DISCUSSION GUIDE

Miketz

Oh, Brother?

In this week's portion, Miketz, a famine drives ten of Jacob's sons from Canaan down to Egypt in search of food. What they do not know, however, is that the minister in charge of dispensing rations is their brother Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery many years before:

בראשית מ:ה-ט	**Genesis 42: 5-9**
(ו) וְיוֹסֵף הוּא הַשַּׁלִּיט עַל־הָאָרֶץ הוּא הַמַּשְׁבִּיר לְכָל־עַם הָאָרֶץ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֲחֵי יוֹסֵף וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ־לוֹ אַפַּיִם אָרְצָה: (ז) וַיַּרְא יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וַיַּכִּרֵם וַיִּתְנַכֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם וַיְדַבֵּר אִתָּם קָשׁוֹת וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֵאַיִן בָּאתֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ מֵאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן לִשְׁבָּר־אֹכֶל: (ח) וַיַּכֵּר יוֹסֵף אֶת־אֶחָיו וְהֵם לֹא הִכָּרֻהוּ: (ט) וַיִּזְכֹּר יוֹסֵף אֶת הַחֲלֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מְרַגְּלִים אַתֶּם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־עֶרְוַת הָאָרֶץ בָּאתֶם:	Thus the sons of Israel were among those who came to procure rations, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan. Now Joseph was the vizier of the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, "Where do you come from?" And they said, "From the land of Canaan, to procure food." For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Joseph said to them, "You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness."

- **Verse 7 says that Joseph acts like a stranger toward his brothers and speaks harshly to them. How might his harsh words help him hide who he is?**
- **Have you ever felt you had to hide part of who you are? What was that experience like?**

Joseph reveals his identity only after putting his brothers through a series of ordeals, including imprisoning one of them and forcing the others to bring their youngest brother to Egypt. Why did he hide who he was for so long? The Chizkuni, a medieval French commentator, offers one answer:

חזקוני, בראשית מב:ז	**Chizkuni, Genesis 42:7**
ויתנכר. אמר אם אגלה עצמי להם יאמרו אף אתה	**He acted like a stranger toward them.**

מושבע ועומד שלא תגלה אותנו. או שמא יברחו מיראתי ויצטער אבא מוטב שיבואו מתוך דוחק יודע הרעב ואדחק אותם להביא בנימין ואעכבנו וע"י הדבר. [ויתנכר אליהם דרכו של אדם כשאינו רוצה לגמול חסד עם קרוביו עושה עצמו כאילו אינו מכירו	His reasoning was that if he would reveal his identity, they would say to him: "if you expect us not to reveal your true identity, you are also sworn not to reveal our true identity." Alternately, his reasoning was that he would frighten them into trying to flee. As a result, he would cause his father untold additional anguish. It would therefore be better that they would appear before him because they had no choice not to do so, as they needed the supplies that only he could provide. This would provide him with the chance to force them to bring Binyamin down to Egypt and he would detain him there. As a result, the fact that he was Joseph would become known.

- **How many reasons does the Chizkuni give for Joseph's actions?**
- **According to the Chizkuni, why might the brothers have wanted to keep their relationship with Joseph a secret? Why might Joseph have wanted the same?**

Nachmanides, a leading medieval Jewish scholar who lived around the same time as the Chizkuni, offers a different explanation for Joseph's actions in his Torah commentary.

