

Spoiled Brats

This week's *parashat Vayeishev* features the young Joseph. The text tells us that Joseph was a tattletale, and that "Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons ... and he had made him an ornamented tunic." We understand the latter to mark Joseph as Jacob's eventual successor as family leader, despite Joseph being 11th of 12 brothers. And Joseph dreamt of lording over his brothers, and had the chutzpah of relating these dreams to the brothers who, Torah already told us, "hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him." Our image of young Joseph is that of a spoiled brat.

The Tanach depicts other spoiled brats. We read of one last week: Shechem, prince of the Hivites and rapist of Jacob's daughter Dina: he "saw her, and took her, and lay with her by force." "And Shechem said to his father, 'Get me this girl as a wife.'" These blunt words seem spoken by one used to getting what he wants. This impression is reinforced when Shechem seems to interrupt his father's negotiation with Jacob to boast, "I will pay whatever you tell me. Ask of me a bride-price ever so high, as well as gifts, and I will pay what you tell me; only give me the maiden for a wife." The Torah describes him as a mere *na-ar*, a boy (Gen. 34:19), yet he brags that he (or perhaps his indulgent daddy) is wealthy enough to pay any price for what he wants.

The Pharaoh of the Oppression was a spoiled brat. When he says to Moses, "Who is the Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord...", we can understand this as a dismissal of God's morality and a claim of entitlement to do as he pleases.

King David's sons Amnon (II Samuel 13), Absalom (II Samuel 13-18), and Adonijah (I Kings 1-2) were spoiled brats, each regarding himself as above the rules, each ending disastrously.

The question is suggested: What is it about Joseph that made him different from all these other spoiled brats? What enabled him to outgrow his spoiled brat-hood to become a *mensch*, Yosef haTzadik? I think the answer is hinted at in the story of Adonijah, the second of David's sons to attempt usurping the throne. We're told, "His father had never scolded him: 'Why did you do that?'" (I Kings 1:6). Except for Joseph, all the spoiled brats discussed above were privileged and powerful their entire lives. Joseph, by contrast, was yanked from his status of Jacob's spoiled son to become a servant and, later, prisoner. Perhaps we should derive the lesson that discipline and adversity are good for us all.