

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Vayeshev, Genesis, Chapters 34-38 | December 9, 2023

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Joseph, Churchill, Reagan, and Begin: Destiny and Political Leadership

The great historian Martin Gilbert reported that he once interviewed General Sir Edward Louis Spears, a friend of Churchill, and was struck when Spears reflected, “Even Winston had a fault.” Gilbert eagerly waited to hear of Churchill’s imperfection, and then Spears told him: “He was too fond of Jews.” As Andrew Roberts notes, not only was Gilbert Jewish, but also “Spears was himself Jewish, though he changed his name from Spiers to hide the fact.”

Apropos of this story, one might find a fault with my series “*Parashah* and Politics” by pointing out that I quote so much Churchill that I might just be *too* fond of him. I hope, however, that this is not a flaw; and even though I also begin my special Maccabees series with a discussion of a Churchill speech, I must speak of Churchill regarding our Torah reading as well. For in studying the story of Joseph we must look to other examples of leaders who had a sense of their own destiny, who had dreams about it. Churchill is just such a leader. And yet just as our reading is not only about Joseph but also about another Israelite leader, so we must look to other statesmen who embody a style of leadership different from Churchill’s, one which is perhaps even more essential to Jewish history.

The dreams of Joseph are famous, but require revisiting. We are informed that he was a favorite of his father, and therefore the target of his brothers’ jealousy. Joseph further incurs their enmity when he informs them of his dreams:

Behold, we were binding sheaves within the field, and suddenly my sheaf stood upright, and your sheaves surrounded mine, and bowed to my sheaf. (Genesis 37:7)

This first dream, involving agriculture, foretells a time when Joseph’s brothers will be economically dependent on him. This of course will come to pass. Then another dream enters the picture:

Behold, the sun and the moon, and eleven stars were bowing to me. (Genesis 37:9)

Note that whereas originally the sheaves bow to Joseph’s own *sheaf*, here the celestial luminaries bow “*to me*.” Joseph foresees a time when the very universe will revolve around him. This may seem extraordinarily arrogant, but the hard truth is that the dream essentially comes true: as vizier to Pharaoh, Joseph will save civilization from starvation. He truly will be one of the great men of history, and his dream reflects this. In this vein, we may recall again Churchill’s vision, told to a friend as a teenager, of his own future greatness:



I have an idea of where I will be. I have dreams about it. . . . I can see vast changes coming over a now peaceful world; great upheavals, terrible struggles, wars such as one cannot imagine; and I tell you London will be in danger—London will be attacked and I shall be very prominent in the defense of London; . . . dreams of the future are blurred but the main objective is clear. I repeat—London will be in danger and in the high position I shall occupy, it will fall to me to save the capital, to save the empire.

Similarly, Joseph somehow senses that he will need to save his family and the known world through a high position he will occupy. Yet in this very vision of Joseph's something sticks out. Joseph sees eleven stars, joined by a sun and moon, bowing to him. The stars are of course his brothers, and the sun seems to symbolize his father; but who is the moon? The natural interpretation is that this is his mother, Rachel; but Rachel has already died in childbirth while delivering Joseph's brother Benjamin. One part of this dream, it would seem, cannot be fulfilled. This, for commentators, points to the deeper meaning behind Jacob's own critique of Joseph:

And his father scolded him, and said, what is this dream that you have dreamt? Shall I and your *mother* and your brothers come to bow to you to the ground? (Genesis 37:10)

Are dreams visions of the future, or do they reflect our deepest desires?

Are dreams visions of the future, or do they reflect our deepest desires? The answer, for the Bible, seems to be both; for as Churchill put it as a young man, "dreams of the future are blurred." The celestial vision reflects Joseph's sense of his future greatness, but also a poignant longing for a restored family that can never be, for a mother who once radiated light in a dark world as the beautiful Rachel once did. Of course the moon in the dream can also reflect some other prediction that will come true, but in dreaming of his mother Joseph reveals that deep down he understands what is tearing his family apart.

From the moment Jacob encountered Rachel and was struck by her beauty, his love for her was constant; indeed, while there are many instances of spousal love in the Torah, this was the one instance where romance enters the scene prior to marriage. Jacob only also marries Leah through Laban's trickery, and the sons of Leah, acutely aware of the fact that their mother is unloved, grow even more resentful following Rachel's death.

