

Vayeshev- Joseph Seeks His Brothers

November 27, 2021

I.

Last week at Parent Child Learning, we learned about the struggle of Yaakov, Jacob, with an *ish*- someone who the Torah simply describes as a “man”, with no other identifying information. This mysterious man finds Jacob when he is alone on one side of the river with his family on the other, and wrestles with Jacob until dawn. Many commentators understand that this person, the *ish*- with whom Jacob struggles is really an angel, as evidenced by the blessing the angel gives- changing Jacobs name from Jacob to Yisrael, which means one who wrestles with God (or a divine being).

That struggle with a *mysterious man* transforms who Jacob is- changes his name, and changes his path in life.

II.

In this week’s parsha, parshat Vayeshev, **Jacob’s son Joseph also encounters a mysterious and unidentified *ish*, who changes his path, changes his life-** and the lives of the nation of Israel, and all of us his descendants. **The beginning of our parsha tells us the background of this fateful encounter with the *ish*:**

- The Torah tells us that Joseph worked alongside his brothers tending to the family’s flocks, and brought back *diba*- gossip- to their father Jacob about his brothers.

- The Torah tells us that Jacob favored Joseph, and openly displayed his favoritism- presenting Joseph with the lavish gift of a special, decorative coat.
- The Torah tells us further that Joseph dreamt dreams of his brothers and parents bowing to him, and told his dreams to his family- and the brothers' jealousy and hatred of Joseph grew even more.

V'aviv shamar et hadavar- "And his father kept the matter in mind."

The Torah specifically notes that Jacob was aware of the dynamic which has developed between his sons. He saw the jealousy fermenting, the tension, the resentment- which he had contributed to.

And yet, one day, when the brothers go to pasture the family's flocks in Shechem, Jacob sends Joseph to see how his brothers are doing there. Commentators note that perhaps Jacob sent Joseph with gifts to reconcile with his brothers, or that the brothers would not harm Joseph out of respect and awe for their father.

Joseph answers his father with one word which signals to us that this is a moment of calling and destiny: ***Hineni***-**"I am ready."**

Dr. Erica Brown writes, "*Hineni* connotes a readiness and acceptance of a mission or task that often portends danger. Abraham said it when God asked him to bind Isaac and once again in response to his son. Jacob answered the call of an angel after he had a dream about his livestock and God called him back to the land of Israel where he could dream of higher things. ...In Shemot, Moses said it at the burning bush."

And Joseph says Hineni when Jacob calls upon him to go to his brothers, despite the tension. Despite knowing it could be a fraught, potentially dangerous situation. Like the others who have their Hineni moments, Joseph expresses with this one word “I am ready to do great things.”

And so Joseph reaches Shechem, but his brothers are no longer there. But before Joseph gives up on his mission, a man meets him, wandering in the fields. The Torah relates:

The man asked him, “What are you looking for?”- *ma t'vakesh?* Joseph answered, “I am seeking my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?”

Joseph’s words are powerful, and they are his mission statement: I am seeking my brothers. Throughout Bereshit, brothers have been in conflict: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau. Joseph steps forward to undertake the mission of attempting to correct this dynamic. To reach over the enmity that has been building, and to connect. To find a way to reach his brothers, and relate to them again not as enemies, not as competitors, but as his family, as the nation of *bnai yisrael*.

And that day, when Joseph couldn’t find his brothers, the mission might have failed- but for this mysterious man who redirects Joseph to find his brothers in Dotan and propels the journey forward.

Because of this *ish*, the brothers meet Joseph and plot to kill him but throw him in a pit and then sell him to passing merchants instead. This begins his descent to Egypt, and

Joseph's path to being viceroy of Egypt, which leads to Joseph hatching a plan to save Egypt- and his family- from years of famine- and leads to Yaakov and his family going down to Egypt, and the beginning of our time of being enslaved there for 400 years, and leads to our redemption and going out to freedom to receive the Torah at Har Sinai.

Who was this *ish* who sets Joseph on his way and sets the rest of our history in motion? Just as in the story of Jacob's wrestling with a mysterious man, the commentators wonder whether this "ish" was in fact a person, or an angel. The commentator Ibn Ezra gives a very practical answer: that he is just a man going on his way. But if this was simply a person, how did this stranger know who Joseph was, who his brothers were? How did he know where they had gone in order to direct Joseph to them?

