

Genesis 37:1–40:23

The name of the weekly reading - "Vayeshev" - means "And he settled".

Jacob settles in Hebron with his twelve sons. His favorite is Joseph. Jacob makes for Joseph a multicolored coat, which makes his 11 brothers jealous. Joseph relates to his brothers two of his dreams which foretell that he is destined to rule over them, increasing their envy and hatred towards him.

Joseph's brothers Simeon and Levi plot to kill him, but Reuben suggests that they throw him into a pit instead, intending to come back later and save him. While Joseph is in the pit, Judah - another one of his brothers - has him sold to a band of passing traders. The brothers dip Joseph's multicolored coat in the blood of a goat and show it to their father, Jacob, leading him to believe that his most beloved son was devoured by a wild beast.

Here, a seemingly unrelated story of Tamar is inserted into our weekly reading:

Judah - Joseph's brother - marries and has three children. This story is not fit for children, so we didn't learn it before our Bar/Bat Mitzvah (and therefore may never have learned it). Judah's firstborn son marries Tamar, who is not Jewish. After her husband's untimely death, Tamar remains a childless widow and suffers a series of setbacks. She comes up with a daring plan to gain a place of honor in the Jewish history. She produces a son to Judah. This son becomes an ancestor of King David.

The weekly reading returns to Joseph, who is sold by the traders to Potiphar, the minister in charge of Egyptian Pharaoh's slaughterhouses. After becoming the chief administrator of all Potiphar's properties, Joseph is thrown into prison on a false accusation. By the end of this week's reading, Joseph is still in prison, forgotten, without any hope for the future. But we know that Joseph's story doesn't end in this prison. Next week we will read the rest of Joseph's story and will learn a lesson from our ancestors: never despair.

Why does Torah intertwine these two seemingly unrelated stories of Tamar & Joseph? Both personalities have character flaws. Both survive through long periods of despair and near-death experience. Both manage to survive and thrive, as the result of their determination and entrepreneurship. Their successes appear astonishing, hard to believe, unless we are willing to accept that history has destiny. And that there is a guiding power, הקדוש ברוך הוא, which was discovered by our ancestors at the dawn of human civilization. Or, as some of us believe, God chose us for being stiff-necked.

According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks,

"Ancient Israel and the Greece of antiquity – the two great influences on Western civilization – had profoundly different understandings of time and circumstance. The Greeks believed in blind fate. They thought that the gods were hostile or at best indifferent to humankind, so there was no way of avoiding tragedy if that is what fate had decreed. Jews believed, and still believe, that God is with us as we travel through time. Sometimes we feel as if we are lost, but then we discover, as Joseph did, that God has been guiding our steps all along."

At this moment of our history, American Jews, particularly our younger generation, feel - maybe for the first time in their lives - that there is no escape from our shared destiny. Regardless of their social position, political affiliation and religious beliefs/disbeliefs, they are singled out as Jews. Those who have had some Jewish education, and are comfortable being Jewish, worry more about Israel's survival, about the preservation of the American pluralistic democracy, and worry less about their own personal safety. Others, who consider themselves atheists and their Jewishness - an atavism, are totally blindsided by Jew-hatred and fear for their personal future in the US. Once again the question "who is a Jew?" becomes relevant.

Rabbi Benjamin Katz forwarded to me an article by Dara Horn (May 2023 issue of The Atlantic Magazine). I think Dara Horn's definition of Jews is the best:

"Jews predate the concepts of both religion and nationality. Jews are members of a type of social group that was common in the ancient Near East but is uncommon in the West today: a joinable tribal group with a shared history, homeland, and culture, of which a religion is but one feature. Millions of Jews identify as secular, which would be illogical if Judaism were merely a religion."

In the ancient Near East each ethnic group had their own god or gods. In tribal wars, the losing side blamed their god(s) for letting them lose the battle, and sometimes adapted the "stronger" god(s) of the winners. Our ancestors, believing that there is only one God, couldn't play the "change gods" game even after a catastrophe. Instead of blaming our God, they blamed themselves. They engaged in self-examination, created commissions of inquiry, etc... Our sages decided that the 1st Temple fell [in 586 BCE] because of our idolatry, the 2nd Temple [in 70 CE] - because of our civil war (or as our sages called it - *sin'at hinam*, "baseless hatred"), and so on. We can argue with God, question Him, wrestle with Him, even reject Him, but we can blame only ourselves for our misfortune. This millennia old imperative made us into who we are now. As long as we live, we do not perceive ourselves as victims. We solve problems, make mistakes, pay the price, and go on working to put together the shards of our broken world.

My parents lost dozens of close family members in the Holocaust and survived through a series of calamities of Biblical proportions. They taught me to be in charge of my destiny. Never act or perceive yourself as a victim.

As Rabbi Sacks wrote:

“Victims want the world to change, forgetting that it may be they who have to change. ... Defining yourself as a victim is ultimately a diminution of what makes us human. It teaches us to see ourselves as objects, not subjects. Blame bars the path to responsibility. The victim, ascribing his condition to others, locates the cause of his situation outside himself, thus rendering himself incapable of breaking free from his self-created trap. **Blame cultures perpetuate every condition against which they are a protest.**”

Not only Joseph and Tamar, but none of our patriarchs and matriarchs, nor any of the other colorful characters in the Torah wallowed in victimhood. There are no pure or blame-free characters in the entire Hebrew Bible. No one was perfect, but everyone was essential to our story as Jews. Throughout our long history, through the fall of two temples, exiles, pogroms, and persecutions, we took steps toward our future.

I believe, as long as we stay faithful to our heritage, we, as a people, are indestructible.

עם ישראל חי - *am yisrael hai*

חג חנוכה שמח
hag hanukkah sah-meh-ahh

and
Shabbat Shalom

Note:

גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶךְ בְּגִיַּא צִלְמוֹת לֹא־אֶירָא רָע כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שְׁבִטְךָ וְיִמְשְׁעֲנִתְךָ הַמָּה
יִנְחַמְנִי:

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me. [From Psalm 23]