

The Grandson of Laban Makes Everything Right

A Mother's Remarks on Her First Son's Becoming Bar Mitzvah

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THIS PAST YEAR HAS BEEN A TOPSY TURVY ONE FOR ME. I WATCHED MY FIRST BORN BABY GROW TALLER THAN I, AND NO LESS UNKINDLY, GO ON TO BEAT ME AT TENNIS. HE NOW HELPS ME with my Hebrew studies, and one of my few consolations is my increasingly tenuous ability to help him with math. It has been a year in which I began to expect the unexpected.

Maybe that is why my son's Torah portion, Mikketz (GENESIS 41-44), has such resonance for me. Mikketz recounts Joseph's amazing rise to power and his stunning reunion with his brothers. In Mikketz, nothing is at it first seems. Dreams have more substance than precious metal. The strong are revealed to be weak; the weak, truly strong. The Egyptian vizier turns out to be a Jewish slave boy, and the Egyptian "wisemen" turn out to be dolts. The brothers confess, but to a crime that they did not commit—or did they?

In so many ways, Mikketz takes the previous weekly portion, Vayeshev, and stands it on its head. Vayeshev began with the grandiose dream of the lowly Jewish shepherd boy Joseph. Mikketz opens with the frightened dream of the great Egyptian Pharaoh. Last week Jacob sent Joseph to his brothers; this week, it is the brothers who Jacob sends to Joseph. Previously, the brothers were the strong ones, and Joseph the miserable youngest. Now, Joseph rules the land of Egypt, with brothers entirely at his mercy. The brothers sold Joseph southward for 20 pieces of silver. They now find, at the end of

their own northward journey from his place of exile, that the silver they rendered has mysteriously reappeared!

Perhaps the strangest incongruity in Mikketz is one which appears in the closing verses. In these verses Joseph, the Dreamer of prophetic dreams, brags of his abilities in practicing the occult art of divination! What a bizarre image of Joseph, bent over his silver fortune-telling cup, revealing hidden truths.

What is the son of Jacob doing with a divining cup? Joseph has set out to ensnare his brothers. He has had his servant plant his silver cup in the pack of the youngest, Benjamin, and then go on to pursue the brothers. Effecting an elaborate search scene, beginning with the oldest, the servant (with feigned surprise!) finds the cup in the last pack he searches, which is of course Benjamin's. He then marches the brothers back to face their unrecognized brother, the Egyptian second in command. And what does the Egyptian, otherwise known as Joseph, say at this point?

What is this deed that you have done? Do you not know that a man such as myself practices divination? (GEN. 44:15)

What is meant by "divination?" To "divine" is to foretell future events or discover hidden knowledge by occult or supernatural means. We know that divination was commonly practiced in the ancient Middle East. Oil or water was poured into a bowl or cup, and omens were interpreted based on the appearance of the liquids inside the container.

The Hebrew root for the word is *nun, chet, shin*—*nachesh*. A concordance shows us that this root appears only a few times elsewhere in the Bible. With one exception which we will examine later, the word appears exclusively in the context of something prohibited to Jews. In Leviticus, for example, the Torah tells us "You shall not practice divination (*te-nachashu*) or soothsaying" (19:26). In Numbers we are informed, "There is no augury (*nachash*) in Jacob, no divining (*kesem*) in Israel" (23:23). Similarly, in Deuteronomy 18:10, this same root, *nachesh*, appears in a string of prohibitions related to occult practices. The Rabbis trace divination to the fallen angels, who were said to have introduced the corrupting practices of astrology and divination to mankind.

Clearly, the Torah sees nothing positive in any of these supernatural practices. The Rabbis were troubled by the apparent attribution of these practices to Joseph. Some commentators were so bothered by this image that they translated it out of existence. For example, Samson Raphael Hirsch translates

verse 44:15 as: “Did ye not know that a man like me is certainly superstitious?” Similarly, Benno Jacob interprets: “Do you not know that such a man as I would take it as a bad omen?” Benno Jacob’s commentary to the text explains his choice of translation. He writes that *nachesh* cannot mean “divination,” as one might first be inclined to translate it, because, “this would not fit Joseph’s religious character.”

