

THE ULTIMATE PORTRAYAL OF THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF THE UNHAPPY FAMILY

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What Rembrandt's etching of Joseph and his family shows us about Judaism, and mankind.

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This is the second in an occasional series of essays by Rabbi Meir Soloveichik on the intersection of Jews and Judaism with the artistic practice, and the aesthetic vision, of the great 17th-century Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn. To read the introductory installment, click [here](#).

“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Tolstoy’s line, one of the most famous in world literature, is at least partially untrue: happy families are certainly not all alike. But yes, every family in turmoil is definitely unhappy in its own way—an adage worth keeping in mind when contemplating a 1638 etching by Rembrandt van Rijn. The etching depicts what, for Jews, may be the ultimate example of the unhappy family: that of Jacob and his twelve sons.



From Rembrandt's Joseph Telling His Dreams, 1638. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Rembrandt gives us here the opening scene of *Vayeshev*, this week's Torah reading. In it, Joseph is relating another of his dreams to his (radically unhappy) father and brothers:

Behold I have again dreamed a dream; and behold, the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed down to me. And he told it to his father, and to his brothers: and his father rebuked him, and said to him, What is this dream that thou hast dreamed? Shall I and thy mother and thy brothers indeed come to bow down ourselves to thee

to the earth? And his brothers envied him; but his father kept the matter in mind.
(Genesis 37:9-11)

In the Torah's rendition, the people "onstage" are clearly named: "and he told it to his fathers and his brothers." For an artist, like Rembrandt, following the Protestant rule of *sola scriptura* (scripture only), the figures depicted should thus be Jacob, Joseph, and ten of his brothers—the youngest, Benjamin, being presumably still a baby. But one of the ten seems to be missing. We see Jacob, we see Joseph, and, counting carefully, only nine brothers crowding in. Scrutinizing the image more closely, however, we may notice that the brother to Joseph's left seems to be eyeing someone even farther to the left, of whose person we can see nothing but a few fingers resting palm down on the table. So a tenth brother is (barely) present after all.



Rembrandt, *Joseph Telling His Dreams*, 1638. [Click to enlarge.](#)

But that brings us immediately to a more surprising aspect of the image, which is not who might be missing from it but those whom Rembrandt, already pressed for space, has nevertheless *added*. There are two of them.

One is the woman in bed on the upper left. This, of course, is Leah, Jacob's first wife and the mother of most of the men onstage—but *not* the mother of Joseph, born to her beautiful younger sister Rachel: the woman who was Jacob's first and only love, whom Jacob would marry and bring into his household after seven additional years of labor for her, and who has since died in giving birth to Benjamin.

What, then, does Leah have to do with the story of Joseph? Nothing—but, as Rembrandt understood, everything. Leah, we learn earlier in Genesis, was desperate for her husband's love, but to no avail: she was *snuah*, disdained, and she certainly felt it. In setting aside precious space in this etching to place her in her bed, Rembrandt reminds us of how desperately Leah had to bargain with her sister Rachel to get Jacob, for whom she had borne so many children, back into that bed:

And Reuben went in the days of the wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes. And [Leah] said to her, Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? And wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? . . . And Jacob came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, Thou must come in to me; for indeed I have hired thee tonight with my son's mandrakes. And he lay with her that night. (Genesis 30:14-16)

Even after Rachel's death, when Jacob might logically have transferred his affections to the wife who gave him most of his children, his love centers instead on Rachel's elder child Joseph—to the bitter resentment of Jacob's other sons: "And [Joseph's] brethren saw that their father loved [him] more than all his brothers, and they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." Many years later, at the end of this saga, Jacob will still be describing Rachel and her children in a way that denigrates Leah and her progeny: "You know," he tells the brothers, "that my wife bore me two children."

Leah is thus in Rembrandt's etching because, at every moment in the story of Joseph and his brothers, she is always in the picture. It is her hurt, her rejection, that drives her sons' all-consuming hatred of Joseph.

As for the second added figure—the young girl sitting on a low stool at Jacob's feet—she must be Dinah, his and Leah's only daughter. Dinah's story appears in the Torah right after the death of Rachel:

And Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she bore to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. And when Sh'khem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her. (Genesis 34:1-2)

Note that Dinah here is identified as the daughter of Leah, not of Jacob, and that the text will soon identify her primarily with her brothers rather than, again, her father. After raping her, Sh'khem has sued for peace with the family, and Jacob is inclined to agree. But the brothers display a dramatically different response to the outrage committed by Sh'khem on their family honor:

And it came to pass on the third day . . . that two of the sons of Jacob, Simon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took each man his sword, and came upon the city unresisted, and slew all the males. And they slew Hamor and Sh'khem his son with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah out of Sh'khem's house, and went out. The sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. (Genesis 34:25-27)

Moreover, when their father Jacob berates them for this rash action, the brothers are wholly unapologetic:

And Jacob said to Simon and Levi, You have brought trouble on me to make me odious among the inhabitants of the land, . . . and I being few in number, they shall gather themselves together against me, and slay me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house.

But they said, shall he deal with our sister as with a harlot? (Genesis 34:30-31)

"Our sister." Their fury with Jacob is acute, as if to say: why did you not act on behalf of our sister, daughter of our mother, your wife who still lives? Why are you acting as if our sister were not your daughter?

