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I am Joseph, your brother

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"I am Joseph, your brother." Gen 45:5

There are many stories about the late Pope John XXIII, and some of them are true. Asked once how many people worked in the Vatican, the roly-poly pope answered, "About half of them." On another occasion, momentous for its significance, Pope John welcomed a visiting delegation of Jewish rabbis by quoting today's Lectionary reading from Genesis 44-50, introducing himself to his visitors with the words "I am Joseph, your brother."

The Patriarchal history of ancient Israel ends with the heart-rending story of the sons of Jacob coming down to Egypt during a time of famine to get grain stored by Joseph, who, many years earlier, had been sold into slavery by his brothers, jealous over the favoritism he received from their father. Once in Egypt, Joseph had found favor in the house of Pharaoh because of his gift for interpreting dreams and his administrative skills. Foreseeing the coming famine in a dream, Joseph had directed that huge storage facilities be built to hold surplus grain.

In scenes worthy of great opera, Joseph questions his brothers, who do not recognize him, about their beloved father, still grieving over the supposed death of his missing son. Joseph turns aside to weep, then reveals his identity to the trembling consternation of his brothers: "I am Joseph, your brother."

The emotional overflow of the biblical moment -- a rejected brother who turns out to be a benefactor -- was matched by the exegetical complexity and deep grief contained in Pope John's greeting to his Jewish brothers standing before him in his Vatican private quarters. Leave it to midrashic experts to decode the many layers of meaning in this welcome, but one interpretation might be that the pope saw the tragic separation of Christianity from its Jewish family roots as a temporary trial meant to be resolved. One of the great accomplishments of Vatican II was the declaration *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Times") on the relationship of the church to Judaism and other world religions.

And among the many metaphors and rich analogies to be found in the greeting, Pope John may also have intended the image of himself as a kind of exile living in Egypt awaiting this family restoration and the overcoming of historical and theological protocols that had imprisoned the western church from its full identity, obscured by its very success as skilled administrator of Christendom, but wounded to the soul by the loss of its Jewish self. In "Nostra Aetate," St. Paul's own anguish at the growing rift between Israel and the young church would provide the authoritative basis in Rom 9 for affirming the eternal validity of God's first covenant with the Jews.

Pope John's greeting, like his vestigial yarmulke in the form of the papal beanie, was a delicate but enduring bridge that would expand and lengthen to accommodate the critical dialogue between church and synagogue. The truth of this story is a matter of record, but it also lies in retelling it over and over again today as a reminder that what John the dreamer and visionary saw and affirmed over 50 years ago must still be realized.

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