

Genesis 37:1-11 (Robert Alter translation)

And Jacob dwelled in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan. This is the lineage of Jacob—Joseph, seventeen years old, was tending the flock with his brothers, assisting the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, the wives of his father. And Joseph brought ill report of them to their father.

And Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, for he was the child of his old age, and he made him an ornamented tunic. And his brothers saw it was he their father loved more than all his brothers, and they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

And Joseph dreamed a dream and told it to his brothers and they hated him all the more. And he said to them, "Listen, pray, to this dream that I dreamed. And, look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf." And his brothers said to him, "Do you mean to reign over us, do you mean to rule us?" And they hated him all the more, for his dreams and for his words. And he dreamed yet another dream and recounted it to his brothers, and he said, "Look, I dreamed a dream again, and, look, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing to me." And he recounted it to his father and to his brothers, and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall we really come, I and your mother and your brothers, to bow before you to the ground?" And his brothers were jealous of him, while his father kept the thing in mind.¹

¹ Alter Robert, *The Five Books of Moses*, 2008

An Unlikable Brother

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: October 13, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 37:1-11

The rabbis loved a good story, and they loved making a good story even better, or at least more detailed and clear.

From our reading this morning we learn that the young Joseph is out helping his older brothers with the flock. Joseph is his father's favorite, born in Jacob's old age of his favorite wife Rachel. Joseph was dad's boy. That was enough to cause his older siblings to resent him. But we learn that Joseph was also a tattletale. He would come back from the pastures with reports of all the bad things his brothers did.

The story as we have it in Genesis is bare-bones; we're missing a lot of details. Just exactly what reports did Joseph bring back to his father? And were the reports true? In other words, just how bad did Joseph say his siblings were, and was he telling the truth? The Rabbis to the rescue:

They said, "There was something boyish about Joseph. He painted his eyes, dressed his hair carefully, and walked with a mincing step. These foibles of youth were not so deplorable as his habit of bringing evil reports of his brethren to his father. He accused them of treating the beasts under their care with cruelty—he said that they ate flesh torn from a living animal—and he charged them with casting their eyes upon the daughters of the Canaanites, and giving contemptuous treatment to the sons of the handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah, whom they called slaves."²

Wow! We learn that Joseph is what we used to call a dandy—he walked with a mincing step. Already we have an unflattering picture. But more to the point, the reports he brought his father were serious accusations. He said his siblings treated the animals badly, even tearing flesh from living animals. They were flirting with the Canaanites. Remember how things like that turned out just a couple chapters ago with Dinah. And they were treating their brothers born of Jacob's concubines as if they were slaves. The rabbis have given us a thicker plot, and now they will give us some answers to our questions.

They write, "Joseph's talebearing against his brethren made them hate him. Among all of them [his brother] Gad was particularly wrathful, and for good reason. Gad was a very brave man, and when a beast of prey attacked the herd, over which he kept guard at night, he would seize it by one of its legs, and whirl it around until it was stunned, and then he would fling it away to a distance of two stadia, and kill it thus. Once Jacob sent Joseph to tend the flock, but he remained away only thirty days, for he was a delicate lad and fell sick with the heat, and he hastened back to his father. On his return he told Jacob that the sons of the handmaids were in the habit of slaughtering the choice cattle of the herd and eating it, without obtaining permission from Judah and Reuben. But his report was not accurate. What he had seen was Gad slaughtering one lamb, which he had snatched from the very jaws of a bear, and he killed it because it could

² Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 328.

not be kept alive after its fright. Joseph's account sounded as though the sons of the handmaids were habitually inconsiderate and careless in wasting their father's substance."³

So there you have it. Joseph's brother Gad was a real shepherd. He cared for the animals, he showed courage and judgment. Gad dispatched the attacking animals. And when one of the sheep or the goats got mauled, Gad killed it swiftly so that it would not suffer and cooked the meat so as not to waste it. Joseph, the anemic dandy, completely misread the situation, and filed a false and slanderous report with his father.

The rabbis filled in missing details in the beginning of the story to make it perfectly clear that Joseph was an unreliable, self-centered and frail dandy, who stretched the truth. The rabbis made it abundantly clear that Joseph was an unlikable lad and that his brothers' were warranted in loathing him.

It's kind of fun to see the rabbis fill in some of the sketchy details of the account. You get an appreciation for how much they loved storytelling. But they also leave us with an interesting question. Why did the rabbis tell stories that made Joseph so unlikable? They could have made him a hero instead. They could have said that Joseph's reports that his brothers were abusing the animals and flirting with the Canaanites were true. They could have told the story that way and said that though it is understandable that his brothers didn't like him, their dislike was truly kindled because their misdeeds were found out, and they were held accountable for them. After all, as we will see, and surely the rabbis knew, Joseph will a few chapters from now turn out to be the hero of this portion of the saga.

