

D'var Torah – Va-Yeshev; prepared by Jonathan Berkowitz

The following D'var Torah is adapted from what I presented at the Jewish Federations Canada – United Israel Appeal (JFC-UIA) Board Meeting on Dec. 7, 2014 in Montreal.

This week's parashah is Va-Yeshev (He dwelt). We meet Joseph as a seventeen-year-old who tattles on his brothers, gets a fashion-forward "technicolor" coat as the favourite son of Jacob, is betrayed by his brothers, is sold into slavery to Potiphar, the Pharaoh's chief steward, quickly gains favour and becomes the household assistant, resists the advances of Potiphar's wife, is imprisoned for resisting, and then begins his career as an interpreter of dreams. Phew!

The parashah gives us a chance to recall the original purpose of Jewish identity. Rabbi Brad Artson writes, "We were called – and are enjoined still – to be a people of priests, and a holy nation. Our mission to the world is to embody a communal life of holiness, sensitivity, learning, and justice, and in this way to testify to the One God who made the heavens and the earth. In the words of the *Shabbat* morning prayer, we are summoned to be 'servants of the Holy Blessing One.'"

Artson asks how Jews can *serve* God when we are all so uncomfortable talking *about* God, and indeed about most spiritual issues at the heart of Jewish communal life. Artson writes, "Joseph provides a role model of a different, more complete, type of Jew. After being sold into slavery in the household of Pharaoh we are told that "the Lord was with Joseph." This is a very strange phrase since Joseph is the son (and a favoured one at that) of a patriarch, and clearly connected to God. Wouldn't we assume that God was with Joseph all the time?

According to Rabbi Huna, Joseph *whispered* God's name. He was quiet about his own religious experiences and instead of using words, he taught about God's love and power through deeds. But according to Rashi, "the name of God was often in his mouth." Rashi explains that Joseph spoke often *about* God, not merely *to* God. He shared his passion and love of God with words to tell others that he was serving God.

These two interpretations, that Artson refers to as "a quiet piety" and "a willingness to speak of God openly," both have their place in Jewish communal work. Sometimes we debate, and once the debate is over, it is time to do. That's what it means for us to serve God.

The story of Joseph, which continues through a number of parashayot, has a number of parallels with the national collective responsibility undertaken by JFC-UIA on behalf of the Canadian Jewish community.

- We meet Joseph as a youth and watch him develop – that's young leadership development and Hillel.
- We see him as an interpreter of dreams for the baker, the cupbearer, and later for the Pharaoh, looking to and planning for the future – that's our census-based demographic research.

- We see him as an administrator in Potiphar's household, and will later see him in an administrative role in the court of the Pharaoh – that's CRA (Canada Revenue Agency) compliance.
- We will see him sustain his family during the famine and manage Egypt for Pharaoh – that's political advocacy of the highest order, like CIJA (Centre for Israel and Jewish Advocacy).
- We will see him bring the Israelites to sojourn and prosper in the new land – rescuing and resettling is the role of UIA (United Israel Appeal), JAFI (Jewish Agency for Israel) and JDC (Joint Distribution Committee).

Perhaps you think I have stretched the parallels too far. But there's more stretching to come!

Say the name Joseph aloud and listen to the consonants: JoSePH = jay, ess, eff = je, se, fe. Change the order and get: je, fe, se. Now say JFC aloud. It has the same sounds! JFC = je, fe, se.

So Joseph is a paradigm for the JFC.

But I hear you say, "We're not the JFC, we're the JFC-UIA."

So let's look at this a different way, using my form of Gematria, a simple substitution where A = 1, B = 2, up to Z = 26.

What is the numerical value of JOSEPH?

J O S E P H = 10 + 15 + 19 + 5 + 16 + 8 = 73

What is the numerical value of JFC-UIA?

J F C U I A = 10 + 6 + 3 + 21 + 9 + 1 = 50

Well, those aren't equal, but wait....

C I J A = 3 + 9 + 10 + 1 = 23

If you add CIJA to JFC-UIA, the sum is 50 + 23 = 73 = JOSEPH

Perhaps that's why our semi-annual in-person board meeting in December coincides with reading the story of Joseph.

By the way, it's a good thing the arithmetic worked. If it came out 1 short we'd have to change JFC to KFC and that's a whole different kettle of fish (or bucket of chicken).

Before I end, a few words about the upcoming holiday of Hanukkah. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg notes that, "Hanukkah is a paradigm of the relationship between acculturation and assimilation. Hanukkah dramatizes the positive strength of loyalty to Judaism. It challenges modern Jews to review their own easy acceptance of cosmopolitanism and sophisticated culture as superior to

the sentiment and tribal feeling of being Jews.” He remarks that, “Pessimists and assimilationists have more than once informed Jews that there is no more oil left to burn. As long as Hanukkah is studied and remembered, Jews will not surrender to the night. The proper response is not to curse the darkness but to light a candle.”

The word “wicked” can be pronounced with one or two syllables, that is, as wicked or wick-ed. The wicked lights of the hanukkiyah can defeat the wicked darkness of evil. Our tradition says, “God’s candle is the human life.” “Ner Hashem, nishmat adam.”

Our job as the national coalition of federated communities is to keep the candles lit.

Thank you.