Dinah's story, too, is thus profoundly connected to that of Joseph. She is another symbol of the emotional pain provoked by Jacob's preferential love for Rachel, and a marker of the near-homicidal rage that will ultimately burn against Joseph. In this scene of apparent domesticity, Rembrandt has given us an emotional tinderbox about to combust.

There is still more. Studying this etching, we can't really put names to the individual brothers—with, as art historians have pointed out, two exceptions. The most prominent son, standing next to Leah's bed, is presumably the eldest, Reuben, who loyally served his mother and, as we've seen, found the flowers that ultimately brought Jacob to her bed. As for the other significantly placed brother, he is standing at center right, holding a staff. This must be Judah, who in fact plays a role in the Joseph story second only to Joseph himself.

There are two striking references in Genesis to the staff of Judah. The first occurs in the seemingly accidental encounter of the widowed Judah with his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar, who is disguised as a prostitute:

And he turned to her by the way, and said, Come now, I pray thee, let me come in to thee (for he knew not that she was his daughter-in-law). And she said, What wilt thou give me, that thou mayst come in to me? And he said, I will send thee a kid from the flock. And she said, Wilt thou give me a pledge, till thou send it? And he said, What pledge shall I give thee? And she said, Thy signet, and thy cord, *and the staff that is in thy hand*. (Genesis 38:16-18)

This is Judah at his most imperfect, his moral nadir. But as the narrative unfolds, this same Judah is about to assume heroic stature in the dramatic encounter between the brothers and another family member in disguise—namely, Joseph, at this point the resplendently garbed vizier of Egypt and, as such, unrecognized by the vengeful brothers who once sold him into slavery. Having seen to it that they have been plentifully furnished with food to take back to famine-stricken Canaan, he now holds them in his thrall, seizing one as hostage until they return with their youngest brother Benjamin.

Upon the brothers' arrival home, their aged patriarch Jacob refuses to relinquish the only remaining son of his beloved Rachel: "for his brother is dead, and [Benjamin] is left alone: if mischief befall him by the way in the which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave." But now the same Judah, who earlier played the key part in persuading the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery, executes a moral turnabout by pledging his own life as surety for Benjamin's and thereby winning their father's acquiescence.

Even more dramatically, when the brothers reappear in Egypt and Joseph, still disguised, stages a fake theft of his golden goblet and fingers Benjamin as the culprit, Judah stands up once again, volunteering himself into slavery if only Joseph will let the boy return to his father. This utter transformation so stuns Joseph that he ceases his charade, reveals himself to the brothers, and proceeds to heal the family's fractured relations.

And here is the second, now-redemptive meaning of the staff that Rembrandt places in Judah's hand. Although this entire episode in Genesis is often referred to as the story of "Joseph and his Brothers," Joseph is not the person who undergoes the most arresting character development over the course of it. That person is Judah, the flawed human being who is at once the most interesting, and the most heroic, character in the book of Genesis.

In the encounter with Joseph, Judah emerges as the leader of the family, and the child of Leah finally gets his due; by the end of Genesis, in Jacob's blessing of his sons, it becomes clear that it is to the descendants of Judah, and not of Joseph, that the children of Israel will bow:

Judah, thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise: thy hand shall be on the neck of thy enemies; thy father's children shall bow down before thee. . . . *The staff shall not depart from Judah*, nor the scepter from between his feet, until Shilo come, and the obedience of the people be his. (Genesis 49:8-12)

So the second identifiable brother in the etching is Judah. But is it also, simultaneously, someone else?

Just before creating this etching, Rembrandt painted a portrait of himself and his wife Saskia that is known today as [*The Prodigal Son in the Brothel*](#). As I'm not the first to note, Rembrandt's self-image in that painting bears a strong resemblance to the image of the man holding the staff in our etching. Moreover, Rembrandt in this self-portrait depicts himself magisterially holding, or rather wearing, a staff of his own: a painter's stick in the form of an épée.

Of course, the Dutch master inserted himself all over his paintings, always to tell us something about himself and also something about us as fellow human creatures. Rembrandt is thus Judah because Judah—and not Joseph—is all of us. True, it is impossible not to admire Joseph, who succeeds at everything, who can make lemonade out of every lemon he encounters, who defies temptation at every turn and forgives his brothers' monstrous act. But Joseph is too perfect to inspire. Judah, by contrast, inspires precisely because he is imperfect, a man who betrays but then redeems, who is cowardly but then courageous, who falters and fails but does penitence and overcomes.

Maimonides puts it this way:

What is complete repentance? That is the case of one who is presented with a sin that he had once transgressed, and he is able to perform it again, and he refrains, and does not sin, motivated by repentance and not from fear or lack of will.

That is Judah, and that is why, as Rembrandt is aware, the story of Joseph and his brothers could properly be called "Judah and his Brothers." It is also why Jews have much to learn from what Rembrandt saw and, in his art, illuminated.

For historical reasons, the faith founded by Abraham and legislated by Moses ended up being named for Judah. But there is more to it than history. For Judaism really *is* "Judah-ism," the faith that asks its followers, as Rembrandt does, to place themselves in Judah's place. Judaism proclaims, idealistically but realistically, that most human beings cannot be Moses but all can be Judah. It asserts, critically but optimistically, that mankind is not inherently good but is capable of goodness. It is a faith whose imperfect namesake is an inspiration to all.