

Good morning! In all the years that I've shared messages up here, this is my first time to share based on this particular Torah portion - *Vayeshev*, which begins at chapter 37 of Genesis. And, yay, here we are at the beginning of one of my favorite places in the Bible: the story of Joseph and his brothers.

A couple years back, Rabbi Russ Resnick was with us sharing insights from his new book **A Life of FAVOR - A FAMILY THERAPIST EXAMINES THE STORY OF JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS.** He brought plenty of copies of his book with him, and I'm sure you each obtained one, and have been devouring it ever since.

But, if you didn't, then I'd like to whet your appetite to begin doing so now. In his Preface, Rabbi Russ writes these words:

I'm a Messianic Jewish rabbi and also a clinical mental health counselor, with long experience in family dynamics and their implications for our daily lives. One reason for the endurance and popularity of Joseph's story is that it deals with struggles found in every family, including the recurring theme of sibling rivalry for the father's favor. This theme underlies what theologians call the doctrine of election---God's special choosing of a people, group or individual. But election is first a family issue before it is a theological one. Every child is born into a family and seeks favor---the approval and affirmation of family members, particularly the parents. Not everyone wants to be a Chosen One, as Joseph seems to become, but in Genesis, the conflicts over chosenness shed light on *the universal struggle for favor, which is not to be won through sibling rivalry, but received as a gift.* (Italics mine) Reading the ancient story of Joseph and his brothers from a family-dynamics perspective provides rich insights into personal identity formation in the twentieth century.

Did you catch the statement: ***"the universal struggle for favor, which is not to be won through sibling rivalry, but received as a gift."*** Oh, if only we humans could really get that into our thick heads! Why? Because, God's choosing of one particular people, group, or individual is THE sign of God's choosing to pour out His favor upon all! If one has been chosen, then all have been chosen as well; maybe not chosen for the same things: the same life paths, the same sufferings and difficulties, the same privileges and responsibilities, but definitely chosen to receive God's favor.

Joseph's road to God's favor was a very difficult one. In the beginning he was doing pretty alright. But he flaunted it, which turned out to be quite unfortunate for him. His father gave him this beautiful and colorful new tunic. It seems like he wore it wherever he went. This made his brothers jealous of him. How would it not? And then he tells his entire family the dreams he's been having of how they will all one day bow before him. 1

It become just too much for his brothers and they are finally fed up with it and want him out of the picture.

You know the story. At first they want to kill him, but in the end they sell him to traders headed down to Egypt. There!! they thought. Now let's see what becomes of this dreamer. And guess, what, brothers? Someday, you will. The turn of events in this story is what is so totally amazing. The brothers had every reason to believe they would never see Joseph again. Joseph had reason to believe that he would remain a slave for the rest of his life. In a matter of a few short hours he plummeted from being an exalted son down to the lowest status of being just someone else's property. And where our Torah portion ends, Joseph seems destined to die a forgotten man in a foreign subterranean prison.

We can only imagine what all of this must have been like for him. A slave's life is one of miserable deprivation. A prisoner's life is worse than that. It surely would have seemed as though *favor* was something that had eluded poor Joseph. Yet, not once do the Scriptures say **And Joseph was bummed out**. And just maybe that is because in the midst of all his suffering and deprivation Joseph had his dreams to hold onto, to ponder, to pray about, to compel him to keep his chin up, and to treat others around him with dignity and kindness.

What we are told about Joseph is that he feared God. Further ahead in chapter 42 Joseph says to his brothers: **"I fear God."** (v.18). What does it mean to fear God? That's certainly a question we spend our entire lifetime learning the answer to. There's a lot of things packed into the phrase *the fear of God*. And we won't unpack that this morning. Suffice it to say that the fear of God includes being conscious of the fact that we are accountable to God for our actions. He sees everything we do; He knows everything we think; and He hears everything we say, And this means that the choices we make really matter.

Now, of course, Joseph didn't choose to become a slave or a prisoner. He was a victim of his brothers' jealousy and hatred. But, finding himself in those positions, he still had choices, the big one, of course, being either to fear God or to detest God for what was happening to him. Joseph chose the former. I see Joseph as an optimist, a "glass half full" type of guy. I see him as always watching for the favor of God to break into the situation. That's a wonderful way to live one's life: always looking for any sign of God's favor and blessing trying to break through.

I have come to feel that way about life. Well, most of the time. To me, God is good. He is my father. He treats me like a beloved son. I see the signs of His favor all about me. And I know He has good plans for every one of us. But I didn't always have this outlook. When I was younger I used to say a lot: "I'm bummed out."

What Joseph discovered is that being chosen, being favored, doesn't mean that things always go well. It doesn't mean that there isn't suffering. Suffering is a part of existence, a fact of life on planet E. And people can choose to suffer alone or they can invite God's Presence into their suffering. God's Presence gives meaning to our suffering, but----that meaning is not something we find at the outset of our sufferings. When it's happening, suffering usually doesn't make any sense at all. It's only when we look back, like Joseph was able to do after he was exalted to viceroy of all Egypt, that we can find something meaningful about our sufferings.

It was the summer of 1971. I had just graduated from high school. This was the tail end of the Viet Nam era. The nation was in an uproar over many things. The youth culture had exploded into all kinds of new expressions and modes of existence. Everything was questionable. The war in Viet Nam had caused the larger percentage of youth to completely lose faith in and respect for the older generation. In this climate, the last thing I wanted to do was go to college.

