

Jewish Identity in our times . . .

'who are we' and 'where are we'



Identity

Joseph Recognized by His Brothers (1863 painting by Léon Pierre Urbain Bourgeois)

After our Chanukah studies and in looking back over our original meetings, we have taken a close and nuanced look at the **real story of Chanukah** and what should constitute **a real miracle**, especially one '**for** our times' and/or '**in** our times.'

The stories of our past embody certain truths, although not necessarily embodying the facts of history. Their truth is all too often found in the way in which they speak of '**our identity**' at any given moment in time. The way they speak and in the way we read them . . .

For example, our 'heroes of old,' the Maccabees, in their own time, sought to force a new understanding of *Chanukah* as a statement of their identity -- how they wanted to be known -- by power and hegemony over all Jewish communities. And here I refer to the wealthy and affluent *Jews of Alexandria*. Alexandrian Jews did not identify as Judean Jews or Judeans who lived their lives in the *Land of Israel*. Incidentally, *Alexandrian Jewry* was a community not too unlike *American Jewry* of post World War II America: wealthy, Jewishly illiterate (with a few exceptions) and **exceedingly late** to the party of '*Judaism as Zionism*.'

In the end, the diaspora *Jewish community of Persia* (i.e. *Talmudic Babylonian Jewry*), some hundreds of years later, would change *Chanukah* forever with a '*Miracle of the*

Oil' that we all grew up with. They made this change in the story partly out of distaste for the long dead *Maccabean dynasty* that had ultimately degenerated in time, from an unsatiated military power into a despotic and demented *Herodian dynasty*. The Babylonian Jewish identity was 'diasporic' and anything but Zionist. Their communal desire was in dwelling comfortably outside the land of Israel with an understanding that messianically driven rebellions would only bring 'national' ruin on anyone and anything expressing a hope and a desire for restoring a strong military and national independence.

Importantly, this change in our story was ultimately made in order to replace the usurping "*Maccabean Priests turned warriors*" imbued with an unrelenting drive for national independence infused with military power.

Among the few powerful emerging symbols of this retelling was the *Menorah* -- although now it became reconstituted as a **memory symbol**. That is to say, not as the original *Menorah*, but as a '*Chanukiah*,' reflecting a *Babylonian Jewish* understanding of *Chanukah* as one of **miracle not power**.

The so-called hard won freedom that we continue to sing about to this day was conveniently written over (**not coincidentally in a 'pintemento' - like fashion**) in Jewish history, overwritten, as it were, and only preserved in books that the *Roman and Eastern Orthodox Churches* continued to maintain for their own purposes in the ensuing centuries down to this very day.



Identifying . . .

Joseph's Bloody Coat Brought to Jacob by Diego Velázquez, 1630

We have now turned to our good friend **Joseph** of the *Torah*, for among other reasons, we desire to understand him and simultaneously understand his place in *Egypt* as a place in which he was thrust into, soon 'to become a part of and then apart from.'

Very possibly, our story.

We are confused as to whether he was Egyptian or Israelite and our confusion stems in part due to his confusion. While his sojourn in Egypt was not his choice, in a somewhat foreshadowing-esque-way, he would give his brothers a rather generous, undeserved pass (as an executive pardon that seems unrivaled perhaps only to these times) and assures them that it was not their doing, but that all of this was ordained by Gd.

This can be understood as '*prophecy fulfillment*' harkening back to the '*Covenant of the Parts*' we looked at in the *15th chapter* of *Genesis* between *God and Abraham* regarding the future of *Abraham's* progeny in servitude, in a land not theirs.

We have just reviewed salient portions of *Genesis* Chapters 44 and 45 in which we have attempted to understand the '*the spoiled self serving child dreamer*' who in time will become an '*interpreter of dreams*' for others -- and only then -- the very one who saves his brothers and 'his Egypt' from starvation.

But as we often leave out of our telling, (embedded in an *underlying Pentimento-esque* telling) he does so by reducing the *Egyptian population to a serfdom* not unlike the *indentured servitude that he himself* has only recently experienced. Yes, there are **identity issues** '*at stake and at play*,' a recurring theme we will witness throughout Jewish history and one that while we are often in search of unity -- all too often this search will yield anything but. -- Perhaps revealing **unity's** evil life-threatening twin, -- one that is an anathema to Jewish identity of the past and to the future, '**disunity.**'

We have reviewed how, when finally revealing his identity to his brothers, Joseph has 'given them a pass' in spite of the treatment they had accorded him, *a literal kidnapping, a stated intent to murder, and a documented trafficking into slavery -- to a foreign nation*, rising to the top and falling again into what looks a lot like that pit which they originally cast him into. There in a darkened cell where he yet again will more than likely ask himself, '*how did I get here -- and who am I?*'



How did I get here . . .

Joseph in prison, painted by Gerbrand van den Eeckhout

'How' indeed and 'who' indeed . . . How he will see himself and his family, who once they arrive in Egypt, became more like a 'Lincolnesque team of rivals' than as a family of brothers. None of them would see their way out, only Joseph (his bones) originally embalmed in an Egyptian wrap of finery, (the wrap more than likely recalling his original appearance standing before his brothers) would eventually find his way home to the Land of Israel. Only Joseph . . .

Long dead but contrary to the 8th verse of chapter 1 of Exodus, not forgotten.

Exodus 1:5-9

ה וַיְהִי, כָּל-נַפְשׁ יִצְאֵי יֶרֶךְ-יַעֲקֹב--שִׁבְעִים נַפְשׁ; וַיֹּסֶף, הָיָה בְּמִצְרַיִם.	5 And all the souls that came out of the loins of Jacob were seventy souls; and Joseph was in Egypt already.
ו וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל-אָחָיו, וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא.	6 And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation.
ז וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, פָּרוּ וַיִּשְׁרְצוּ וַיִּרְבוּ וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ-- בְּמֵאדָּ מְאֹד; וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ, אֹתָם. {פ}	7 And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them. {P}
ח וַיִּקָּם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ, עַל-מִצְרַיִם, אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע, אֶת-יוֹסֵף.	8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph.
ט וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶל-עַמּוֹ: הִנֵּה, עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--רַב וְעָצוּם, מִמֶּנּוּ.	9 And he said unto his people: 'Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us;

We will explore this further, not just Joseph 'as one of us,' but very possibly *us as them*.

The identity issues he experienced in Egypt (and his people along with him) are the same identity issues we have struggled with even unto to this very day.

Let's pick this up on Wednesday at 7:00 PM and then possibly Sunday at 3:00 PM EST.

Warm wishes for the new year,

Seth