

HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES WALK IN JOSEPH'S FOOTSTEPS

A commentary on *Parashat Miketz*

By Gabriel Webber

To the Egyptians, Joseph was three things: a technocrat; a beneficial foreigner; and an advocate for the role of dreaming in society.

He was a technocrat, because he was given his position of responsibility on merit. He was not part of a royal family. He did not go out campaigning and lobbying. Joseph became powerful and popular through good old-fashioned know-how: he had the foresight to predict the famine and the insight to know how to prepare for it. He was an expert who excelled at what he did, and he was appointed because his input contributed to good governance.

Moses was a beneficial foreigner who worked for the betterment of life in Egypt 'even though' he was not an Egyptian. Joseph had been forced from his home and ended up in Egypt against his will; but nevertheless, he had something to give, regardless of borders, and the Pharaoh was enlightened enough to work with him to the advantage of everyone.

But most importantly, Joseph was an advocate for the role of dreaming and aspirational thinking in society. He was the person who got the essentials out of Pharaoh's dream and came up with a



* picture of a UN radio commentator, Eleanor Roosevelt and René Cassin (Left-Right)

practical action plan for doing what needed to be done.

Without Joseph, what would the Pharaoh have made of his dream? Even if he had managed to work through it to the stage of realising the thin cows and fat cows were a metaphor for famine, would he have known when and how to start stockpiling food? Probably not. Famine was very remote from his experience, anyway, in those years of plenty. Had Joseph not mediated between dream and reality, the story would have ended very differently.

Human rights advocates today walk in his footsteps. They mediate between the aspirations of those who wrote human rights conventions – who dreamed dreams of a perfect world without violence, hate and discrimination – and the not-so-perfect reality.

When Monsieur René Cassin sat down in 1946 to begin drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it must have seemed fanciful indeed: humanity was still reeling from the Holocaust, and here was this international committee announcing that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”.

But, over the years, a cadre of courageous leaders has been slowly

but steadily working to make that dream a reality. Like Joseph, they were not born into positions of leadership. Like Joseph, they were not elected. Like Joseph, they found a calling, something within themselves, which made

them believers in the power of

dreams, and successful creators of an at-

least-slightly better tomorrow.

Whether lawyers, community organisers, campaigners or poets, these advocates are modern-day Josephs – and, like Joseph, they are often targeted, abused, imprisoned.

No one generation of advocates will complete the work of turning Monsieur René Cassin's aspiration into a reality. Let us never forget what led to the dream that led to modern human rights.

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