

Joseph and Moses – A Study in Opposites

Jonathan Katz

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Introduction

There are significant moments in the Torah where siblings go their separate ways and become distinctly different tribes with different priorities and customs, such as the brothers Isaac and Ishmael or Jacob and Esau. Joseph bucked that trend by leading his entire family into Egypt. There, despite their differences and rivalries, they became the Jewish People with a common identity, united through collective prosperity and, later, collective suffering. Examining the Torah's account of events, from the inception of the in-gathering into Egypt and slavery through to the exodus from Egypt and flight into the Wilderness of Sinai, there is an apparent symmetry to almost every aspect of this narrative.

During a discussion several years ago, I presented the idea that Joseph and Moses are opposites in most ways. They have opposite personalities, play opposite roles as agents of G-d, and the details of the stories for which they play central roles are often inverted or mirrored. Since my last discussion, I have compiled additional examples of these symmetries. I am including what I consider to be the most convincing examples in the following table.

I've limited my list to differences that are found in the text of the Torah (except for one Midrashic view -- that Moses was a shepherd in Midian for at least 40 years). Further, the list only includes contrasts between Joseph and Moses. But there are other events in these parshas that allow for similar parallels and contrasts to be drawn. After presenting the table I will invite you to add your own examples.

Joseph	Moses
Led us into Egypt	Led us out of Egypt
Raised in a Jewish family and ends up as a member of the Egyptian palace	Raised as member of the Egyptian palace, ends up with his Jewish family
Did not outwardly show anger	Had a bit of a temper
Confidently projected a narcissistic sense of his own greatness ¹	Humbly protested his worthiness to lead the Children of Israel ²
Great talker	"Heavy of speech"
"Father" to Pharaoh ¹	Like "a son" to Pharaoh's daughter ³
His brothers' murderous intentions precipitate his journey into Egypt	Murderous defense of his "brethren," precipitates his flight out of Egypt
Starts out as a shepherd, becomes royalty	Starts out as royalty, becomes a shepherd ⁴
Long latency locked in a dark jail before assuming leadership by Pharaoh's decree ⁵	Long latency as a shepherd before assuming leadership by G-d's decree ⁶
Joseph has cooperative relationship with Pharaoh	Joseph has cooperative relationship with Pharaoh
A strategic thinker -- devises his own elaborate, long-term plans	Follows G-d's commands one-step at a time

Indirect communication with G-d	Direct communication with G-d
Adversarial siblings	Supportive siblings

Table Footnotes

1. Joseph – Agent of G-d (but also a narcissist) -- always ready to show others how special he is because of his G-d given talents. It's always seems to be about Joseph.

Vayeishev, 37:5-11 Joseph dreamt a dream which he told to his brothers, and they hated him even more. He said to them, "Here if you please, this dream which I dreamt: Behold! – we were binding sheaves in the middle of the field, when, behold! – my sheaf arose and also remained standing: then behold! – *your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf.*" His brothers said to him, "Would you then reign over us? Would you then dominate us?" And they hated him even more – because of his dreams and because of his talk. He dreamt another dream, and related it to his brothers. And he said, "Look, I dreamt another dream: *Behold! the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.*"

Vayigash, 45:7-13 Thus *G-d has sent me* ahead of you to insure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a *momentous deliverance*. And now: *It was not you who sent me here, but G-d; He has made me father to Pharaoh*, master of his entire household, and ruler throughout the entire land of Egypt. Hurry – go up to my father and say to him, "So said your son Joseph: "*G-d has made me master of all Egypt*. Come down to me; do not delay. You will reside in the land of Goshen and *you will be near to me* – you, your sons, your grandchildren, your flock and your cattle, and all that is yours. *And I will provide for you there* – for there will be five more years of famine – *so you do not become destitute*, you, your household, and all that is yours."

"Behold! Your eyes see as do the eyes of my brother Benjamin that it is my mouth that is speaking to you. Therefore, *tell my father of all my glory in Egypt* and all that you saw; but you must hurry, and bring my father down here."

2. Moses is humble servant of G-d. It is always apparent who is performing the miracles:

Shemot, 3:10-11 And now, go and I shall dispatch you to Pharaoh and you shall take My People the Children of Israel out of Egypt." Moses replied to G-d, "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?*"

Shemot 3:1 "Moses responded and said, "*But they will not believe me and they will not heed my voice*, for they will say, 'Hashem did not appear to you.'"

Shemot 4:10 Moses replied to Hashem, "*Please my Lord, I am not a man of words, not since yesterday, nor since the day before yesterday, nor since You first spoke to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech.*"

Shemot 4:13 He replied, "Please, my Lord, send through whomever You will send!"

3. Shemot 2:10 The boy grew up and she brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh and he was a son to her. She called his name Moses, as she said "For I drew him from the water."

4. Shemot 3:1 Moses was shepherding the sheep of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; he guided the sheep far into the wilderness, and he arrived at the Mountain of God, toward Horeb.

5. Miketz 41:14 So Pharaoh sent and summoned Joseph, and they rushed him from the dungeon.

6. Midrashic accounts vary but the most commonly held view is that Moses lived as a shepherd in Midian for 40 years.

7. Shemot 2:4-7 His sister stationed herself at a distance to know what would be done with him. Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe by the River and her maidens walked along the River. She saw the basket among the reeds and she sent her maidservant and she took it. She opened it and saw him, the child, and behold! a youth was crying. She took pity on him and

said, "This is one of the Hebrew boys." His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and summon for you a wet nurse from the Hebrew women, who will nurse the boy for you?"

Discussion:

1. What other examples of contrasts between Joseph and Moses can you provide?
2. Beyond the differences between Joseph and Moses that we just discussed, what are some contrasting details between going into Egypt vs. coming out of Egypt?

If you think of additional parallels or contrasts, please send me an email.