

Six Words

Many Opinions

אֲנִי יוֹסֵף, הֲעוֹד אָבִי חַי

I am Joseph! Is father alive?

Gen. 45:3

"Joseph called out, 'Joseph, son of Jacob come to me! Come to me and speak to your brothers who sold you.' The brothers turned their eyes to the four corners of the room. Joseph asked them, 'Why do you look this way and that? I am Joseph, your brother.' Instantly their souls flew out of them [they dropped dead on the spot!], and they could not reply. But the Holy One performed a miracle and restored their souls to them. The Joseph said, 'Behold what your eyes see, for it is I, Joseph, that speaks to you.' When they recognized him, they wanted to kill him. But an angel came down and flung them apart to the four corners of the room. In that instant Judah let out a might roar, so loud that all the walls in Egypt collapsed, all pregnant women miscarried, Joseph fell of his seat, Pharaoh tumbled from this throne and all the guards had their faces twisted around backwards, and their teeth fell out! "When Joseph saw that his brothers felt such deep shame for what they had done, he said to them, 'Come near to me,' and each drew near to him kissing him and weeping over him."

(Genesis Rabba and Tanhuma, English adapted from The Book of Legends, Bialik and Ravnitzky)

*Joseph, to his brothers says: "I've
Decided no more to connive
You thought me deceased
But my fortune's increased
I am Joseph! Is father alive?"
Rabbi Joe Black*

WHAT DO JOSEPH'S SIX WORDS TEACH US ABOUT JEWISH IDENTITY?

Can we encapsulate our own Jewish identity in six words?

45 Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace.

³Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him.

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come forward to me." And when they came forward, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.

מ"ה וְלֹא־יָכַל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק לְכָל הַנִּצָּבִים עָלָיו וַיִּקְרָא הוֹצִיאוּ כָל־אִישׁ מֵעָלַי וְלֹא־עָמַד אִישׁ אִתּוֹ בְּהִתְנוּחַע יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו: ² וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־קֻלּוֹ בִּבְכֵי וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּשְׁמַע בֵּית פַּרְעֹה: ³ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי הִי וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפָּנָיו: ⁴ וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו גִּשׁוּ־נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֶחְיֶיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִמָּה: ⁵ וַעֲתָה אֶל־תַּעֲצֹבוּ וְאֶל־יִחַד בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הֵנָּה כִּי לְמַחְיָה שָׁלַחֲנִי אֱלֹהִים לִפְנֵיכֶם: ⁶ כִּי־יֵהָ אֲנִי שְׁנֵתִים הָרָעָב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ

CHAPTER 45

The Reconciliation (vv. 1–28)

JOSEPH REVEALS HIS TRUE IDENTITY (vv. 1–3)

1. The brothers have repeatedly proved their integrity and family loyalty. Joseph can gain nothing more from his stratagems. By now the emotional tension is overwhelming. Twice before Joseph had broken down—when he overheard Reuben describe the agonies of his sale into slavery (42:24) and when he first set eyes on Benjamin (43:30f.). On this last occasion Joseph had succeeded in controlling himself, but he can no longer contain his pent-up feelings.

before all his attendants Literally, "before all who were standing by him," that is, the great man's entourage.

no one else about No outsider may share this intensely intimate, climactic moment of self-revelation and reconciliation. Besides, Joseph would not want the Egyptians to know that his own brothers had sold him into slavery.

2. *the news reached Pharaoh's palace* Literally, "the house of Pharaoh heard." The report was quickly bruited about so that it reached the court.

3. *I am Joseph. Is my father . . .* The statements follow in rapid succession with no pause between them. Judah could not have known it, but more than anything, it was the repeated mention of the aged father—no less than fourteen times—that shook Joseph and brought his self-restraint to an end. No wonder, then, that Joseph's first thought is for the welfare of his father. True, he had already sought and obtained the information he wanted (43:27f.), yet the terrifying picture Judah has painted makes Joseph cry out in such a way that his words are more an exclamation than an inquiry. That is why there is no reply and Joseph does not press the point.

REASSURANCE (vv. 4–8)

4. *your brother Joseph, he whom you sold* At once a reassurance and a rebuke: I shall behave as a brother should even though you were unbrotherly.

