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**Torah Portion
Bereishit, Vayeshev, 37:16 - 37:19**

When the brothers decide to slay Joseph and then sell him into slavery because it is more profitable, they shock our conscience. How can one explain such depravity? What had Joseph done to merit death or a life of slavery? This morning, I would offer three proposals by way of explanation:

- **First, this is not about Joseph. When the brothers sarcastically call Joseph -- "Ba'al Ha Chalamot", master of dreams, they give us a hint. Like many who conspire to kill a dreamer the brothers actually have as their intended victim the dream itself. It is the dream, that envisions Joseph as their superior, that inspires the brothers' anger and fear -- The brothers want Joseph's dreams to die -- and to kill those dreams -- they are prepared to kill Joseph and they will actually sell Joseph into slavery, tell Joseph's father that Joseph is dead, deliver to the father Joseph's birthright, a rainbow coat emblematic of God's covenant with Noah,¹ covered in blood. The intended victim is the dream.²**
- **Second, this is not about Joseph. In Genesis, prophetic dreams come from only one source -- as Joseph himself later says to Pharaoh³ -- they come from Elohim. They come from God. This is about Elohim. It is only Elohim that can decide the future, and transport a human to that future, and finally make him reappear as though from the dead. Joseph, like the magician's wand, or hat, or cape -- is merely the prop. . .**
- **Third, this is not about Joseph. *The brothers are rejecting Elohim's divine plan.* This is not the first time divine fiat is rejected by mortals in the Torah.**

If this is not about Joseph, then what is the story about? This story is ultimately about Judah, the brother who sold Joseph into slavery and probably sarcastically called Joseph "Ba'al ha Chalomot" and it is about the boundaries of the moral

¹ Joseph's coat is described using the word passim – פסים – which is not always translated as rainbow, but often as stripes, and it is not the same word used for rainbow in the Noah story, which is קשת.

² The Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew [based on the work of the great scholar, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch] indicates that the etymology of the word for dream, Chalom - chet/lamed/mem - means "to connect disparate elements into a functioning whole." This deeper meaning reveals that dreams themselves connect and create, and the dreams Joseph receives are moments of creation within Elohim's larger creation. This suggests that Joseph's dreams and what materializes are an extension of Elohim's act of creation and that Joseph as an extension of that divine will. These are Elohim's dreams within Elohim's larger Creation dream.

³ As Joseph instructs Pharaoh later in the Torah portion, the dreams come from God. "What God is about to do, He has told to Pharaoh." Genesis 41:25. Indeed, not even the interpretations belong to Joseph. When Pharaoh asked whether Joseph can interpret his dreams Joseph responds "not I, Elohim will respond to the peace of Pharaoh." Genesis 41:16. Joseph knows that the real master of dreams is Elohim. In the world of Genesis there is only one creator acting upon unformed creation – and that is Elohim.

universe God creates in the very first lines of Genesis: "In the beginning Elohim created the heavens and the earth." Genesis 1:1.

Joseph, because he is a dreamer of prophetic dreams, does, however, have a special role. As a dreamer of divinely inspired dreams -- Joseph inhabits a very mortal *present*, but he is also able to see and experience the *future* through his dreams. When Joseph dreams of the stars, sun, and moon and the sheaves of grain -- these are symbols of future events in Egypt. Sold into slavery Joseph physically travels back to the future he has already seen, and once in Egypt waits and prepares for his family's arrival. Joseph is the Torah's first and only time traveler.

Able to travel through time, his very existence violates the moral framework of the Creation. As a dreamer who can foresee his own future and then participates in that future, Joseph also contradicts the central moral paradigm of Genesis. If you know the future, how does that affect your moral decisions? Joseph is not a moral actor, he can travel through time -- he is an extension of divine will.

Recall the importance of time. Elohim first creates the physical universe -- the heaven and earth. Genesis 1:1. Elohim then creates time, "Yom echad", the first day, from light and darkness. Genesis 1:2. Without time, there is no past, no present, no future. Without time, the past, present, and future are as one.⁴ Cause-and-effect are simultaneous. There is no human agency, no moral agency, no good or bad. The Hebrew word for Genesis is actually Bireishit, which means "In the beginning" -- and without time there is no beginning.

Joseph, as a dreamer, through his dreams, is permitted to stand outside of time and therefore outside the moral universe of which time is the essential constant.

Contrast Joseph with Judah, his brother, who makes no small mistakes -- Judah is the proponent of selling Joseph into slavery. Judah violates tradition and takes a local Canaanite woman as his wife. Judah mistakenly sleeps with Tamar the widow of his son. Yet Judah is the ancestor of David, our greatest king. It is from Judah's line that the Messiah will be born, and it is Judah who gives his name to our people. When Jacob, before his death, blesses Judah he says "Judah is like a young lion. You have risen above plunder my son." Genesis 49:9.

How has this total and phenomenal transformation come about? Judah, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains, is the Torah's first "ba'al teshuvah"⁵ -- the Torah's first true penitent. Judah admits he was wrong with Tamar and says "she is righteous." Genesis He shows that he has changed when he offers to remain in

⁴ I am reminded by Rabbi David Shneyer that the name of God in Hebrew represented in Hebrew by the tetragrammaton יהוה (Yod Heh Vav Heh), derives from the old Semitic root הוה (hawah) meaning "to be" or "to become", reflecting the same unity of the future, present, and past.

⁵ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Choice and Change, http://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2071641/jewish/Choice-and-Change.htm.

Egypt as Joseph's slave rather than leave his brother Benjamin behind. Genesis 44:32 - 44:34.

According to some rabbis teshuvah was among the first things God created even before God created the physical universe.⁶

Teshuvah (תשובה) literally means "return" and *Ba-al teshuvah* literally means, "master of return" -- one who has "returned" to God.⁷ Unlike Joseph, the "ba'al ha chalamot," who transcends moral choice through transcending time, Judah's enormous moral blunders arise because he cannot see the future. Like us, he is blind in a time-bound universe. But this is how he becomes "ba'al teshuvah."

He rises above his mistakes, not by transcending them, but through teshuvah, returning to God.

We remember Heschel's well-known dictum that Jews are a people who sanctify time rather than space.⁸

I believe this is why - Elohim's creation of time in Genesis is the source of that sanctification, because time enables us to return.

Time makes these B'nai Mitzvah, our B'nai Mitzvah, special. It is the marking of time. Time to look back. Time to look forward. Unlike Joseph, we do not know the future. We do not exist outside of time. Today we celebrate time. But hopefully, like Judah, we can learn from the past and this day can mark our own form of "return" -- to Elohim – with humility, with repentance, and with purpose.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Nedarim, Folio 39b, http://www.come-and-hear.com/nedarim/nedarim_39.html ("[F]or it was taught: Seven things were created before the world, viz., The Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah. The Torah, for it is written, The Lord possessed me [sc. the Torah] in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. Repentance, for it is written, Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world ... Thou turnest man to destruction, and sayest, Repent, ye sons of men.")

⁷ See *Repentance in Judaism*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Repentance_in_Judaism ("Being or becoming a Jewish penitent (or returnee), is known as a Baal teshuvah (Hebrew: תשובה בעל; for a woman: בעלת תשובה, baalat teshuvah; plural: תשובה בעלי, baalei teshuvah) the Hebrew term referring to a person who has repented. Baal teshuvah literally means 'master of repentance or return (to Judaism)'."

⁸ Arnold Eisen, Heschel on the Comandments, at 22; see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1979) at 8 ("Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time.")