

Joseph an Imposter?

Category: Bereishis, Vayigash

What's the connection between Moses, Joseph and the Rebbe?

The Fake Background

This week, a newly elected congressman from New York admitted that he lied about his Jewish heritage. During his election campaign, he had claimed that he was Jewish and that his grandparents were Holocaust survivors, but recent investigations revealed that it was all a fake identity; none of it was true.

Understandably, the admission drew a lot of attention, and the Republican Jewish Congress declared him a persona non grata at all of their events going forward.

But I think it's fascinating. 50 or 60 years ago, politicians did everything to hide their Jewish identity; they were sure it would reduce their chances of being elected. But today, a non Jewish politician adopted a Jewish persona assuming that it will help his chances of being elected.

To me, the story seemed to jump out of the weekly Torah portion.

Why Were They Afraid?

This week, we read the climax of the Joseph story. It's the moment Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and declares, "I am Joseph." His brothers were at a loss for words. Rashi explains that they were simply ashamed — ashamed to be standing before the very brother that they had sold into slavery.

Joseph, the Torah says, asked his brothers to come close to him, and they did. What did he want? Rashi explains that he showed them his circumcision.

Why was that necessary? If they were simply ashamed, what difference would the circumcision make?

This seems to indicate that there was another issue. They suspected that the person standing before them wasn't actually Joseph, but rather an impostor who

had adopted his identity.

Joseph continues and says, “I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold to Egypt. Behold, your eyes see....” Again, Rashi explains, “You see that I am your brother, that I am circumcised like you, and that I speak to you in the holy tongue.” (45:12). Clearly, they suspected that this was a case of a stolen identity; that this individual had heard about the long lost son of Jacob, and had decided to adopt his persona.

You see, Joseph had arrived in Egypt as a slave, and the rule in Egypt was that a slave cannot rule nor wear ministerial clothing (Rashi Mikeitz 41:12). This was something that had always clouded, to some extent, Joseph’s rule. It would have therefore been no surprise had he adopted a new identity as a member of an upstanding family to clear his name.

This narrative — that Joseph may be an imposter — appears in a second story, at the end of the book of Genesis, from a different angle:

After the death of Jacob, when the brothers return from the funeral, they fear that Joseph will choose to take revenge now that their father is gone. So they sent a delegation of brothers to him with a posthumous message from his father, claiming that Jacob had requested that he forgive them wholeheartedly.

The Torah says that Joseph cried when he heard those words. “God sent me here to save the world from hunger,” he told them. “Don’t worry about the sale, it was all God’s hand.”

Then Rashi brings up a conversation that shows us again that many in Egypt thought that perhaps Joseph “stole his identity.” Joseph tells his brother, “:If I kill you, what will people say? That I discovered an attractive group of men and chose to identify as their brother, and that I got rid of them [when no longer useful]. After all, would a man kill his real brothers?” (Vayechi 50:21)

Another Reason

But maybe there was another reason they were afraid of him. There’s another case in the Torah where people are afraid to approach someone. Who was that person?

The answer is, Moses!

After the story of the golden calf,, when Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets, the Torah says that he didn't realize that his face was shining with a powerful light. When the people noticed, they were afraid to approach him (Ki Sisa 34:29). This included his brother Aaron, who entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Even he was afraid to approach the brilliant radiance on Moses's face.

What Changed?

But it's interesting that this only took place when he came down with the second pair of tablets. His experience with the second tablets was quite similar to his experience with the first. On both occasions, he spent 40 days and nights studying Torah with G-d, not eating or drinking in the interim. So why was he more radiant the second time around?

This question is posed by Tana D'vei Eliyahu (ch. 4), which suggests the following answer:

Moses earned the radiance when he risked his life on behalf of the Jewish people.

His entire life, he endeavored to bring peace between Israel and their Father in Heaven. Whenever the Jews in the desert angered G-d with their deeds, he would fight for the sake of the Jewish people.

The main saga took place in between the first and second tablets, when they committed the sin of the golden calf. When that happened, G-d told Moses that he wanted to restart from scratch; he would destroy the Jewish people and make Moses the father of his new nation.

But Moses wasn't about to let it happen. He said, "If you don't forgive them, erase me from your book!"

This was the key to his radiance. For his dedication to the Jewish people, he was granted this powerful Divine light.

The Rebbe

In the late 1920s and early 30s, the Rebbe lived in Berlin where he was enrolled in the Humboldt University in Berlin. There he met Rabbi JB Soloveichik, who was studying in Berlin as well. They became very close, and their connection continued long after they went their separate ways when the Nazis came to power — Rabbi Soloveichik to the United States and the Rebbe to France. They corresponded with each other, and he visited the Rebbe during the Shiva of the Rebbe's mother.

In 1980, when the Rebbe celebrated 30 years of leadership, Rabbi Soloveichik attended the farbrengen.

It was an impressive sight. The hall was packed to the rafters with thousands of people. Rabbi Soloveichik entered together with the Rebbe, and when they reached their seats, the Rebbe waited for him to be seated before sitting down himself.

The Rebbe's farbrengen was an event in which the only speaker was the Rebbe. The Rebbe would speak for about a half hour or 45 minutes, and then take a short break of 10 to 15 minutes for song and l'chaim. Afterwards, he will continue his address, and so it would go for 4 or 5 hours. Rabbi Soloveichik sat there, close to the Rebbe's place, and listened intently.

After close to 3 hours, he said a warm goodbye and left the event. On his way out, Rabbi Soloveichik used the above Midrash to express his thoughts about his experience. He mentioned how Moses had become radiant only after he had Mesiras Nefesh for the Jewish people.

He continued, " I knew the Rebbe in Berlin, but what I saw at this farbrengen was a radiance. A radiance that emerged from his dedication to the Jewish people." (Shemen Sason Mechaveirecha).

Joseph's Radiance

Perhaps this is what occurred with Joseph and his brothers as well.

When he left his family, he was no doubt a wonderful young man, but he was only

17 years old. Now, 22 years later, he had a lot of life experience behind him. He had spent time in jail, worked in his master's home, and had then become second to the king, saving the entire world from hunger. Throughout all this time, the name of G-d had been constantly on his lips (Vayeshev 39:3, Rashi). This dedication to the people and to spreading the word of G-d, no doubt, gave him a radiance — a radiance that scared away his brothers.

The lesson for us is that when a Jew chooses to make a sacrifice for another, he gets the gift of this great radiance — becoming a light that will illuminate his/her surroundings.