

# The Visionary Soul

By Rochel Holzkenner

For four years, we weren't able to have children. In retrospect, that chapter of life seems less dramatic than it felt at the time, especially since I'm now blessed with four healthy kids. But those first four years were a challenge for me, and there were so many disappointments that came along with the ride. Every treatment and procedure brought high hopes and eager anticipation. When they failed, I felt a stab in my vulnerable heart.

After the first year, though, I really toughened up. I didn't cry anymore. I went through the motions sensibly: the endless visits to the doctor's office, the blood tests, the acupuncture treatments. Trying to start a family became my second job, and I pursued it with vigor. But I didn't hold my breath too hard when I started a new round of treatments, and I avoided self-pity like the plague.

**Those first four years were a challenge for me**

One afternoon, as I was driving through Miami, my shield of strength suddenly shattered. With no warning, I started to weep till the tears drenched my cheeks. I was alone, so I let myself cry out loud like a child.

I'd been letting my mind wander, perhaps too far, and I'd started to imagine what it must be like for a mother to watch her daughter struggle. I was watching my "daughter" as a young girl. I watched her grow up and start a life of her own. I wanted her to have the sweetest life; she deserved it. Then I saw her desperately wanting a child; I saw her attempt multiple fertility treatments without success. It broke my heart to see my "daughter" in pain. And that's when I broke down. I cried for the daughter who was me. Even if I was okay with it, my mother wasn't. I suddenly felt undeserving of my fertility struggle.

I don't regret that cry, and I don't judge myself for my self-pity. It felt great to cry again, a powerfully cathartic cry.

Where is that fine line between healthy self-compassion and debilitating self-pity? The tenderness of pain is so frightening, like a dark abyss, that it's often safer to check out of the world of feelings and stay practical. But what's at the back end of an emotional shutdown?

In one of the most moving interactions in the Torah, Joseph met his younger brother, Benjamin, after 22 years of separation. Benjamin, however, had no idea that he was meeting his long-lost brother; he thought that he was talking to the minister of finance in Egypt. Joseph became so emotional from their conversation that, for the first time in his dealings with his brothers, he "hurried to go out because his compassion was aroused to his brother, and he wanted to weep. He went to his room and wept there."<sup>1</sup>

Joseph had heard that his brothers had come down to Egypt to purchase food, and he chose to personally administer their transaction. One can imagine the overwhelming emotional reaction that this must have generated. After 22 years he saw his brothers again, ten of them, standing humbly before him. They don't recognize Joseph, nor would they ever suspect that he was a powerful politician. And Joseph gave them no reason to suspect that he had any tender affinity toward them. On the contrary, for several weeks he played hardball with his brothers. He pretended to suspect them of being spies; he held his brother Simeon as collateral until they brought Benjamin to Egypt. He put on a perfect poker face to make them uneasy in his presence. Joseph knew that if he played his cards right, the brothers would fully regret their choice to sell him 22 years earlier, and they would finally begin to heal from their mistake.

Joseph chose a brilliant strategy and carried it out like an award-winning actor.

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But then Joseph broke down. He couldn't even wait until he was alone to cry. He had to hurry out and find a private space, so that he could let himself weep fully. What changed? What triggered this extreme response?

When the brothers brought Benjamin to Egypt, Joseph invited them all to dine with him. Over dinner, he inquired about their (his) father's well-being. Afterwards, he focused his attention on Benjamin. Joseph asked, "Do you have a brother from the same mother?"

Benjamin carefully responded, "I *had* a brother, but I don't know where he is."

Joseph continued, "Do you have any children?"

"I have ten sons," he answered.

Joseph probed, "What are their names?"

Benjamin listed the names of his 10 sons. Joseph was curious. "What is the idea behind these names?" he asked.

"They all relate to my brother and the troubles that have befallen him: **Bela**, because he was swallowed up (*nivla*) amongst alien nations; **Becher**, because he was my mother's firstborn (*bechor*); **Ashbel**, because G-d sent him into captivity (*sheva'o E-l*); **Geira**, because he had to live in a foreign land (*ger*); **Naaman**, because he was extremely pleasant (*na'im*); **Echi** and **Rosh**, because he was my brother (*ach*) and my elder (*rosh*); **Mupim**, because he learned from the mouth (*peh*) of my father; **Chupim**, because he didn't see my marriage (*chuppah*), and I did not see his; **Ard**, because he went down (*yarad*) amongst alien nations."<sup>2</sup>

Joseph was taken aback that his brother had named all of his sons with names that commemorated him. Apparently, Benjamin was tormented by Joseph's loss. Even after he began a family of his own, he couldn't come to terms with the fact that his brother, whom he apparently admired, was suffering. He couldn't surrender to the notion that they weren't able to share a life together. All this time, he was bleeding for Joseph's pain. The wound had not scabbed over and grown callous. Time had not healed Benjamin.

And this is why Joseph broke down. All of his learned self-discipline, the whole charade that he put on to orchestrate his family's ultimate reunion, wasn't enough to protect him from Benjamin's revelation. Benjamin's ceaseless compassion for Joseph caused a shift in Joseph. He was no longer the savvy viceroy of Egypt; he was a heartbroken man.

The first Chabad rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, writes that inside every man and woman there is a Joseph and there is a Benjamin.<sup>3</sup> Joseph is the archetype of a Jewish survivor. "Listen, O Shepherd of Israel, You who leads Joseph like a flock," writes King David.<sup>4</sup> Joseph is a code name for the Jewish nation. He is the prototype of the loyal Jew in foreign surroundings who rejects secular values and remains faithful to his G-d.<sup>5</sup> The Joseph in us puts on a remarkable fight to live as Jew in a world of adversity, to survive and to thrive despite the rough spots we encounter.

