

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Vayeshev. Brotherly Hatred

The family violence of Parashat Vayeshev is startling and disturbing. How can one brother think of killing another brother?

Joseph is depicted by the Torah as a talebearer and an egocentric 17 year-old. We can imagine that he might have been quite annoying, but is that a reason to kill him?



- How do families, and we might say, the Jewish family, become so toxic?
- How do we reach a point at which the Jewish people becomes so fractious?

Let us examine two perspectives on this story:

1. Favouritism

Rava bar Mehasseya said... in the name of Rav: A person should never distinguish one of his sons from the others, as due to a coat of two *se'la* of wool given by Jacob to Joseph, his brothers became jealous of him and the matter unfolded such that our forefathers descended to Egypt. (Talmud Shabbat 10a)

- Why is favouritism so divisive, so incendiary?
- How do people feel when they witness favouritism, when they feel unfavoured?
- Do you see favouritism in Jewish communities or other Jewish environments?
- How can preferential treatment be avoided?

2. Delegitimization and Fear of Rejection

But possibly it was more than mere favouritism.

It might be that the sons of Leah suspected that Joseph who had been given a royal coat (II Sam 13:18) and was this being primed to take his father's place. Were they perhaps fearful that Jacob would select Joseph and reject the other brothers' covenantal status, as Abraham had done with Isaac and as Isaac had done with Esau?

Here we might suspect that a thought that Jacob never entertained – rejection of his sons – was in fact seen by his sons as a possibility.

3. Clashing Ideologies

But a further thought comes to mind:

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When the brothers see Joseph, they say: "Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits... We shall see what comes of his dreams!"

But why did the brothers perceive Joseph's dreams not merely as egoism but rather as a severe threat? Rabbi Soloveitchik offered the following suggestion:

What did Joseph seek? To what did he aspire? What foreboding troubled him? The answer is: an obscure feeling of insecurity frightened him ... The words "for your seed shall be a stranger in an alien land" (Gen. 15:13) kept tolling in his ears.

He saw himself and his brothers in an alien environment, far from the land of Canaan, in new circumstances and under new conditions of life. In his dream he saw "behold we are binding sheaves" (Gen. 37:7): we are no longer in Canaan, we are in the land of Egypt and can no longer be shepherds. We are integrated into a new economy, with new styles of living, characteristics, and laws. We can no longer support ourselves by pasturing sheep. The sons of Jacob have to learn new occupations ... adapted to the new conditions. Basically he dreamt of a new framework within which the unity of the family could be preserved, even in the far places where the Creator of the universe would scatter them.

... The brothers did not understand him, for they looked upon the future as a continuation of the present. They perceived all problems from within the framework of their life in Canaan, the land of their fathers' wanderings. In the traditional surroundings, in the thoroughly familiar habitat of the Patriarchs, they did not need new frameworks or novel economic methods.

Ego and power may not be a reason to kill a brother, but when he threatens to uproot the very stability of the family and to act as an agent of change, altering the family occupation and the national dynamic, THAT is a reason to resort to violence.

In this perspective, Joseph made his intentions clear that he wanted to lead the family to a new future. Joseph was sure he understood God's plan. The brothers were intimidated by his vision, by his dreams. It was unsettling and threatening. They disagreed with Joseph and they didn't know how to cope.

- Why can ideological difference turn to violence?
- Why do people feel so threatened by ideologies that undermine their way of thinking?
- What is to be done when rival groups adopt alternative visions of what is right?
- Will this sort of divergence always end in conflict, or is it resolvable in peaceful terms?

Shabbat Shalom!