

Vayeishev 5771 Mystery Man
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

Last summer, my wife Sharon and I were able to take a short, two-day vacation without our kids, something we had not done in a few years.

After dropping Talya off at Camp Ramah, we headed up to the White Mountains on the border between Vermont and New Hampshire. We planned to do some hiking and got some suggestions. We picked a nice big hike up Little Haystack with options of going back down the same way or doing a longer loop that included two other 5000 foot peaks: Mt. Lincoln and Mt. Lafayette.

We did not really focus on the details too much. The next morning, it was raining, so we waited and got a late start. At first we thought we would just hike up Little Haystack, which would take us only a few hours, bringing us back in plenty of time for supper.

But because we had already slipped a few times on the wet rocks on the way up, we anticipated more problems returning the same way. We had been told that there was a longer, but easier route down called the Bridal Path, and we estimated that we could still get back before dark even if we went down that way.

So we did.

At first, it was gorgeous – we were in the clouds, and, when they broke, we could see an enormous expanse of heaven and earth. At the top of those 5000 foot peaks, the gusts were strong, the weather was colder, and other trails merged into ours.

Our estimates on the amount of time it would take were off, and we started to panic, realizing that, even though it was the middle of the summer, it might be dark by the time we would be hiking back through the forest.

We had not seen a living soul in hours, and, after another fall, we started to fear we would not be able to get back in time. We didn't know what to do. We were also not sure where we were on the map. We were anxious in the middle of the wilderness.

This morning's parashah, *Parashat Va-yeishev*, also contains some hiking, although, as you know, it's not in northern New Hampshire, but in the land of Israel.

Joseph is sent out from his father Jacob's home in *Hevron* to find his brothers, who had been pasturing their father's flock near *Sh'khem*. He is told to go to see how his brothers are doing and how the flocks are faring in order to report back to his father. The Torah states:

“So, (he) [Jacob] sent (him) [Joseph] from the Valley of *Hevron*.

“When he reached *Sh'khem*, a man came upon him wandering in the fields, and the man asked him, ‘What are you looking for?’ He answered ‘I am looking for my brothers – *Et-ahai anokhi mevakeish*. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?’ The man said ‘They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dotan.’ So, Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dotan.” (Genesis 37:14-17)

After that, you know the rest of the story. The brothers see him, they conspire to kill him, and, thanks to the efforts of the oldest brother Reuben, they do not kill him, but sell him into

slavery. From there, Joseph becomes Potiphar's slave, and the story, the trilogy of Joseph's *parshiyot*, picks up from that point.

The Torah is famously sparing of details, but suddenly here in the middle of this intense, powerful narrative about Joseph and his brothers – an amazing tale of sibling rivalry – a mystery man appears, directing Joseph to his brothers.

Had this man not appeared, it is most likely that Joseph would have returned home without any news. We can assume that he would not have been sold into slavery and, therefore, he would not have interpreted Pharaoh's dreams nor would he have saved Egypt and his own family from famine. The entire narrative of the Jewish people could have been quite different.

Who was this mystery man?

Maimonides suggests he was an angel sent by God to make sure that Joseph did find his brothers so that the rest of the story we know would take place.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in our Etz Hayim Humash comments, "We never hear of this man again. [...] Do we ever know the consequences of the little acts of thoughtfulness we perform?"

This is a powerful reminder that each of us in every day and in every moment can become that mystery person, helping others, pointing them in the right direction, connecting others to what they need, never fully aware of the impact that we can have.

But there is also another message here. This man's appearance is simply random. Here is a man who happens to know where Joseph's brothers have gone, who happens to be in the right place at the right time, but it was random. The man might have attacked him. There could have been wild beasts that came upon

Joseph and killed him, as the brothers report to Jacob. Life has a certain amount of randomness to it, and that is unsettling. Here, we might see this random mystery man as positive, but in other moments it could be quite negative.

Life is all about dealing with this randomness: the random good things, the blessings – the random bad things, the inconveniences, the car accident, the illnesses, the losses, the getting lost in the mountains of New Hampshire.

How do we cope with the mystery people who can be good or not so good?

One approach is by putting it into context. In the short term, this man first directed Joseph almost to his death and then to what became slavery. But, we know that, in a longer view, Joseph plays a major role in Egypt, and this man pointed him toward that role. The contours of our narrative – where it begins and ends – shape our perspective.

At first, finding his brothers did not turn out that well for Joseph. But afterwards, the consequences look better. He saves his family from starvation along with all of Egypt.

But that led to the evils of the Hebrew slavery in Egypt.

Of course, the next step was liberation from Egypt and God's revelation, receiving the core of the Torah at Sinai.

