

A Brief Note on Joseph, Part Two

Parsha Miketz is the second instalment of the Joseph chronicle. It begins after a two year hiatus, with Joseph still a prisoner in Egypt.

The Torah recounts how Pharaoh had been haunted by a simple dream, yet none of his advisors or seers offered him a satisfactory interpretation of the visions. The Chamberlain of the Cupbearers (whom Joseph had predicted would be freed from captivity) however remembered Joseph's uncanny ability to interpret dreams and commended him to Pharaoh. Joseph was cleaned up and brought before the Pharaoh. Upon hearing Pharaoh's recital of his dreams, Joseph unreservedly stated that God was giving Pharaoh advanced notice of an impending cycles of feast and famine, that would afflict Egypt. Pharaoh unquestionably accepted this explanation. Joseph was then appointed to oversee Pharaoh's stores.

In time Joseph became one of the most powerful men in Egypt, as the prolonged famine brought wealth to the prepared Egyptians and the royal court. The famine that engulfed Egypt eventually spread throughout the world, and Egypt attracted refugees seeking to survive the blight by purchasing provisions from the fortunate Egyptians.

The story then shifts back to the camp of Jacob near to Beersheba, The famine had made the plight of the Israelites tenuous, and Jacob had no alternative but to send his sons down to Egypt to purchase needed provisions. Jacob was still grieving the loss of Joseph and would not allow Benjamin to make the journey; he was not ready to lose his last tie to his beloved Rachel.

The ten brothers journeyed across the Sinai desert unto the land of Egypt, and there they went before the Pharaoh's overseer of the stores to petition for provisions. That official was Joseph. Joseph recognized his brothers; they did not recognize him. Joseph decided to play on this advantage.

In a very remarkable vignette, Joseph teased his brothers, accusing them of coming to spy on Egypt. Initially he demanded that they all remain in his custody, until their youngest brother, Benjamin, was brought before him. He gave them three days to digest the situation, and returned with a slightly different proposal; one brother would stay with Joseph as a hostage while the others fetched Benjamin.

In an amusing aside, the brothers began to discuss matters amongst themselves, not knowing that Joseph understood them. Ironically, they agreed that their anguish was because of the anguish they had caused Joseph. Reuben then chided the brothers for not heeding his warning not to harm Joseph. Joseph interrupted their bickering and took Simon hostage. He commanded the other brothers to go to Canaan and return to him with Benjamin.

The drama of the brother's return journey was prolonged. Jacob was disturbed by Simon's captivity, and would not accept Reuben's assurances that he would safeguard Benjamin. Jacob's obstinacy is then blunted by the famine's continued rage, and he had no option but to allow his sons to return to Egypt. Jacob accepted Judah's pledge to safeguard Benjamin.

The brothers returned to Egypt and were welcomed by Joseph with open arms; they were wined and dined in Joseph's home, and given provisions for their return journey. However, further intrigue lay ahead.

Joseph arranged for his goblet be secreted in the unsuspecting Benjamin's pack. After they left, Joseph ordered his guard to give chase. Judah, in an incident that runs parallel to Jacob's flight from Laban, proclaimed that if anyone of the group did steal Joseph's goblet, that person "*shall die*". This time however, no ruse could fool the Egyptian and Benjamin was caught with the goblet. Joseph readied to return to Egypt, with Benjamin as his slave. The brothers would be forced to return home to their father and explain Benjamin's fate to their father. The *parsha* ends in a dramatic cliff-hanger fashion, much like *Parsha Vayeshev*.

As a snapshot, the events described by this week's *parsha* are fantastic. This wondrous story, of Joseph's journey from a prison cell to being appointed the Pharaoh's right hand man seems contrived, as does his brothers meeting with him, the second most powerful man in all of Egypt, simply to buy provisions. The depiction of an all mighty Joseph, taking the supplicants' bow, suggests that the dreams of his youth were being fulfilled, and his toying with his brothers suggests the immaturity of his youth. There is nothing heroic in Joseph's story, nor is there anything magical about his abilities.

The mystery of the *parsha* lingers with the angst of Joseph's brothers, as they face a return to Jacob, with the sad news that Benjamin has been enslaved. And, that will be next week's story.

Parsha Miketz

1. literally, "*as it happened*".