

ALL MY CHILDREN – REDUX

TEXT: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Well, today we look at the next generation of Abraham's family. Abraham, the great patriarch of the Bible, the one God chose to bring forth the nation of Israel. His son Isaac produced twin sons, Esau and Jacob, whose lives were full of turmoil. Last week we heard the story of Jacob's difficult journey to make peace with his brother, and in the process wrestled with God by the River Jabbok.

Jacob, with his wives Leah and Rachel, and their servants Bilhah and Zilpah, has fathered twelve sons. As we enter today's episode of *All My Children* we find the boys mostly grown up, and the focus rests on the next to youngest, Joseph. You remember, the one with the amazing Technicolor dreamcoat.

Favoritism has always been prominent in Abraham's family. The patriarch was partial to Isaac, his son by Sara. Isaac and his wife Rebekah had the twins, Esau and Jacob. Isaac favored Esau, but Rebekah doted on Jacob and was the instigator or enabler in some of his nefarious adventures.

So now Jacob has returned to his homeland with his 12 sons. If you look on the front of today's bulletin you will see them pictured and named. True to form Jacob (now called Israel following his wrestling match with God), has a favorite – his next-to-youngest Joseph. You would think that Jacob would know from his own history the danger of playing favorites, but human nature does not always help us make those connections.

We are introduced to Joseph as a youth of seventeen. Joseph is the first son of Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife. He is "the son of his old age". To show his love for Joseph, Jacob gives him a special robe. Traditionally translated, "coat of many colors", the Hebrew term here probably refers to a coat with long sleeves or to an ornamented

coat. In any case, the coat is an explicit sign that Jacob loves Joseph more than any of his other sons and they hate Joseph because of it.

But there are other reasons that his brothers dislike him so much. He is a young man somewhat lacking in common sense, or perhaps simply a bit self-absorbed. He has two different dreams with the same message: He will become preeminent in his family. His brothers (and even his parents) will bow down to him! Seemingly unaware of his brothers' feelings for him, he eagerly shares these dreams with them. They hate him both because of the dreams and because he insists on talking about them. Even his doting father rebukes him for his words.

Even more than this, Joseph is a tattle-tale. He takes delight in spying on his brothers, checking on them as they pasture their father's flocks. When his brothers see him coming they scornfully refer to him as "this master of dreams". One day when Jacob sends Joseph out to check on his brothers, they decide they've had enough of him and decide to kill him. But Reuben, the oldest, talks them out of homicide, and instead they strip Joseph of his beautiful robe and throw him into a pit without water, mockingly ignoring his pleadings while they callously sit down for a picnic. They tear up his tunic and soak it with goat blood to show it to Jacob and allow him to draw his own conclusion that Joseph was killed by a wild beast. Ah, but soon they see a band of traders heading toward Egypt, loaded with rich goods.

Judah, #4 son, hatches a plan to make some cash out of the fate of their now helpless brother. "What profit is it if we kill our brother and hide his blood? Come, let us sell him to these Midianites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is (after all!) our brother, our own flesh". So, murder evolves into human trafficking, and one can only assume that Judah is more than cynical while uttering that crack about "our own flesh" as he prepares to name a healthy price for his brother. Might as well get something for the nasty little twerp, says Judah. This is the first of several literal and metaphorical descents (and ascents) Joseph will make in his life.

So they let Joseph out of his pit, and proceed to sell him to the traders for twenty silver pieces. Not only does Judah personally get nothing for Joseph, so too are the hopes of Reuben dashed when he returns to the pit and finds his one chance to find his way back into Jacob's favor is gone. With a shriek of despair, he cries, "The boy is gone, and I, where can I turn?" Where indeed?

Well this is truly a Genesis tale, isn't it? Trickery and hatred and deception abound, and the hero is finally not so heroic after all. He flaunts his sumptuous robe and his dream skills, and finds himself at the bottom of a pit, alone, and then sold off to the pits of Egypt, nearly a certain and monstrous death. But, of course, as we know, that will not be Joseph's fate at all, a fate that still will intertwine with his murderous and greedy brothers in ways we will be astonished to discover. And just who is Joseph? He is Abraham and Isaac and even Jacob all over again. And, as usual he is us, if we are courageous and honest enough to admit it.

Today's lesson, and those before and after it, have implications on many levels. For me, in order to understand its meaning, we need to go to the Torah, to the original text that is studied by our Jewish brothers and sisters. They understand it so much better than we do.

They tell the story about an elderly Jewish lady in Eastern Europe who would sit attentively in her seat in the women's gallery of the synagogue, following the weekly reading carefully in the Yiddish commentary, the *Tzena Urena*. As the reader progressed through the opening words of this week's section, her countenance became increasingly filled with consternation, until she could hold it back no longer, and blurted out audibly: "*Joseph, don't do it again! Didn't you learn your lesson from last year?!*"

Indeed, as we review the events that are related in this week's reading, it is hard to suppress a similar reaction. At times we direct our frustration at Joseph. At times, it might be towards other players in the drama: Jacob, Judah, Reuben, or the other brothers. How can they continue to act so stupidly year after year?

And those of you who can see the matters from a broader perspective may find another address for the complaints – the Almighty himself: Master of the Universe! How could you stand by, we ask, and allow the situation to degenerate so tragically without calling a stop before matters got out of hand?

Actually, this last question is the easiest one to answer, since God's role in the story seems to be the most understandable of all the players. After all, God had a clear agenda. Back in Genesis 15 he had informed Abraham that his descendants would end up enslaved in a foreign land, which is precisely what is accomplished by the conclusion of the book of Genesis. The story of Joseph and his brothers is designed to bring about that situation.

Seen in their own context, we have before us a sequence of mistakes and weaknesses – and only occasional glimmers of virtue.

Jacob, for example, violates every rule of good parenting in the preference that he displays toward Joseph. Joseph, in turn, acts like an obnoxious brat when he flaunts his ambitions and his favored status before his siblings. Even so, none of this can justify the murderous intentions of the brothers, or the vacillations of Reuben and Judah in not nipping the whole story in the bud.

So each of the figures can be taken to task for their misdeeds. This is the case, at least, if we choose to ignore the historical and theological context in which they are unfolding.

Imagine, if you will, that Jacob were here before us to answer to our criticisms. He could reply in all innocence: "I've done nothing wrong! If I had not provoked the jealousy of Joseph's brothers, then he never would have been sold to Egypt, and the family would never have joined him there! The Holy One's pledge to Abraham would never have been fulfilled. No Egypt, no Passover, no Sinai....So why blame me?"

Then we can imagine Joseph's brothers, and Joseph himself, stepping out from the dark corner where they have been trying to maintain invisibility, and offering the same excuse. And truly it is a very powerful argument.

We live in a world in which the petty deeds of individuals seem to count very little against mighty political and historical forces. How many false political gods have been founded on the premise that "the end justifies the means", that immoral acts can find their justification in the furthering of exalted destinies? How often do we get sent the message that the global economy would be fine if it weren't for all those troublesome *people* who keep getting in the way?

But the message for today comes from Rabbi Arama, who perceived so clearly that the Torah teaches otherwise. Even the furthering of God's own plans can never be a justification for unethical deeds. Next week we will see the ramifications of all of this as we follow Joseph into his captivity in Egypt and the final outcome. Seen in this light, maybe the little old lady is not being completely out of line in her expectation that Jacob's family – to which we all belong – will learn its lessons in time for the next time we read the story.