Well – you get the picture. Randomness can be good or bad depending on how far you zoom in or out. Life, both individual and national, has its ups and downs.

Nehama Leibowitz, the great Israeli scholar, makes a fascinating comment on this text. She points out that Joseph

apparently is sent by his father in verse 14: “*Vayishalhayhu mai’eimek hevron* – So he sent him out of the valley of Hevron.”

Joseph reframes this sending by telling his brothers at the end of the story: “*Lo-atem sh’lahtem oti heinah kee ha-Elohim* – So it was not you who sent me on this mission, but God.” (Gen 37:14; 45:8)

Through this lens, we experience the entire narrative differently. On a simple level, it is Joseph’s father and brother who send him out so that he ends up a slave in Egypt.

But as Nehama Leibowitz points out, according to the tradition, there is another hand at work here: the hand of God. God is somehow sending the descendents of Abraham to Egypt on this extended journey.

Leibowitz also cites the Midrash which talks about how Joseph is sent mysteriously - the Midrash playing off of the word “*emek Hevron*,” meaning the valley of Hevron. Of course, Hevron is a mountain, not a valley, so the Midrash understands “*emek*” to be a deep place, deep in the sense of mysterious.

So, we have an allusion to the mysterious advice that was first given to Abraham a few weeks ago regarding the future of his descendants - that they would sojourn in a land not their own. “It was this prophecy that Jacob and Joseph were fulfilling, unwittingly; the father – in sending, and the son – in going to seek his brothers.” (Leibowitz, page 395)

Through this lens, we see Divine Providence orchestrating the events that bring the Israelites to Egypt. While that resonates with me literarily, and perhaps there are moments I have felt similarly, this remains a VERY challenging notion for me, and perhaps for some of you as well.

There is a major problem here. Many of us, particularly post-Holocaust, do not believe that God is determining our future. And if we don't believe that, where do we see the role of God in our lives?

For that, I turn to the festival that is rapidly approaching – Hanukkah. Hanukkah can be a simple story. The Syrian Greeks wanted to prevent us from worshipping our God and practicing Judaism, and we rebelled against them and won. And then, of course, there is the story about the miracle of the oil. The Book of Maccabees, which was written around the time of Hanukkah, but not placed into the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, never mentions God, nor any miracles for that matter. It simply recounts this military achievement, much the same as when the modern State of Israel was born against overwhelming odds and has survived devastating attacks, being outnumbered 1000 to one.

But is it a miracle? Is it God's doing?

Miracles are... in how we understand them. The birth of a child on some level is not miraculous. It happens every second. It is part of the natural process of the world. But, having witnessed the birth of my children – and if you have had the same experience or something similar you understand, that it is quite miraculous. It is miraculous in the sense that it is a peak experience, a moment when we feel a presence that we don't normally experience. That's what we as Jews call *Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh*, the name of God.

So I would reframe it somewhat: God is not orchestrating all the events, but is somehow sustaining us through all these moments.

The rabbis claim that Joseph's mystery man is an angel. In fact, the Midrash states that it is the angel *Gavriel* – Gabriel – who was sent to make sure that Joseph arrives at the right destination.

But while that may have been what it felt like to Joseph – that he was being guided by an angel, this mystery man may simply be a random person who was present at the right place at the right time.

We have all had those moments. Someone was just there. Good luck. A nice coincidence. These interactions have suddenly connected us to what we have needed.

We have been on both sides of all those moments of connection.

But another overlooked element is that Joseph trusts and accepts the man's suggestion. He is a person of faith, a believer, and he accepts the man's directions and goes on the journey to find his brothers.

That is a key part of being Jewish. It's an attitude of faith. An attitude of optimism. There will always be challenging moments in life, from birth to sickness to death. It is how we choose to respond to these moments, even to random moments, that will sustain us.

God's presence is all around us. We simply have to hone our skills and become aware. That will help us when we need it most.

So, turning back to the hike up in the mountains of northern New England, we did start to panic – we had not seen a person in hours, and we were not sure if we could keep going for so many hours, nor did we know if we were on the right path. We prayed and hoped we would make the right choices in our route.

How wonderful it would have been had a person appeared to guide us as the mystery man guided Joseph. But that did not happen. We were forced to derive strength from ourselves and from each other. Sometimes we find people to guide us on our journeys, and other times we need to dig deep into ourselves and to those closest to us to find the power to move forward.

We did choose the right path, and eventually we did find other people who confirmed where we were.

And, after a few more hours, we arrived around sunset, slightly bloodied from our falls, a bit tired and exhausted, but safe.

Thank God.

May we always be able to find the strength and the people who will point us in the right direction, knowing that God's presence is all around us.

Shabbat Shalom.