

Becoming Righteous

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When my mother was pregnant with me, my oldest sister, then, six, kicked her in the stomach. My mother doesn't remember this and obviously, neither do I. But my oldest sister told me about it years ago. I asked her why she did it. She said, "Because I was jealous." At six, Janet had a lot of reasons to be upset. For five years she had been the only child, then Joann was born, and less than two years later, me. Janet's life of complete parental (and grandparental) attention divided by three in less than two years. Sibling rivalry. It's natural, and a difficult struggle for children and parents. It's also manageable if parents are on top of things.

In our reading for this morning we read about that fine, arrogant, favored young man, Joseph. At seventeen we are told, Joseph

Brought a report of them [his brothers], an ill one, to their father
 Now Israel loved Joseph above all his sons,
 For he was the son of old age to him,
 So he made him an ornamented coat.
 When his brothers saw that it was he whom their father loved above all his
 brothers
 They hated him,
 And could not speak to him in peace. (Genesis: 37: 2-4)

In the very next verse we learn about two dreams that Joseph has of ruling over his family, dreams that he imprudently shares with his brothers and his father. The animosity between Joseph and his brothers only grows, and when Jacob, in a stroke of parental insanity, sends his favored son, the one that all his brothers hate, out to spy on his brothers, well, they plot to kill him, and Joseph is taken in slavery to Egypt for the final twelve chapters of *Genesis*.

I like the fact that Joseph is handsome, weak, and arrogant. He has great power, as seen in his dreams, and by his father's love, but he has no idea how to positively harness either. He is tremendous hero material based on the fact that his great potential is matched by his great flaws. I am fond of Joseph, the self-centered brat.

Elie Wiesel writes of Joseph

Jacob refused him nothing. He owned the most beautiful clothes, for he liked to be regarded as graceful and elegant. He craved attention. He knew he was the favorite and often boasted of it. Moreover, he was given to whims and frequently was impertinent. Arrogant, vain, insensitive to other people's feelings, he said

freely whatever was on his mind. We know the consequences: he was hated, mistreated, and finally sold by his brothers, who in truth were ready to kill him.¹

Centuries of commentary have been written on Joseph. And most Torah commentators agree that even though wronged by his brothers, Joseph was also a dislikable young man.

What I find even more interesting is the absence of parental responsibility and accountability laid on Jacob, Joseph's father. Wiesel speaks of it first in his estimation of Joseph. Jacob sets Joseph up for failure with his parental favoritism, and that it is primarily Jacob's responsibility. But I have been astonished to see how little responsibility Jacob is given for Joseph's attitude and behavior even though we are told that Jacob favored this one son, even though we are told that Jacob gave him a special coat, even though Jacob sent him to spy on his brothers. What kind of responsible parent says "Joe, I want you to go see what Judah, Rueben and the rest of them are doing, and I want you to come back to tell me?"

Since October a group of members from Congregation Beth Adam and First Unitarian Church have been studying the Torah on a monthly basis. In fact, tomorrow, Monday at 10:30 A.M. here at First Church we will meet again to discuss Joseph, so please come. We have spent a lot of time on the so-called "Patriarchs," Jacob, Noah, Isaac, Abraham. They are a discouraging lot. As much as I love the poetry, myth, language, and story of the Hebrew Scriptures, and I do, I despair of it being any suitable ethical framework and this is what sets many liberal religionists apart from the orthodox.

Even the reputable Schocken Bible says of Jacob and Joseph "In point of fact he (Joseph) is largely responsible for his own downfall, bearing tales about his brothers even before Jacob's preference for him is noted." I read this and thought, "OK, let's see what the text says." Is Joseph a gossip first and is he morally responsible? As a matter of fact we are told that Joseph is a gossip in verse 2 and that he is his father's favorite in verse 3 and that he is but seventeen. Does Jacob have no ears, no eyes, no power, no parental awareness? I know it is tempting and possible to love one child above others but who is the adult in this relationship, the one responsible for control, security, and love for all the children? Jacob.

