

Vayeishev is an incredible parsha. On one hand, it is one of the most familiar, because it, together with Miketz, serves as the basis for the popular rock opera "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," as well as well-known books, such as "Joseph and His Brothers" by Thomas Mann, and even a recent DreamWorks cartoon adaptation. So almost everybody in America has a general idea of its plot, as it relates to Joseph, his brothers, Jacob and the Egyptians.

On the other hand, and I will try to show this to you, Vayeishev is one of the strangest parshiyot in the Torah. Also, if you strip off the external elements and get to the nuts and bolts, you will see that it really, in microcosm, reflects the life of each of us and the history of humanity in general. And, just like in our lives and history, there are more questions in Vayeishev than answers.

So what is so strange about it? One thing that you will notice is that it has branching storylines, talking about Joseph and his brothers, Joseph and Jacob, Judah and his Adullamite friends and family, and Joseph and the Egyptians. So the plot of this parsha is non-linear.

Another amazing thing about it is that its timeline appears non-linear as well. For example, the story of Judah marrying into the Adullamites is nested inside the first portion of the story of Joseph in Egyptian captivity. Rashi estimates that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers at the age of 17 and achieved his high honor in Egypt, which happens at the beginning of the following parsha Miketz, at the age of 30. Therefore, Joseph's storyline here lasts 13 years. At the same time, in Judah's storyline, he marries an Adullamite woman, raises three sons, marries off the two eldest sons and sees the youngest at least achieve a marriageable age, sees his two elder sons, Er and Onan, die by the hand of God, becomes widowed, unknowingly consorts with Tamar, his former daughter-in-law, and sees the birth of his twin sons by her. Even given the earlier ages at marriage in antiquity, this whole process had to have taken longer than 13 years! So you see how the parsha's timeline is non-linear here. Did they forget Judah's story and then insert it at random in a place where it approximately fits? Or did Judah truly live out nearly half his lifetime to Joseph's 13 years? The only thing Judah himself might say here, is that time flies when you are having fun... with the Gentiles.

Spatially, the parsha also bounces around, from Canaan to Egypt and back, and then to Egypt again. But one thing that truly amazes me is how uneven it is in its attention to the temporal detail. In some places, single sentences gloss over multiple years, while two long paragraphs, six pasukim, describe Jacob's dispatching of Joseph to see the latter's brothers in the distant pastures, of which three very long pasukim are devoted just to Joseph blundering in the environs of Shechem looking for his brothers, until a helpful stranger discovers him and directs him to Dothan, where the brothers had gone with their flocks. Why is this in the narrative? Why couldn't the parsha just skip it and say simply that Joseph found his brothers, one way or another?

In explaining this, we dive headlong into the most awesome aspect of Vayeishev, its dealing with destiny. So many things happen in this parsha that defy explanation. What were the negative reports that Joseph had been bringing on his brothers to Jacob that made them hate him so? Why did the brothers decide to kill Joseph instead of just chastising him? Why did God kill Judah's son Er? What had the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker done to be imprisoned? Why was the cupbearer pardoned and restored to his job, while the baker was executed in a gruesome way?

Looking more broadly, do the characters in the parsha act of their own free will, or are they being led along by their destiny? Joseph arrives to Shechem and wonders forlornly looking for his brothers. What

if the helpful stranger had not appeared to direct him to Dothan? Joseph might have returned home to Jacob. Would he then have avoided the fate of being sold into slavery and lived happily ever after? Or would his brothers have then continued harboring their grudge and ambushed him later when Reuben was not at hand to prevent them from killing him? Also, if Joseph had not been taken to Egypt, would the entire family then have starved to death in the ensuing famine?

Or take Judah, for example. He is happily heading to Timnah with his Adullamite friend Hirah to shear his sheep. Suddenly he stops and says, "Look, Hirah, there, there, is it a prostitute sitting there at the crossroads? By Ashtoret, it is! Well, why not? You know what, Hirah, you go on ahead, I'll catch up with you later." In this instance, Judah is sure that he is acting quite independently and is about to amuse himself big time, but in reality, he is just being set up by Tamar, as he would eventually find out.

Vayeishev is all about balancing on the edge of a precipice. Joseph's brothers see him approaching in the distance; what will they do? Will Joseph die in the pit, will the repentant Reuben save him, or will the boy be sold? Will Onan die like his brother? Will Tamar be burned at the stake? Will Potiphar believe his wife and have Joseph killed, will he believe Joseph and acquit him, or will he choose some middle ground in handling the Josephgate? The Pharaoh's cupbearer and the baker have just had their dreams – will they turn out to be just irrelevant fantasies, or is there something fateful about them?

A few days ago we heard the heart-breaking news of another young sojourner in the Land of Israel who has tragically walked into eternity. IDF Sergeant Ron Kokia, 19 years old, was stabbed to death by two Bedouin men while waiting for a bus in Arad. The driver of a passing car described the situation as follows: "We saw a soldier stumble into the road. He was vomiting. I was sure he was drunk, but then I realized he was vomiting blood. We got out of the car to assist him and put a towel on his wounds. He was conscious and was trying to speak, but could not. We called an ambulance, but he died before it arrived." Sergeant Kokia had been on leave, but he decided to return to base early, because he had found out that his troop was relocating to Hebron. How did he end up at the deserted bus station in Arad? Had a helpful stranger directed him to it? Why did the two Bedouins, citizens of Israel, decide randomly to stab an IDF soldier, in a crime that shocked the local Bedouin population and was roundly condemned by the Bedouin community leaders?

Questions such as these are the reason why parsha Vayeishev is our life in miniature. Just like the actors in the parsha, we too think that we are exercising our free will when we make the myriads of choices that are presented to us all the time, but sometimes we are set up by others and made into players in their hidden plans. We, too, are subject to seemingly minute and insignificant interferences that may later turn out to be all-important. As a Russian proverb says, if you knew where you would fall, you would spread some straw. And God is the greatest puppeteer of all, as parsha Veyeishev shows.

So what are we to do about this? Should we give up and just stay home, knowing that by taking any action we inevitably expose ourselves to the unknown? No, we should act like the Joseph, never losing hope and working hard always, like his brothers in their better moments, and like Jacob, just trying to do our best in each situation and be guided by our conscience and God's commandments. We should act like Sergeant Kokia, with bravery and a sense of duty, in any situation. Then, even if anything goes wrong that is out of our control, we need not have any regrets.

Joseph's amazing colored garment must have looked great on the outside, but if we looked from the inside, we would probably just see a chaotic bundle of threads. Only God gets to see the whole picture.