According to Nachmanides, Ramban, he is a passer-by but who has been sent by God, thus fulfilling the role of a messenger. For **The 11th century commentator** Rashi, he is the angel Gabriel. **Rashi** is sure that the only way the man could know the brothers' whereabouts was if he were the angel Gabriel. The 19th century commentator Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yiehuda Berlin, agrees and adds that since the man came across Joseph, the man must have been looking for Joseph. Joseph wandered, perhaps got a little lost, and the angel Gabriel was there to redirect him. He knew the right question because he was sent from God.

It's axiomatic that the Torah does not waste words, so does the Torah take time to detail the dialogue between Yaakov and this *ish*, whether angel, or human? Who cares if Joseph found his brothers in Shechem or Dothan or Lakeview?

Though Joseph may not have realized it at the time, the question which the man asks Joseph-*ma t'vakesh*, **“What are you seeking?”** was not a question about the location of his brothers, but a question about the trajectory of his life. And the stranger who met Joseph in the fields of Shechem may not have understood the significance of their meeting either- the ish may have thought that he was just helping a stranger find his flocks, but what he was really doing was helping the Jewish people find a future.

That simple question, asked by an unknowing stranger, leads Joseph to the realization of what is important to him. *Et achai anochi mevakesh*, says Joseph, I am seeking my brothers. In response to the question, Joseph is able to articulate out loud: What I really want is reconciliation, unity. I want to fix the broken dynamic that exists between us.

This personal realization for Joseph comes via a stranger-come-angel who Joseph meets on the way. And what happened to Joseph in the fields happens to us in our lives. We meet people or angels and they can change everything. The teacher who encouraged you to pursue your passion, the friend who supported you and lifted you up when you were in hard straits, the chance encounter with a person who becomes a lifelong partner. The man who met Joseph in the fields of Shechem was of course not a man- he was an emissary of God- or he was not **only** a man **he was also** an angel.

And so it was with the three people who visited Abraham who delivered messages from God, and the man who wrestled Yaakov. Rabbi Marc Gellman explains that through these stories which confuse people with angels, the Torah is teaching us that it is possible to be both at the same time.

Joseph probably did not know that this man was an angel, and the man himself may not even have known yet that he was an angel. Joseph could easily have dismissed the stranger's directions to Dothan, thinking, 'How could this stranger know who my brothers are? Maybe he confused them for some other shepherds!' These kinds of angels in our lives might present us with a message, but we choose whether or not to hear it.

Sometimes we have to wander a bit to figure out where we want to go. Whether angel or man, the question the *ish* asked-*Ma Tevakesh*- helped Joseph go on to meet his brothers, though his fate was uncertain, and helped him realize his destiny.

Rabbi David Silber argues that Rashi's understanding, that the *ish* was an angel, might actually be the simple reading of the text. How? Rabbi Silber explains: The Torah must always be read in two ways: We of course read and understand the events of the Torah as a product of human actions- the cause and effect of choices and mistakes the people in the Torah make. Jacob and Joseph's actions and choices lead to the jealousy between the brothers that gets Josef sold down to Egypt. But the Torah reminds us that the slavery in Egypt wasnt just a product of human choice but also a Divine plan. God had already told Abraham in **Bereshit Chapter 15** that his descendants would be slaves in Egypt for 400 years. And so this *ish*, an agent of God, is there to direct Joseph to find his brothers, and get sent to Egypt which leads to our bondage there.

Both of these perspectives may seem contradictory and yet we are asked to see their truth at the same time: The Torah is a function of human conduct- God might send us

angels, people who support or guide us, or whose questions and challenges shake us awake, or lead us to personal realization. Yet we choose which messages we receive or don't, and ultimately we choose which actions to take. At the same time, says Rabbi Silber, the Torah and history is the playing out of the divine will, and the divine promise.

Like Josephin this week's parsha, may we live our lives with our hearts and minds open to feeling God's guidance, cognizant of the "angels" who appear in our lives and help us find what we might not have even known we were looking for. And at the same time may God guide us always on the right path.