5. *you sold . . . God sent* The brothers had indeed acted with evil intent; yet behind it all had been the hidden, guiding hand of Divine Providence investing the base deeds of men with

stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known to his brethren.² And he wept aloud; and the Egyptians heard, and the house of Pharaoh heard. ³And Joseph said to his brethren: "I am Joseph; does my father still live?" And his brethren

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there stood no man with him. a. Not even the members of his own household, whom he had ordered to see that the others went, because they understood that he wished to be alone.¹⁵ b. Because of his order, "Cause every man," etc., though he had wanted his own servants to remain, to guard his personal safety.¹⁶ while Joseph made himself known. Rather, there stood no man with him, so that he might make himself known.¹⁷ ²he wept aloud. a. When he saw the depths of Judah's compassion for his father, his own compassion was stirred, and he wept.¹⁸ b. In order that the Egyptians might know that they were great men, whose separation from Joseph had caused him great sorrow,

and of whom, in spite of his own exalted position, he was proud.¹⁹ c. He had raised his voice to order everyone to leave, and now with this same uplifted voice he broke out weeping.²⁰ the Egyptians heard. a. The townspeople.²¹ b. Those who had left his presence, for they were still in the outer courtyard.²² c. And from them it travelled to the house of Pharaoh.²³ d. That Joseph was weeping, but they did not know why.²⁴ e. They heard his cry, "I am Joseph; does my father yet live?" and they understood that the people within were his kinsmen; but only later did they learn that they were his brothers.²⁵ the house of Pharaoh. a. His servants and the members of his household.²⁶ b. His ministers and courtiers.²⁷ c. I.e., after the Egyptians heard it, the house of Pharaoh learned it too.²⁸ ³I am Joseph. a. He did not mention immediately their selling of him, lest they think that he intended to kill them.²⁹ b. He understood that people were listening outside.³⁰ c. In his emotion he spoke very briefly, and therefore omitted "your brother" at this stage.³¹ does my father yet live? a. His first question was about his father.³² b. Is he well?³³ c. He knew the answer, having questioned them previously through an interpreter; but now he asked them directly, to "break the ice" and show that he was friendly toward them.³⁴ d. Although Judah's plea had been based entirely on Jacob's suffering, he might have pleaded thus merely to play on

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shame my brothers in the presence of the Egyptians.

Thirty angels accompanied Joseph into Egypt; the greatest was Harpaniel; the least, Hanatel. Ten delivered him from Potiphar's wife, ten from the dungeon, and ten from his brothers when he revealed his identity to them. For it says, And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known to his brethren: no man, but only angels.

Tan. Vayyiggash 5; Yemenite Anth. MS Sassoon. T.S. 45, 8 and note.

8. There stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known to his brethren.

Why did he not inform his father immediately [he was brought to Egypt] that he was alive, nor in all the twenty-two years that he was there? Because when the brothers pronounced

a ban on any who might reveal what had happened, they included Joseph himself in the ban, and even the Holy One, blessed is He. So Scripture writes, He confirms the word of His servant (Isa. 44:26), which means that He obeys His servants' decrees. For that reason now there stood no man, etc.¹

Tan. Y. Mabo 132. T.S. 45, 9.

9. He wept aloud, and the Egyptians heard.

They did not hear his weeping, but only that his brothers had come.

Or Haafelah. T.S. 45, 11.

10. "I am Joseph" . . . and his brothers could not answer him.

When Joseph said this to his brothers, their souls fled, and they could not answer him. . . . [They would have died on the spot, but that]

§ 8 ¹ Since under the terms of the ban he might not disclose it to any outsider.

could not answer him; for they were affrighted at his presence. ⁴And

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Joseph's emotions and sympathy.³⁵ e. He spoke in wonder: to think that he is still alive after all his sorrow! surely his grief must have killed him.³⁶ his

brothers could not answer him. a. They were speechless in amazement, having sold him as a slave and now finding him a ruler.³⁷ b. Believing and disbelieving at the same time.³⁸ c. Even to say how their father was.³⁹ for they were affrighted at his presence. a. Overwhelmed by shame.⁴⁰ b. Because of their treatment of him.⁴¹ c. They noted his omission of "your brother"; also, that he had said, "my father," not "our father": they thought this foreboded evil, as though he repudiated his kin-

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the Holy One, blessed is He, restored their souls miraculously.

