

# Joseph, Haman, & the Power of Vulnerability

Shani Rosenbaum '06 | BronfmanTorah | Parshat Miketz 2015

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James Jacques Joseph Tissot, French, 1836-1902

*Joseph Maketh Himself Known to His Brethren*

Stop me if you've heard this story: an ambitious, crafty man has been appointed chief advisor to the king of a major empire. His power is great – he holds the signet ring of the king himself – and his ego overblown and fragile; he is obsessed, for example, with being bowed-to. And at a crucial moment in Jewish history, the fate of the Children of Israel lies in his hands.

Part of the magic of the Biblical text lies in its capacity to tell multiple stories within a single narrative. Much has been taught about parallels between the melodramatic satire that is Megillat Esther, and the story of our patriarch Joseph. Naturally, most of the comparisons between the Megilla and the Joseph story focus upon Joseph's likeness to the heroes of that story, Esther and Mordechai. But as I read parshat Miketz this week, it struck me that our hero Joseph holds an unsettling resemblance to another character in the Megilla: the egomaniacal, genocidal villain, Haman.

What do we gain in our reading of the Joseph story by casting it through the lens of the Megilla – by placing the proverbial three-cornered hat on Joseph's head? To tease this out, I'd like to take a deep dive into the moments when Joseph bears most striking a resemblance to Haman – and search for the subtle shift that sets the two characters apart.

From a young age, Joseph is the kind of guy who finds favor in the eyes of authority figures. Maybe it's because he's "of beautiful form, and fair to look upon"[\[1\]](#), as many charismatic people tend to be; or perhaps he's simply clever, resourceful (having an uncanny ability to interpret dreams, for example), and a little bit manipulative[\[2\]](#). By the time he rises to be the viceroy to Pharaoh, Joseph is practiced at being second-in-command: he serves as chosen attendant to his elderly father[\[3\]](#); and not long after his arrival in Egypt in chains, he has been promoted to head-of-household to his master Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard[\[4\]](#). So in placing Haman's character as the right-hand-man of the king, the Megilla can't help but make us think of Joseph.

And Joseph, like Haman, is almost absurdly interested in prostration. At the age of 17, he dreams his brothers are bowing to him. Years later – after the brothers plot his death and then sell him into slavery – Joseph watches his dream materialize: his starving brothers, not recognizing Joseph in his royal garb, bow low as they beg the him for food for their families. At this moment, the text tells us, ויזכור יוסף את החלומות אשר חלם להם – Joseph remembers his dreams about his brothers[\[5\]](#). And as a result of remembering, Joseph does something strange: he accuses his brothers of being spies, keeping one brother hostage and

demanding they prove themselves honest by returning with Benjamin, the only brother who was left home.

What is Joseph's aim here? One popular read is that he is testing whether his brothers have truly repented – will they give up the favored brother, as Joseph later demands, in order to save themselves?

But paying particular attention to Joseph's Haman-ish side, there may be another, more sinister layer to this game. ויזכור יוסף את החלומות אשר חלם להם – he remembers telling his brothers the dreams, and their subsequent betrayal. ויזכור יוסף את החלומות -- he remembers the dreams themselves; that in the dreams, *eleven* sheaves, *eleven* stars bowed to him – and before him he sees only ten. Like Haman – who could not be calmed when a single man out of an entire kingdom would not bow to him – Joseph seems unable to tolerate the slightest adjustment to his dream of dominance.

Joseph's great pitfall, like Haman's, is his obsession with recognition and respect. Traipsing around wearing special gifts from his father, spouting dreams of lording over his brothers, sets the course for Joseph's troubles in his early life. And now, it seems that however much power he has achieved, Joseph is overcome by this thirst for recognition – he is unable to be satisfied with an incomplete fruition of his fantasy.

By the end of parshat Miketz, Joseph seems in true danger of becoming Haman – of pursuing respect and recognition so doggedly that he risks destroying everything in his path. We know how this ends for Haman. But how will it end for Joseph? How can he overcome his villainous edge, and emerge more Esther than Haman?

At the climax of our story – as Joseph accuses Benjamin of stealing from him, and is preparing to imprison him – Yehuda, one of the brothers, makes a heart-wrenching plea. And suddenly, Joseph's façade begins to crumble. ולא יכל יוסף להסתפק, the text tells us – Joseph is unable to contain his emotion. For the first time in this saga, we see a new side to resilient, charismatic, Joseph: ויתן את קולו בבכי – in the ultimate act of humility and vulnerability, Joseph breaks down and

cries. Uninhibited at last, not only his brothers but the whole of Egypt hear his sobs.

What made the difference between Joseph's continued spiral into megalomania, and his recovery of his own humanity and mercy? Perhaps it was Yehuda's moving appeal – Yehuda's exposure of his own vulnerability – that opened the space for Joseph's most exposed and small self to emerge. That moment of vulnerability saved the brothers from Joseph, and Joseph from himself.

There is a strong case to be made that cultivating dignity and respect – of others, but also of ourselves, our bodies, and our nation – are among the highest of traditional Jewish values.<sup>[6]</sup> And yet, when we read the Joseph story through the Megilla's eyes, we see that the line between a Haman and a Joseph is remarkably thin. The Megilla itself is a caricature of power and dignity, and on the holiday of Purim that it inspired, we shed our attachment to respect, dress like idiots and drink ourselves near oblivion. We are, in other words, deeply vulnerable to each other as a way perhaps to counterbalance our inclination to take ourselves dangerously seriously.

Purim's sister holiday, Chanukah, which we celebrate this week, is in many ways a story about restoring Jewish dignity. Our tiny army proved itself capable of great military victory; we reclaimed the Holy Temple, removed its disgraceful impurities and restored it to its former glory. On Chanukah, we celebrate the miracle of our resilience and reclamation of self-determination, just as we celebrate, and take pride in, Joseph's own rise from the depths of the dungeons of Egypt to the highest heights of political power.

But when we read the Joseph story at this time of year, the voice of the Megilla – of Haman – should also echo in our ears. In a historical moment when the Jewish people have risen from the most undignified depths to, in many places, the height of power, we need to guard vigilantly our humanity and humility; to hold on to our ability to be vulnerable; to access our tears even for those who have wished us harm. Even Joseph, after all, has a little Haman in him.

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[1] Gen. 29:6

[2] Gen 41: 33, 39: Immediately upon interpreting Pharaoh's dream prophesying years of plenty followed by famine, Joseph conveniently suggests that Pharaoh "look out a man discreet and wise" – to which Pharaoh responds, "there is none so discreet and wise as thou", and appoints Joseph as viceroy

[3] See Ramban on Gen

ממנ יפרד לא תמיד ידו על נשען לשרתו, והוא עמו להיות הקטנים מבניהם אחד שיקחו הזקנים מנהג "36:3 תמיד, ועל עמו והיה הזה לדבר יוסף את יעקב לקח לזקוניו, והנה שישרתו בעבור זקוניו בן לו נקרא ו, והוא Joseph was the son Jacob had chosen to be by his side at all times attending to him in his old age, which is why he was not out in the fields helping his brothers tend the sheep

[4] Gen 39:4

[5] Gen 42:9

[6] The concept of צלם אל-קים, for example – humans being created in God's image, has vast implications in rabbinic literature for our treatment of ourselves and of other humans (the importance of washing our bodies regularly, for example). The Children of Israel are called multiple times ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש – a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation – and much is developed in rabbinic tradition about dressing with dignity and making a good impression among other nations for the sake of קידוש השם, sanctifying God's name.



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