This can be seen in last week's reading. After Leah's daughter Dinah is horrifically assaulted by a man named Shechem, two sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, massacre the entire city that Shechem's family rules. The two brothers' statement following this event reveals their acute anger at the fact that Jacob had himself not taken action; and it also reveals the profound pain at the center of the family.

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

The brothers' words are noteworthy. We would have expected them to instead to say: "shall **your daughter** be made a harlot?" Instead, they speak of "**our sister**." They are implicitly accusing Jacob of not caring sufficiently



for Leah's children. Why, they are saying, were you not acting on behalf of our sister, the daughter of our mother who still lives? Why are you so focused on the wife you loved who is now dead? "Are we," they are implicitly asking, "not also your children? Is not our sister also your daughter?"

The memory of Rachel, and Jacob's love for her, is a constant theme throughout the rest of Genesis. Thus the complexity of Joseph's dream: it foretells the future of his family, but also reflects the fact that his mother will forever remain in the picture.

Joseph will be one of the greatest figures in the entire Bible; but the pain revealed in his dream also reveals his humanity, the fact that he very much misses his mother, and is acutely aware of the fact that the memory of her is a sore that will tear their family apart. He is marked by destiny, but he is still the son of his father and mother. Here too one might think of a dream recorded by Churchill, not as a young man, but rather after the war:

I was drawing my father's face, gazing at the portrait, and frequently turning round right-handed to check progress in the mirror. Thus I was intensely absorbed, and my mind was freed from all other thoughts except the impressions of that loved and honored face now on the canvas, now on the picture, now in the mirror.

I was just trying to give the twirl to his moustache when I suddenly felt an odd sensation. I turned round with my palette in my hand, and there, sitting in my red leather upright armchair, was my father.

Churchill reported that in his dream he told his father all that occurred in the 20th century up to that point, but amazingly, he never told his father of the role he played. Andrew Roberts comments on this with a fascinating reflection:

For all Churchill's seeming modesty in not mentioning to his father the fact that he had been prime minister and one of the saviors of Western civilization, the reader nonetheless inevitably concludes that Churchill's achievements in the tumultuous 20th century were far greater than his father's in the relatively quiet and peaceful 19th. The avoidance of saying so makes the point all the more powerfully. Underlying it is an acute psychological appraisal of a boy who only ever wanted his father's approval, but never received it.

Or, as Margaret Thatcher, cited by Richard Langworth, commented about this dream:

I read it in the early hours of this morning and am totally fascinated by the imagination of the story and how much it reveals of Winston the man and the son.

Joseph, of course, has his father's approval, but in his dreams, he reveals himself to be both a future savior of civilization, and also his mother's son. It is both these aspects of his identity—a sense of his future greatness, and his being the son of the beloved wife—that set him apart from his brothers, and both of these aspects come together in the brothers' jealousy and rage. As they shepherd sheep, he goes out to see them:



And the brothers said, behold the master of dreams comes. Let us now kill him, and throw him in a pit, and we will say a wild beast devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams. (Genesis 37:19-20)

In the midst of this terrible episode, two other sons of Jacob make themselves known. Reuben prevents the murder but does not return Joseph to his father, which leaves time for another brother, Judah, to make an infamous suggestion:

What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites . . . (Genesis 37:26-27)

Joseph is sold, and is taken to Egypt, where he becomes a slave to a minister of Pharaoh. He is again marked by destiny:

And it was when he appointed him over his home and all that he had, that the Lord blessed the home of the Egyptian because of Joseph, and the blessing of the Lord was in all he had in the home and field. (Genesis 39:5)

When the minister's wife propositions Joseph, he resists. In the Midrash, Joseph is said to have overcome temptation because a vision of his father appeared in the window, a striking parallel to Churchill's vision of his own father in the mirror. The minister's wife then falsely accuses Joseph of attempted adultery, and Joseph is thrown in prison. There too he continues to reflect that destiny has greatness in store, for the Bible tells us that the warden marveled at Joseph's gifts, and placed him in charge.

