

# Spies

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The famine in Canaan forces the brothers to go down to Egypt for corn. They come down, minus Benjamin, the other son of Rachel who died in childbirth. Jacob was not going to risk losing him too. They arrive at the distribution center where Joseph himself controls the process. Joseph immediately recognizes them. They were mature men when he last saw them. When they last saw him, he was a beardless youngster. And they certainly could not have imagined he could have survived and risen to this position.

He remembers his dreams, how things have worked out as he predicted. He challenges them claiming they are spies. No, they reply, we are all the sons of one man. In other words, if we were spies we would not all have risked being caught. And then remarkably they offer up the information that one of their number is at home and another is missing. Why? Was it their guilt? Their feeling that now they were being punished? And was this Joseph's intention, to see if they regretted the past, if they had changed?

He kept them in jail for three days, claiming he needed to check their facts. Then he tells them they can only come back if they bring Benjamin. Meanwhile he is going to imprison Simon till they return. An interesting choice. Simon of course was responsible for the destruction of Shechem. Joseph obviously wanted to keep this aggressive and unpredictable brother separate to avoid any incitement he might attempt against Joseph's authority.

The brothers are now distraught. It is Reuben who says that this is punishment for what they did to Joseph. The process of expiation is beginning. Meanwhile they think that because there is a translator there, Joseph won't be paying attention.

Joseph instructs his men to fill up their sacks with corn and to put the money they brought back into their sacks and sends them off. Naturally they are even more worried when they discover their money is there.

This whole charade might strike us as gratuitously cruel. He is toying with them. But remember he needs to know that they will accept his authority. That if he brings them to Egypt he needs to know they will not rebel or make his life difficult. This quite apart from wanting to know if they have learnt their lesson.