When He will reveal Himself to Israel, He will not reveal His full glory all at once, because none could bear such full revelation, but would die from its very abundance. You may learn this from Joseph: when he made himself known to his brothers after all those years, they all died [and were miraculously resuscitated, as it says,] His brothers could not answer him. How much more so when the Holy One, blessed is He, will reveal himself. Therefore He will disclose His glory little by little.

R. Simeon b. Eleazar said, quoting R. Eleazar b. Azariah, who used to say this in the name of Abba Cohen b. Bardela: Woe to us on the Day of Judgment, woe to us on the day of rebuke. Balaam was the wisest sage of the nations, yet he could not stand up to his ass's rebuke, as we read, "Was I ever wont to do so to you?" And he said, "No" (Num. 22:30). Joseph was the youngest of the Tribal Ancestors, and his brothers could not withstand his rebuke, as it says, His brothers could not answer him. How much more, then, when the Holy One, blessed is He, will come and rebuke every person as he deserves; as it says, But I will reprove you, and set the cause before your eyes (Ps. 50:21).

[The following are different versions of the same thought.]

R. Eliezer b. R. Simeon, quoting R. Eleazar b. Azariah, said: When Joseph told his brothers, "I am Joseph," they could not answer him, knowing how they had treated him. How much more impossible will it be for any to stand before Him, when He comes to rebuke

each of His creatures and to tell him what he has done; as it says, He forms the mountains and creates the wind, and tells to man what is his thought (Amos 4:13).

R. Johanan said, How wretchedly shall we stand in the Day of Judgment and in the Day of Rebuke! When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, their souls fled. How much more so will it be thus before the Holy One, blessed is He, of whom it is written, Who may abide the day of His coming, and who shall stand when He appears? (Mal. 3:2); also, For man shall not see Me, and live (Exod. 33:20). If his brothers were terrified of him, how much greater shall be the fear when He comes to demand a reckoning for the contempt shown for His precepts and the transgressions against His Torah!

Yea, who will be able to stand before Him? we can only rely on His abundant mercies. Thus Scripture writes, If Thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? (Ps. 130:3) How great will be the terror and panic on the Day of Judgment; as it says, What will you do in the day of visitation? (Isa. 10:3); also, For God shall bring every work into judgment concerning every hidden thing (Eccl. 12:14).

Tan. Vayyiggash 5. D'barim 1; Gen. R. 93, 11; Tan. Y. Vayyiggash 7; Ner Has'chalim. T.S. 45, 12-13a and note.

11. For they were affrighted at his presence.

They had said, "We shall see what will become of his dreams" (37:20); and the Holy Spirit had answered, "We shall see whose plans shall be fulfilled."¹ Thus it says, For My thoughts

§ 11 ¹ Cp. Vol. 5, chap. 37, § 79 (p. 22).

(44:16), had used the Name *Elohim* and had led to silence and acquiescence in guilt and indiscriminate punishment.

Now, he is after different game: the unit of persuasion is "a vocabulary rather than a proposition"; his method is "redescription rather than inference."³⁴ Using his anger and his pathos, he invests old words with new meanings, so that by the end of a narrative in which no detail is new he has constructed a radical criticism of Joseph and all he stands for. "Nothing," writes Rorty, "can serve as a criticism of a person save another person . . . for persons . . . are, for us, incarnated vocabularies."³⁵

In this sense, Judah's speech can be read as a personal litany,³⁶ a chain of words and images that have peculiar resonance for himself. In a project of self-creation, he lists the events, the experiences that have meshed together to created the unique world of his selfhood. His inspired articulation of contingency, of the particulars of his own life, represents a recognition of God, without reference to the authoritative perspective of a privileged vocabulary.

A classic midrash narrates that the angel of transcendental truth advised God against creating man. God threw it down to earth; it shattered, and must now grow out of the earth in splintered, contingent shards—"Truth springs up from the earth" (Psalms 85:12).³⁷ The personal litany of a human being is such a project of producing personal truth "from the earth." And Judah's greatness lies precisely in this capacity to redescribe himself, rooted in earth, aspiring to a personal vocabulary, in which the splintered letters of God's Name can be detected.³⁸

Judah inspires Joseph: the personal litany

The power of such a personal litany is paradoxical. Precisely because Judah presents himself in his contingency, in the intimate vocabulary that weaves his uniqueness, he moves Joseph to remove his mask. Speaking with all the force of his private experience, Judah evokes the lost wholeness of the family, and stirs Joseph to his own attempt at self-redescription.

