

Parashat Vayeshev: The Power of Complete Surrender

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Vayeshev is almost always read just before Chanuka. How appropriate - there is so much darkness in this parasha! There are moments in it when it seems as if light will never shine again. From a favorite, spoiled son in his father's house at the beginning of the parasha, Yoseph becomes an anonymous prisoner in an Egyptian jail, charged unjustly with a serious sexual offense. Only in the coming week, in the midst of the Chanuka holiday, Parashat Miketz will have Yoseph freed from the darkest depths and rise to the height of honor and power.

The unknown is a major motif in this parasha, as it is in many others and in life in general:

In Vayeshev Yaakov does not yet know when his troubles will be over.

Yaakov does not yet know that the coat of many colors which he made for his beloved son, the one born to his deceased beloved wife, will change the course of history forever.

Yoseph does not know that his search for his brothers and his casual conversation with the mysterious man ("Ish") in the field will lead him into a terrible, painful adventure in a distant and strange land.

Yehuda does not know that selling his despised brother to the Midianites will cause his father so much pain, from which he will not be freed, and that he too will be exiled from the tribe for a number of years.

Yaakov does not yet know that his son's torn, stained coat is actually a sign of a brilliant, joyful future.

Yoseph does not know that the sexual harassment he experiences by Potiphar's wife is really the beginning of the fulfillment of his prophetic dreams.

Yehuda does not know that the whore he has relations with is actually his daughter-in-law, and both of them don't know that together they are establishing the lineage of King David, as well as the future Messiah, which half of humanity is waiting for to this day.

But that is not all. While Yosef will be very pleased with himself for having saved his family from famine, he does not yet know, and he never will, that he is actually laying the foundations for their enslavement. And that it will be followed by the greatest drama in human history – the Exodus, Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah...

Parashat Vayeshev is clearly the parasha of the unknown.

What would our lives look like if we surrendered to the obvious truth: that we don't know?

What would our disappointments look like? Would they be eased or disappear altogether?

Would our jubilations be dampened too, if we realized that any triumph today might really be the beginning of a major defeat tomorrow?

I am captivated by the Torah's invitation to total, radical surrender, to not knowing.

And indeed, the persona that represents this ability more than any other is Yoseph, and the moment that signifies this surrender best is described in the words "wandering in the field": Yoseph is sent by his father to find his brothers and see what they are up to, as he does every single day. This task is not his life's mission. His mission is yet to unfold. Hence, he is "wandering in the field". In Hebrew, the words for wandering, mistaking, and wondering are very similar, though not identical. Yoseph wanders in a state of total unknowing – where are my brothers? Where did they go? Where am I going? Where will this path take me?

Yoseph was certain, though, of one thing: his dreams! He did not understand them, nor did he know their promises will be achieved. He does not know what his life would look like – not the next day, not next month, and not in 20 years. But he was in total submission to this lack of knowledge. He allows an unclear "something" to lead him on his path. Yoseph is led by a special quality, I don't know what it is, but it seems to be found at the point at which knowledge ends.

Not knowing is replaced by belief, and belief is an invitation to surrender and flow.

This is not the first time I am writing about not knowing in my drashot, and I have a feeling it is not the last time either (although I really don't know). Not knowing seems to be the core message of the Torah, the Torah's invitation from the first parasha until the last: a radical shift, from knowing to faith, and a complete surrender to that "something" which seems to carry us forward, with amazing wisdom, which we may call God.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha