

Parshat Vayeshev: On Wandering Towards Purpose

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At the beginning of the Yosef story, Yaakov sends Yosef out to find his brothers. And then, in Bereishit 37:15:

A man discovered, him and behold Yosef was wandering in the field. וַיִּמְצְאוּ אִישׁ, וְהִנֵּה תֹעֵה בַשָּׂדֶה

Yosef is *toeh b'sadeh*. The word *toeh* is used in two other places in the Torah and the context of these verses sheds light on Yosef's state of mind at this moment.

In Mishlei (21:16), the Torah describes someone as:

A person who wanders (*to'eh*) from the intelligent way. אָדָם-תּוֹעֵה, מִדֶּרֶךְ הַשְּׂכִל...

The word *toeh* here conveys someone who is misguided or misdirected. Perhaps then, the Torah's description of Yosef as "*toeh b'sadeh*," is meant to describe a person who has gone down the wrong path in life. A child who was too conceited to appreciate his siblings and thus drifted away from the embrace and love of his brothers.

The second rendering of the word "*toeh*" is found in Shemoth (23:5):

If you come across an ox or donkey belonging to your enemy wandering כִּי תִפְגַּע שׁוֹר אִיבְרִי, אוֹ חֲמֹרוֹ--תֹעֵה: הַשֶּׁבֶט
(*to'eh*), you shall return it to him repeatedly. תְּשִׁיבֵנוּ, לוֹ

This *toeh*, this wandering, implies something quite different. The animal is lost in this world, blundering along. This interpretation imagines Yosef is lost in a metaphysical and emotional sense. Along these lines, The Ba'al Turim (Bereishit 37:15) offers a deeply psychological interpretation: Yosef is lost, and therefore the man/*ish* must return him to himself. He does not know who he is or what he wants in this world. Yosef is unsure of his *tafkid* (task) in this world.

Both definitions of *to'eh* - of pursuing the wrong path, the wrong *derech*, as well as the existential feeling of being completely lost - convey a wandering soul. It is in this state of mind that Yosef encounters the mysterious unidentified man (*ish*). It is interesting to note that Yosef doesn't stop the *ish* to ask him for directions. He does not flag down the man and say, "I am lost, have you seen my brothers?" Yosef is not walking with purpose. Rather, a man discovered him wandering, blundering along, lacking an understanding of how lost he actually is.

The conversation that ensues has deep theological and life changing impact. The *ish* discovers Yosef, and behold he is *to'eh b'sadeh*, he was wandering in the field, and the man asks: מַה-תְּבַקֵּשׁ What are you seeking? (Bereishit 37:15) What, Yosef, do you want out of life?

At this liminal moment, the beginning of the rest of Yosef's journey unfolds. He happens upon someone who changes the course of his life. Upon not being able to find his brothers, Yosef could have returned home to his father, but the *ish*, directed him towards the place that his brothers were, and ultimately sealed Yosef's destiny of being sent down to Egypt.

At this moment, Yosef experiences a moment of clarity, and realizes what he was seeking.

What do you seek, the man asks. And Yosef answers (37:16):

My brothers do I seek. וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶת-אֲחָי אֲנֹכִי מְבַקֵּשׁ

The *ish* helped him discover his purpose by setting him on the path towards his brothers. And yet, it would be years before he would be able to fully comprehend and express his *tafkid*, his purpose.

In chapter 43, Yehudah describes the encounter with the Egyptian viceroy, which, unbeknownst to him, is his brother Yosef to his father. (Bereishit 43:3)

The *ish*/man (Yosef) said, 'do not seek my face unless your brother is with you.' הָאִישׁ יֹאמֵר לֹא-תִרְאוּ פָנַי, בְּלִתִּי אֲחִיכֶם אִתְּכֶם

Don't seek me out, until you all the brothers are together. This time, Yosef is the *Ish*, the man, asking Yehudah to fulfill his ultimate dream of brotherhood. *Mah tevakesh?* Yosef finally understands what he articulated so many years ago. What was he seeking? He was seeking his way back to brotherhood.

Rabba Sara's Overarching Theme:

Feeling God's presence, shouldn't be that difficult. "You shall walk after the Lord your God,"(Devarim 12:5) we are told; seek out God's presence. And yet, astonished, R. Hama son of R. Hanina (Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a) asks, how is it possible to walk with the Shechina? Rav Hama quotes an early pasuk from Devarim that describes "... the Lord your God as a devouring Fire."(Devarim 4:24). How is it possible to get close to God without being scorched? R. Hama answers his own question: We must walk after the *midot*, after the attributes of God, not his immediate presence.

In Hebrew, good attributes, *midot*, are translated as "good measures." Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, suggests that a quality is determined by its proportion. In other words our *midot* are the balance of our varied characteristic traits. To act Godly is to put our best spiritual essence forward, while trying to keep in check the inevitability of negative attributes. We are at once both good and bad, compassionate and injurious.

At Yeshivat Maharat, our students are ordained with the ability to lead, pasken, and teach. But, they must also be finely attuned to the nuances of the human condition. Spiritual leaders are most effective when they have confronted and understand their own *midot*, their own balance of human traits. Our Torah narratives bring to bare the multi-layers of the characteristic traits that individuals must learn to balance within themselves.

And so, I offer this weekly parsha column as a model of Yeshivat Maharat's Pastoral Torah curriculum, where we will explore the rich and varies layers of the human condition.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.