When two other ministers of Pharaoh join Joseph in prison, their dreams are interpreted by Joseph. There is much to say about Joseph's interpretations but what is most important is the fact that it is not Joseph who is dreaming: the dreamer has become the dream interpreter. Not once does Joseph dream in Egypt, because his sense of achieving his destiny is made manifest constantly. He has no need to dream of future achievements when he is actively bringing those achievements into being. Similarly, Churchill, the great dreamer, tells us of the moment when he finally achieved the office of prime minister:

During these last crowded days of the political crisis, my pulse had not quickened at any moment. I took it all as it came. But I cannot conceal from the reader of this truthful account that as I went to bed at about 3 a.m., I was conscious of a profound sense of relief. At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene. I felt as if I were *walking with Destiny*, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial. [Italics my own.]

Churchill had once dreamt of serving as savior of Britain. As he saw his dreams unfolding in real life, as he truly felt himself walking with destiny, he did not actually dream, or as he concluded:

I slept soundly and had no need for cheering dreams. Facts are better than dreams.

Joseph senses that his own interpretation of the dreams of these ministers will set the stage for his appearance before Pharaoh, and for his own rise to leadership; this will indeed prove to be the case in next week's reading.



The constant success of Joseph, perhaps the most politically gifted person in the entire Bible, and the amazing parallels to Churchill, inspire an obvious question: why, in the end, is Joseph not chosen as the ancestor of Israel's future monarchs, of the dynasty that will make manifest the destiny of the Chosen People? Why will David descend from Judah, rather than Joseph?

The answer is that despite Joseph's greatness, there are other forms of leadership that are also valued. Churchill's sense of his own destiny drove his achievements, and we are so grateful that it did, just as we are grateful for all that Joseph achieved. Yet for the leader of a covenantal people, the Bible often seeks a different sort of statesman; one whose leadership involves not a reflection of his or her own destiny, but a connection with one's people that allows them to feel that they too are marked by destiny. One powerful example can be found in Ronald Reagan's famous "A Time for Choosing" speech from 1964:

You and I have a rendezvous with destiny.

We'll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we'll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.

Both Begin and Reagan shared the ability to commune with the peoples they led, to draw their fellow citizens into a sense of destiny that bound them together

As I noted in an article in *Mosaic*, we have a striking contrast here between Reagan, the most successful statesman of the second half of the 20th century, and Churchill, the most successful statesman of the first. Churchill's destiny describes the role he (correctly) believed he was destined to play as a Great Man of history. But Reagan utilized destiny in a different

way. Reagan spoke not of himself walking with destiny but of "you and I" together having this rendezvous. His rhetoric was communal and covenantal. And sixteen years later, he concluded his acceptance of the Republican nomination by making this theme even more explicit:

The time is now, my fellow Americans, to recapture our destiny, to take it into our own hands. But, to do this will take many of us, working together. I ask you tonight to volunteer your help in this cause so we can carry our message throughout the land.

In the very same time period that Reagan delivered this speech, Israel's prime minister was making manifest his own ability to connect with his people. One of the most disgusting moments in American journalism was when *Time* magazine, purportedly seeking to help its readers pronounce the name of the new Israeli prime minister, informed its readers that "Begin rhymes with Fagin," utilizing the anti-Semitic caricature of Fagin, the thief from *Oliver Twist*. But it is more appropriate to say—as *Time* magazine could so easily have written—that Begin rhymes with Reagan. Both Begin and Reagan shared the ability to commune with the peoples they led, to draw their fellow citizens into a sense of destiny that bound them together.



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It is just such a leader who will emerge in Jacob's family. In the midst of the story of Joseph, we are told how Judah, who had suggested selling his brother, suddenly seems to abandon his family entirely.

And it was in this time that Judah went down from his brothers. (Genesis 38:1)

Yet by next week's reading, Judah is suddenly back with his family, and will emerge as the leader of his brothers. It is this that we will consider next week, as we see how Judah, and his descendants, come to embody the form of leadership that the Bible cherishes most.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Israeli society, in the midst of this difficult time, is Israelis' realization that they are bound together, and that they, in a certain sense, have a rendezvous with destiny. Future leaders will be forged in this moment. Meanwhile, what is desperately needed in America is a leader who can commune with his or her fellow citizens, allowing them to understand the exceptional nature of this nation—and to seek a rendezvous with a destiny of their own.

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Additional Resources

Winston Churchill's Dream, *The Dream*, 1947. [Click here to read.](#)

Meir Soloveichik on Reagan and Churchill, "What the Right Still Has to Learn from Ronald Reagan," *Mosaic*, July 18, 2022. [Click here to read.](#)

