

From Prison to Rule

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The more I read about Joseph the more impressed I am. The way he rebounded from one disaster after another, how he worked hard to reach the top, time and time again. He becomes the head of Potiphar's household. Sent to jail he rises to manage the prison. And now called to explain Pharaoh's dreams, he becomes the senior administrator of Egypt. He navigates the complexities of political life. He knew how to keep both his boss and the masses happy, avoid offending entrenched priestly interests, running an economy with booms and busts and avoiding irrational exuberance.

No shifty Insider Dealing, Hedge Fund Manager or rogue trader he. He subjected his brothers to a rigid process of selection before hiring them to make sure they'd accept his authority. And throughout it all, the lows and the high, he preserved his spiritual integrity and values. A poster boy for Jewish talent and adaptability.

You could on the other hand argue that he was vain and selfish and never had the courtesy to at least write one letter to his father. He started off by being identified as a Hebrew but then never mentioned it again as he rose up the ranks. He threw himself far too easily into Egyptian culture and convinced everyone he was one of them. He married an Egyptian girl, bought a palace in the suburbs and drove a fancy chariot. He could be a picture book example of assimilation. He arranged a special trip home to Hebron to bury his father but no longer cared enough to do the same for himself.

The fact is the narratives of the Torah lend themselves to multiple possibilities and variations. But each one of us is invited to find the interpretation that most suits our own predicament and circumstances. The real significance for us of the story is the lesson we draw from it.