

A Brief Note on a Story

The Joseph account, which begins in *Parsha Vayeshev*, is the longest single narrative in the Torah. [1] The entire tale is told with a remarkable amount of detail, delicately woven throughout a wonderful series of vignettes, producing the most magical saga of the Torah. The careful depictions of characters and of events contribute to the grandness and the timelessness of the tale. The pace of events allows the narrative to unfold, much like a modern-day novel, with dramatic flourishes, including the “cliff-hanger” found at the conclusion of the *parsha*.

The Torah’s dominant subject has been the Covenant that was reached between God and Abraham (recounted in *Parsha Lech Lecha*). Much of the story since the declaration of Covenant has devoted to the iteration of the Covenant. Drama was supplied by external political and environmental forces, but mostly by the fraternal competition to be the sole recipient of the blessing of the birthright and the bequest of the Covenant. That struggle has now ended and henceforth all of Jacob’s children and all of their descendants would share in the Covenant

The Torah’s focus turns to a parallel promise given by God to Abraham; the foreboding declaration Abraham’s descendants would suffer many lifetimes of suffering: “*Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years*”. [2] Unlike the Covenant, there is no record that the promise of the Egyptian Exile and Redemption, as it was later called, was repeated to Isaac or Jacob. The Torah gave no reason for the dire prophecy, nor did it explain the how and most importantly the why that the descendants of Abraham would suffer four centuries of oppression, over twenty-five generations.

In some respects, how the Children of Israel came to be in Egypt, and why they suffered harsh enslavement by the ruling Pharaoh were secondary to the central message of the Torah; that God had led the Children of Israel out of Egypt. However, rather than report only the salient facts - that there was a drought in the lands of Canaan and Jacob was forced by starvation to go down to Egypt and benefit from the harvest of the Nile much like his grandfather had once done – the Torah pointedly includes a wonderful story, that is both interesting and challenging.

The hero of the saga seemed unlikely; he was brash as his ancestors were reputed to be humble. Joseph was easily the most colourful, yet the least ideal of all Torah personalities. He was given distasteful features, perhaps the ugliest of which was his habit of giving his father “*evil reports*” about his half-brothers. He practiced little judgement, provoking his brothers with pretensions of his glorious future. Joseph however, was loved by Jacob over all of his other sons. He was of course hated by his brothers. Eventually they subdued him and sold him to Midianite slavers bound for Egypt. Once in Egypt, Joseph’s life seems secure, rising in the service of the household of an Egyptian dignitary. Then as suddenly as he rose, he fell and was imprisoned in the Pharaoh’s dungeons.

The story is told at a very rapid pace; introducing the characters, describing the brothers' plot, and Joseph enslavement, brief empowerment and quick downfall, in short scenes. The subject matter of a broken family and siblings' vengeance posed very perplexing questions about our ancestor's behaviour. [3] Joseph's rise from the slaver's block to the head of Potiphar's household imparts specialness, as much as his sudden downfall suggests a form of poetic justice, perhaps retribution for the *evil reports* he had made about his brothers.

The *parsha* reminds us that the Torah was fashioned as a living document describing real people suffering the real vicissitudes of life. Most importantly its contents were meant to be disseminated, read and discussed by the Children of Israel. It was meant to give the Children of Israel a sense of their history and impart to them national memories and a national consciousness. A task made all that easier by having a good story to tell.

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1. Literally,
2. *Parsha Lech Lecha* 15:13-16
3. As a horrific footnote, the traditional Martyrlogy service read on Yom Hakkipurim includes liturgical poem "*These I shall recall*", the description of the execution of ten leaders of Israel by the Romans. They were killed ostensibly for the crime of selling a brother into captivity, the unanswered sin of the Children of Israel.