

Among the loneliest biblical figures is Joseph. Forget that he has eleven brothers and a doting father, Jacob. His father's unabashed favoritism for Joseph, and Joseph's own self-aggrandizement, have given rise to a 17-year old narcissist who, in the words of Rabbi Brad Artson, "becomes increasingly isolated from his own kin, for he needs to feel preeminent. He needs to belittle his brothers in order to glorify his own talents, to stand out."

As a teenager, taken with himself, Joseph demonstrates his need for personal superiority by sharing with his brothers dreams in which they are depicted as bowing down to him. The ancient rabbis suggest Joseph spent more time "penciling his eyes, curling his hair, lifting his heel" than contributing to the well-being of his family and community. In fact, the Torah describes the early years of Joseph's life not in terms of accomplishment or deed but rather "Joseph was well built and handsome" (Gen. 39:6).

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard divides humankind's existence into four cycles: 1) beauty, 2) morality, 3) laughter, and 4) devoted to sacred things. Joseph's early years—a period that found him separated from family and sold by his brothers to be a slave in Egypt—was defined by superficial dreams of physical beauty, grandeur, and power. Rabbi Artson notes, "Only [after having been sent to prison in Egypt] does Joseph learn to accept a fundamental principle of Jewish living: *Kol Yisrael areivim, zeh ba'zeh*—We are all responsible for one another!

In prison, Joseph realizes his knowledge and insight might better be used to help others less able. Again, he shares his dreams, this time for fellow prisoners—in particular, a butler and a baker. In this instance, his intent is to help them. He is no longer the central figure, they are. As Joseph matures, so does his understanding of morality and his devotion "to sacred things" like other lives.

The bumper sticker reads, "Everyone has to grow up, but you can be immature forever!" The superficiality and narcissism of youth are part of the often-painful process of growing up. Being able to finally distinguish the sacred nature of life, the importance of family, and the needs of others is maturity.

The late author and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel writes: "Joseph -a *Tzaddik* (righteous person)? His only error: he should not have revealed his dreams."

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