

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Revenge or repentance: Joseph and his brothers



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Last week we discussed the issue of sibling rivalry as portrayed in Genesis with reference to Isaac-Ishmael and Jacob-Esau. In his book "Not in God's Name," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks also has an intriguing chapter dealing with the rivalry between Joseph and his brothers.

We remember the story of the spoiled younger son of Jacob and his coat of many colors. Joseph loved to tell his dreams of his brothers bowing down before him. Furthermore, Jacob, we are told, loved Joseph more than any other of his children, which led to hatred from his brothers, and they "could not speak peaceably to him." (Genesis 37:4) When communication fails, violence is often the next step, and the brothers plot his death. Noting a caravan heading to Egypt, they instead sell him into slavery and tell his father he was devoured by a wild beast.

In Egypt, he becomes a slave in the house of Potiphar, an officer of the pharaoh. When he resists the attempts of Potiphar's wife to seduce him, she accuses him of the indiscretion, which lands Joseph in prison. His ability to interpret dreams leads him to an

encounter with the pharaoh, who is both-ered by dreams that Joseph interprets as a warning of a future famine for which preparation must be made.

Joseph's status profoundly changes, and he is put in charge of the famine preparation, given an Egyptian name and made second only to pharaoh. As the famine hits Jacob and his family, he sends his sons, except for his youngest, Benjamin, to Egypt to buy grain. They appear before Joseph and bow down to him but do not recognize him as their brother, thus fulfilling the early dream that Joseph had predicted.

Sacks says that the story now takes a wholly counterintuitive turn. Rather than it being the story of the younger son vindicated and the reconciliation, Joseph instead accuses them of being spies and demands that they bring the youngest son Benjamin back to verify their story. This demand is disturbing to the brothers, who know their father Jacob will be most reluctant to let the youngest return with them. The oldest son, Judah, the one who proposed Joseph's sale into slavery, finally pledges to take full responsibility for Benjamin's safe return.

Upon their return with Benjamin, they are no longer treated as spies but are lavishly entertained at the home of Joseph,

who they still see only as the Egyptian ruler named Zaphenath-Paneah. Joseph plans the next step as a controlled experiment in repentance. It is not revenge that he seeks, since repeatedly the text says he weeps in private as the story unfolds.

When the brothers are sent on their way with the grain, Joseph has a goblet secretly placed in Benjamin's bag. Joseph's officers overtake them with the accusation of the stolen goblet, which is found in Benjamin's sack. They must now return to face the charges assuming they would all be made slaves. Joseph instead says that only Benjamin must remain and the others can go free.

At this moment of crisis, Judah steps forward and pleads for the youngest to be set free and that he would instead remain as the slave. At this point Joseph finally breaks down and reveals that he is their brother and that God had sent him there ahead of them in order to save lives.

Judah's response is what Rabbi Sacks calls the moment of repentance. Judah had previously been placed in a similar situation when he proposed selling Joseph into slavery so he could save himself. Now, he could have again turned his back on the youngest brother, letting him be kept in slavery. Instead, Judah acted differently:

he repented of his earlier selfish ways and offered himself as the slave. It was at this point that Joseph could reveal his identity. Sacks notes that they had earlier treated their brother as a stranger when they sold him into slavery. "Now they must learn that the stranger, Zaphenath-Paneah, ruler of Egypt, is actually their brother."

Sacks continues, "Perfect repentance comes about when you find yourself in the same situation but this time you act differently. That is proof in action of a change in heart."

In that final chapter of Genesis, Joseph says: "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good." (Genesis 50:20) Sacks affirms "the power of a religious vision to reframe history, liberating ourselves from the otherwise violent dynamic of revenge and retaliation. ... The point could not be more significant in the context of the sibling rivalry between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The past does not dictate the future. To the contrary, a future of reconciliation can ... retroactively redeem the past."

Can we also affirm the power of repentance, seek reconciliation, and see the stranger as a brother?

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