

## Table for One

Parshat Mikeitz 5784

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There is an incredible moment in this week's parsha. Yosef's brothers have just returned from Canaan, this time with Benjamin, as instructed. The emotion in this moment is so overwhelming that the Torah tells us that Yosef needed to take a break:

*Looking about, he saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and asked, "Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?" And he went on, "May God be gracious to you, my boy." With that, Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there.*

Yosef composes himself for the royal banquet, at which point a very strange scene occurs:

וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ לוֹ לִבְדּוֹ

*They served him by himself,*

וְלָהֶם לְבָדָם

*and them [the brothers] by themselves,*

וְלַמִּצְרָיִם הָאֹכְלִים אִתּוֹ לִבְדָּם כִּי לֹא יוּכְלוּן הַמִּצְרָיִם לֶאֱכֹל אֶת-הָעִבְרִים לֶחֶם  
כִּי-תוֹעֵבָה הוּא לַמִּצְרָיִם:

*and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians.*

We might have expected a large banquet table with Yosef at the head of it and all of his Egyptian courtiers together. Or perhaps he would sit with his brothers and see if they still kept the same customs he had grown up with. But instead, Yosef dines alone.

Rabbi Norman Lamm (in his drasha "Three Tables" 1969) analyzes this scene as follows: He says, I can understand two tables very well. The Targum Onkelos points out that the Egyptians found it disgusting to eat with the Hebrews because they were eating meat, which came from animals which the Egyptians may have worshiped. Jacob's sons may have made brachot over their food or had other distinct customs which made the locals wary. So it makes some sense for the foreigners to be eating alone, while the Egyptians maintained their customs and dietary preferences. But what about Yosef?

[*Bekhor Shor*, a French Tosafist, intuits that Yosef was seated separately due to his high stature. It would be unbecoming of anyone else to eat with him. The Italian commentator

Sforno notes that Yosef's separation served a more practical purpose: שלא ירגישו אחיו: so that his brothers would not feel that he might be a Hebrew. Perhaps Yosef after all these years still had certain things he did which felt - distinctly Jewish, or could be discerned as such.]

Rabbi Lamm suggests that Yosef alone at his own table represents a Jewish person in *galut*, caught between two different poles. At one table, there is a dominant culture with its own set of values and priorities; at the other table sit the Jewish people from the land of Israel. Yosef is caught right in the middle.

Among the many feelings that so many of us are holding right now - grief, angst and confusion to name just a few - I have recently felt like the different parts of my identity are being stretched and pulled apart. Many of us feel caught in the middle, tenuously holding both our Jewish commitments and elements of our secular identities.

Yosef then, has much to teach us about how to navigate this liminal space, when we feel alone at the table, far from our family in Israel and distant from those whom we once thought of as neighbors.

Specifically, I would like to briefly highlight three aspects of Yosef's narrative which serve as lessons for us in our present moment.

### Lesson 1: Names tell stories

Although Yosef is given an Egyptian name by Pharaoh (41:45), *Tzafnat Paneach*, he makes a very different choice when naming his own children:

וַיִּקְרָא יוֹסֵף אֶת־שֵׁם הַבְּכוֹר מְנַשֶּׁה כִּי־נִשְׁכַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־עַמְלִי וְאֶת כָּל־בֵּית אָבִי: וְאֶת שֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי קָרָא אֶפְרַיִם כִּי־הִפְרִנִי אֱלֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנִי:<sup>1</sup>

*Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home." And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction."*

The names of Yosef's children serve as markers of his own painful journey into the diaspora of Egypt. *Menasseh* means "God has made me forget my hardship and my parental home" which is funny because if you name a child with the intention to forget something, you are encoding the memory of that event for that child's life and generations to come. Every Menasseh who has ever lived is a reminder that Yosef had a difficult childhood and was separated from his parents! Ephraim's name tells the other half of Yosef's story: that despite his success and prominence, he has also faced

affliction and persecution in the land of Egypt. הִפְרֵנִי אֱ-לֹהִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנִי, “*God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.*”

One complex dynamic for us in the Jewish community and that like Yosef, we have experienced both power and peril. I don't need to list our community's accomplishments or accolades and indeed, we must express *hakarat hatov* [gratitude] for the success we enjoy. Yet, if you scratch the surface, our community has experienced peril and persecution, more and more today and certainly a generation or two ago. If you speak to any Persian Jew, ask them about their experience of being Jewish in Iran a generation ago. How many of us have names that tell the story of a place our family once lived in Eastern Europe or are named for an ancestor we never met, who was murdered?

