

Hanukkah is not mentioned anywhere in the Torah, which makes sense because the events of the Hanukkah story happened much more recently than the Israelite's wanderings in the wilderness. But this week's parashah, Miketz, always falls during Hanukkah, in this last full-length dvar Torah before I leave on Sabbatical, I'd like to explore with you what we learn by considering the parasha in light of Hanukkah.

In Miketz, Joseph begins in an Egyptian prison, literally in a pit – the same word for the place his brothers threw him in last week's parashah. He is released to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, rises to great power in Egypt, and finally reunites with his brothers – and seriously messes with them!

While he is in power in Egypt, Joseph marries and has two children, and the names he gives them indicate an internal struggle that continues throughout the psyche of the Jewish people. His first child, he names Menashe, which as the same Hebrew root as a verb "to cause to forget," saying in Chapter 41, verse 51, "God has made me forget my father's house."

Consider how internally contradictory this statement is. If Joseph had actually forgotten his ancestral home, there would be nothing to say about it. It would be like naming a child today, "I'm so over it." The very fact of stating it makes clear that it is not true. In verse 52, he names his second son Ephraim, related to the word for fertility, and says, "Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction." As Avivah Zornberg¹ writes, "...nowhere does Joseph reveal as nakedly as in these names his own feeling about the strange vicissitudes of his life. Nowhere does he comment so openly on its bitterness and its sweetness as in these namings that encode his sense of God's dealings with him. . . . he names his firstborn son for the alienation that he experiences from his native culture."

¹ *The Beginnings of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, p 285- 286.

Of the name Ephraim she writes, “The paradoxical thrust is palpable: fruitfulness and affliction are inseparable in Joseph’s life.”² Joseph struggles with how to tell the story of what has happened to him.

But I think that itself, difficulty of memory, the interconnectedness of suffering and growth, are key to the Jewish people and particularly to the story of Hanukkah. The holiday is barely mentioned even in the Talmud. It has a few pages devoted to it in Tractate Shabbat. In the context of discussing shabbat candle lighting, it also talks about Hanukkah candle lighting. Only after describing the arguments about how to light the Hanukkah candles, the Talmud asks “My Hanukkah?”³ – What is Hanukkah? – and briefly describes what we’re doing and why as “ **The Sages taught ‘On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the days of Hanukkah are eight. One may not eulogize on them and one may not fast on them. When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary. And when the Hasmonean triumphed and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil the intact seal of the High Priest. And there was sufficient oil there to light the candelabrum for only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit the candelabrum from it eight days. The next year the Sages instituted those days and made them holidays with recitation of *hallel* and special thanksgiving.’**”

No mention by the rabbis of the Maccabees’ rebellion, of prolonged battle and organizing. No mention of the internal conflicts between the Jewish who wanted to assimilate and the Jews who wanted to hold to tradition. No mention, even, of religious freedom. The sages, too, were struggling with memory and alienation. In the time of Talmud, in more recent memory of the Hanukkah story, the Jews had been crushed in two rebellions against the Romans, and the sages of the Talmud,

² Ibid, p 288

³ Shabbat 21b <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.21b.10?lang=bi>

perhaps, did not want to tell any stories that were encourage fantasies of military might. And the rabbis were seeking unity, not stories of internal division.

And yet, they still told a story of Hanukkah, of defilement and purification, of a miracle of light.

We talk about Hanukkah as a time to light candles in the darkest time, but we wouldn't have the holiday had it not been for the combination of religious persecution and a successful military rebellion. Hanukkah is a celebration of a miracle of light, a most universal religious symbol, and a particular battle against the demands of assimilation to a majority culture that had no room for religious particularism. As Jews living in 21st century America, Hanukkah functions for many as an assertion of a non-Christian identity, and yet the ways that we celebrate; gifts, cards, decorations, even the Hanukkah sugar cookie molds; mirror and take from the majority Christmas season culture. Like the ancient Jews in Hellenistic times, we may be divided between attraction to and immersion in the surrounding culture, and a desire to assert the uniqueness of our own heritage and fiercely hold to our own traditions, even though we ourselves sometimes feel alienated from them. Unlike the Jews of Hellenistic times, fortunately, that struggle is internal to each of us, rather than a cause for war between us. And unlike the Talmudic Rabbis, there is no danger in acknowledging the military origins alongside the miracle of light. We get to keep every layer of the story, as we continue to tell it.

With Joseph too, we get to keep every layer of the story, as we continue to tell it:

Joseph's story evolves, not with forgetting, but through an ordeal of memory when he reunites with his brothers, and he hurts them – whether to test them, or whether simply as revenge, the text does not make clear. He cries, multiple times. He reclaims and is literally reclaimed by father and his brothers. It seems that there is some healing; some reconciliation.

But Menashe and Ephraim's names do not change. Joseph's sons become their own tribe of Israel, and their names are invoked in the traditional blessing recited on shabbat for all Jewish sons. Encoded in the blessings we pass down are these names that contain a reminder of alienation from tradition and the possibility of return, and the blessings that come when we can flourish through our trauma.

Perhaps our task is to be like Joseph in Egypt: to dance with memory, with trauma, naming what we remember, what we forget and, at the same time, the impossibility of forgetting. Like Joseph, we must be aware of the hurts we hold, and ready to give thanks for the improbable flourishing that is possible out of those hurts. We must be ready for the story to keep changing, and to both weep and give thanks as we continue to tell it.