### **Benjamin's ceaseless compassion for Joseph caused a shift in Joseph**

Benjamin is the more vulnerable aspect of our being. Benjamin was orphaned as he took his first breath of life. His mother, Rachel, died while birthing him: "As her soul was departing . . . she named him Ben Oni (son of my affliction)—but his father named him Benjamin."<sup>6</sup> But she wasn't lamenting over her own labor pains; she was prophetically envisioning the suffering that her sons and their tribes would endure. What anguished Rachel was the loss of her dream. She envisioned her children growing up together in the land of Canaan, but she knew that their lives would take another course. Benjamin was born with his mother's pain.

Benjamin is the part of us that's tortured by our unfulfilled expectations. The expectations come from a deep-rooted vision of what life should look like. We feel that we should have integrity and growth, our relationships should be loving and profound, our work should be dynamic and expressive. The visionary within us has immense depth, but is likely to be disappointed by the reality of life.

Our visionary expectations come directly from our soul. Before descending into a body, she eagerly awaited her turn to spend a lifetime doing G-d's will here on earth. To the soul, the opportunity to do a mitzvah, to transform something of the material world into a spiritual experience, is priceless. Throughout our life's journey our soul still clings to her vision of purposeful living, and is quite disappointed by all the things that challenge this ideal lifestyle.

Our Joseph is used to being abused, betrayed and trapped. He makes the most of his tumultuous journey, and rides each wave with grace. But Joseph has a brother who is deeply connected to him. This brother, this soul-consciousness, is deeply pained by the injustice. A Jew deserves a more dignified life. And, perhaps more importantly, a Jew deserves to treat himself with greater dignity. Sometimes it is the self-abuse that most painfully shatters our internal visionary. While our Joseph is jaded and functional, our Benjamin is idealistic and vulnerable.

Our inner Joseph forgets to cry. Or perhaps it sees no function in crying. It's an indulgent waste of time! But there is always a part inside of us that's still hanging onto a dream and is pained every moment that the dream isn't actualized. It's the dreamer that sensitizes us to what life really should look like. And even if it's impossible to live that dream right now, at least we haven't succumbed to our challenges.

When Joseph listens to the story of his life from Benjamin's perspective, he cries. That cry is a powerful cry. Healing will often begin only when we give ourselves permission to empathize with our vulnerability and our disappointment. In the Tanya, Rabbi Schneur Zalman describes the most effective way to reconnect with G-d after we've done something to compromise our relationship with Him. One of the key ingredients to authentic regret is compassion, compassion for our Life Source. Our mistakes may have felt okay at the time, and perhaps we still don't feel that badly about them. We may view ourselves as the kind of people who are susceptible to sinning, not mature or spiritual enough to take the high road. But the meditation that the Rebbe describes involves the belief that there is another part of us, a part that was never okay with that choice. There's a part of us that's still sensitive and is tortured by our mistakes, even if they've happened countless times. It's that internal innocence that's wounded every time we abuse ourselves. *Teshuvah*, the commitment to change, happens when we try to experience the pain of the soul and feel deeply compassionate for her humiliation.<sup>7</sup>

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Benjamin is our innocent visionary who wants a life of dignity. But life's not always that way. And even if it's all for the best, even if all of our challenges are in place for our growth, the Benjamin in our psyche is pained. It's not self-pity, the kind that makes us feel like unlucky victims of circumstance. It's self-compassion for the part of us that is aristocracy but needs to play foot soldier for the time being. Self-pity can be crippling. Self-compassion allows us to be emotionally available. If we can feel for our higher self, our soul, then she becomes a more conscious part of us.

Chassidic thought teaches about the seven emotional stratospheres within the psyche of every being. Love, the first emotion, is cold. Love is compared to water, a substance that maintains a cool temperature. Love inspires us to connect with someone or something outside of ourselves, but that connection can be a very calculated choice, and it doesn't require intense emotion. Severity, the second emotion, is compared to fire, powerful and often volatile. Compassion is the third emotional sphere. It fuses the first two emotions, creating a love that is hot. This connection is not as calculated as it is compelling. For example, I love my sister, but I feel passionate compassion for my friend who has a sick child. Self-compassion propels us forward, giving us the drive to make life work. As Joseph, we may just be going through the motions. But when Joseph resonates with the voice of Benjamin, we become more vibrant.

Let's not become complacent with our soul's struggles in this material world. Allow, for a moment, some compassion for that innocent part of us that yearns for a higher reality. And then G-d will reciprocate in kind, giving us the strength to work through our challenges with more passion and potency.<sup>8</sup>

When I gave myself permission to feel the pain in my journey, when I let go of the fear that I'd become self-pitying, I was much more authentic. I could share more honestly with friends. I had more tolerance for my shortcomings. And I was able to pray with more passion. I believe it was those prayers that shifted my destiny—and G-d blessed me with children.

**FOOTNOTES**

1. [Genesis 43:30](#).
2. Talmud, Sotah 36b.
3. Likkutei Torah, Behar 40d.
4. [Psalms 80:3](#).
5. See commentaries of Rashi and R. Hirsch to Psalms loc. cit.
6. [Genesis 35:18](#).
7. Iggeret Hateshuvah, ch. 7.
8. Likkutei Sichot, vol. 15, p. 348.

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