

Sermon | Parshat Vayeshev
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Wait and See?

Tomorrow night we will begin the celebration of Hanukkah. Despite the place that it now occupies in American Jewish life, Hanukkah itself is a rather minor rabbinic holiday. Its origins are not in the Hebrew Bible, let alone the Torah. Other than appearing in the noncanonical books of First and Second Maccabees, Hanukkah appears only sporadically in rabbinic writings. Even there, the discussion about Hanukkah and its customs pales in comparison to other topics of Jewish life. Nevertheless, Hanukkah has become a significant holiday for Jews today. We celebrate that God brings miracles to our world. We celebrate that the just cause of the few can defeat the wicked designs of the mighty. The real story of Hanukkah is rather complex, and we do not have time to explore it in all of its intricacies here, but suffice it to say that the story of Hanukkah teaches us that when we and our traditions are under threat, it is incumbent upon us to speak up, to take action, and to do what we must in order to defend our rights to live and to thrive as Jews. That is why we celebrate the victory of the Maccabees; they saw what was at stake and they took action. There were others in the Jewish community at that time who proffered a different approach. There were those who thought that perhaps everyone should just wait and see. Maybe Judaism would in some way survive in the wave of Hellenization. That was not the perspective of the victors of our story.

In hindsight, it is easy to say that the Maccabees had the right idea. Easy for us to look back and say that indeed Hellenism was a powerful force in the ancient world, and had the Maccabees not revolted perhaps ancient Israelite religion would be but a footnote in a history

textbook. Thankfully, that is not the case. But determining in any given situation whether to act, or to wait and see is not so clear cut. Parshat Vayeshev offers us a one such situation where a character chooses to wait and see.

Our parsha begins with Joseph sharing two of his dreams. The implications of both are clear: he sees a future in which his siblings and even his parents look to him as a leader and figure of authority, someone to be honored by all others. We know how the story ends, and we know that all of this is ultimately true. Joseph will become the second highest ranking official in Egypt; only the Egyptian pharaoh will have more authority than him. But at this place in the narrative, that future is unknown to Joseph's brothers and his father, Jacob. After sharing these visions with his family, the Torah says, וַיִּקְנְאוּ-בּוֹ אָחָיו, "His brothers were wrought up at him," וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת-הַדָּבָר, "and his father kept the matter in mind."¹ Literally, the text says "and his father guarded the matter." In other words, Jacob noticed this deep tension between Joseph and his other sons, and decided to wait and see. He did not choose to act or to intervene. Rather, he noticed it and he noted it, keeping the idea in mind but choosing not to act on it yet.

The classical commentaries on the Torah all try to make sense of this verse. Why are we told that Jacob kept the matter in mind? Radak, a Frech rabbi of the 12th and 13th centuries, notes that Jacob was angry with Joseph for revealing his dreams to his brothers and causing them this anguish. Nevertheless, he worried about what the dreams foretold and remembered them. In other words, Jacob could have berated Joseph for bringing tension into the relationship with his brothers. Jacob could have dismissed the dreams entirely and ignored the potential long-term implications. Instead, he chose to wait and see; not to forget and move on,

¹ Genesis 37:11.

but to wait and see how things would unfold. That is an important distinction. Sometimes we notice something troubling and deal with it by ignoring it, or moving beyond it, or setting it aside as a minor nuisance. Other times we notice something troubling and we are not yet ready to act on it, but we are also not prepared to just let it go. That is what Jacob did in this case.

Looking at the entirety of the narrative, we have the advantage of knowing that the animosity Joseph sparks by sharing these dreams leads to his being sold into slavery and brought down to Egypt, a horrible ordeal both for him and for his father to endure the loss of a son. And, we also know that it works out well in the end for the entire family for only Joseph, thanks to his eventual station in Egypt, is able to rescue them in a time of a famine. One could argue that Jacob, therefore, made the right decision by choosing to wait and see. Had he intervened, Joseph may not have been sold off by his brothers, and perhaps the entire story of our people would have ended due to an awful famine in Israel. Or, we could critique Jacob for choosing to wait and see. Had he intervened, he would have saved his son from a terrible ordeal, and they could have dealt with the famine in other ways. Either way, it is much easier for us to look at the whole story and judge. It is much harder to be Jacob and actually be faced with making the decision in that very moment.

All of this is to say that choosing to act or choosing to wait and see are options that we might take based on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We must look at each situation and determine whether it is best to keep the matter in mind, to wait and see, or to intervene when we notice something troubling before us. I do not necessarily know all of the criteria for choosing either option, but at the very least I suggest that when the situation

presents a clear and present threat, we are obligated to intervene. When the situation does not, perhaps it is suitable to wait and see before acting too soon.

Recently, antisemitism has felt like a clear and present threat to many of us. No, I am not drawing a parallel with the threat of antisemitism in Nazi Germany, but rather noting that antisemitism has both surfaced and has been normalized by so many in our country and even here locally that we perceive the threat to be clear and present. Whenever someone makes a statement or takes action that we deem is antisemitic, I believe that we must do more than take note. Rather, we call it out, denounce it, and work to combat both its origins and its reach. Like the Maccabees of ancient Israel, I refuse to wait and see in this scenario. We must be both proactive and reactive in the face of antisemitism. When I say proactive, I mean that we must work to build relationships with our communities and our society. That we must be in relationship with our allies and supporters, especially those in the faith community and in other minority communities who understand what it is like to feel threatened, and who are willing to stand up for us just as we stand up for them. We are doing that at B'nai Israel through our engagement with AIM, through the building of relationships between our clergy and those in the local faith community, and in other ways. When I say that we must also be reactive, I mean that we must work to educate ourselves and our children on how we respond to antisemitism. We do this by engaging with organizations like the ADL and JCRC. This year our congregation is part of a new ADL initiative called Kulanu, an eight-month program dedicated to empowering congregations to address antisemitism through education, community engagement, and advocacy. On the matter of antisemitism, none of us should feel comfortable to just wait and see.

I say this because I believe it is our sobering reality, but I do not say it to make you somber. Rather, I take inspiration from the story of Hanukkah and from the proactive spirit of our ancestors who recognized that something significant was at stake, and who therefore determined that they would stand up and do something about it. I do not worry that we will have to literally fight as they did, but I do believe that we must harness the spirit of their convictions and their bravery in speaking up and addressing the issues that are set before us. The miracle of Hanukkah is not only that they succeeded in their efforts militarily. The miracle of Hanukkah is not only that one day's worth of oil lasted for an additional seven. The miracle of Hanukkah is also that we continue to stand here today as proud Jewish people, rooted deeply in our cherished traditions, committed wholly to the continuity of our story, and intertwined simultaneously with the community and country in which we are so grateful to reside.

Shabbat shalom.