

Vayeshev

Dec. 21, 2024

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There are many rich stories in this parsha but I'm going to focus on the stories of Joseph and his brothers in Chapter 37.

The parsha opens with a sentence that conveys a moment of stability and ease, of things being settled – a break for the reader as much as for the characters – a respite that is shattered immediately by family discord.

That discord centers around Joseph, who is the fulcrum of the story. But what I noticed is that we're told nothing about what Joseph is thinking or feeling. He's actually the only character this is true of. The motivations of Jacob and his other sons are laid out clearly, but we're left to impose our own interpretations on Joseph.

Why does he tell his family these unsettling dreams, even when they provoke such negative reactions? Maybe he's trying to send them a message about his greatness, maybe he wants to disturb them. But I doubt it. We don't even know what he makes of the dreams – he offers no interpretations of the dreams himself.

To me, Joseph seems oblivious to the reactions – maybe he gets this from his father. To me, he seems naïve. Maybe he can't himself; he's just too excited by the dreams. Maybe he's so startled and confounded by his dreams that he needs to tell them to get some explanation or reaction. Maybe they give him some confused sense of mission, and he feels he's supposed to talk about them. Remember, the text tells us that Joseph is 17 years old, and he seems to me to be acting like a teenager, to use a very anachronistic term. He doesn't seem calculating here, and he's entirely unable to pick up on the danger.

Perhaps it's not until he's in the pit that he starts considering what has happened and his role in it. It's only after he's been sold into slavery that he's able to interpret dreams, as far as we know.

Joseph's apparent death destroys Jacob. We don't know, though, if it prompts any new thinking on Jacob's part, whether he starts reconsidering the consequences of his favoritism toward Joseph. All we're told is that he cannot be comforted – a line interestingly (and beautifully) echoed in the haftarah from Jeremiah that we read on the second day of Rosh HaShanah, where Rachel is weeping – she cannot be comforted for the Israelites, her exiled children.

There's a lot here but it's a prelude to what struck me most this time. The line that haunted me is what the brothers say when they see Joseph walking toward them while they're out with their sheep. Presumably dripping with sarcasm, they say, "Here comes that dreamer!" And then they decide to kill or abandon him.

“Here comes that dreamer!” This is an attitude that seems to reverberate through history – both individual history and national: we have to exile or even kill the dreamer. The dreamer – the one with the big new ideas, the one whose thinking is not like ours and who questions our ways, the one whose personality is a little different, the one who society may need but doesn’t want.

That led me to a slightly different, unnerving thought. Should we see the Joseph story as an inadvertent allegory about the history of the Jewish people and of contemporary Israel? As a people, have we, like Joseph, blithely told our dreams, oblivious to the reaction of other people(s)? Told our dreams because we’re on a mission and feel an obligation to tell them, but with little perspective. Our dreams – that we’re the chosen people, a kingdom of priests and a holy people; that nations will some day flow into Jerusalem and abide by the words of our G_d. And what is Zionism but a reborn dream – that we will retake and rebuild the land, a land without a people for a people without a land?

But now our Semitic “brothers” have thrown us into a pit and left us for dead. Those of us watching from afar are left crushed like Jacob and are weeping like Rachel. Will it change how we think about our dreams?

This interpretation hit me hard. It wasn’t where I was going when I started reading the parsha, and it wasn’t one I had thought of before. I haven’t had time to fully think through it or to consider what kind of future the rest of the Biblical story might portend.

At the very least, maybe this interpretation can make us more sympathetic toward, or at least more curious about Joseph. Maybe it makes him and his youthful behavior harder to dismiss or denigrate, makes it harder for us to sit outside the story and issue judgments. Because maybe all of us have been – or even are – Joseph, overcome with his dreams.

Thoughts?