

Introduction to the message.

The nice thing about the summer months is we can experiment a little. We had a 4-week cycle on Generous Living, and today I'd like to introduce you to an ancient Jewish tradition that's called the *Aggadah*, which is still being practiced to this day. At its core it's basically telling another story to understand the main story. It's an wonderful way of getting in touch with the deeper meaning and emotional truth of a story without having to explain too much and sounding you're like giving a lecture.

So here's my feeble effort at Aggadah, the retelling the story of Josef meeting his brothers again and somehow, with God's help, managing to forgive their betrayal.

After the story, we will watch a brief clip of a present-day example of what it can mean to forgive others after you have been betrayed and robbed by them.

Tears of Reconciliation,

Pinegrove, Aug. 17, 2014. Pastor Hubert Den Draak
(based on an idea by Ralph Milton)



Strange, sad sounds echo through the hallways and corridors of Egypt's royal palace. The servants and pages are tiptoeing through the palace, trying to stay away from the governor's room – because that's where the sounds seem to be coming from. One brave (or just curious?) servant tries to peek through the crack in the imposing double doors. All he can see is a dark empty room with the governor's throne hardly visible. Perplexed, he quickly tiptoes on again...

The sad sounds are sobs, and they *do* come out of the throne room. In fact, they come from Joseph, Egypt's second most powerful person. But now, this powerful man is curled up like a small boy on the edge of his ornate throne, sobbing with grief and pain he'd never known he could feel. Until now.

Joseph had never known how to cry. His life had been one long struggle to survive, to prevail, to prosper, to overcome. Joseph survived on his wits. He is the only Hebrew in this hostile Egyptian court, and his very life depends on his ability to be one jump ahead of everyone else. There is no time, no room for weakness or self pity, ever. And certainly no time for tears.

And yet, Joseph is weeping. He is weeping tears of anger. Anger at his abusive brothers, who years before had beaten him and stripped him of his special, colourful cloak, and sold him as a slave.

Anger at the Egyptians for whom he has slaved, whom he has outwitted, and over whom he now rules.

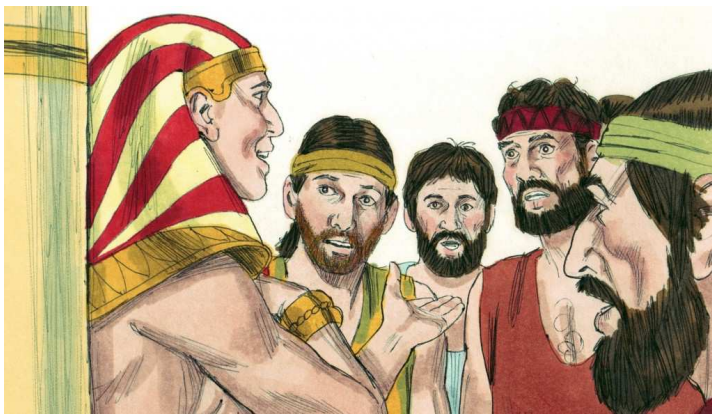
Anger at himself, for the spoiled-brat younger brother he has been, for the lies and the cheating and the manipulation he has used to get his way.

And also, he is weeping the tears of loneliness and fear. Torn from his family, thrown into slavery, no love, no affection, no affirmation, nothing but his own wits and pretend-determination to carry him into each new terrifying day.

And now his brothers are standing before him. His brothers, his own flesh and blood. But they are also the ones who had abused and betrayed him. He finally can punish them for what they have done - but he can't make himself do it. Because in spite of himself, Joseph wants nothing in the world more than to be accepted and loved once more by his brothers. And his father. Oh, how he yearns and aches for the affection of his father!

His brothers are standing before him. Confused. Scared. They have no idea that this high-ranking Egyptian official is the brother they have betrayed so long ago. "Get out of here!" Joseph shouts through his tears to his Egyptian servants who are casually hanging around, trying to figure out what the big deal is. "Get out! I want to be alone with these men!"

