

Parshat Vayeshev 5770
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I began thinking of this Torah portion two years ago, or so, when we decided that this would be the date of my daughter Nellie's bat mitzvah. The date for her birthday weekend was taken, so we thought, why not pick a cool portion and, heck, get a Hallel service to boot? And the cake possibilities for Vayeshev were just too good to pass up.

Until about three months ago, I was thinking of this portion as the mother of the bat mitzvah, not as the giver of the d'var. I had wondered whether she would talk about the famous dreams and coat, or perhaps family discord, the fantasy of selling a sibling into slavery.

A few weeks ago I was re-reading the English translation in preparation for the Torah reading, and I was struck by a few things that I hadn't remembered from my own Sunday school lessons, in verses 12-17:

Genesis 37, translation by Everett Fox

12 Now his brothers went to tend their father's sheep in Shekhem.

13 Yisrael said to Yosef:

Are not your brothers tending sheep in Shekhem?

Come, I will send you to them!

He said to him:

Here I am.

14 And he said to him:

Come, pray, look into the well-being of your brothers and into the well-being of the sheep, and bring me back word.

So he sent him out from the valley of Hevron, and he came to Shekhem.

15 And a man came upon him—here, he was roaming in the field; the man asked him, saying:

What do you seek?

16 He said:

**I seek my brothers,
pray tell me where they are tending-sheep.**

17 The man said:

**They have moved on from here,
indeed, I heard them say: Let us go to Dotan.
Yosef went after his brothers and came upon them in Dotan.**

What first caught my eye was that the brothers were tending their sheep in Shekhem. Shekhem? Really? The brothers went to tend their sheep in Shekhem? The place where the two brothers, Shim'on and Levi, killed all the freshly-circumcised men in the city to avenge their sister's, Dinah's, honor, and then the other sons 'came up upon the corpses and plundered the city because they had defiled their sister.'(Gen 34:27.) (For those of you not here last week, the story can be found in Gen. 34:1-27) It seems an odd choice of places to pasture, given the almost certain hostility by the survivors.

With a little more investigation, I learned that in fact Jacob owned some land in Shekhem (Gen 33:19-20). He'd bought it from Hamor (the father of the man Shekhem who is killed in the massacre) and built an altar there. And we know from the book of Joshua that Joseph himself is buried there, when Moses brings his bones out of Egypt. Joshua, chapter 24:32 says 'And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in the parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of the children of Joseph.'

<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0624.htm>

Now knowing that Joseph ends up being buried in Shekhem, it seems even more foreboding. A 17 year-old dreamer boy is sent off alone to find the brothers who hate him, in a town where they'd recently killed all the able-bodied men folk, and which will prove to be his ultimate resting place. Sure hope he packed that sunscreen.

The second thing that stood out to me was Joseph's choice of words to respond to his father, when Yaakov says **Are not your brothers tending sheep in Shekhem? Come, I will send you to them!** Joseph responds, **hineni**, Here I am.

When I saw the hineni, I was surprised because I had thought it was used only when a human was speaking with Gd. Of course, I was wrong about that, but the times hineni is used in the Torah before this occurrence happen at pretty significant times:

The story of the binding of Isacc:

Abraham to Gd (G 22:1); Abraham to Isaac (G 22:7); Abraham to an angel of the Lord (G22:11);

The story of the twins and the birthright:

Esau to Isaac (G 27:1); Jacob pretending to be Esau to Isaac (G 27:18)

Jacob wrestling with the angel:

Jacob to angel of Gd (31:1)

(and according to the source I checked, it only happens twice more after Joseph says it to Jacob)

<http://www.blueletterbible.org/search/translationResults.cfm?Criteria=here+i+am&t=KJV>

This phrase, hineni, this I am here, seems to be a signifier for bigger things to come. In each case something pivotal occurs. Like the trekkies know a random actor in a red Star Fleet uniform will be the first to be killed, we regular readers of Torah have come to expect something fairly tragic to occur when we hear or read the hineni.