רמב"ן, בראשית מב:ט **וַיִּזְכֹּר יוֹסֵף אֶת הַחֲלֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם**... כִּי יֹאמַר הַכָּתוּב כִּי בִּרְאוֹת יוֹסֵף אֶת אֶחָיו מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לוֹ, זָכַר כָּל הַחֲלֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר חָלַם לָהֶם, וְיָדַע שֶׁלֹּא נִתְקַיֵּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם בַּפַּעַם הַזֹּאת, כִּי יוֹדֵעַ בְּפִתְרוֹנָם כִּי כָל אֶחָיו יִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לוֹ בַּתְּחִלָּה מִן הַחֲלוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן "וְהִנֵּה אֲנַחְנוּ מְאַלְּמִים אֲלֻמִּים", כִּי "אֲנַחְנוּ" יִרְמֹז לְכָל אֶחָיו אֶחָד עָשָׂר, וּפַעַם שֵׁנִית יִשְׁתַּחֲווּ לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְהַיָּרֵחַ וְאַחַד עָשָׂר כּוֹכָבִים מִן הַחֲלוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי. וְכֵיוָן שֶׁלֹּא רָאָה בִּנְיָמִן עִמָּהֶם, חָשַׁב זֹאת הַתַּחְבּוּלָה שֶׁיַּעֲלִיל עֲלֵיהֶם כְּדֵי שֶׁיָּבִיאוּ גַּם בִּנְיָמִין אָחִיו אֵלָיו, לְקַיֵּם הַחֲלוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן תְּחִלָּה, וְעַל כֵּן לֹא רָצָה לְהַגִּיד לָהֶם אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחִיכֶם וְלֵאמֹר מַהֲרוּ וַעֲלוּ אֶל אָבִי וְיִשְׁלַח הָעֲגָלוֹת כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה עִמָּהֶם בַּפַּעַם הַשֵּׁנִיָּה, כִּי הָיָה אָבִיו בָּא מִיָּד בְּלֹא סָפֵק. וְאַחֲרֵי שֶׁנִּתְקַיְּמוּ הַחֲלוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, הִגִּיד לָהֶם, לְקַיֵּם הַחֲלוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי. וְלוּלֵי כֵן הָיָה יוֹסֵף חוֹטֵא חֵטְא גָּדוֹל לְצַעֵר אֶת אָבִיו וּלְהַעֲמִידוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים בְּשִׂכּוֹל וְאֵבֶל עַל שִׁמְעוֹן וְעָלָיו. וְאַף אִם הָיָה רְצוֹנוֹ לְצַעֵר אֶת אֶחָיו קְצָת, אֵיךְ לֹא יַחְמֹל עַל שֵׂיבַת אָבִיו. אֲבָל אֶת הַכֹּל עָשָׂה יָפֶה בְּעִתּוֹ לְקַיֵּם הַחֲלוֹמוֹת, כִּי יָדַע שֶׁיִּתְקַיְּמוּ בֶּאֱמֶת	**Nachmanides, Genesis 42:9** **Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them...** Scripture states that when Joseph saw his brothers bowing down to him, he remembered all the dreams which he had dreamed concerning them and he knew that in this instance, not one of the dreams had been fulfilled. He knew that it was inherent in their interpretation that according to the first dream, at first all his brothers would bow down to him, as it says, *And, behold, we were binding sheaves*, for "we" refers to all eleven of his brothers. The second time, in accordance with the second dream, *the sun, the moon and eleven stars* would bow down to him. Now since he did not see Benjamin with them, he conceived of the strategy of devising a charge against them so that they would also bring his

	brother Benjamin to him, in order to first fulfill the first dream. It is for this reason that he did not wish to tell them at this time, *I am Joseph your brother*, and to say, *Hasten and go up to my father*, and send wagons, as he did to them the second time, for in that case his father would undoubtedly have come at once. It was only after fulfillment of the first dream that he told them, *I am Joseph your brother*, etc., in order to fulfill the second dream. Were it not for this consideration, Joseph would indeed be regarded as having committed a great sin: bringing anguish to his father, leaving him for many days in the position of being bereft and mourning for Simeon and him. Even if it was his intention to cause his brothers minor anguish, how did he not have compassion for his elderly father? But *he assigned each to its proper time* in order to fulfill the dreams, knowing that they would truly be fulfilled.

- **Which words in the biblical passage lead Nachmanides to his explanation?**
- **Nachmanides argues that Joseph would have committed a serious sin by causing his father pain without good reason. Do you agree? Does the reason Nachmanides gives justify Joseph's actions?**

Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, an eighteenth-century Moroccan rabbi and author of the Torah commentary *Or HaChaim*, offers another explanation:

אור החיים, בראשית מב:ז **וַיַּרְא יוֹסֵף אֶת אֶחָיו.** גַּם לִבְחוֹן בָּהֶם בְּאֶמְצָעוּת הַמִּתְגַּלְגֵּל לֵידַע מַחְשְׁבוֹתָם אֵלָיו בְּאוֹתוֹ מַצָּב, וְנִתְגַּלָּה לוֹ כִּי מִתְחָרְטִים הֵם עַל אֲשֶׁר כְּבָר עָשׂוּהוּ וּלְחֵטְא יַחְשְׁבוּהוּ.	**Or HaChaim on Genesis 42:7** **Joseph saw his brothers.** He also wanted to test them to see how they felt now about what had transpired between them many years ago. He then became aware that they were sorry for what they had done to him and considered themselves as having committed a sin against him.

