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2625 N. Tustin Avenue • Santa Ana, CA 92705
714-628-4600 • information@tbsoc.com

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Joseph's Character

Mark Thompson

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Inspiration sometimes comes from strange places. The other night I was surfing the web, checking out movie reviews in anticipation of our family's annual Christmas Eve cinema extravaganza when I stumbled upon an article which contained what I thought was a wise and thoughtful meditation on life. This was especially surprising because it came from a very unlikely source: Hollywood.

This is what I read:

"As there begins to be less time ahead of you, you want to be exactly who you are, without making it easier for everyone else."

And I said to myself, "Yeah--- sometimes that's exactly how I feel." Way to go, Meryl Streep!

The famous actress was promoting her new movie entitled "It's Complicated," in which she co-stars with Steve Martin, whom I love and Alec Baldwin, whom I can't stand. I think I read somewhere that Baldwin's retiring from the film industry--which is fine, except I'm afraid he may now enter politics. Anyway, the lovely Meryl Streep, who is my age, is one of the most-talented and versatile actors ever to grace the Silver Screen. She is interviewed in the January issue of Vanity Fair, and this is what she says:

"It's incredible - I'm 60, and I'm playing the romantic lead in romantic comedies. Bette Davis is rolling over in her grave. I've been given great, weird, interesting parts well past my 'sell by' date. I remember saying to my husband when I was 38, 'Well, it's over.' And then we kicked the can down the road a little further. I can't remember the last time I really worried about being appealing. I think it was a really long time ago. It's freeing as an actress."

This is her take on acting: "I don't think it's something anyone can tell you. I think you just have to get sick of hearing the accommodation in your approach to things - the way people have to get sick of drinking or drugs before they stop."

Then comes the quote that resonated with me: "As there begins to be less time ahead of you, you want to be exactly who you are, without making it easier for everyone else."

Okay, what makes this philosophy appealing to us? The first part is a no-brainer. Of course, most of us desire to be exactly who we are. At this stage of our lives we realize that we're probably not going to change much so we might as well be comfortable with ourselves. I call it the Popeye Postulate: You know--"I am what I am and that's all what I am—I'm Popeye the sailorman. Toot-toot!"

But what about this notion that you shouldn't accommodate others by making it easier for them to put up with you? If you're an inveterate people-pleaser, like me, you may find this difficult. But you may have noticed that as you get older, you're far less concerned about what people think of you. Perhaps now, you only feel a little bit guilty if you don't meet others' expectations. Personally, I'm hoping I'll be entirely cured of this affliction within the next decade.

The benefit of becoming a senior isn't just discounted movie tickets. This is the time when, according to author James Hillman, the force of our character becomes fully realized and our true nature emerges.

"Aging is no accident," Hillman writes. "It is necessary to the human condition, intended by the soul." We become more characteristic of who we are simply by lasting into later years; the older we become, the more our true natures emerge. "

Hillman believes that the changes of old age, even the debilitating ones, have purposes and values organized by the psyche. Worried that your memory for recent events is faltering? Now you have more room for long-term recollections. Do you have a heart condition? Be grateful you now have an opportunity to remove blockages from constricted relationships. Trouble sleeping? Now you can experience the profound elements of nighttime that you've previously overlooked. As Hillman says, "Aging makes metaphors of biology."

Who can argue that Americans generally disregard old people who aren't young-acting and young-

looking? But Hillman has a solution for that, too. He resurrects the ancient idea of the old person as "ancestor," a model for the young, the bearer of a society's cultural memory and traditions. We must transform our relationship to aging by realizing that "oldness" is an archetypal state of being that can add value and luster to things we treasure, places we revere, and people's character. Only when we open our imaginations to the idea of the ancestor, can aging free us from convention and transform us into a force of nature, releasing our deepest beliefs for the benefit of society.

Do you buy this so far? Actually, I don't care if you do. See? The transformation has already begun. Alright, then. Me? An "ancestor?" I'm not quite ready to bear that mantle. I could be convinced to prepare, though, if I have a good role model. Now I realize that we suffer from a distinct lack of role models nowadays in just about every area of life. Meryl Streep is great, yes, but she's an actress, after all. Political leaders generally leave me disillusioned and disappointed as we discover more about their true character. Athletes generally decline to be regarded as role models and... as we are recently reminded, with very good reason....????