If *Genesis* were used as a framework for moral, family development it would be a framework for male avoidance and disingenuous powerlessness. Women and children are repeatedly blamed for incidents where they have no or little power, and the Patriarchs, they receive an alarming amount of leeway. Please, never use the Bible as a model for family relationships.

Jacob is the parent, and it is his job to find out if his sons are doing their job. Period. Then again, Jacob and his mother tricked his inept and absent father, Isaac into giving the birthright to Jacob instead of his older brother, Esau. If you remember that story, Isaac, who we are told has lived with his sons for years, can't tell his boys apart. And then there is Noah. Genesis tells us that "Noah was a righteous, wholehearted man in his generation." We are also told that Noah's colleagues were great evil-doers. After closely reading the story of Noah several months ago our Torah study group decided that it wasn't saying much to say that Noah was righteous. He didn't have much competition, which goes a long way to explain why he later gets drunk, exposes himself to his son,

¹ *Messengers of God*, 145-146.

Ham, and then curses him. Like he has no responsibility for getting drunk and lying around naked? I know, there is an ethno-historical reason for this. Ham is the father of Canaan, and the Israelites battle the Canaanites, but stories have power, and Noah's moral and ethical lapses are never challenged. Neither are Jacob's. In the stunning climax of Genesis, Judah pleads with the powerful Egyptian, Joseph, who he does not know is his brother, saying that it would kill his father (Jacob) if something happened to his youngest son, Benjamin. I read that and wonder "Why do you care so much for your father when he was never fair to you?"

In *Exodus* Moses comes down the mountain with two separate sets of commandments (which differ, but that his for another sermon), but the set that we remember lists one commandment that says "Honor your father and your mother." Why I ask? If anyone behaves this badly, why would you honor them? For centuries we have heard "Honor your father and your mother." What if he or she beats you or cheats you or neglects you or assaults you? There is no justice in this. There is no love in this. There is no relationship in this. Honor is earned, not just given. It's earned by being a responsible parent. So it does alarm me when the Ten Commandments appear in public spaces. The commandments belong to two religious groups, Christians and Jews, and they are rarely considered in a critical light. The tyranny of any orthodoxy is that it tells us that we should believe in scripture with blind obedience, even when justice is still crying to be served.

Jacob was a neglectful, favoring parent, and his family had problems because of it. I think of sibling rivalry as the story of war among nations. That is how it is presented in the Hebrew Scriptures, and this I believe, is correct. The first murder in Genesis is between Cain and Abel, two brothers. Jacob and Esau fight. Joseph and his brothers fight. Why do we hate? We can only hate if we love. The opposite of love is not hate, it is apathy, nothingness. Love and hate are emotional versions of the same thing, emotions of longing, need, and a fear of loss. In many ways I see the Hebrew Scriptures legitimizing hate because siblings fight, instead of disputing that siblings need to fight and upholding a different model that says they must learn a better way. All of our children this morning are learning the story of Joseph. When you go home, or when driving home, ask your children what they learned and what they think of Joseph and his father and his brothers.

My sister doesn't hate me any more. She got over it. My parents made sure she got over it. It was slow and it took up to fifteen years, but it passed. She told me the kicking story with great embarrassment when we were both adults.

Genesis tells that as Joseph is taken as a slave to Egypt. There he is bought by a man named Potiphar, and because Joseph was talented and directed he soon began to manage Potiphar's household. We are then told that Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of assaulting her, and Joseph spends the next two years in jail. Many of the commentators say that Joseph is a righteous man because he refuses the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife. I don't agree with this because I think that the bar on righteousness is much more complex and long term than refusing to have sexual intercourse with someone one time. Remember, the bar for Patriarchs is set abysmally low.

In jail Joseph hones his skill as an interpreter of dreams and here he finally disciplines his arrogance into maturity. Later he successfully interprets the Pharaoh's dreams about seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. The Pharaoh is so

impressed that he selects Joseph to collect and disperse the harvest, which Joseph successfully does, and which is how he meets up with his starving brothers many years later.