- **What is the difference between regretting what they did and recognizing that they had sinned against Joseph?**
- **Have you ever come to see something you did in the past differently? What changed your understanding?**

Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, better known as the Chafetz Chaim, offers a final explanation. He was a leading Eastern European rabbi in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

שמירת הלשון ב:יב:ב **וַיִּזְכֹּר יוֹסֵף אֶת הַחֲלֹמוֹת וְגוֹ', וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: מְרַגְּלִים אַתֶּם וְגוֹ'.** בְּכָל זֶה הָיְתָה כַּוָּנָתוֹ כְּדֵי לְכַפֵּר עֲוֹנָם. וְכֵן בְּמַה שֶׁכָּתוּב (בראשית מ"ב כ"ה): "וַיְצַו יוֹסֵף, וַיְמַלְאוּ אֶת כְּלֵיהֶם בָּר וּלְהָשִׁיב כַּסְפֵּיהֶם אִישׁ אֶל שַׂקּוֹ" וְגוֹ'. וּבֶאֱמֶת עַל יְדֵי הַכֶּסֶף הָיָה לָהֶם צַעַר גָּדוֹל מְאֹד מִתְּחִלָּה בְּדַרְכָּךְ, כְּשֶׁפָּתַח הָאֶחָד אֶת שַׂקּוֹ, וְהוּא לֵוִי, כְּפֵרוּשׁ רַשִׁ"י. כְּתוּב עַל זֶה (שם כ"ח): "וַיֵּצֵא לִבָּם, וַיֶּחֶרְדוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו לֵאמֹר מַה זֹּאת עָשָׂה אֱלֹקִים לָנוּ". וְגַם בַּסּוֹף, כַּאֲשֶׁר בָּאוּ אֶל אֲבִיהֶם (שם ל"ה): "וַיְהִי הֵם מְרִיקִים שַׂקֵּיהֶם וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ צְרוֹר כַּסְפּוֹ בְּשַׂקּוֹ, וַיִּרְאוּ" וְגוֹ', הֵמָּה וַאֲבִיהֶם וַיִּירְאוּ, וְכֵן בְּפָסוּק י"ח (פרק מ"ג): "וַיִּרְאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים כִּי הוּבְאוּ בֵּית יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמְרוּ: עַל דְּבַר הַכֶּסֶף הַשָּׁב בְּאַמְתְּחֹתֵינוּ" וְגוֹ', מֵעִנְיַן הַכֶּסֶף הָיָה לָהֶם צַעַר גָּדוֹל מְאֹד, וְזֶה הָיָה כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּתְכַּפֵּר לָהֶם עַל הַכֶּסֶף שֶׁלָּקְחוּ בִּשְׁבִילוֹ.	**Shemirat HaLashon, 2:12:2** **Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Joseph said to them, "You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness.** In all of this his intent was to secure atonement for their sins, as it was [his intent] in (*Ibid*. 25): "And Joseph commanded that their vessels be filled with grain, that their money be returned, each to his sack, etc." And, in truth, the money caused them much grief in the beginning of their [return journey], when (*Ibid*. 27): "the one [Levi (according to Rashi)] opened his sack (28) … and their hearts went out, and each trembled to his brother, saying: 'What is this that G-d has done to us?'" And also at the end, when they came to their father (*Ibid*. 35): "And, as they emptied their sacks, behold, each (found) his money bundle in his sack, and they saw their money bundles, they and their father, and they were afraid." And also (*Ibid*. 43:18): "And the men were afraid, for they were brought into the house of Joseph … and they said: 'It is because of the money which was returned to our sacks, etc.'" They suffered greatly because of the money; this, to atone for them because of the money they had taken for him [in selling him as a slave].

- **What does this source suggest about how Joseph feels toward his brothers?**
- **According to this source, what does it take to make up for wrongdoing? Do you agree?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Which explanation for Joseph's decision to hide his identity do you find most convincing? Is there one you find difficult to accept? Why?

2. What role does God's plan play in each explanation? Does Joseph seem to be following that plan, making his own decisions, or both?
3. What does each explanation suggest about Joseph's character and motives? Do these views fit together, or do they offer conflicting pictures of him?
4. What is one idea from these sources that will stay with you, and one question you still have?

Suggestions for Further Study

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Miketz, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Miketz page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Miketz topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Joseph, Joseph and his Brothers, and Joseph in Egypt**.**

Another question which intrigues many commentators, based on the verses in the first source, is why Joseph recognized his brothers but they did not recognize him. If you're curious to explore this further, commentators such as Rashi, the Ramban, the Chizkuni, and the Sefat Emet all offer their own answers, which you can find on Sefaria via the links above.

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