How about a spiritual role model? Can you give me a suitable ancestor to emulate? How about Joseph? He's the subject of this week's parashah, and has been the principal player, really, for the last few weeks. Frankly I can't think of a better example. The scribes have devoted more space to Joseph than any of the preceding patriarchs and although Moses steals the show beginning next week, it's pretty hard for most of us to relate to the lofty Moses, whereas Joseph—Joseph is the Jewish everyman, and as we shall see, a person whose character emerges to fruition and ultimately reveals his true nature.

Let's quickly recap his life up to now.

As a kid, let's face it--Joseph's immature. He rats on his brothers. He's favored by his father, Jacob; that doesn't help. The coat of many colors—that hurts. His self-aggrandizing dreams make things worse. In short, his brothers can't stand him, want to kill him but instead dump him in a well and sell him off as a slave but tell their father that he was devoured by wild beasts. Yes, he's devoted to his father, but it's not a very auspicious beginning, is it?

In Egypt, Joseph becomes Potiphar's servant and proves himself to be industrious and trustworthy. He's also a handsome young man and Potiphar's wife wants to make him into her boy toy, but being faithful to his master, Joseph repeatedly resists her advances. Spurned, she falsely accuses him of molesting her and Potiphar throws him in jail, where Joseph finds favor with the keeper of the prison who entrusts Joseph with the responsibility of overseeing the other prisoners.

Joseph, reviving his dream-weaver gig, interprets the dreams of the butler and the baker and is soon placed in the employ of Pharaoh, in whose eyes he finds great favor. Because Joseph demonstrates wisdom in interpreting the Pharaoh's dreams, Pharaoh makes him his right-hand man, exalting Joseph to rule over Egypt.

Joseph shrewdly administers the affairs of state, adequately preparing Egypt for a famine which he had earlier foretold. Notwithstanding a lot of bad stuff that has happened to Joseph it is important to note that he has nevertheless accomplished a great deal. But Joseph refuses to take credit for his good fortune. He's matured. He acknowledges that God has provided for him because it's all part of God's grand plan.

And now comes the famous reunion of Joseph and his brothers. Except for the youngest, Benjamin, Jacob instructs all of his sons to leave Canaan where the famine has depleted their food supply and seek assistance in Egypt where he has learned there are rations to be had.

The brothers encounter Joseph, whom of course they do not recognize, who not only controls the granaries, but seemingly their destiny. Now we hearken back to Joseph's original childhood dreams. Remember: "There we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf stood up and remained upright; then your sheaves gathered around and bowed low to my sheaf." And his brothers answered: "Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?"

And now stands Joseph, as vizier of the land, dispensing rations to all the people of the land. And Joseph' brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground. His dream is fulfilled.

What does Joseph do? Does he let his brothers off the hook, or does he make them squirm a bit? You bet, he makes them squirm. In fact, he reeks havoc among them; accuses them of being spies, throws them in jail where they can stew and blame themselves for their misfortunes; then lets them go in a few days with grain in their sacks, only to hide the money used to purchase the grain in their sacks in order to implicate them with thievery, so he can hold the oldest, Simeon, hostage while charging the others to bring their youngest brother back to him for verification of their story. Truthfully, Joseph makes life miserable for his brothers. Joseph is being who he is and he's not making it any easier for everyone else.

But it's not just games-playing and retribution. Ultimately, it is Joseph's goal to be reunited with his father and bring his entire family to dwell with him in Goshen. These are the steps he must take for his destiny to be fulfilled. The dramatic poignancy and irony of these events is almost too much for Joseph to bear. At one point he even needs to leave the room so his brothers can't see

him weep.

Joseph's character has been forged through the seasons of his life. As a youth, tempted and tried with no help from family or friend; as a mature individual, charged with important responsibilities, and as an aging person, knowing that death is imminent, Joseph becomes a tzaddik. As James Hillman would say, Joseph's character has been fully realized. He has himself become a force of nature. Although the Torah teaches that he was in fact not perfect, still-- in a life filled with struggle, pain and many trials--Joseph's character shines down through Jewish history. May the character of Joseph serve to inspire us to develop our character as well, to be exactly who we are—and be our own Tzaddik.

Shabbat Shalom

Temple Beth Shalom
2625 N. Tustin Ave. Santa Ana, CA 92705
Phone: 714-628-4600 • Fax: 714-628-4619
Email: information@tbsoc.com

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