

The Joseph narrative begins in our parashah, extends to the end of Genesis, and always coincides with Chanukah, which falls in the darkest part of the year for us in the northern hemisphere. Like the stories of Chanukah, both historic and rabbinic, the story of Joseph as well as the story of Judah and Tamar have to do with physical as well as spiritual darkness. In essence, these are stories of alienation caused by incidents stemming from misunderstanding and rooted in misguided parenting. Although it would be illogical to hold Jakob's parenting skills to today's Western standards, his blatantly preferential treatment of Rachel's sons, including the order in which he places his family for the encounter with Esau, obviously impacts all of his children. But Jakob is simply perpetuating the pattern he has learned from his own parents. This pattern is finally broken when Joseph and Judah each confront the darkest episodes of their lives and emerge with the ability to become the leaders their people need. At first glance, Joseph seems to be the quintessential spoiled brat, strutting around in the beautiful coat his father gave him and bringing back slanderous tales about the brothers he is closest to, who happen to be the sons of Jakob's concubines. When he begins to tell his family about his dreams of superiority over them, all his brothers have had enough. We know what happens after that. And we also know that Joseph ascends from the darkness of the pit into which his brothers throw him to a position of responsibility in the house of his Egyptian master, only to be thrown into prison due to the slanderous accusations of his master's wife. In next week's parashah he emerges from this darkness to become viceroy of Egypt. Thrust into the physical darkness of the pit and later, the prison, Joseph confronts his spiritual darkness. When Jakob sends him to check on his brothers, he is discovered "straying" in a field. The verb תעה means to wander, to be lost, to deviate. Indeed, callow, arrogant Joseph is still stumbling in the dark. His first dreams might have made him dimly aware of HaShem's immense presence in his life, but it is not until his confrontation with Potiphar's wife that he actually acknowledges this: "... Now how can I commit this great evil and sin against God?" (39:9) It is noteworthy that the word used here is *elohim*, not יהוה. That word appears first in verse 21: "יהוה was with Joseph, and He was benevolent and gave him favor in the eyes of the prison warden." The word *elohim* denotes a general sort of divinity and power, whereas the unpronounceable יהוה is deeply personal and all-encompassing. Joseph is slowly beginning to recognize his enormous talents and their Divine origin. When he finally reemerges, he is ready to use them with wisdom and humility, and through them he will be able to navigate the later dark episodes of his life. Judah also descends into darkness, separating himself from his brothers after they "demote" him (38:1). Among other explanations for his departure, Midrash Tanchuma Buber teaches: "When his [Jakob's] sons saw that he would not accept consolation, they went to Judah and said, 'You have brought us this great misfortune!' He answered, 'I said to you: What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ... They answered, 'We listened to your advice to sell him to the Ishmaelites.' ... If you had advised to return him to his father, would we not have listened to you?' In that hour they arose and expelled him." He marries the daughter of his Adullamite friend Hirah, lives among her people, experiences the death of his two older sons and later nearly causes the execution of his daughter-in-law Tamar. After pointing out the profit in selling, rather than killing Joseph, his weak afterthought "... for he is our brother, our flesh" (37:27) only echoes Reuben's admonition in verse 22 and barely masks his opportunism. Later, on a whim, he engages the services of a prostitute he sees on the road, unaware that it is actually Tamar. Realizing that Judah does not intend to marry her to his third son as stipulated by the laws of levirate marriage, she has taken matters into her own hands and becomes pregnant with Judah's child. At her trial for having "betrayed" his son, Judah recognizes the items he had given to her as collateral. His arrogance gives way to humility, and he publicly acknowledges his wrongdoing. Separated from their dysfunctional family, Joseph and Judah are free to engage in a painful process of self-evaluation and repentance. Flourishing in alien climates, they manage to navigate the perilous waters of assimilation and maintain their true identity. Both marry non-Israelite women, but they raise their children as Israelites. One of the twin boys born to Tamar and Judah is the ancestor of the Davidic line, and descendants of Joseph's sons Ephraim and Menashe lead the "half-tribes" within the tribe of Joseph. The stories of Joseph, Judah, and their sons reverberate in the story of Chanukah, which despite the rabbinic legend of the oil miracle, is actually the story of assimilationists versus traditionalists. As we know all too well, these battles still persist, and it is increasingly difficult for people of all religions to maintain a healthy balance between religious fundamentalism and the equally pernicious fundamentalism of total secularization. Judah lives among the Adullamites, but eventually returns to Canaan to lead and finally reunite the family. Joseph becomes outwardly so Egyptian that he is able to deceive his brothers, but he maintains his Israelite identity and transmits this legacy to his sons. As we kindle our Chanukah lights let us remember that the Maccabees were able to overcome the darkness of their era and ensure our survival because their ancestors Joseph and Judah had shown them the way. Remember too, that the greatest miracle of Chanukah is the unlikely defeat of a mighty force by a small group of determined people working together in the name of freedom. There is still much darkness in our world, and far too much alienation. May the light of Chanukah give us courage to face these challenging times and work together for a better future. AM YISRAEL CHAI!