I pretty much hated my entire high school experience. I wasn't one of the smart ones, or popular ones, or athletic ones. I certainly did not feel like I was a favored one *at all*. My father was alcoholic, my mother was depressed. The biggest joy in my life came from playing and listening to music. And I made money at it. I made more money for a three hour gig than my friends made working as stock boys in the grocery store. So I was looking for new opportunities working as a musician.

A high school friend and I happened to meet up one day. He was a drummer. He told me about this night club act that he was working with at a local Holiday Inn's cocktail lounge. And he invited me to come hear the band. The name of the band was Dean Clark and The New Arrivals. Clark was the front man. He was a decent singer. He was handsome. So he attracted a modest crowd into the nightclub. His back up band was my drummer friend, a bass player, and a keyboard player.

As I watched them perform I noticed that the bass player was also working the light board between songs. So I proposed to the band the idea that I could sit off to the side and run the lights during their performance and dazzle up the look of the show a bit. They went for this and hired me to run the lights for them. They liked what I did. The bar manager liked what I did. And the audiences seemed to like it as well. A well-timed light show is a boon to any stage production.

Now, as it turned out, the guy playing keyboards actually preferred to play guitar. He was better on guitar than he was on keys. Running the lights over that summer, I had learned all their musical arrangements. I suggested they consider expanding the band

one more guy by letting me play keyboards, and then the other guy could play guitar like he preferred. They liked that idea. We began to make plans for this.

I was very excited about all this because Dean Clark and The New Arrivals was a traveling club band. They would play for a few weeks at one Holiday Inn location, and then move on to another Holiday Inn in another city. I saw this as my ticket to get out of Toledo, Ohio and to see a bit of the country.

Then one day in early August my phone rang. It was Dean Clark. He asked me to please come over to where they were staying. He wanted to talk with me. I was so psyched. Surely we were going to be discussing the new plan for the band. When I walked in, Dean Clark and his three New Arrivals were sitting there with rather dour looks on their faces. Dean said, "Robb, I'm just gonna get right to the point. Holiday Inn management is unwilling to pony up extra funds to support the addition of another band member. Not only that, they don't want to pay for a light man anymore either. So we're sorry to have to terminate the need for your services---effective immediately."

My throat closed off as I felt the tears welling up in my eyes. The pain of being rejected hit me right in the pit of my stomach. All I could do was walk around the room to each one of them, shake his hand, say goodbye, thank them, and turn and leave. As I walked back to my canary yellow 1961 Ford Galaxie, I was simply devastated. It was like, wow, I did *not* see *that* coming. And I was mega-bummed out.

My dream of being a traveling musician off on my own, of hooking up with girls that came to the nightclubs, of having a decent weekly salary--all of this was dashed to pieces in only a few moments of time. So now what was I going to do, I wondered. My parents, of blessed memory, suggested it was not too late for me to enroll in the fall quarter at the University of Toledo. And so that is just what I did. And what a significant course correction that turned out to be.

Had I continued on with Dean Clark and The New Arrivals I would not have received the intensive training in music that I got at the University. I would not have met the Messianic Jewish student who led me to the Lord. I would not have linked up with Korean Christian missionaries who introduced me to their Korean pastor whom one day God would use to fix the deep brokenness of my life and of my relationship to my own father. Especially, I would not have met and married my dear wife Merrill. I would not have moved to this area and learned the craft of piano technology. And, most especially, I would not have the three wonderful children, the daughter-in-law and the grandson who are all a constant source of joy to me. And I would not have come to BMC and met all of you.

All this favor that God has poured out upon me came only after that descent into disappointment, disillusionment, and much inner turmoil and pain. In the midst of that agony, I did not see God. We usually can not see Him until we are afforded the opportunity to look back.

This is part of the meaning of what happened to Moses in Exodus 33 when Moses asked the LORD, **"Please show me your glory."** God told him, **"there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."** We often only see God when, like Moses, we look back after He has passed by.

John 13 records some of Yeshua's last moments with His disciples. As He was about to wash their feet, Simon Peter questioned why *He* would do such a thing. Yeshua replied to him: **"What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."** This can be a comforting word in difficult times. This is not to say that all difficulties and suffering come from the hand of the LORD. They certainly do not. But the LORD is never confounded by what happens in this world. He has the power to turn anything around. Joseph told his brothers after their father Jacob died, **"you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."**

Because his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, Joseph was positioned to become the viceroy of Egypt, and to organize and implement a viable plan to save up enough grain so that not only all of Egypt but also surrounding peoples could survive a devastating famine.

It's far better to have a Joseph attitude than to be a "woe is me" type. I don't mean that we should necessarily try to flaunt God's favor in ways that incite jealousy and hatred. But, like Joseph, we should always be looking for the signs of God's favor, especially as we try to help others who are going through rough times. That 's often not easy to do. As we see in the story of Joseph and his brothers, there are those who might not want to be around the ones who are experiencing God's favor.

The most important thing to find in this life of suffering and set backs is meaning. We want our lives to count. We want to know what all of our suffering means. It means that God is making us into conduits of His favor. He is slowly and methodically giving each of us something we can offer others. And as we apprehend what this is all about, God makes it possible for the sphere of our responsibilities and our influence to broaden.

I conclude with Rabbi Russ's words: ***"the universal struggle for favor..... is not to be won through sibling rivalry, but received as a gift."*** Shabbat shalom!