Why did the rabbis reinforce Joseph's negative attributes? Part of the answer, no doubt, is that the rabbis, for all their love for expanding the Biblical stories into ever bigger legends, of the answer, no doubt, is that the rabbis were very attentive to the original tone of the text. Even before the rabbis took hold of the story, Joseph was unlikable. Joseph is more than a tattler. He's a dreamer. And oh what a dreamer he is.

"Listen, pray, to this dream that I dreamed. And, look, we were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf."

It takes a pretty self-centered guy to think first of all that his brothers are just dying to hear his dreams. It takes a really self-centered guy to tell that particular dream to his brothers and not understand how offensive it sounded—look at that, all your sheaves around there bowing down to my sheaf; is that cool, or what?

But Joseph doesn't seem to compute the problem. A few days later he says, "he, guess what? I had another one. 'Look, I dreamed a dream again, and, look, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing to me.'"

When the rabbis embellished their stories, they were consistent with the original. But that then begs a very big question. Joseph's dreams are going to come true. He will become the hero. Not only that, but in the ancient Biblical era people knew that double dreams, two dreams back to back with the same message, were certain to come true. Joseph is going to be the hero of the story, and his brothers and the reader knows it. So why make him a jerk here in the beginning? Wouldn't the whole story make more sense if Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and hateful for no good reason, and then many years later they have bow down to him near starvation? Wouldn't the story told that way better satisfy our sense of justice—Joseph's nasty older brothers

³ Louis Ginzberg, Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 329.

get their comeuppance? They never liked the dear boy, but in the end justice wins out. Wouldn't we like that better? But what we have is a story in which Joseph is the nasty character, and he goes on to become the hero. What's up with that?

We should probably note that such things are not all that unusual in the Bible. Abraham passes his wife off as his sister to save his skin. Jacob, Joseph's father, was the sneak and heel grabber. King David was a murderer and an adulterer. You get the idea.

Biblical religion is a religion grounded in the reality of living here on earth. It's an earthy faith. Its stories are anchored to times and places. It's why Jews and Christians are so fascinated by the Holy Land and archaeology. The stories are bound by date and location. They happened at particular time in a particular place.

Over the centuries that focus of our religion has endured. This life we live is central. It matters what we do today. We pray for God's companionship and assistance in the here and now. Put another way, we have a religion that is grounded in life, life in which God is present with us, and yet as Matthew reminds us, a life in which God also makes the "sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." Matthew 5:45 (NRSV)

This was the same conundrum that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the rest grappled with. God broke into human history. God demanded obedience and sealed a covenant with the people. God promised blessing and curse commensurate with the choices the people made. What the people did was paramount. But as Job famously screeched, it doesn't really seem to work out that plainly. The sun rises on the evil and on the good, and the rain falls on the righteous and on the unrighteous. The Biblical religion is a religion in which how we live in this life makes all the difference, except that a lot of the time it doesn't seem to make any difference at all.

The rabbis, as much as anybody, were aware of this contradiction. So even as they embellished and filled out the Biblical narratives, the rabbis were loath removing its most embarrassing aspect—in the arithmetic of blessings and the curses, two plus two rarely seemed to equal four, and the rabbis knew it, just as we do..

To be sure, there has always been an opposing narrative, that is, the narrative that says that people actually get what they deserve. Most profoundly, this interpretation reads ancient Israel's defeats at the hand of the Assyrians and the Babylonians as deserved punishment for the disobedience of the Jewish people. Some Jews have read even the Holocaust that way. It's an easier, if more harsh, calculus—you get what you deserve in life. Much our current political discourse is about whether you believe that to be true—you get what you deserve in life.

But against that rather formidable and in many ways appealing perspective—appealing because at least things make simple sense—the Biblical text insists on preserving a more muddied counter narrative—the sun rises on the evil and on the good, and the rain falls on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Many people today see two stark alternative narratives. Alternative one: there is a God, and we get what we deserve—a view decidedly short on evidence. Alternative two, there is no God, and many things in life are more or less random—a view, quite frankly, for which a good argument can be made.

Against these two stands a much different view. In one way of saying it, this other perspective asserts that there is more to existence than meets the eye. There are things beyond our understanding. By this view these things we cannot explain, often painful and disturbing things, are contained in the mystery of God. Sometimes we glimpse inside this mystery, but more often it remains opaque to us. This view demands a leap of faith. It says that we accept that the

world isn't as we wish it were, but we take that fact not to be a sign of godless randomness but as the crux of a God-filled mystery.

If we choose this view, the stories are what strengthen us. We keep on reading and telling stories about this maddening but mysterious existence we inhabit, stories that sometimes irritate us and sometimes uplift us. We keep on reading and telling them believing that in them God will touch us in ways we cannot know or predict. I don't like Joseph very much. I wonder why a guy like him gets to be the hero of the story. And I think I can hear God responding, "Okay. Good. Just keep reading the stories." "Will I understand everything then," I ask. God answers, "Probably not. Just keep reading the stories." And so it is. We read the stories and live into the mystery of God. Amen.