

This Week In Torah *Vayashev*

It has been said that if a butterfly flaps its wings in China, it could cause a hurricane in the United States. This is known as the butterfly effect or chaos theory. In reality, it is completely false. But this often-quoted poetic example is just a metaphor for the true power of the butterfly effect. It was discovered and named by a meteorological expert Edward Loren in 1969. He was running mathematical models trying to predict the exact paths of tornadoes. He noticed that the results will change drastically as a result of tiny alterations to the initial conditions of the experiment. When he ran the simulation hundreds of times, he noticed that the plotted results looked like the wings of a butterfly thus he named it the butterfly effect.

But don't let the truth mess up a great metaphor. Let's play with the butterfly effect metaphor--- this week's *parasha* introduces us a nameless individual who changes the course of Jewish history. This man is our butterfly—his interaction with Joseph sends him to Dothan, rather than heading home to Jacob without finding his brothers in Shechem. From there, Joseph is thrown into a pit, sold into slavery, ends up in Egypt... and the rest is history! Our history!

In Genesis 37, we read: Israel said to Joseph, “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “I am ready.” And he said to him, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word.” So, he sent him from the valley of Hebron. When he reached Shechem, a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?” He answered, “I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?” The man said, “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.” So, Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.

If it was not for THAT man, we would not be here today! Had Joseph not encountered him, there would've been no slavery in Egypt, no great deliverance, no Moses, no Torah... who knows what our fate would've been? Thus, that nameless individual changed the course of our history. Our version of the butterfly effect!

The rabbis teach us that the man was not there by happenstance. He was an angel sent by God. RaSHI believes that he was the archangel Gabriel whose presence reminds of

God's strength as well as making known God's will to humankind. He believes that this was the same angel who stayed the hand of Abraham as Isaac was bound on Mount Moriah. It was the same angel dressed as an *ish*/man who wrestled with Jacob in the wilderness. Gabriel's job was to direct human beings to understand the power [in Hebrew *Gabor*] of God [in Hebrew *El*] – thus GABRIEL!

Nachminides who lived in Spain in the 12th Century had a slightly different take. He viewed that Joseph was wandering aimless off the path [in Hebrew *Halacha*] as he tried to find his brothers. According to the RaMBaN, the man/angel was there to put him on the right path—regardless of how difficult it might be. Ibn Ezra who lived around the same time in Spain believed that the man just stumbled on Joseph and just pointed him in the right direction, based on what he overheard. The results were the same—Joseph found his brothers in Dothan!

For us, we need to see ourselves as angels of God; we represent God in this world. Our actions can shape lives; we are the butterflies who cause incredible changes. WE can put someone on the right path with our direction. WE can also change lives inadvertently as Ibn Ezra states—therefore, we should choose our words and actions very carefully. WE can empower the will of God through our conscious decisions, making us God's sacred partners—true angels.

The “butterfly effect” as a theory does not have much scientific credence. But as a spiritual metaphor, it reminds us that every action or inaction can possibly shape a person's destiny—whether we recognize it or not.

Now... enjoy the narrative of Joseph!