gives

permission for the next generation to struggle and wrestle with it to make it its own. Just as Isaac re-digging his father's wells and then digging his own, Joseph had to experience the struggles of his father's faith. Just as Jacob had to be left alone to gaze upward in a dream, Joseph had to be thrown into a pit to interpret others' dreams to make sense out of them for another. Jacob knew his destiny but had to obtain its blessings; his naiveness and inexperience had him succumb to trickery to do so. For Joseph, his naivety had him speak with unfiltered assertions that lead to animosity and betrayal. Yes, the hyphen inherent to the text showed that history repeated itself in the next generation to ensure a deeper connection to the faith in God which was their legacy.

Rabbi Arthur Green of Boston's Hebrew College sees a mystical connotation here. He wrote that the Joseph narrative may appear to be a simple narrative where God dissipates into the background. But what he sees here is a transformation of a young man into a true *tsadek*, a righteous soul. This is his education, he wrote, as to be a true leader. His prime task is to find the courage and humility to stand before true power and advocate for another. In the Chasidic tradition, a man like Joseph has the experience to stand before God with authority to plead for the people. Green writes: "the son needs his own formative suffering in order to be able to stand before Father/God to defend Israel."

In its comment on the opening line of the *parasha*, the anthology entitled *Itorei Torah* echoes the sentiment and takes it a step further. It describes a contradiction that appears in the opening verse: "Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan." How can he settle in a place where his ancestors sojourned as if they are transient or foreigners? The citation continues by saying that things on the outside are not as they appear internally. Joseph was the antithesis of Esau—a man of the field who deceived his father into believing he was worthy of inheriting the legacy. He appeared righteous and honest but underneath, the text says, "he hunted Isaac"—not for him but with a lust to take what was his. But Joseph was different. On the surface, he could look like an Egyptian, but inside he was a Jew. Dressed as an Egyptian prince, he revealed himself by asking if his father was still alive. The text in the anthology teaches us that surface appearance can be deceitful in masking one's true convictions.

Joseph became a *tsadek* by experiencing the struggles and challenges in life and overcoming them. Joseph may have changed his outward appearance—a blessed son with a coat of many colors to a prisoner in a dungeon to a dream interpreter to an administrator with great authority, but his true spiritual self would only grow deeper rather than abandon his soul.

There is a bond between Joseph and his father, Jacob, which cries out for a hyphen in the text. It is there—a link between them that instills a sense of security and purpose. It is bound as a spiritual hyphen that links Joseph to the previous generation but also connects him to his brothers to be their advocate and savior. It is incorporeality that lets Joseph be a spiritual role model as one who keeps his faith strong... no matter what.