

This week's Torah portion, *VaYeishev*, brings us to the famous -- or infamous -- story of how Joseph's brothers strip off the beautiful cloak which his father Ya'akov had lovingly made for him -- and throw him down into a deep pit.

So, *nu?* How many of us at one time or another haven't felt like we wanted to similarly toss a family member -- or a boss or co-worker, or someone else close to you -- or -- of being yourself cast away, and, as it were, stripped -- of your very essence?

Oy!

Indeed, the all-to-human history Torah gives us -- particularly in the book of Beginnings -- *Bereishit* -- is filled with tales of the strife and jealousy among family -- from brothers Jacob and Esau, sisters Leah and Rachel -- all the way back to the very first siblings -- Abel and Cain.

In our present story Joseph / Yosaif is the favored son of his father Ya'akov, thus already incurring the jealousy of his older brothers ... even before he reveals two dreams which seem to prophesy that **he** is the one destined to become the next family leader. Then his father sends him off on a mission, saying: "Are not your **brothers** out tending the flocks? ... **Go**, please, and see to the welfare of your brothers, and the welfare of the sheep!"

Yosaif replies simply, "Here I am", and sets off.

When his brothers see him coming in the distance, they immediately start to conspire: "Aha! ... the dreamer cometh ... let's do him in, and see then what shall become of his dreams!" And so it is -- in the ironic way that "things sometimes happen" -- that the brothers, themselves, set into motion the very stream of events which will ultimately bring Joseph's dreams to fruition, and bring the whole family of Israel down to Egypt to survive a global famine. Not to mention the slavery and eventual deliverance of the Passover story, and the birthing of the Jewish nation.

There is ... though ... this one curious scene: Right after Yosaif heads out to find his brothers, we find Yosaif ... wandering, lost in the wilderness. An unidentified person -- Torah just calls him an '*ish*' -- "a man" -- finds him there, and asks:

*"What are you seeking?"*

Yosaif responds, *"It is my brothers I am seeking."*

and the man points over there and says,

*"Oh yeah ... I think they went that-away".*

A chance encounter ... such an insignificant -- almost trivial -- scene that one wonders: *why would it even be enshrined in the Torah?* Seemingly insignificant -- and yet also an *essential* link in the path of Yosaif's life -- a mid-course correction which will ultimately lead him -- and his entire family -- to their destiny ... and indeed -- us to ours.

Now some say this unidentified "*ish*" was actually an "angel", sent to steer the course of history. And some say ... that angels ... are none other than we -- ourselves ... and that this scene is here to show us the potential importance of even the most seemingly insignificant encounter -- that indeed -- we can never fully appreciate the effects of even the smallest action. ... It's as though we're all given pieces of a giant jig-saw puzzle ...

This passage might even invite us to ask ourselves ... *"What seemingly small encounters in our lives have had far-reaching consequences for us?"* ... or to wonder: *"How might my 'insignificant' actions touch the lives of others, perhaps in very significant ways?"*

Yosaif says: *"Et achai avakeish.* It's my brothers I'm seeking."

Here we have the universal quest found again and again in Torah -- from Cain's plea of *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* ... until -- two weeks from now in our reading cycle -- we find Judah's passionate answer: **"Yes!"** when he cries out: "How could I possibly leave my younger brother here enslaved in Egypt -- *v'nafsho keshurah b'nafsho* -- when they are bound together -- soul to soul".

Yosaif is seeking his brothers -- it's as though he is asking -- who really **is** my family? How can I find -- and truly connect with them? -- And how can we find -- and truly connect -- with ours?

Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pesischa finds a clue in our text. At the beginning of the parsha, we are told that Yosaif had been bringing "*dibatam ra'ah*" -- bad reports -- about his brothers. When Ya'akov sends Yosaif off on his mission, he says to him "*Lekh-na lir'ot et sh'lom achekha ...*" -- literally "see -- check on the

**shalom** -- the well-being of your brothers”.

Now we know the word “**Shalom**” as peace, and we use it to say “hello” and “goodbye”. The Hebrew roots go deeper, though, and the full sense of the word also contains a sense of completeness, of wholeness. **L’shaleym**, for example, means to complete something, to make it whole.

So Reb Simcha Bunem reads Ya’akov’s instruction “*lir’ot et sh’lom achekha*” -- as -- “**see** the **shalom** -- that is, the **sheleimut** -- the completeness -- of your brothers -- see their wholeness -- rather than their blemishes ... see their merits and their accomplishments -- rather than their deficiencies.” See the good in them ... see their light. This, then, is how *he* reads Ya’akov’s fatherly advice, on how to **truly** find your brothers.

Hanukkah is drawing near -- calling upon us to see light even in the darkest of times. Yet every day, in the first morning blessing of the *Shema*, is a prayer for “*Or chadash*” -- for the shining of a new light ... and that we all merit -- to behold that light ...

And each night of hanukkah, as we gaze upon the light of the lamps we’ve kindled, we say “*ha-nerot ha-lalu, kodesh heim*” -- these lamps, they are holy -- their light is indeed none other than a manifestation of Divine Love.

Jacob, too -- at the beginning of his journey -- had a dream -- a ladder, with angels in motion -- and when he awoke -- realized that God, too -- was in this place -- and that this place -- right here and now -- was indeed none other than *sha’ar ha-shamayim* -- the gateway to heaven.

So I invite us ... let’s ask ourselves: what dreams will we realize, and what will it take -- to see -- more and more -- the shining of that light -- as we face each other ... our sisters and brothers -- our human family, near and far -- and to answer our dream, as does Yosaif in the tradition of his father -- with the steady faith that -- even though it may not be easy to see -- that the light of the divine -- indeed **is** in **this** place -- and in **this** face -- and **this** face ... and that **this** face -- the face of my **brother** -- the face of my **sister** ... **this** is *sha’ar hashamayim* -- the gateway to heaven -- and to a heavenly life -- right here on earth.

May we each be blessed with that awareness -- every time **we** gaze upon the light -- in ourselves -- and in each other ... and may the merit of **our** light grow into the legacy which we bequeath to our children, and to theirs -- for a world of peace ... a world of wholeness ... a world of **shalom**.