Then he turns to his brothers, and stammers "I... am Joseph. I am your brother. Do you remember me? Is father still alive?"



The men drop to the ground, terrified. Only Judah manages to raise his head enough to nod a feeble yes to Joseph's question about his father.

Seeing his brothers back, Joseph knows how much he wants to be loved, to be accepted by them; and yet his anger at them boils inside, even more than before. All he can think of is to cover up his anger with some tale, a half-truth.

"It's all right, my brothers" he says, "God arranged it all. God knew there'd be a famine in the land, and God put me here in the Egyptian court so I could take care of you and my father and our whole tribe. So it wasn't really your fault, you see!" Out of his desperate need, Joseph denies his anger and tells a pious white lie...

He then walks up to Benjamin, his youngest brother and embraces him. "Ben, Ben. It is so good to see you. How is Dad? Tell me how my father is?" Benjamin swallows hard and can only stammer, "He... he's fine. Just fine."

"Tell Dad that I'm alive and well. And tell him that I've done OK. Tell him I'm in charge of just about everything here, that I'm second-in-command to Pharaoh. Tell him all that, will you Ben?"

As Ben nods in shock, Joseph wonders why he said that. Why is it so important to have his Dad know of his success?

It takes days before Joseph and his brothers cut through years of fear and anger and repression to talk, really talk with each other. Then one day, Joseph's hidden anger flares up again, and in his rage he shouts, "Why would you *do* such a terrible thing?! We're brothers! What were you *thinking*?!" For which there is, of course, no longer any answer.

But there are confessions. One by one the brothers, and Joseph too, find the words to name their sins, for acting out of self-interest. One by one they ask forgiveness from each other - and from God. One by one they vow to no longer let jealousy, greed and their ego destroy the lives of others and ultimately their own, too.

Now, with history finally behind them and no longer between them, now the tears flow freely, but with a difference this time: these are no longer tears of anger, these are tears of healing. And sometimes tears of laughter too, as the brothers see each other now for who they really are: fragile, lonely men who need the care and the love that only they can give each other more than anything else.

It is Judah who finds the right words to describe what happened and what they had learned - the hard way:

"The God of our ancestors did not make us abuse and betray you, Joseph", he says. "Our God is a just and loving God, and would never do such things. I now see how God has used our weakness and our sin, and through it has brought life to the land of Egypt and to our father's tribe. Thanks be to God!"

"Thanks be to God," repeats Joseph, and his brothers join him in this brief but powerful prayer: "Thanks be to God!"
Amen.

* * * * *

This story is placed thousands of years ago. But it is still happening. There still are Josephs in this world who manage to not let fear, anger and ego rule their lives and the lives of others, we we'll now see in this brief clip from the movie "Invictus".

It shows a scene in the office of South Africa's first black president, Nelson Mandela. He has spent 26 years in solitary confinement on Robben Island, doing slave labour. And just like Joseph, he overcame the conditions of his life and rose to the top, to become his country's most powerful man. And also just like Joseph,

he refused to take that as an opportunity to take revenge on the people who had taken from him everything he had, betrayed him and used him as a slave. Instead, he sees the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness, not only for his country, but also for himself.

In this clip, the captain of his bodyguard is overwhelmed by the demands of his position and requests more people to help him out. To his shock, the extra people he gets are white. And not only that, they come from the deeply hated SAS, the elite corps who have abused, injured and killed so many black South Africans. This is unacceptable to him. Upset, he walks into Mandela's office - and this is what happens: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHqi6ZB_F0U.

When you go home after this service, I invite you to ask yourself where in your life *you* need to reconcile with others and forgive them - even if you feel they don't deserve it. Think back of Joseph and Mandela, think of how they dealt with it, and maybe apply it in your own life. It will not be easy, but it is what we are asked to do for the benefit of everyone.

Or, as Mandela said: "Forgiveness liberates the soul. It removes fear".