

Parshat Vayeshev

Evan Pressman

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This Shabbat's Sedrah, Vayeshev, serves as the launching point for the story of Joseph, Jacob's most beloved son. It is a narrative that spans the remaining parshiot of Genesis, and plays out like a biblical soap opera, full of twists and turns, dreams and realities, cunning and compassion, innocence and maturity, personal hardships and domestic triumphs.

From the start, we are introduced to Joseph as naïve, inexperienced, and somewhat immature young man. As opposed to working the flocks with his siblings, Joseph continually provides not-so glowing reports of their exploits to Jacob, much to the brothers' chagrin. He is given a striking, multihued coat from his father that he shows off to his brothers, further aggravating the situation. He tells his family of his wondrous dreams that seem to relegate them to a subordinate status, but Joseph's apparent youthful exuberance and corresponding lack of tact further inflame the ire of his brothers, even getting a minor scolding from Jacob. At the surface, these events do not bode well for Joseph on the road

to his ultimate destiny. But as we know, the Torah continually teaches us to dig deeper, to research beyond just the surface level.

A classic case study can be found in a short and seemingly insignificant episode described in Genesis 37:12 – 17. Jacob sends an eager and enthusiastic Joseph out to again check-up on his brothers, who are shepherding Jacob’s flocks in Shechem. Upon his arrival, Joseph immediately seeks out his brothers in the region’s fertile fields and pastures. As he searches, an unnamed man approaches Joseph abruptly and asks him *Ma Te’Vahkaysh* – “what are you looking for?” Joseph explains that he’s looking for his brothers, to which the man replies *Nas’oo MiZeh Ki Sh’mahTi Ohmrim NaylCha Dotahna* – “they departed from here, for I heard them to say: Let us go to Dothan”. This exchange then ends as suddenly as it started: Joseph proceeds on to Dothan, and the stranger disappears, never to be heard from again.

The evident questions surrounding this vignette would be “who is this stranger?”, “why the inclusion of this parable”, and “what does it have to do with Joseph’s future”? There are a couple of intriguing possibilities. The first is to take this episode at face value: the stranger was just a regular person, like a field hand, a town elder, or more likely a fellow passerby. In the movies or on TV, this individual would be considered a bit player: one who interacts with the main

character for a minute or two, then departs off screen, not be seen again. Ibn Ezra believed that the passing of information from the stranger was the actual intent, and nothing more. He further inferred that we shouldn't put that much importance into the storyline: just move on to the next scene.

Though this option is the most obvious, it exposes several issues that begs question. First, the stranger offered his information on the whereabouts of the brothers as a result of Joseph's inquiry. If so, how did this passerby actually know that they were Joseph's brothers? Second, we are not told how much time passed from when the brothers left Shechem and Joseph's subsequent arrival – it could have been several days or weeks. Was the passerby actually residing there the entire time? Third, we aren't told how the passerby actually overheard about the trip to Dothan. Was it through polite conversation with Joseph's brothers, by covert means, or by an inadvertent disclosure? Lastly, it's unusual for the Torah to digress into these supposedly immaterial excursions unless there was a significant purpose to be gleaned. Why mention this precise incident for no other reason except that it occurred, per Ibn Ezra's reasoning? If so, why not include other mundane items as well, such as which route Joseph used to Shechem, how long it took, or where he stopped for his meals.

A second possibility is offered by both Rashi and Maimonides, one that is worthy of a midrash. They interpreted that the Almighty directly orchestrated the stranger's undertaking, ensuring that Joseph doesn't desert his mission due to any perceived difficulty in locating his brothers. Rashi saw this figure as the angel Gabriel, though Maimonides surmised that the stranger was simply a person who was possessed by one of G-d's angels or holy messengers. Regardless, both sages accepted the premise that Divine intervention was involved. Note that from Gen. 37:15, the stranger finds the wandering Joseph and approaches him, not the other way around. Though not mentioned in the text, we don't know how long Joseph was searching, so the implied goal of this heavenly stranger was to get to Joseph before he could become either despondent or distracted from his given mission. Joseph's destiny was at stake.

This option is also supported by the fact that Divine intercession does run in Joseph's family. A good by-line could be "close encounters of the celestial kind". Two prime examples are Abraham's hospitality to the three visiting angels in *Lech Lecha*, and more recently, Jacob's wrestling match with what we understand to be an angelic being. If Joseph is similarly blessed with a guiding Divine presence, what an appropriate moment for this being (in the guise of a passerby) to appear!

This angel provides Joseph both physical directions to find his brothers, as well as moral assuredness to keep him on the task at hand.

We can further this assertion by studying the verse immediately preceding this story. The second part of Gen 37:11 states *V'ahviv Sha-Mar Et HaDahVar*, “and his father kept the matter in mind”. Two things are of note here. First, the Torah states “his father” instead of Jacob, perhaps to underscore the special relationship between the two. Second, the word *Sha-mar* is interpreted as watched or observed, as in taking into account the verbal and visual aspects of the situation, then processing the information afterward. Jacob is conscious of the animosity against Joseph at the surface level. However, he does not appear to comprehend the true acrimony the brothers have toward Joseph, probably due to Jacob’s greater affection of him over his siblings. The scolding, though sincere, was an attempt to calm the situation and remove the perception of his favoritism toward Joseph. Unfortunately, it didn’t really work as Jacob has hoped.

However, *Sha-Mar* also has another set of related meanings: to protect, safeguard, or shield. This second construal forms an ideal link between Joseph’s interaction with his family regarding his dreams and the subsequent encounter with the mysterious stranger. It is noted in the Torah that an unspecified period of time passes between Jacob’s reprimand of Joseph and when he is sent to

Shechem. In addition, Jacob doesn't give him any detailed list of what to do. Is it possible that between this two distinct periods, G-d may have interceded with Jacob, maybe in a dream or vision, instructing him that when the time was right, he should send Joseph on this mission? He also assured Jacob that Joseph would be protected in all his travels, just as Jacob and his forefathers had been. Jacob placed his faith in G-d's plan, and when that time was right, he sent Joseph on this assignment. Jacob may not have been aware of what adventures would lie ahead for Joseph, but he did have the complete assurance that G-d would safeguard his son.

Regardless of which possibility you'd choose to believe, the outcome of this seemingly inconsequential act is the same: the road to Joseph's true destiny remains in tact. As outlined in the Eitz Chaim, if Joseph had never encountered this man, the subsequent chain of events would not have occurred. Joseph would not have found his brothers, been sold into slavery, gone to Egypt, imprisoned from the false accusations of his master's wife, met the Pharaoh's attendants in prison, and correctly interpreted their dreams. He would not have been introduced to Pharaoh himself, interpreted his dreams, saved his kingdom, and been richly rewarded with power and authority. Joseph would not have been able to bring Jacob and his family to Egypt to live and prosper. There would not have been a

subsequent bondage for three hundred years, nor a Moses, an Exodus, redemption at the Red Sea, or a revelation at Mt. Sinai. All of this is due to a simple act of consideration from an unidentified individual who may or may not have realized the importance of his action.

In highlighting this minor deed, it helps all of us focus on the little things we can do to make the world a better place, our own personal approaches of *Tikkun Olam*. Not only it is a true Mitzvah, but like the stranger, we can take heart in the fact that our thoughtful actions not only assist individuals in need, but can also change the world in a positive way.

Shabbat Shalom & Happy Chanukah