Another solution the Rabbis evolve interprets *nachesh* as “to divine,” but only in the strictly limited sense of “to figure something out.” This view construes Joseph to be saying, “Didn’t you guys realize that someone clever enough to hold this position, to be the second highest personage in all of Egypt, could surely figure out who had stolen my silver goblet.” In fact, this is Rashi’s understanding of the verse: “Are you not aware that so distinguished a person as I am knows how to divine, and (even though you have robbed me of the goblet by which I divine) to discover by my own intelligence and common sense or by logical deduction that it was you who stole the goblet!”

A third way of looking at the verse is that Joseph did not really practice divination, but that he simply wanted his brothers to *think* that he did. Looking at Genesis 44:4, Joseph coaches his steward in exactly what to say to the brothers at the moment the cup is discovered. Joseph tells the steward to *say* that the cup was the “very one which my master uses for divination.” But nowhere does the text confirm that Joseph actually *used* the cup for divination. But what purpose would this particular deception serve Joseph?

Since all high ranking Egyptians are believed to have practiced divination, such a ruse would have enhanced Joseph’s disguise. We know that Joseph hid his identity in different ways so that his brothers would not discover him. He pretended not to speak Hebrew, for example, using a translator instead. Midrash Rabbah says that, similarly, Joseph pretended to practice divination, as when he struck his cup and exclaimed, “You are spies.”

In like manner, the *Me’Am Lo’ez* (an eighteenth century Sephardic anthology of midrash) portrays Joseph as gazing into his cup, *as if* he were going into a trance, saying, “Through my spell I see that two of you destroyed the entire city of Shechem. You sold your brother to Ishmaelites.” The *Me’Am Lo’ez* affords Joseph yet another opportunity to pretend his knowledge comes from his supernatural powers. Joseph’s ability to seat the brothers in correct age order, in verse 33, is explained, at least to the *brothers’* credulous satisfaction, as the result of the occult abilities of this Egyptian:

Joseph therefore took his cup and pretended to be divining with it. He raised his cup and said, “Judah is the leader, and he must sit at the head of the table. Reuben is the oldest and he shall sit next to him. Until now I thought that Judah was the oldest, since he has been your spokesman. But now the liquids flowing in my chalice tell me that Reuben is the oldest.”

The fact that the brothers believe that this man can discern their deepest secrets, see into the future, and know the hidden past through occult divination, speaks volumes about the brothers. There is more than a little irony here. These same brothers once ferociously rebelled against believing the truly prophetic dreams of their God-fearing brother. Now they are quick to believe in the hocus pocus of the occult!

One of Joseph’s talents, honed in the long, hard years of servitude, was the ability to ascertain what other people needed, and to give it to them. For proof, we need look no further than Joseph’s remarkable speech to Pharaoh, which gets him appointed top aide. Here Joseph picks up on his brothers’ weakness, gullibility, and spiritual immaturity. Joseph uses his understanding to speak to his brothers in a way which they can understand and relate to. Joseph’s use of the language of the occult can be seen as a way of masking his God-given talents, so that he can make use of them without alienating others. What a change from Joseph the braggart, Joseph the tattletale, Joseph the Dreamer! Joseph plays the part of seer, not in an effort to lord it over his brothers in any way, but as a means to effect the spiritual education of his brothers, his family’s reconciliation, and to prepare his brothers to accept Joseph as the spiritual center of the family, in accord with his early revelatory dreams.

In this scene of redemption and familial reconciliation, Joseph’s divining cup is a crucial prop. As we have seen, Joseph has cunningly set the stage to re-enact the events of Vayeshev. Joseph places pieces of silver in the sacks of his brothers, which will force them to return with Benjamin. Once again, Joseph entraps the brothers, this time with his silver cup. Now the stage is set for the ultimate test: Will the brothers sacrifice Rachel’s only other son? Do the brothers hate Benjamin the same way they hated his only full brother, Joseph?

