

"When to Take a Hint"  
Vayeshev 2001

We read in this morning's parasha that Joseph goes out into the field, looking for his brothers, the very same brothers whom the Torah has already told us hate him.

The narrative clearly states, *vlo yachlu dabro l'shalom*: they could not even bring themselves to speak peaceably to him. The narrator tells us after hearing that Joseph has had a dream, *vayosephu od sno oto*: they hated him even more. He did not even yet reveal the content of his obnoxious dream, that he would rule over them. All they heard was that he had a dream, and they hated him. Then just to be sure we get the picture, a few verses later, the text says that they were jealous of him.

Do you think maybe Joseph could have taken a hint? Gotten the message? Let's face it – his brothers don't like him. We know it, they know it, but apparently, he chooses to ignore the reality of the situation.

The truth is people often have a hard time hearing, or accepting what others are saying. We believe what we wish we had heard, or what we want to believe.

Perhaps you heard the joke about the woman who is complaining on the phone to her mother that she doesn't know what to do. The sisterhood board is coming over for a meeting, and she has nothing to serve them. At the same time, she is supposed to drive carpool, help her son with his science fair project, all of which is especially difficult because of the snow storm they just had, and so on.

Her mother says, "not to worry. I'll come and make blintzes and a kugel for your meeting. I'll pick up the children from school. While you're in the meeting, I'll help with the science fair project." Then she says, "Tell me, with all this snow, how did your husband, Al get to work?"

The daughter says, "Al?! My husband's name isn't Al. It's Milt." On the other end of the line --- "Wait a minute. I'm sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number."

And the younger woman says, with desperation in her voice, "Does that mean you're not coming?!"

Like the woman in the joke, Joseph is oblivious to reality, and so is Jacob.

Jacob sends his favorite son to meet his brothers in Shechem, and Joseph, goes. Neither one of them shows any suspicion or concern that something may happen to the young lad.

Joseph sets out on his journey and asks a stranger he encounters in the field, for directions. Seeing no 7 - 11 or service station nearby, he asks the man for

help. "et achai anochi mevakesh, It is my brothers I am seeking." And the unidentified character says to him, "They have traveled from here."

The midrash and our commentators, ever conscious of the subtleties of the text note that if Joseph hears what the man is telling him, Joseph would realize that while he is looking for his brothers, they have traveled far from here. They understand these words to mean, that they have moved a great distance from Joseph, literally and figuratively, physically and spiritually.

And they have moved a great distance from God as well. As Rashi says, "Whereas you, Joseph, have asked about your brothers, they have gone away from any feelings of brotherhood." For the verse continues, "they have gone to Dothan," which is interpreted to mean, based on the word dothan being related to the word for justice or religion, (dat) --- as if the anonymous man in the field is hinting to Joseph they have gone to find a legal justification for killing you."

And still, Joseph either doesn't get it, or chooses not to take the hint. He goes to his brothers, who proceed to take out their contempt for him on him by throwing him into a pit and selling him into slavery.

Despite all the signs, so clearly stated in the torah, that the brothers hate and resent Joseph, he naively is unaware of their feelings towards him.

And I am afraid, my friends, all too often, we, are like Joseph.

We innocently look for our brothers, for peace, but they are not interested.

I am referring of course, to times in our lives when we do not hear what others may be telling us.

And I am also referring to the current situation in Israel. And I wonder, when will we, and when will the rest of the world wake up to this reality?

How many more attacks does it take for people to see that there is no interest in a peaceable solution by Palestinians? How many more times do we have to see and hear mothers celebrating the murderous acts of their sons, and wishing they had more, before we realize that we are not operating from the same values system.

It is not just the suicide bombings, which are not spontaneous acts, but are well-planned, coordinated, complicated operations, requiring a great deal of money and logistical support which are tell-tale signs of their feelings. It is the reactions and celebrations which are especially revealing. It is the pronouncements in the media and mosques.

Some of their fanaticism is couched in religious terms.

One commentator said about the section, we read earlier, "they seek to justify their act with the cloak of their religion, which can be misused and misapplied to justify wrong and sinful acts."

Even if, as some say, Arafat cannot control these groups, which is clearly not true, he most certainly can control the propaganda that is put out in the state-controlled Palestinian press. He certainly can control the words which come out of his own mouth. He continues to tell his people that soon all of Jerusalem will be theirs, that all of Israel will be theirs. His people continue to deny that Jews have any claim to Jerusalem. He and others feed this radicalism and hatred of Israel. And we still think we are looking for our brothers.

We need to wake up, and get the message. They don't like us. They resent the success of Israel. The Arab nations have had the same opportunities over the last half century to absorb their refugees, to build a modern society, to create a thriving democracy. In fact, they had even more chances. Israel has done all that it has built up without the benefit of the vast oil revenue they had.

As someone commented, while Israel and America are building planes, the Arab radicals are busy learning how to crash them. And as long as that is the case, there is no hope for peace.

This week, I had my weekly shiur, from Jerusalem. While waiting to begin the lecture, the professor said, the Palestinians acts of terror have nothing to do with occupation, or any specific thing Israel has done. Their purpose, and thus the thing which is especially upsetting to the Palestinians is their inability to unravel Israeli society.

Ultimately, the brothers made their peace with Joseph. Not in this week's parasha, or even in the next one. It came about when Joseph was in a position of power, when they saw that Joseph was invincible and survived what they had tried to do to him. Perhaps there is a message here as well.

But for now, for this shabbat, let us at least, accept the message, even if it does not conform to the reality we would wish to see. For only, when we understand the need to open our eyes, and see what our enemies seek to do to us, can we respond accordingly and appropriately.

Let us learn to be able to take a hint.

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