

Parashat Vayeshev 5781

Shabbat Shalom. This Shabbat's Torah portion is incredibly interesting. From this Torah portion through the remaining three portions in the book of *Bereshit* (Genesis), Joseph is the main character. His personality and story are fascinating. There is way too much to talk about in the portion so I had to pick something manageable. Before I continue, I want to mention a little sidebar. The only time in the entire Torah a birthday is taken note of is in this Shabbat's portion. Interestingly enough, the birthday is Pharaoh's.

Back to our topic. I often quote from Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors – one of the few volumes of the Talmud that is a Mishna without a Gemara. The Talmud is comprised of an earlier section called the Mishna “sealed” around the year 200CE and is written in Hebrew in generally very succinct passages. After each Mishna, generally, there is a much longer passage, mostly written in Aramaic, the spoken language of the time, called the Gemara, that uses the Misha passage as its jumping off point. The entire tractate (of which there are 63) is composed of alternating Mishna and Gemara passages. The two components together form the Talmud. There was a Talmud created in the land of Israel called “the Jerusalem Talmud” “sealed” around 450CE and there is the Babylonian Talmud sealed around 550 CE. Pirkei Avot has six chapters and each chapter is divided into numerous sections each of which is also called by the name Mishna. Chapter 2 Mishna 1 includes in it the phrase in Hebrew: “*Vehevay Zahir b'mitzvah kalah k'vakhamura*” which I would translate as “be as meticulous in performing what seems like a minor Mitzvah as with one that seems major (in your eyes).” That's my theme essentially tonight. We usually don't know how something will affect the future. What may seem like a minor insignificant act or word may be like a pebble that sets off an avalanche. I think Joseph's story in this Parasha illustrates this point well. Let's take some examples: How much cloth did it take to make Joseph's “coat of many colors?” That little bit of cloth used in the way it was used effected a rift between Joseph and his brothers. It embodied the favoritism that his father, Jacob, showed for Joseph over the others. Probably each of the acts or words that showed favoritism individually might have been minor, but they added up – one probably catalyzed the next. Each made the successive one more hurtful, more painful.

It's easy to forget that we are living history and each of us is a product of thousands of years of history. The fact that each of us is sitting in this virtual room right now is because each of us is the latest stage of an incredibly long chain of events that occurred to those who came

before us. Had my mother, for example, as a 25 year old woman in a Chassidic household in Poland not gone against her parents' wishes and volunteered for the Russian army as a nurse she would have never met my father who was drafted into the same army as a doctor – she wouldn't have been the only one to survive the war and I would have never been born, etc. etc. Most events can be traced back in a similar manner. Often what may have led to the crucial turning point may have at the beginning seemed like a minor detail. But we never know where a minor detail may lead.

The story of Joseph in the Torah is filled with turning points like that. Had Joseph not told his dreams to his brothers, he probably would have antagonized them less. Whether he told them in innocence not realizing how they would be heard by his brothers and how they would affect them, or he didn't care enough to consider those things is a separate issue, however important it may be.

After telling the dream to his brothers and another dream to his brothers and father a little later, his father sends Joseph out to see how his brothers are faring in pasturing their father's flocks. Could Jacob have been so oblivious to the enmity between the other brothers and Joseph? Joseph willingly goes. Is he also oblivious to the friction between them? There is an interesting moment that comes at this point. Joseph encounters an anonymous "*ish*" as he is unsuccessfully looking for his brothers. This *ish* asks Joseph what does he seek? Joseph answers that he is seeking his brothers. This is the kind of phrase that is great raw material for our ancient sages who generally seek deeper meanings that can be read beneath the literal level of the Torah's words. Literally in the story at this juncture, Joseph is looking for his brothers as they are pasturing their father's flocks. On the other hand, if he were seeking his brothers in a deeper sense, in the sense of trying to understand who they really are – if he were seeking to connect with them and overcome the enmity between them that would be a very different story.

Meanwhile when they see Joseph coming in the distance they say "here comes that dreamer" – things have gotten so bad by this point, the resentment so great, that they scheme to kill him without their father knowing of course. If their brother Judah had not dissuaded them from killing Joseph, the story of the Jewish people would be vastly different. Had they not sold him into slavery he would not have ended up in Egypt. Had Joseph not ended up in Egypt, the family would not have followed him down to Egypt because of the famine in the land of Israel, the Exodus would have never happened, etc.

There are three words for work in Hebrew which are common: *P'ulah*, *Avodah*, and *M'lakha*. *P'ulah* is pretty straightforward. The word *Avodah* can also mean worship. The word *M'lakha* is the type of work that is forbidden on Shabbat and Holidays. We know this because it was the word used for the work/labor done in the holiest work mentioned in the Torah – i.e., the constructing of the Tabernacle. Despite the holiness of this work, everyone ceased from working on the Tabernacle on Shabbat and Holidays. The Talmud goes on to detail the 39 categories of work that our ancestors refrained from on Shabbat. The Torah also says that *M'lakha* should be done six days a week and refrained from on Shabbat. Here are two more phrases regarding *M'lakha* from *Pirkei Avot* Chapter 2: 16, 17. The first one I'm sure most of us can identify with: "The day is short and there is much *M'lakha* to do." My commentary is there's always more to do than can be done given the limitations of time. The next Mishna address this: "You are not obligated to complete the *M'lakha*, but neither are you free to abstain from it." Life is a work in progress. We are always in the middle until the very end. And we can never know what the ramifications of what we do or say will be – so we should be careful and mindful about what we do and say. Shabbat Shalom and wishing you all a Happy and Healthy Chanukah.