The particularly complex piece here is that many of our non-Jewish neighbors are familiar with Yosef the viceroy, but have never heard of Ephraim and Menasseh. Despite International Holocaust remembrance day, they don't understand the meaning of our names or the history behind it. And certainly, they don't understand that even if I feel comfortable in American society in 2023, I carry with me the generational trauma and loss of all those marginalized and persecuted who came before me.

This is a complicated story to tell, and Yosef teaches us that we have to tell it to the Jewish and non-Jewish world alike. Names tell stories and we must continue to tell the full story of the Jewish people, with its many ups and downs.

### Lesson 2: Be a kiddush hashem

Though I haven't seen it said explicitly, we could make the argument that Yosef is deeply engaged in the world of tikkun olam - he literally repairs and fixes the world. His rapid rise and economic development plan saves Egypt and the entire ancient world. But the source of this success and salvation is very apparent, both to Pharaoh and to Yosef: it comes from God. Pharaoh says this explicitly:

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-עֲבָדָיו הַנִּמְצָא כֹהֵאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בּוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יוֹסֵף אַחֲרֵי הוֹדִיעַ אֱ-לֹהִים אוֹתָהּ אֶת-כָּל-זֹאת אֵין-נִבֹן וְחָכָם כָּמוֹךָ: אֶתְהַלְתִּיהָ עַל-בֵּיתִי וְעַל-פִּיךָ יִשְׁקָ כָּל-עַמִּי רַק הַכֶּסֶּא אֲגַדֵּל מִמֶּךָ:

*And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, “Could we find another like him—a man with the divine spirit?” So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my court...*

Yosef is the quintessential kiddush hashem - his actions in the public sphere bring an awareness of God and sanctify God's name. Pharaoh himself knows that Yosef's

brilliance, his ability to interpret dreams and develop strategic plans that save lives - all this comes from God.

As Jews, we carry Avraham's mandate "*v'heye bracha*" to be a blessing to the world, or as we say in Aleinu, *l'etaken olam b'malchut shadai*, to fix the world and imbue it with holiness and divinity. The longtime and legendary conservative rabbi, Rabbi Harold Schulweis said that we find "the presence of God in acts of moral courage, compassion and human decency." He constantly reminded people "that we are the hands of God in this world." In Egypt, Yosef was acting as and very much seen as an instrument of the Divine. We have to do the same and seek to be a kiddush hashem broadly and in our daily interactions as well.

### Lesson 3: Our legacy is Bound up with the Jewish People

The final mention of Yosef comes long after his success has faded and his life has ended. On his deathbed (Breishit 50:24-26), Yosef makes his brothers swear an oath to be fulfilled by future generations: פֶּלֶד יִפְקֹד אֶל־הַיִּם אֶתְכֶם וְהָעֹלָם אֶת־עַצְמוֹתַי מִזֶּה: "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here." Indeed, hundreds of years later, this oath was fulfilled in the book of Joshua, as Yosef's bones are brought out of Egypt and ultimately buried in *Shechem*.

Even though Yosef lived his life outside of the land of Israel and largely apart from the Jewish people, he understood that he was still very much a part of them, even generations later. He was to be reunited not just with his father but with his brothers and eventually with his ancestors.

If we've ever felt distant from our fellow Jews or extended family in Israel, we are in a moment of closeness and intimacy, albeit for terrible reasons. Never in my lifetime has it been more apparent that what happens in Israel impacts us in America and vice versa. I've heard from more than one person who has visited Israel while many American Jews are concerned for Israelis, Israelis are worried about us. As I've said before - and this is also something that is often not well understood in broader society - the Jewish people are really an extended family. While we may not have plans to be buried in Israel, our community's legacy and future is very much bound up with that of our siblings and cousins, and extended family members in Israel. We learn this from Yosef.

The Jewish people are said to be a nation that dwells alone, *badad yoshev*, just as Yosef dwelled at his own table. However Yosef's story provides tools for Jews living in the diaspora, tools that we can marshal at a time when we may feel pulled between two large parts of ourselves.

Our names and our children's names tell stories. Our names are windows into the tumultuous story of the Jewish people, and we have to tell this story, lest *other* people tell a different version of *our* story.

As we are out in the world, we have to continue to be a *kiddush hashem*, to sanctify God's name in our workplaces, at the supermarket, at rallies and in the public square. We have to make a positive impact, acting as God's hands in this world.

Finally, we must remember that we are ultimately and inextricably linked with our fellow Jews, here in America, in Israel and around the world. This filial link places certain responsibilities upon us, just as it did the generations that left Egypt and carried Yosef's bones. We can also take great comfort in this, as Yosef did. Though we might have been dining alone at one point or another, at the end of the day, we sit together at the great, family table.