

Joseph's Journey  
from Forced Migration to Redemption:  
A Model for Immigration Justice  
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HE WAS NOT LIKE the other boys. While they went out to the fields he stayed behind, curling his hair and kohling his eyes. 1 He walked with a lilt 2 and wore a colorful coat that caught everyone's attention (Genesis 37:3). He was a dreamer. The other boys hated him and could not even bring themselves to utter a friendly word in his direction (37:4). One day their hatred grew so intense that they tore off his clothes and sold him into slavery, at just seventeen years old (37:2).

This began Joseph's forced migration down to Egypt (37:23–28), and it ultimately led to our national enslavement.

In our contemporary world of social justice, we often place different struggles in separate silos, imagining that somehow, they exist in isolation. We assume that the struggle for the full equality of LGBTQ people is separate from the struggle for immigrant rights and protections. The Torah never makes this mistake. And in Parashat Vayigash, the interweaving is powerful. LGBTQ people are among the immigrants who struggle for asylum and refugee status and are also among the refugees who flee from violence and persecution. Economic collapse is a truth for all, regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

And those who are LGBTQ and/or gender nonconforming face an even greater burden as immigrants.

Our Rabbis understand Joseph as a person who stood out from his brothers and suffered greatly from their unwillingness to accept him as he was.

His experience resonates with many LGBTQ folks who are forced from their homes and made to travel to foreign places in dangerous conditions, reflecting the complicity of a society that enables these atrocities. Joseph's position upon arrival in Egypt is precarious. The midrash teaches that both his master, Potiphar, and his master's wife desire Joseph and plot to sexually abuse him. He is alone, vulnerable, and eventually imprisoned for trying to defend himself.

Yet despite his hardships and suffering, Joseph perseveres, becomes the viceroy of Egypt, and reinvests in healing and advancing the relationships with his brothers.

Although Joseph is dehumanized and expelled, he rallies, exceeding all expectations to navigate climate change and the subsequent food insecurities, while saving Egypt and his family of origin (Genesis 41:54).

His Hebrew name, Yosef, alludes to these two roles: to add on and to gather. It is perhaps because he is born into cycles of displacement and humiliation (Genesis 30:23) that he is so committed to ending it. Joseph's ability to prioritize human dignity, unity, and forgiveness over hate, division, and fear produces the first set of biblical siblings who can get along with each other.

It is one of the reasons that we have a custom to bless our children as Joseph's children were blessed.

In chapter 45 of Genesis, Joseph finally comes out to his brothers, revealing his identity while modeling restorative justice and rehabilitation of society. Because the brothers have never been open to seeing Joseph as an equal, they're unable to recognize him when he is talking to them from a position of power.

Only when the pain of staying silent outweighs the pain of screaming out does Joseph finally give voice to his internal turmoil.

With tremendous sensitivity and deep empathy, he removes everyone else from the room and communicates his humanity to them in the universal language of crying (Genesis 45:1–2).

In one of the most intense moments in the Bible, Joseph simultaneously reveals, rebukes, and rebuffs the brothers' false claims of innocence and equality by saying, "I am Joseph—is my father [really] alive?" (Genesis 45:3). The brothers have claimed to be preoccupied with the well-being of their father and how Jacob couldn't possibly survive being separated from his son Benjamin, so here they are reminded that they didn't seem to care at all about their father when they sold Joseph and then crassly asked Jacob to identify Joseph's unique outfit (Genesis 37:32).

Ani Yosef haod avi chai ( אָנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אָבִי חַי ), “I am Joseph—is my father [really] alive?” (Genesis 45:3). The Rabbis see these five words as challenging our confidence in our own choices. If Joseph, among the youngest of the brothers, leaves them with no way to respond for their actions, how are we going to answer those who will introduce themselves to us as “one of the children you put in cages”?

It is not the responsibility of people we have separated from their children, denied asylum, or kept captive in exploitative conditions to educate, support, or forgive us. But that is the role Joseph takes with his oppressors.

As a corrective reaction to their “[seeing] him in the distance and . . . wickedly plotting against him to bring about his death” (Genesis 37:18), Joseph invites them to “come, draw near to me” (45:4), engaging them in a way that makes it easiest for them to be receptive. Joseph then reviews with them the fact-based history of what happened—and, with excessive encouragement, he helps them process it (Genesis 45:5). Unfortunately, this absurdity is often observed when privileged people feel encumbered by their own entitlements and need to be reassured of their own self-worth.

None of this, however, absolves the brothers of their actions nor the need to make amends for the communal impact. There is a curious moment in the brothers' reunion when Joseph gives each one a change of clothing, but he gives Benjamin four additional sets of clothing plus three hundred silver pieces (Genesis 45:22). The Vilna Gaon explains that the three hundred silver pieces are a form of reparations for Benjamin—who, due to Joseph's absence, had to work harder. Even though this was by no means Joseph's fault, he teaches his brothers the importance of trying to make the community whole.

Many commentators are surprised that Joseph seems to favor Benjamin with extra clothing in the same way that Jacob earlier favors Joseph with a splendid coat.

They explain that Joseph is demonstrating his confidence in his brothers' rehabilitation. Judaism defines repentance as being in the same circumstances but responding differently. Although the brothers had initially been jealous of Joseph's special clothing, Joseph knows that they have changed and will not resent Benjamin's extra garments.

As Joseph sends the brothers home to retrieve their father, he warns them not to fight during the journey (Genesis 45:24). The midrash explains that Joseph is worried that the brothers will spend time arguing about who was to blame for Joseph's sale and, in so doing, lose sight of the larger goal of family reunification. Today as well, we must take care not to allow factional infighting to distract us from achieving our dream of a just society.

Like Joseph, many LGBTQ immigrants seeking asylum in the United States make their journey alone. Today, Joseph is a young gay man from Russia whose parents and siblings have disowned him, with a plane ticket and \$100 in his pocket, thanks to a tiny organization that helped him leave behind the daily fear that he might be beaten or killed.

Today, Joseph is a transgender woman from Chechnya whose cisgender partner managed to scrape together money for a plane ticket to get her to safety; however, because they are not legally related, they have no path to living together safely in either country.

Today, Joseph is a gay woman from a small village in Nigeria who has never heard the acronym LGBTQ+, but who spent years trying to understand why she was constantly being attacked and beaten for wanting to live with her best friend instead of marrying a man. Like our ancestor, today's Josephs are fleeing violence and rejection by families of origin, traveling, and navigating new systems, often in a new language. They may have families of choice but very rarely have access to any legal documentation of those relationships from the countries they leave behind; they are much more likely to go through the months or years of applying for asylum alone.

Everyone loses when we deny people the ability to be and to contribute.

We, like the brothers, must atone for our actions and inactions by following Joseph's model, coming together to create the opportunities for all people to have their dignity restored and preserved.

Block, Barry. The Social Justice Torah Commentary (Kindle Locations 1903-1908). CCAR Press. Kindle Edition.