



Parshas Vayeshev

For the week ending 23 Kislev 5759
11 - 12 December 1998

Overview

Yaakov settles in the land of Canaan. His favorite son, Yosef, brings him critical reports about his brothers. Yaakov makes for Yosef a fine tunic of multi-colored woolen strips. Yosef exacerbates his brothers' hatred by recounting prophetic dreams — of sheaves of wheat bowing to his sheaf, and of the sun, moon and stars bowing to him — signifying that all his family will appoint him king. The brothers indict Yosef and resolve to execute him. When Yosef comes to Shechem, the brothers relent and decide, at Reuven's instigation, to throw him into a pit instead. Yehuda persuades the brothers to take Yosef out of the pit and sell him to a caravan of passing Yishmaelim. When Reuven returns to find the pit empty, he rends his clothes in anguish. The brothers soak Yosef's tunic in goat's blood and show it to their father Yaakov, who assumes that Yosef has been devoured by a wild animal. Yaakov is inconsolable. Meanwhile, in Egypt, Yosef has been sold to Potiphar, Pharaoh's Chamberlain of the Butchers. In the Parsha's sub-plot, Yehuda's son Er dies as punishment for preventing his wife Tamar from becoming pregnant because he feared that she would lose her beauty. Onan, Yehuda's second son, then weds Tamar by levirate marriage. He too is punished in circumstances similar to those of his brother. When Yehuda's wife dies, Tamar resolves to have children through Yehuda, as this union will found the Davidic line culminating in the *mashiach*. Meanwhile, Yosef rises to power in the house of his Egyptian master. His extreme beauty attracts the unwanted advances of his master's wife. Enraged by his rejection of her, she slanders Yosef, accusing him of attempting to seduce her, and he is imprisoned. In jail, Yosef successfully predicts the outcome of the dream of Pharaoh's wine steward, who is re-instated; and the dream of Pharaoh's baker, who is hanged. In spite of his promise, the wine steward forgets to help Yosef after he is released, and Yosef languishes in jail.

Insights

THE PLAY'S THE THING

“And Yaakov sat...” (37:1)

Once there was a woman sipping coffee in the lobby of a theater long after the movie had started. The usher was curious why she hadn't taken her seat, and asked if she knew that the movie had already started. “Oh yes,” she replied, “I know, but I don't want to go in there now. It's much too crowded and noisy. Once they all come out, that's when I go in. Then I can have all the seats to myself!”

We tend to think that the purpose of life is those endless, sunny, summer days; days when you can't see a cloud and everything seems perfect. And when the rain falls into our lives — as it does to us all — well, that's something to be endured until the clouds clear. We put up with hardship, thinking that it's just a painful intermission, and when it ends we will get back to the “real purpose of life.”

The reverse is really the case. Life is all about the rain and the storms and our striving to overcome them. For in this way, we elevate ourselves spiritually and fulfill the purpose for which we were sent down here. Those sunny days are so we can gather our strength, and thus derive the maximum benefit from facing life's challenges.

Yaakov wanted to live in peace and tranquillity. Hashem said *“Is it not enough for the righteous that they have their reward in the World to Come? They also want to live in this world in serenity?”* Even though Yaakov desired serenity to devote himself to spiritual pursuits, nevertheless it was considered improper for him to place his *focus* on serenity. For in life “the play's the thing,” not the intermission.

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MAKING HISTORY

“A man discovered him (Yosef), and behold, he was blundering in the field; the man asked him, ‘What do you seek?’ And he said ‘my brothers do I seek, tell me, please, where they are pasturing.’ The man said ‘They have journeyed from here, for I heard them saying ‘Let us go to Dosan.’ So Yosef went after his brothers and found them at Dosan.”
(37:15-17)

Sometimes our lives seem filled with trivial events. We go to the store. We stand in the checkout line. We buy a packet of cereal. Someone asks us the way to the bus stop. Seldom do we have the feeling that we are connected to great events.

In this week's parsha, Yaakov sends Yosef to inquire after his brothers' welfare. When Yosef arrives in Shechem, he cannot find his brothers. He asks a man where they are. The man says they have gone to Dosan. Yosef goes to Dosan and finds them there.

Why did the Torah include this interlude? Why do we need to know that Yosef went to Shechem, couldn't find his brothers, and then some anonymous stranger comes along and re-directs him? Why didn't the Torah just write: "Yosef eventually found his brothers in Dosan?"

In the morning we bless G-d "who prepares the steps of man." From our vantage point, many events in life seem to be without purpose. However, if we had eyes to see, we would realize how every little occurrence is part of a vast cosmic jigsaw.

If this man had not directed Yosef to Dosan, Yosef might not have found his brothers, in which case, they wouldn't have sold him into slavery. So then, Yosef would never have risen to power in Egypt. He would never have interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. Pharaoh would never have set up store houses in the years of plenty. There would have been no reason for Yaakov to send the brothers down to Egypt, because the famine in Egypt would have been as devastating as anywhere else in the world. There would have been no encounter between Yosef, the grand vizier of Egypt, and his brothers; no tearful reunion between father and son. The Jewish People would never have gone down to Egypt. There would have been no slavery. No Exodus. No matzos. No Passover seder. No afikomen. No splitting of the sea. And no giving the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The entire future of the Jewish People depended on an anonymous man telling Yosef that his brothers had left town and gone to Dosan.

