

Parashah Miketz

“And Joseph recognized his brothers but the brothers did not recognize him.”

In one of the great reversals in Tanakh, Joseph, whom we saw at the end of *Vayeshev*, languishing in prison, becomes in *Miketz*, a ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. It happens with astonishing speed. Pharaoh has two disturbing dreams. None of the interpretations offered by his Magi satisfy him and only then does Pharaoh's Chief Steward remember Joseph, his former fellow prisoner, who had an uncanny gift of deciphering dreams. Hurriedly, Joseph is taken from prison, given a wash and change of clothes and brought before the ruler. Not only does he interpret the dreams, he becomes, in effect, the world's first economist, inventing the theory of trade cycles: the dreams portend 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of scarcity. Having diagnosed the problem, Joseph immediately proceeds to solve it: store surplus grain in the years of plenty and then use these reserves in the years of famine. Pharaoh invites him to implement the strategy, giving him control of the Egyptian economy. Joseph moves from prisoner to Prime Minister in one effortless leap.

But as so often happens in Genesis, not only with Abraham, Isaac, and now with Joseph, there is always a famine in the Land of Canaan. This famine forces the brothers of Joseph, whom they thought was dead, to come to Egypt in order to bring food back to their father and the grandchildren of Jacob.

This leads to the major theme of my Drash, which I would entitle, “Disguise,” or as the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks, puts it, “Behind the Mask”. Here, we encounter what the brilliant Robert Alter defines as a “*type-scene, a drama enacted several times throughout Genesis with variations.*” I find that these type scenes, as Alter describes them, are absolutely fascinating. This Darash is my interpretation of a Commentary written by the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain in December, 2006, and a summary of Robert Alter's interpretation of the scenes in Genesis.

As I look through the Book of Genesis, there are two major themes that seem to crop up all the time. One is sibling rivalry, as we see between Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. But the second theme that is fascinating is this concept of disguise. We see it between Jacob and Isaac when Isaac is blind and Jacob, through the prompting of his mother Rebecca, puts on a costume which Jacob himself doesn't want to do, but he follows his mother's wishes and he disguises himself as Esau.

The second disguise in Genesis is the disguise of Leah, who Jacob thinks is Rachel on their wedding night. The third is in last week's Parashah, Genesis 38, in which Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute to carry on the Levirate marriage, prompting one of the most incredible statements by Judah. When Judah refuses to allow Tamar to mate with his third son Shelah, Tamar devises a plan to complete and fulfill the Levirate marriage. As she is being accused of adultery, Tamar has the decency to avoid accusing Judah by name but by saying the father of my children (because they were twins) is the owner of this staff and signet ring. Judah now beginning his process of Teshuvah says the most amazing thing in the biblical narrative, “She is more righteous than I.”

And the final disguise is in this present Parashah Miketz, in which Joseph recognizes his brothers but they do not recognize him as Egyptian royalty.

In summary, then, this is the fourth scene in which a disguise takes place. And this disguise is the framework within which the meeting between Joseph and his brothers must be understood. The *man* the brothers bow down to bears no resemblance to a Hebrew shepherd. He speaks Egyptian. He is dressed in Egyptian ruler's robes. His is called *Tzafenat Paneah*, an Egyptian name. He wears Pharaoh's signet ring and the gold chain of authority. Thus, the brothers think that they are in the presence of an Egyptian prince but it is Joseph their brother in disguise.

4 scenes, 4 disguises, 4 failures to see behind the mask - what do they have in common? Something very striking indeed. It is only by *not being recognized*, that Joseph, Leah, Tamar and Joseph *can be recognized*, in the sense of attended, taken seriously, heeded. Isaac loves Esau, not Jacob. Jacob loves Rachel, not Leah. Judah thinks of his youngest son, not of the plight of Tamar. Joseph is hated by his brothers. Only when they appear as something or someone other than they are, can they achieve what they seek: for Jacob - his father's blessing; for Leah - a husband; for Tamar - a son; for Joseph - the non-hostile attention of his brothers. The plight of these four individuals is summed up in a single poignant phrase, "Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him." Do the disguises work? In the short-term, yes; but in the long-term, not necessarily. Jacob suffers greatly for having taken Esau's blessing. Leah, though she marries Jacob, never wins his love. Tamar had a child, in fact, twins, but Judah, "was not intimate with her anymore."

As for Joseph, his brothers no longer hate him, but now they fear him. Even after his assurances that he bears them no grudge, they still think he will take revenge on them after their father dies. What is achieved in disguise is never the love that is sought.

But something else happens. Jacob, Leah, Tamar and Joseph discover that though they may never win the affection of those from who they seek it, God is with them. That, ultimately, is enough. A disguise is an act of hiding from others and perhaps from oneself. From God however, we cannot, nor do we need, to hide.

1 Samuel 16:7 says, "Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart." He knows our thoughts, hears our cries and answers our unspoken prayer. He heeds the unheeded and brings them comfort.

In the aftermath of the disguises of Jacob, Leah, Tamar and Joseph, there is no healing of relationship but there is mending of identity. That is what makes them not secular narratives, but deeply religious chronicles of psychological growth in maturation. What they tell is simple and profound. Those who stand before God need no mask, no disguise to achieve self-worth when standing before humankind.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah