

TIMELESS TORAH

PARSHAT VAYEISHEV - Fractured Perspectives, Fractured Visions

Approaches to Change

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Parshat Vayeishev and the next few *parshiyot* form the longest single narrative of the Torah. They are a backdrop for enduring lessons in navigating the challenges of communal leadership in changing circumstances.

A magnificent interpretation of Yosef's dreams by Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993) begins with a small but powerful detail. Yaakov's family were, and had always been, shepherds by occupation. Yet, when Yosef envisions his brother's bowing down to him, he dreams in a context of crop farming. The brothers picked up on this seemingly insignificant anomaly and understood its message. They recognized that the dream about the sheaves of wheat was actually set in Egypt and not in Canaan, and they understood that Yosef was cognizant of the family's looming destiny of exile. Yosef's dream underscored the necessity of preparation for change. He recognized that survival in a foreign land would require adaptability and new skills. The brothers, on the other hand, rejected this vision, preferring to trust in Divine providence.

Throughout our long history, we have frequently experienced this clash of perspectives. We have been in certain situations where things have been stable, but then, the winds of change blow. At such junctures, there are always competing forces among the Jewish

people as to how to react. There are those who prefer an idealized adherence to the present and others who engage in a realistic appraisal of an uncertain future. In this debate between Yosef and his brothers, Rav Soloveitchik concludes, the events of the ensuing *parshiyot* clearly side with Yosef. Without the true fulfillment of Yosef's dreams, Yaakov and his entire family would have perished in famine.

A Unique Perspective

When all of Yosef's brothers plotted to kill him, only Reuven stood up for him. Why was it Reuven who saved Yosef? The Midrash tells us that Reuven had a different perspective on the dreams than the other brothers had. While they felt threatened by Yosef's vision of ruling over them, Reuven felt encouraged. We know from last week's *parshah* that Reuven had undergone a certain experience in which he had interfered with his father's marital arrangements, and as a result he felt ostracized by the rest of the family. Yosef's dream, which featured all eleven stars bowing to him, offered Reuven reassurance that he was still counted among the brothers. This inclusion shifted Reuven's outlook on Yosef and his dreams.

Later in the narrative, this divergence of perspectives becomes clearer. The brothers are in Yosef's palace in Egypt, dismayed at the thought of having to fetch Binyamin. In a moment of introspection, they berate themselves, saying, '*Asheimim anachnu al asher ra'inu tzarat nafsho... v'lo shamanu*—We are guilty for having seen [Yosef's] distress and not heeding (Bereishit 42:21)'. The brothers, at this stage, do not regret what they did; the



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only culpability they find in themselves is for not behaving more mercifully. Reuven, on the other hand, asserts that, '*atah damo nidrash*—now his blood is being sought'. We should not have touched him altogether, he tells his brothers, and now we are being punished for assailing him.

Rabbi Aharon Kotler (d.1962) explains that Reuven's recognition of his own faults allowed him to view Yosef's dream as a vision for the unification of the tribes of Israel rather than as a threat to the continuity of the family. Our interpretation of external events is shaped significantly by the state of our inner self. If we view ourselves in a particular light, we are likely to continue that perspective in how we construe things that occur to us. If we acknowledge our own shortcomings and the virtues of our friends, it makes a radical difference in our reaction towards other people's conduct.

The Value of Responsibility

Another lesson on the theme of fractured perspectives can be gleaned from an analysis of the dreams of the butler and the baker at the end of the parsha. Yosef is thrown into jail and has the opportunity to interpret the dreams of his fellow inmates, former attendants of Pharaoh. The butler, in his dream, sees the vines flowering and the grapes growing. Then, he presses the grapes into Pharaoh's goblet. The baker also dreams of his former role in the palace, and he tells Yosef that in his vision, he was holding three baskets of bread, but instead of serving them, the birds were pecking at them. Yosef interprets these dreams to foretell the butler's reinstatement and the baker's execution.

Rav Nissan Alpert (d.1986) explains the difference between the two dreams. The butler and the baker, as officials in the palace, were probably not directly involved in serving Pharaoh; presumably, the work was done by their subordinates. Nevertheless, the butler's dream reflects his acknowledgment of personal accountability. He envisions himself directly involved in serving Pharaoh, signalling his readiness to learn from his mistakes. In contrast, in the baker's dream, the bread is already baked and placed in baskets on his head, portraying passivity and reflecting his refusal to take ownership of past failures. Interestingly, the verses seem to say that the baker was also given back his role before he was put to death. According to Rav Alpert, Pharaoh reinstated both of them to test whether they had learned their lesson. When he witnessed the baker's failure to take responsibility, his fate was sealed.

For Yosef, these events served as a critical formative lesson. When he later ascends to power in Egypt, Yosef does not stand on a pedestal and delegate responsibility for supporting the country during the famine. Rather, he personally oversees the distribution of food. In fact, it was precisely this fact that was the key to him encountering his brothers when they came to buy provisions for their family. Yosef learned his lesson from the butler and the baker and made sure that he was intimately involved in looking after the people under his charge.

Next week: Parshat Mikeitz - Points of Light in the Confusion of Night