The choice of a silver divining cup on which to fix this false accusation of Benjamin is an ingenious fusion of the motif of silver and the theme of knowledge. As Robert Alter notes in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, the silver cup focuses the brothers’ guilt toward Joseph (guilt connected to their sale of

Joseph for 20 pieces of silver), and links it with the central theme of knowledge, for it is an instrument supposedly used by Joseph to foretell the future, as he had done more prominently with dreams. By themselves, a divining cup, a crystal ball, tarot cards, have no power. But in the hands of one whom God has truly blessed to reveal the hidden, even a divining cup can be an instrument of family reconciliation.

And family reconciliation is what this portion is all about. Joseph, by dint of his superior talents and spirituality, has done everything in his power to make the Dream come true—to rectify the wrongs of the past, to further his own and his brothers' moral development, and to reunite his family.

ALL SHOULD BE WELL, BUT THERE IS ONE FINAL PROBLEM WHICH JOSEPH MUST first solve. Recall that there was one other place in the Torah where the Hebrew root *nun-chet-shin* was used, besides those examples involving prohibitions. We must look back to Vayetze (GEN. 30). Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife, has just borne Jacob a son, whom she names Joseph. Jacob then demands that his father-in-law, Laban, allow him to leave with his wives and children, to return to his homeland. Laban's response to Jacob is:

But Laban said to him, "If you will indulge me, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me on your account" (GEN. 30:27)

The Rabbis have a field day with this response. In contrast to their squeamishness about the same word in Joseph's mouth, the Rabbis jump at the chance to demonstrate that Laban, that wily deceiving rat, was not only a wily deceiving rat, but an oracle-consulting idol-worshipper as well. The text gives the Rabbis plenty of support. In the very next chapter we see that Rachel steals her father Laban's household idols or teraphim. These were figurines used as oracles. Ramban, among other commentators, notes that Laban specifically used his teraphim to divine knowledge of future events. He concludes that Laban was not a man of God, but one who put his faith in idols.

When Laban discovers that his teraphim are missing, he engages Jacob and his family in hot pursuit. When he overtakes them, Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his idols, a very serious offense: "Very well," says Laban, "you had to leave because you were longing for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?" Not knowing that it was, in fact, his beloved Rachel who had

stolen the teraphim, Jacob answers with explosive indignation, "I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force. But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not remain alive!" (GEN. 31:31-32). Then, *sotto voce*, the Torah adds, "Jacob, of course, did not know that Rachel had stolen them."

The stage is set for disaster. Laban begins his thorough search of Jacob's tents. He starts with Jacob's, continues with Leah's, and then searches the tents of the two maidservants. He does not find the teraphim. Finally, as the suspense builds, Laban enters Rachel's tent. Although Rachel escapes discovery for the moment, she dies in childbirth shortly thereafter, the victim of her crime of stealing the divining idols, and of Jacob's injudiciously-invoked death penalty.

And while all this was taking place, what were the children to think? Their grandfather an idol-worshipper and diviner, their mother, at best a thief, at worst, an idol-worshipper herself, their father's careless curse causing their mother's premature death? Mostly we are left to our own conjecture. In the midrash of Genesis Rabbah 74, however, we are told that when Jacob's sons heard Laban's accusation of theft, they said, "We are ashamed of you, O maternal grandfather, that in your old age you should use such words as 'my gods,'" in referring to figurines. So it is clear, at least to Midrash Rabbah, that Joseph was present during this episode, that he was appalled by his grandfather's use of the teraphim for divining, and that he must have been deeply worried throughout the entire ordeal of the theft, the running away, the pursuit, the search and the subsequent death of his mother. The image of his grandfather is inextricably intertwined with the sin of divination, and with the grief surrounding his mother's death.