Essentially, what Joseph does in response to Judah's speech is—not reveal himself—but create himself in words. First, he says, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" His anxious question about his father is logically redundant—he had asked them the same question when they arrived in Egypt shortly before (43:27). Moreover, when his brothers "could not

answer him, so dumbfounded were they on account of him" (45:3), he repeats and amplifies his self-description: "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt" (45:4)—but he does not repeat his question about his father, in the course of the long speech that follows. In fact, although he refers to his father several times in the course of his speech, he does not express any further anxiety about his survival.

³⁹ This spontaneous question: "Is my father still alive?" should, however, be understood as Joseph's first, poignantly incoherent attempt to find a vocabulary in which to describe himself. Judah's confession of personal truth inspires him to a similar spontaneity; and he uncovers the two hidden preoccupations of his masquerade: his identity, and his concern that the masquerade, compounding with his original disappearance, has made his father's life impossible. J

The narrative against shame

Here, one of the central questions about Joseph's behavior arises. Ramban asks it, as do many other commentators: how could Joseph not communicate with his father, at least during the years of his success and power? Some powerful restraint bars him from relieving his beloved father of his anguish. The question is, of course, exacerbated by the protracted torment to which he subjects his whole family—his charge that his brothers are spies, the money hidden in their sacks, the "planted" goblet. These make an enigma of the whole narrative.

Or Ha-hayyim offers a simple, but totally convincing answer:³⁹ Joseph is paralyzed by the prospect of his brothers' shame, if he reveals himself to his father. This is a genetic sensitivity: his mother, Rachel, according to a classic midrash, had been so horrified at the idea that her sister, Leah, masquerading as Rachel, would be shamed on her wedding night, that she gave her the secret signs that Jacob had given her, to prevent just such a deception (Rashi, 29:25) To prevent his brothers' shame, Joseph has, like his mother, kept silent, while his heart yearned to express itself.⁴⁰

When his brothers actually appear before him for the first time, passivity and silence are neither possible nor necessary. From this point on, Joseph engages in an active project of discovery, the aim of which is to produce evidence that will allow his brothers to endure his "resurrection" without shame.

In this week's *parsha*, *Miketz*, which is always read within the time frame of *parsha*, *Miketz*, we encounter Pharaoh the dreamer, while Joseph is the dream interpreter who is soon to be elevated from prisoner to second in command over Egypt.

I recall a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary presenting his senior sermon on *Shabbat Miketz*. He told a well worn story about names. In the early years of the 20th century, as Jews immigrated to the shores of the United States, the trip from Europe was treacherous. Nervous about presenting himself to the authorities, one Jew practiced his name over and over. Our young man repeated his anglicized name. When the moment arrived and he stood before the immigration official, everything flew out of his head. "What's your name?" In a panic our young Jew reverted to his native Yiddish and said, "*Oy Shoyrn Fergessen*" - Oy, I have forgotten my new Americanized name. Shoyrn Fergessen it shall be said the inspector - Shaun Ferguson it is. In *Parshat Miketz*, Joseph is given a new name. Like our European immigrant, Joseph is given a title and name by his new environment, his new land and his new overseer, Pharaoh.

Pharaoh removed his ring and put it on Yosef's hand. Joseph was then dressed in fine linen with a gold necklace and a royal chariot.

And Pharaoh called Yosef, Tzafnat Panayach. Pharaoh tried to change Yosef in responsibility, in dress, in jewelry, and in title. Pharaoh tried to acculturate and assimilate Yosef.

The name change was to be the final step in removing any remnant of his father's values. But Yosef remembered his history. Rashi explains that the name change meant "he who explains what is hidden." Yosef may have interpreted dreams, but his history was always with him, never hidden.

A *midrash* offers us a lesson. It teaches that for the hundreds of years of Egyptian slavery, the Israelites did not adopt the dress patterns of their masters -they remained modest in dress; did not adopt the diets of their overseers but maintained the distinct pattern of *kashrut*; and did not adopt the Egyptian names but named their children with Hebrew names.

The *midrash* is declaring that as Jews we have a sacred, unique lifestyle. *Kedusha* elevates our daily lives. *Kedusha* in dress, in eating and in names help us to withstand the seduction to assimilate.