What I want to spend time talking about this morning, though, is the chance encounter between Joseph and the man he meets in his wanderings.

**15 And a man came upon him—here, he was roaming in the field; the man asked him, saying:
What do you seek?**

I must say that whenever I've read this, I've thought, how hard can it be to find 11 men and a flock of sheep? I have always, and clearly erroneously, pictured the rolling hills of central Pennsylvania, with all the green patches of land that used to be there before the highways cut things up. Okay, so they are in a desert and not in bucolic PA. Still, maybe a hill or two over? Near that nice little oasis? Rabbi Toba patiently showed me a map of the area. From Hebron to Shekhem looks to be about 45 miles (see the back of the Eytz Chayim for a map), and another 15 miles or so to Dotan.

Here we learn Joseph is 'roaming in the field.' Joseph must look lost. He has travelled to find his brothers, perhaps only bringing enough provisions to last him the travel time to Shekhem. We know he is wearing the special coat his father gave him (because the brothers, in a few verses, will take it from him). Perhaps it was the coat that caught the stranger's attention. We know from later in the story that he is attractive, from Gen 38:6 'Now Yosef was fair of form and fair to look at.' and clearly Potiphar's wife thought so, too. So we have a good looking young man wandering around the oasis, and a stranger approaches him.

Who is this man? How does he know who the brothers are that Joseph refers to? Is he a good guy or a bad guy? Is he an angel, as Rashi, and other rabbis, seem to think? According to the book Studies in Bereshit, by Nehama Leibowitz,

“Ramban translated the figurative statement of the Rabbis and Rashi, who state the man was “the angel Gabriel” into the abstract concept of Divine messenger, unwittingly carrying out his mission.”
(1966? World Zionist Organization: Jerusalem, pg 355)

When I was reading this, it wasn't at all clear to me that he was a good guy. My first response was, holy moly, he's from Shekhem! He recognized the brothers from the massacre and wants to send Joseph to his doom! I like that theory. Although, as I am writing this, I'm not sure he would know it was his doom to which he was sending him. When I asked Nellie about it, she thought it was one of his brother's in disguise as a way of tricking him and luring him to a place where they could do him in.

Here's another thought: does it matter what the man's intentions were? Either way, to fulfill HaShem's promise to Abraham, our people needed to become enslaved in Egypt and someone had to help get us out. Was this merely, as a friend on Facebook put it 'a plot device sent by HaShem to move the story along'? Again, does it matter?

If the stranger were an angel, a messenger of Gd, would that make it any different from him being a man? Why not say so? In parshat VaYera, Gen 18:1-2, the story says that Gd appears to Abraham, and when he looks up, three men are standing over him in the front of his tent. Here, in the hebrew, the word ish and ha-ish, 'a man' and 'the man' are repeated in lines 15-17 (one commentary thought this meant there were actually three different angels...)—could they be the same three messengers of HaShem? Why not say so?

This stranger helps keep Joseph in motion to get him where he needs to go so our story of a people can continue. Since I have begun studying this, I have thought of what chance encounters have played in my own life. When I was in Sunday school in Altoona, one lesson we learned was that *anyone* could be the messiah, so we had to be nice and polite to everyone. I remember being worried that if I were the messiah, would I know? How would I know? It didn't take long to realize that, just like if you have to ask how much something is, you can't afford it, if you have to ask yourself if you are the messiah, you ain't the messiah. (I did worry with my first pregnancy that what if I was gestating the next dalia lama? I think we can let that one go, too.)

I can think of two significant chance encounters that changed, or seemed to change the direction of my life. The first happened in the late 1980's. I used to work at Widener Library at Harvard University. On Wednesday nights I got to work at the desk in the Reference Room. One night, a very pretty man with the longest eyelashes I'd ever seen, asked me, 'Where's the Library Lit?' This is a reference tool only library students ever asked for. Him being so pretty and all, I decided to walk him over to the shelf rather than just point it out to him. Two years later we walked down the aisle and under a chuppah. He is a large factor in why I am standing here today and not Nellie, but that is another story...

