

## **D'rash on Mikaytz 2021**

### **David Goldston**

This is a difficult parsha on which to give a d'rash in some ways – it's so brimming with detail. You might think that would make it easier to draw from, but the story is so human; it's hard to abstract from. (It reminds me of a biography I read years ago, where the biographer half apologized for the book, noting that his subject “had not lived so that we might deduce.”)

But this got me to wondering about what makes this story so human, so moving, so involving.

It occurred to me that the Joseph story combines three deep human desires – fantasies, one might say – in striking ways.

The first is a desire to think that we, as individuals have great, perhaps even unique promise in a way that no one else fully appreciates or understands. The second is a desire for revenge, or at least comeuppance for those who have mistreated or thwarted us. And the third is for reconciliation – completely embraced reconciliation that makes the past immaterial. It seems unusual to combine these three powerful desires in a single story.

The Torah further deepens our connection to the story by narrating it almost entirely from Joseph's viewpoint. It puts us in his position, leading us to identify with him and his desires. At the same time, though, the Torah opens the aperture just enough to add complexity.

We see Joseph's sense of his promise from his vantage point, but also how his youthful dreams affect others. In the revenge/testing part of the story, the story's lens widens enough for us to see how Joseph's plot afflicts Jacob and, presumably, Benjamin. The Torah also complicates our reaction by not making clear Joseph's motivation or really anything much about his thinking besides his ultimate decision – we are put in his position, but not fully in his head. Similarly, the Torah tells us nothing about how Joseph's brothers respond to the reconciliation. We see that almost entirely from Joseph's perspective; we get his weeping.

So what can we take away from this? I think that, as usual, the story presents us with tensions rather than simple principles or solutions. On the one hand, these three desires/fantasies are natural and normal, part of being human. G\_d sets and keeps the story in motion through them. They are needed to move things forward, perhaps in the way that “the evil impulse” is needed for progress.

But the story also shows how these natural, sometimes productive impulses are also problematic. Our ambitiousness can shade into arrogance. Our desire for revenge can degenerate into manipulative cruelty. Our desire for reconciliation can lead us to an unrealistic belief in an impossibly complete healing that simply blinks away the hurt borne by others.

So we need balance and self-awareness.

So as I open it to discussion let me ask a more personal question than I sometimes do – what is our experience with the kinds of desires that are the engine of the Joseph story? And how do we relate to the Joseph story as a very human story?