

Parashat Mikkeitz – Torah Introduction
Rabbi David Englander

The drama of the Joseph narrative relies again and again on Joseph's brothers failing to recognize him as one of their own. It's interesting to imagine what would have been different had the brothers walked in to his palace office the first time and said "Joseph, it's you, we can't believe it!" So much for the dramatic climax of the story when he finally reveals himself to them. The part of the narrative that is meant to explain how the Israelites eventually wound up being saved from famine, but which also explains how the Israelites wound up in Egypt to eventually be enslaved, would have been unchanged. But this is not only the story of a nation's trial – it is the story of an individual family's coming to grip with its past, and the role that each member of that family played in it.

This is such an important – and incredibly engaging – plot device – that is, the failure of the brothers to recognize Joseph – that like a great magic trick or illusion, we are mesmerized by it, barely scratching the surface of the question 'how did this happen'? Some commentators try to explain. One contemporary comment notes a visit to a high school reunion – have you ever been to your high school reunion? Joseph was about 20 years older than when his brothers last saw him – at your 20th high school reunion, did you have any trouble recognizing anyone? Probably you did – but probably these were probably not the people you knew well. What about the people you were close to in high school – it is unlikely they could have changed so much as to be unrecognizable.

Unlikely – but not impossible. Joseph, according to one school of thought, immersed himself so fully in Egyptian culture – out of necessity, desire, or both – that his appearance changed radically, which caused his brothers to be unable to recognize him. This is indeed not impossible, but there is a more plausible explanation which speaks to this family's dynamic, and at times to ours too.

Perhaps the brothers failed to recognize Joseph because they had never really seen him before. He was different than they were, they hated him deeply, they were barely able to speak to him. The Torah tells us that they recognized him coming from afar but that was because of the coat his father had given him – not because of his features or how he walked. They didn't 'see' him in Egypt because they had never bothered to 'see' him before. Had they looked more closely at Joseph when he was among them in Israel, had they resolved or even tried to address their differences with him, had they engaged him in anything but critique as a dreamy – and perhaps annoying – kid they didn't understand, they might have recognized him when they ran into him in an unexpected place, some twenty years down the road.

Truly 'seeing the other' is a catchphrase of those committed to working toward deeper tolerance and heightened justice in the world. It seems an appropriate lens through which to view Parashat Mikkeitz on this Shabbat, as we welcome Ms. Ruth Messinger, President of the American Jewish World Service, from whom we will hear toward the end of services today.

Haftarah Intro – Shabbat Chanukah

If someone asked you what the miracle of Chanukah was, you would likely reply in one of two ways. First, you might recount the narrative of the oil, enough of which was found by the Macabees to last for one day, but which of course lasted for eight. It just wouldn't be Chanukah without the miracle of the oil.

Or you might recount the military victory of these same Macabees over the local Syrian military presence, which has been read through Jewish eyes as being an example of right defeating might, and of the few defeating the many. This is the miracle most often recounted in the modern state of Israel's celebration. It just wouldn't be Chanukah – especially in Israel – without the military victory of the Macabees.

There is a third miracle of Chanukah, which is tied closely to the season in which we celebrate it. We are hardly the only people in the world – and we are also not the first – to celebrate a mid-winter holiday which involves the lighting of lights on the darkest nights of the year. In fact, pretty much every religious tradition marks these long nights with the kindling of lights. The third miracle of Chanukah is the miracle of light itself, including the gift of the light of Torah, which calls us to be a 'light unto the nations', which commands us to bring the light of hope and support to even the darkest places.

In our Haftarah, the prophet Zecharia recounts a vision of the anticipated dedication of the second Temple on which construction was just beginning. The menorah which would again shine in the Temple is the subject of one of this vision. Like in the time of the Macabees, the people knew the Temple was open for God's business only when these lamps were re-lit. The metaphor of the menorah is a powerful one. It represents the light of conscience, of commitment, even of creation itself. As Professor Michael Fishbane points out, "In [the context of Zechariah's prophecy], the new Temple symbolizes a restoration of the world, a rekindling of the lights of Creation through the pure worship of God."