The other happened more recently, about seven years ago—practically to the week, actually. I was having a bit of a hard time and had decided to go to

Kripalu for the first time. For the most part, it was a huge disaster. But I got a massage. Many of you who know me know I hate massages. Well, maybe not many of you here who only have known me for the last few years, but trust me when I tell you that it is true. Anyhow, I had the most amazing experience I have ever had. The woman who worked with me created a very safe space—it was warm, I knew where she was, I knew where I was. My body was respected and seemingly honored. All I could think of was that if I could offer this kind of gift to one other person, my life would have meaning. And that thought sustained me through that weekend and through some very bleak times. I don't know that I have accomplished that goal yet, or if I ever will. It is kind of hard to judge how someone else feels, but I do try to continue to treat most people as if they were at least related to the messiah, and each body I work with with respect and honor. Perhaps at Kiddush you can share with me or each other how a chance encounter changed a direction in your life.

As this is Hanukkah, there is a brief drash by Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer, a Rabbi in Southern California, on this Torah portion I'd like to share:

***Drash of the Week- Parashat Vayeshev
Light and Power***

by Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer

With the simple act of lighting a candle, you can illuminate an entire room. Add a mirror, and you have twice as much light. So, too, with people. We all carry internal sparks, rays of light within. But sometimes it takes another person to show us how to release them to ourselves and to the world. In this week's Torah portion, Joseph – favored son of the patriarch Jacob and the possessor of the coat of many colors – finds himself lost, far from home. He is searching for his brothers, but instead of finding them, Joseph encounters only a stranger: "And a man found him, and –behold! – he was wandering in the field, and the man asked him, 'What do you seek?'" (Genesis 37:15)

The Torah does not identify the man. All it tells us is that Joseph is directionless. Searching. Without a compass and without a clue. And all of a sudden, another human being appears, and notices that Joseph is needy. Upon seeing Joseph's vulnerability, the man does not attack him. He does not take advantage of Joseph's confusion and he does not try to manipulate him in any way. Instead, the stranger poses a question to Joseph, to see if he can, by some chance, be of help.

"What do you seek?"

Rabbinic tradition has it that this unnamed figure is no man, but rather an angel, the archangel Gabriel. It is this celestial being, sent to earth by God, who

approaches the roaming Joseph, asks him a single question and sends him on his way.

Until the appearance of the stranger/angel, Joseph had been in darkness, unsure where he was going, feeling his way around as though he were unable to see. The man's question helps enlighten his path (and his answer helps him move on it).

The power of this type of encounter is not limited to our Biblical ancestors. We too find that we are often wandering, aimless, in need of help, guidance, direction. But we don't need to be told what to do. We need to hear questions – sometimes just one question – asking us not to rely on the advice of others but to be able to see our direction for ourselves.

The Chasidic master, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, explained that the angel helped Joseph understand his own existential condition. The angel, he said, taught Joseph that when he is wandering through life, when his soul is weeping from despair and self-doubt, he should ask himself a question: What do you seek? After doing so, he will be able to see his path and walk down it with confidence. According to the Kotzker Rebbe, then, it is the question – posed to the self – which enlightens our path.

This is the season of Chanukkah. It is a time of wintery darkness, of shortened hours of daylight, of clouds and cold. Like Joseph wandering directionless in the field, we may find ourselves in a season of potential gloom and blackness. But in the midst of the darkness, we kindle lights. By lighting that chanukkiah – that Chanukkah menorah – we break through the darkness.

The act of kindling the Chanukkah lights – brief, flickering though they are – reminds us that we have an obligation to bring enlightenment. As the rabbi taught, we do it for ourselves, and as Joseph's angel teaches, we do it for others. It is customary to place the menorah in a spot where it can be viewed by as many people as possible: let the lights inspire us to bring enlightenment, clarity and warmth.

In this season, may the glow of the chanukkiah bring us the confidence we need – and enough light – to see our way clearly.

<http://www.ozreinu.org/drashArchive/Vayeshev.htm>

Sources

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