These events are as much a formative part of Joseph's development, of the person he becomes, as the events that befall him later on. Not only modern psychologists say that early experiences are critical—the Torah tells us this as well.

IN MIKKETZ THE TIME HAS COME FOR THIS FAMILY TO RECTIFY ITS PAST mistakes, to regroup as a healthy unit, and to move on. We saw how Joseph manipulated events to effectuate the reconciliation with his brothers. Can he pull the same thing off, and make things right even as between his grandfather

Laban and his parents? And what can Joseph do to redeem a family history of idol worship?

As we saw, much of this week's portion is concerned with replaying the events of last week, only this time, they come out right. A small part, though, actually re-enacts the events of Rachel's theft. Joseph caches the silver divining cup in Benjamin's sack. He sends his steward out in pursuit of the brothers, and instructs him to accuse the brothers of the theft. The brothers respond in honest indignation. Echoing their father, they utter an inadvertent curse of death for their youngest brother, Benjamin:

Whichever of your servants it is found with shall die (GEN. 44:9).

Joseph then carefully orchestrates the discovery of the so called divining cup, but not without putting everybody through the agony of a suspenseful search. The search begins with the oldest brother, proceeds one by one, until finally, the cup is discovered in Benjamin's sack. At this point the Torah puts the words of Laban in Joseph's mouth. "I divined it," Laban the idol worshipper had said. "Didn't you know," asks Joseph his grandson, "that a man such as myself would surely divine?"

It is no coincidence that the Torah places the exact, and strikingly uncommon, words of Joseph's grandfather, Laban, in the mouth of Joseph. We are meant to recall the honest indignation of Jacob and his family when they were suspected of theft by their grandfather Laban. The brothers propose the same intemperate punishment in the same words. The suspenseful evocation of the earlier painful search is palpable. And lest any doubts remain, the Rabbis, elaborating on the text, tell us that when the goblet was discovered in Benjamin's sack, the brothers said:

"Woe, thief, you son of a thieving woman! You have disgraced us, as a true son of your mother, who disgraced our father by stealing her father's teraphim." (Torah Shlema, Menahem Kasher ed., Genesis XLIV, par. 29)

But this time, things turn out all right. Unlike his father, who was unaware of the truth, Joseph is not only aware but is actually orchestrating it. This time, there is no idol worshipped by a member of the clan of Abraham, but a mere cup, and one not actually used for divination at all. The apparent theft by a son of Rachel isn't really a theft at all, and the murderous oath of the brothers is rendered null and void.

AT MY SON'S BAR MITZVAH, WE GATHERED TOGETHER AS PARENTS, AS AN extended family, and as an entire community of friends, neighbors and teachers, to send a young boy off into the wider world. We have all done our best. Yet I am struck by the ways in which we could have done better, so many ways in which we have encumbered this child with our own baggage, with our own family histories of idol worship of one sort or another. Laban the diviner is part and parcel of Joseph. He is his grandfather, as surely as is Isaac. So, too, my son Micah will find that from what we have been able to give him, there is good, but also some not-so-good.

The Torah tells us not to shrink from this fact of life. To the contrary, Joseph himself proclaims his lineage for all to hear: "A man such as myself," says Joseph, the son of Jacob and of Rachel, the grandson of Isaac and of Laban, "a man who divines." But Joseph unflinchingly acknowledges his heritage, all of it, and makes the best of it. He makes it work. He effects a reconciliation with his brothers, and he redeems the stain on his parents—his mother's theft, his father's curse, even his grandfather's idolatry. The family has been given a second chance to play their scenes. This time, they do it right. Joseph transforms the godless divination of a Laban into the God-fearing prophesy of a son of Israel.

In whatever ways we, as parents, as a family, or as a community, may have failed Micah to this point in his life, it is my wish that he have the strength and the wisdom, like Joseph, to transform the curses into blessings, the weaknesses into strengths, the divinations into dreams, and to make it all come out right.



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