We cannot say about Jewish life - *shoyrn fergessen* - I forgot how to be a Jew. The Maccabees defended the challenge to destroy the spirit of Judaism's existence. Joseph remembered who and what he was regardless of an outside name placed on his shoulders.

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers he says, I am Joseph not Tzafnat F'anayach. Is my father alive?

SMITH Magazine is teaming up with the Jewish cultural mavens of Reboot to bring you "Six Words on the Jewish Life." The book's due out in March. Here are some of my favorites.

Enough tsores to fill six books.

Mazel Tov describes everything in life.

Celebrating Catholic Christmas at Jewish sister-in-law's.

Faith is fine, service fills souls.

Yiddish makes even pleasantries sound filthy.

We came, We concurred, Let's eat!

Migrating with my people, Florida bound.

Judaism must be earned, not given.

At 55, considering a Bat Mitzvah.

My grandmother's tattoo dominates my nightmares.

Matzah balls, should be light, fluffy.

Guilty admission: didn't hate Hebrew school.

To each his own kashruth level.

Judaism: 5000 years of terrible candy.

A journey from Chelm to Charvard.

A smorgasbord of genetic diseases. Hooray!

Why isn't coffee a Jewish drink?

OHI? You mean there's dietary laws?!?

Marcel Marceau Jewish? He never talked!

Eighth day: Immobilized my screaming son.

Guilty overachiever seeking spirituality and patience.

Loehmann's communal dressing room nuff said.

Is he Jewish? Is he Jewish?

Read Marx, Freud, Talmud; Still Reading.

613 rules one soul set free.

Yes mom, I'm wearing a coat.

G-d listens to a sound argument.

Jewish mother: happiness, worry, pride, worry.

Shabbos goy: Such a hard worker!

Not just chosen but also choosing.

2 Atheist parents; 3 Zionist daughters.

Six words equals how many opinions?

Living Torah means always having gratitude.

The few, the proud, the tribe.

Bar mitzvah video used for blackmail.

Still no clue. But tryin'. I'chaim.

I've learned I'm really more Jew-ish.

Chanted Torah, danced hora, parents poor-ah.

Had third kid to spite Hitler.

Have nine Rachels in address book.

Family spends meals discussing other meals.

We are not a concise people.

We read backward but think forward. Six words equals how many opinions?

Jewish, yeah. But enough about me.

You never write, you never call.

Toward the Future - based on a passage by Milton Steinberg

When I look into the human future I see scientists still struggling with problems, but they are the problems of wresting the truth from nature, not of finding the most economical means of destroying it.

I see artists still working day and night at their canvases and marble, but to incarnate their vision of beauty, not to keep the wolves from their doors.

I see all people laboring not to ward off hunger, disease and enslavement, but for self fulfillment and mutual aid.

I see each religion and culture exerting its fullest energies, but for the purpose not of fighting off the assault of other faiths and traditions, but so as to make the most of its own resources for its own sake and that of the world.

I see each polity, each economy hard at work but with one problem only - to give to each person the maximum of freedom, the most generous access to the good things of living.

I see each national state very busy, not in defending itself against its neighbors, but in doing its best for its citizens and sister national states.

This to me will be heaven on earth.

Happy New Year - based on a column by Russell Baker

New Years Day is always a depressing holiday, and for good reason. For one thing, it comes in January, and to those who ask, "If January comes, can spring be far behind?" my answer is yes; two months and three weeks behind, including February, a month that never fails to last at least nine years.

For another thing, New Year's Day is when the annual hike in Social Security taxes always starts to erode your standard of living. For a third thing, the day is a nightmare of football.

With age, each new year's arrival merely mocks you with the memory of all the bad habits you've failed to break and forces you to concede that you are, among other things, the sum of your bad habits.

Humans are the only creatures who allow themselves to be made morose by the turning of the calendar.

Humans treat time as a map and always know where they are located on it and respond with the appropriate emotion. If it's the Fourth of July we are happy to eat hot dogs, and if it's Thanksgiving we are unhappy to eat hot dogs.

And if it's New Year's Day we feel the depressing weight of the new rising tax and lurch toward despair at thoughts of the frigid Sahara separating us from spring.

These are the curses of our intellectual superiority to all other creatures, whose intelligence is as dim as though their brains had been marinated in 16 hours of televised football.

That is why I usually spend 16 hours of New Year's Day in front of the television set watching football.