

D'var Torah: VaYeshev
December 9, 2017

Shabbat Shalom

Preparing for my Bar Mitzvah at the old Temple Beth El on Richmond Avenue sixty years ago, I did not write a d'var Torah.

Does anyone here remember what we did about a d'var Torah back then?

As I recall, they handed us a 2 or 3 page typescript and said, "Here's your Bar Mitzvah speech."

Did they have a cabinet full of those? Did they wait a few years before re-using the same speech? Did the rabbi come up with something new every week?

I don't know.

Did they download them off the Internet?

I'm pretty sure "No" to that.

But I do remember the gist of the thing. It starts where "a certain man" found Joseph "wandering in the field," and in the words of the old JPS version,

"And the man asked him, saying: 'What seekest thou?' And he said:
'I seek my brethren. Tell me, I pray thee, where they are feeding the flock.'
—p 229; Gen 37:15-16

And the point, of course, was that we are all obliged to seek our people, to look after the welfare of other Jews, and to find our own connection to them.

Wish I had that old typescript now. Because I can't remember how it managed to get that message out of the actual text. Joseph has already alienated his brothers by tattling on them, by being their father's pampered favorite, by reciting his dream of being the top banana, or, at least, the top bunch of wheat. When he comes up with that other dream about outshining the sun, the moon and the stars, even his father is left speechless.

When Jacob tells Joseph to "see how your brothers are"—actually, r'eh et-sh'lom acheicha, "see about the well-being of your brothers"—do we really think he is interested in their well-being? Because they certainly aren't interested in his. Their only dilemma is whether to kill him or sell him into slavery.

And yet, as we know, Joseph eventually does look after the welfare of his father and brothers. He saves them from starvation during the years of famine, and his descendents become leaders of the twelve tribes. And the brothers eventually do bow down to Joseph, beg his forgiveness for their cruelty to him, and are reconciled to him.

We could argue that Joseph was decent all along, though maybe a bit full of himself. But clearly he is transformed in some way, from a naive youth to a capable man.

Rashi hints at this transformation in two very perceptive comments. The translation in Etz Hayim says that the seventeen-year-old Joseph was “a helper to the sons of his father’s wives,” but in Hebrew it’s v’hu na’ar, “he was a youth.” Rashi says this means that Joseph spent a lot of time combing his hair and making sure that he looked attractive. In short, like many a youth, Joseph was vain and boastful.

But after Joseph is sold into slavery and is purchased by Potiphar in Egypt, the Torah says that “HaShem was with Joseph, and he became a successful man.” Isn’t that the same thing—Hashem was with him, and he became successful? Rashi says no, those are two separate things. “HaShem was with him” means that the name of God was always on his lips.

And we see this fact as soon as Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him, and Joseph says, “How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?”

From that point on, Joseph mentions God just about every time he speaks. Not every sentence, but in every conversation. When Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and chief baker tell Joseph that there is no one to interpret their dreams, Joseph says, “Surely God can interpret!” Later, Joseph tells Pharaoh, “God will see to Pharaoh’s welfare.” And so on through the parashiot of Miketz and Vayiggash. Keep an eye out when we get there.

And Joseph’s awareness of God is all the more remarkable because no one else seems to mention God or speak God’s name in our whole parasha. Jacob has not spoken to God, or about God, since the death of Rachel. He doesn’t speak of God when he sends Joseph away, when he sees Joseph’s torn and bloody cloak and presumes him dead, or even, later, when he learns that Joseph is alive. The brothers do not mention God when they conspire against Joseph; Judah doesn’t mention God when his two sons die.

But it’s not just that Joseph speaks of God. More importantly, he is aware that there is unity and purpose in the world. That insight enables Joseph to interpret the dreams of the two imprisoned officers, and later to interpret Pharaoh’s dream. And by mentioning God, Joseph also shows his awareness that our actions have consequences for ourselves and for others—a fact that Jacob seems to have forgotten, and that the brothers have yet to learn. And it is precisely that moment when Joseph refuses the demands Potiphar’s wife that he is transformed by realizing that his actions have consequences; that he has obligations to his boss, to his responsibilities, and to God.

Rashi says that Joseph is a tzaddik, a righteous man, because he stands up to “that cursed one,” Potiphar’s wife. Joseph does the right thing, even though no one is looking. He accepts some harsh and unfair consequences, knowing that no one will believe him. And Potiphar’s wife gets away with it by accusing Joseph of the very thing that she wanted to do to him.

From that point on Joseph shows himself worthy to be a leader, as he once dreamt, and worthy to look after the well-being of his brothers, as his father once told him to do.

Lately we have been hearing almost daily of another person in a position of power and influence who has abused that position to make sexual advances on others. And not just the sex abuse cases; all too many of our leaders are driven by plain old greed for money, for power, for people telling them how great they are. Like Potiphar's wife, they will tell any lie to cover their misbehavior, and they accuse anyone who stands up to them of the very thing they were doing themselves.

And yet we know there are many among us who quietly do the right thing, even if it gets them into trouble they don't deserve. And we look especially to our young people to follow Joseph's example: to have the name of God on their lips; to be aware that there is unity and purpose in the world; to do the right thing even when nobody is looking, even when it's not convenient, knowing that our actions have consequences for ourselves and for others. By following the example of Joseph, the young people of today will be worthy to be the future leaders of our country and of the Jewish people, and truly to seek the well-being of all humanity.

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