Genesis tells us that Joseph then tests his brothers, first by keeping his brother Simon in jail, and then demanding that his brothers bring him their youngest brother, his father's new pride, Benjamin, a brother he never knew he had because Benjamin was born after Joseph was sold. There has been much commentary on this section. How can Joseph be so cruel and deceptive to his brothers? The commentators ask how Joseph could do this to his aged father, Jacob. I always think "aged Jacob" is the least of my concerns. Jacob is neither honorable nor fair and his old age does not give him a "by" on the mistakes of his middle age. I feel much more for Simon and Benjamin who are again, children pawns (like Joseph was), who do not fully know what is going on, and their lives are hanging in the balance. And there are far too many of these children pawn characters in the Bible (Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac on the altar, Lot ready to turn over his daughters to a hostile crowd, Pharaoh's son killed by Yahweh with all the other Egyptian first-born). I know that the death/sacrifice of children is a literary device designed to move the reader, but it also has real, troubling consequences for those that take the Bible literally.

I don't think that Joseph does the right thing by testing his brothers for so long, but I appreciate his struggle. It feels very human to me, very real. He is trapped between being a powerful man with a strong desire for sweet vengeance and a repentant family that asks for quiet mercy. I think that Joseph becomes righteous as he wrestles with his power, his desire for vengeance and ultimately does the right thing, by choosing mercy and forgiving his brothers (for they were pawns too) and moving on with his life, for his life has already moved on.

Joseph has money, power, privilege, a wife, and two sons. In addition, he does this all in a foreign country and his wife is not Hebrew, but Egyptian. Joseph is the only Patriarch who ultimately seems real and admirable to me, who grows, and improves each time he faces a challenge, which also says to me that righteousness is not made and sealed, but continually tested, earned, and recreated (or not). Joseph begins as a very dislikable young man and evolves into a powerful, compassionate man who saves his people and family. In addition, in his old age he does not make the favoritism mistakes of Isaac or Jacob. It's as if he learns to be righteous and stays with it.

Even as a child I remember the story of Joseph because Joseph has dreams. I thought that was so wonderful. As an adult I wondered why Joseph's dreams were considered good. There are many passages in the Bible (*Old and New Testament*) that are dismissive of dreams, evil spirits, and prophecy. Why are Joseph's dreams so positive (although they initially get him into trouble)?

If you look closely at the text, Joseph's dreams are seen as manifestations of God's will. Throughout the story, when Joseph is in Potiphar's house, when the jail warden places him in charge of the other inmates, we are always told that Yahweh was with him and Yahweh made Joseph succeed. For all of his losses, we are never told that Joseph doubts or challenges Yahweh. He believes, and eventually all his dreams, even the early ones that so enraged his brothers, come true. In this way the story tells us that God's hands are in all things and that even suffering has a purpose.

This would be an orthodox understanding of the story, and it is not one that I accept, yet the text clearly intends to convey this message. For every story of Joseph, you and I could tell a story of “unfair” suffering, when things did not come out for the best, were not fair, were never reconciled. I find myself very irritated by the “God’s will” message of this and other stories which have often been used to encourage people who are suffering to just wait and accept their suffering. Slaves were told that slavery was “all part of God’s plan.”

There are those that draw great faith from believing in God’s plan. I wish them well and believe that it would be irresponsible for me to neither choose nor act for good. This is the only way I know to attempt to become righteous, to struggle with the challenge to live a life of integrity. I find the story of Joseph much more meaningful if Joseph’s protection and choices are not obvious. His struggle and choices then have that much more responsibility, meaning, and righteousness. This is much closer to the challenge of life that I face and know. It is much closer to the challenge of life that you tell me about as well.

If you are able I hope that you will come to our Torah study class tomorrow at First Church at 10:30 AM. Scripture has so much to test and teach us, from the limits of liberalism and orthodoxy, to the wonder of poetry and the timeless message of the human story. Is Joseph righteous? As our Unitarian Universalist heritage would encourage, educate yourself, test your theories, and decide for yourself.