Next time someone asks you to direct them to the bus-stop, remember — you're making history.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE HOLY

“His brothers saw that it was he whom their father loved the most... so they hated him.”
(37:4)

One of the more satisfying aspects of early cowboy-films is that you can always tell the goodies from the baddies. As every schoolboy knows, the goodies wear white hats and the baddies wear black hats. This is an immutable law of cowboy-film reality, no less than water always flowing downhill and the sun always rising in the east.

Life, however, is usually stranger than fiction, and always more complex. In life, it's not always so simple to work out who are the goodies and who are the baddies.

Around two hundred years ago, the great Yeshiva of Volozhin was embroiled in a dispute between two giants of the Torah, the Netziv and the Beis Halevi. On Shabbat morning of Parshat Vayeshev, the Maggid of Vilna arose to address the Yeshiva.

The Maggid pointed out that from the beginning of the Torah until this week's Parsha, good and evil are as clearly defined as black and white. Adam and Chava are good, the serpent is evil. Hevel is good, Cain is evil. Sarah is good, Hagar is evil. Yitzchak is good, Yishmael is evil, etc. However, in this week's Parsha, for the first time in the Torah's narrative, it's not so simple to discern who is good and who is evil.

On the one hand, Yosef behaved immaturely, dressing his hair and adorning his eyes to make himself look beautiful. He held himself aloof from Leah's sons, preferring to associate with the children of Bilha and Zilpa, the handmaidens. Yosef "informed" on his brothers to his father. He judged them harshly, failing to give them the benefit of the doubt. In a sense, the brothers could be forgiven for thinking that Yosef was evil. For in the previous two generations, there had been a son who had turned to an evil usurper (Yishmael and Esav), so they understood that one of their number might also turn aside and become evil. When Yosef started telling them his dreams, they understandably thought that Yosef was setting the stage to grab the mantle of kingship for himself. And thus they tried him and sentenced him to death.

On the other hand, the brothers did not act out of total altruism. They were jealous of Yosef. He was the favorite of their father Yaakov. They resented the embroidered tunic of fine colored woolen stripes that Yaakov had given Yosef.

Sometimes in life it's not so clear who's the goodie and who's the baddie.

Sometimes it's the goodies who wear the black hats.

Sources:

Making History - Rabbi Reuven Subar

The Good, The Bad, and the Holy - Rabbi Berel Wein, as heard from Rabbi C.Z. Senter

The Play's The Thing - Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz

Parshas **Vayeshev**

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Haftorah: Amos 2:6-3:8

LEATHER SOUL

“For their having sold a righteous man for silver and a destitute one for the sake of a pair of shoes.” (2:6)

The Haftorah alludes in this verse to the sin of Yosef's brothers. With the money they received from selling Yosef to the Ishmaelites, they bought shoes. This is very strange. Why did they buy shoes? Didn't they already have shoes?

When Moshe encountered the Divine Presence at the burning bush, G-d instructed him to remove his shoes. Whenever the Divine Presence rests, man is elevated above his natural physical state.

The body is to the soul as the shoe is to the body. The shoe covers the lowest part of the body, the part of the body which is in direct contact with this earth. The body clothes the soul in its lowest habitation, this world. This is one of the reasons that on Yom

Kippur, when we try to emulate the purely spiritual creations, we doff our shoes.

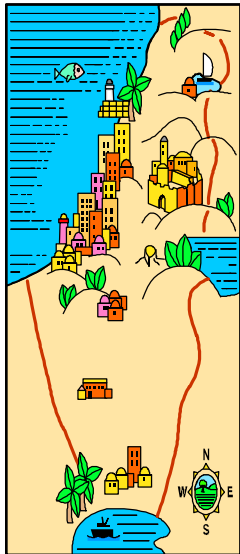
The Divine Presence only settles on the Jewish People when there is unity amongst us. For the Torah to enter this world, the Jewish People needed to be like one man with one heart.

Until the brothers sold Yosef, the Children of Israel dwelled together. But as soon as Yosef was separated from the rest of his family, necessarily there was a split, a division. In other words, while the brothers were together, they had no need of shoes because they were living in unity on an elevated level, under the wings of the Divine Presence. This level was symbolized by their not wearing shoes. However, as soon as they had sold Yosef, the Divine Presence departed from their midst and their feet needed covering, for they had descended to the mere physical.

The Ostrovzer Gaon as heard from Rabbi C.Z. Senter

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



TEL AVIV-JAFFA

The harbor on which this city was built was the famous gateway to *Eretz Yisrael*. The cedars of Lebanon which Hiram, King of Tyre, sent to King Solomon for building the *Beis Hamikdash* and his palace were floated down the sea till they reached Jaffa. (*Divrei Hayamim II 2:15*)

The Sea of Jaffa, say our Sages (*Sifra Devarim 33:19*), is the repository of all the treasures of ships wrecked at sea, and in the hereafter it will yield these treasures to the righteous. The port of Jaffa was the departure point for the Prophet Jonah, whose futile flight from a Divine mission we read about at the Mincha service of Yom Kippur.

Jews began returning to Jaffa (“*Yafe*” in Hebrew means beautiful, and this may be the source of the city’s name) in 1840. Subsequent immigration led to the development of colonies in the area, climaxing with the establishment in 1908 of Tel Aviv, which eventually became the major urban center of modern Israel.

Tel Aviv is mentioned (*Yechezkel 3:15*) as a Babylonian city where exiles from *Eretz Yisrael* had gathered, but its Zionist founders gave this name to the city because it was the title of the Hebrew translation of Herzl’s “*Altneuland*.” The emblem of Tel Aviv-Jaffa is a lighthouse and a gate, symbols of the city’s historic role as the gateway to *Eretz Yisrael*.

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