

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
Parshat Vayeshev – Genesis 37:1-40:23
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As a Rabbinic student, I could often be found working with teens, in various settings – in local synagogues and youth groups, with regional youth groups, on retreats, and at camp. I vividly remember one moment in one of these settings, tied to this week’s Torah portion. The then Vice-President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Daniel Syme, was addressing a large gathering of teens. He asked the group to suggest who might be candidates for the most significant figures in the book of Genesis. A wave of hands went up, and we can each easily imagine a list of names offered up by the teens. Rabbi Syme affirmed all their suggestions. He then proceeded to point to one figure in this week’s *parshah* as an often overlooked, but critical player in *Sefer Bereishit*. Recounting the story of Joseph being sent by his father Jacob to inquire after the welfare of his brothers, Rabbi Syme cited Genesis 37:15 –

וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תֹעָה בְּשָׂדֵה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאמֹר מַה־תְּבַקֵּשׁ׃

... an *ish*/man came upon [Joseph] wandering in the fields.

The *ish* asked him, “What are you looking for?”

Rabbi Syme went on to explain that to his way of thinking, this anonymous *ish* plays one of the most critical roles in all of Torah. Without this *ish*, perhaps Joseph does not find his brothers? Perhaps they do not have the opportunity to throw him in a pit because of their challenging relationship with their brother, the dreamer? Perhaps Joseph does not get sold to band of Ishmaelites, and does not find himself in Egypt, first as a servant, and then as a high ranking official in Pharaoh’s court? Perhaps he does not become the conduit for his family, and then our people, to end up in Egypt? Perhaps the Israelites do not become slaves, and we lose the set-up for the story of the Exodus, and the remaining four books of the Torah?

Lots of perhaps’. Rabbi Syme’s point to the teens that day was that we never know the power of the role we may play in the lives of others. As individuals we have incredible power and oft-overlooked opportunities to impact the lives of others.

In his commentary on our verse, Nachmanides, the Ramban¹ teaches:

¹ Moshe ben Nachman, (1194-1270), also known as Ramban, was born in Gerona, Spain. He was a leading Torah scholar of the Middle Ages who authored commentaries on Torah and the Talmud. He wrote responsa and stand-alone works on Halachic topics, as well as works on mysticism, science and philosophy. Ramban's commentary on the Torah often critiques earlier commentaries and incorporates kabbalistic teachings. He was born in Gerona, Spain, where he established a large yeshiva which produced hundreds of disciples who became leaders of Spanish Jewry. In 1263 he took part in a debate in Barcelona with an apostate Jew named Pablo Christiani, at the behest of the Church. In 1267, at the age of 72, he immigrated to the Land of Israel, where he settled in Akko (Acre).

A MAN FOUND HIM, AND BEHOLD, HE [Joseph] WAS STRAYING IN THE FIELD. Our verse is stating that Joseph was straying from the road, not knowing where to go. He entered a field, since he was looking for [his brothers] in a place of pasture. Scripture mentions this at length, in order to relate that many events befell [Joseph] which could have easily caused him to return home. Yet, he endured everything patiently for the honor of his father, [Jacob] . . .

. . . The Holy One sent him a guide [the *ish*] without his knowledge in order to bring [Joseph] into their hands. This is what our Rabbis intended when they said² that [a] man [such as this one whom Joseph encounters] is a *malach*/an angel, for these events did not occur without purpose, but rather to teach us that “It is the counsel of the Eternal that shall stand.” [Proverbs 19:21]

A variety of *middot* came immediately to mind as I pondered this verse anew this year. Joseph’s “mission,” if we can call it that, came at the behest of his father, as we read in the two preceding verses,

Israel said to Joseph, “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, *Hineini* - “I am ready.” And [Israel] said to him, “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring, and bring me back word.” So, he sent him from the valley of Hebron.³

Joseph’s immediate readiness to heed his father’s request calls to mind *zerizut*/alacrity. It also reflects *kavod*/honor for his father Jacob/Israel, as well as his *savlanut*/patience along the way. Against the backdrop of Ramban’s comment about his persistence in seeing through the task he was asked to undertake, I can also see *netzach*/persistence. Of course, given the Ramban’s attribution of the outcome of Joseph’s journey to God acting in our lives and our world, we can look towards *emunah*/faith and *bitachon*/trust.

Ironically, as I explored various volumes of teachings from our *ba’alei Mussar*, I found precious little attention is paid to verse 15, and this anonymous figure who points Joseph in the direction of his brothers. In *Shiurei Chumash Bereshit*,⁴ Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe does lightly touch on our verse, as he reflects on the exchange between the *ish* and Joseph in verses 15-17:

The man asked him, “What are you looking for?” He answered, “I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?” The man said, “*Nas’u mi-zeh* - They have gone from here . . .”

² In *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 84:13

³ Genesis 37:13-14

⁴ *Shiurei Chumash Bereishit*, page 318

Rav Wolbe comments on Rashi's read of the words *nas'u mi-zeh* – “They have gone from *zeh/here*” which Rashi interprets as meaning, “they have departed from all feeling of brotherhood.” Rav Wolbe teaches that every place we see the word *zeh/this* (or, “here” as it is rendered in our translation, meaning “from *this* place) it may be understood as a sign that this individual is literally pointing with their finger. Rav Wolbe further interprets this response as meaning, “they have left any connection with you.” It is as if the *ish* is warning Joseph not to pursue them as they no longer wish to associate with him. Nevertheless, honoring his father's request, and seeking to fulfill his *hineini* response, he persists. Hence the *ish* points out the direction which Joseph follows.

While I found myself reflecting on the aforementioned *middot* as I studied our *parshah*, it was Rabbi Syme's message to those teens, likely some forty years ago, which spoke to me as I reflected on this story anew, through a *Mussar* lens. For each of us, our *Mussar* journey is personal. As we know, it begins by focusing on our internal landscape – that of our *neshamah*, our soul. We can only wonder what may have been bubbling up in Joseph's *neshamah* as he sought out his brothers. But for me, the lesson about the nameless, faceless *ish* grabbed me from a different angle.

While our *Mussar* journey is personal, it is best taken in the company of others. To me, this speaks of the importance and impact of *hevruta* partners, the members of a *va'ad* of which we may be a part, our teachers, and our *Mussar Institute* community, our “fellow-travelers” as it were. As with that that *ish*, that anonymous figure who pointed Joseph in a direction in Genesis chapter 37, we have the opportunity to point others towards insights, meanings and applications as we study, practice and journey together. Each person we encounter on our journey can have a major impact, no matter who they are. And thinking about *anavah*/humility, I am reminded that sometimes it is the lesser-known people in our lives who can help us see what those who know us best cannot. And let us not forget the impact we can have on others as we share the study, practice and journey.

FOR FOCUS:

- Can you think of a time when someone offered up an insight or interpretation of something that totally turned your thinking around?
- Can you think of such a moment along your *Mussar* journey?
- Which other *middot* come to mind for you as you read and study the encounter between Joseph and the *ish*?
- How can you use Rabbi Syme's teaching about the importance of incidental or even anonymous figures in our lives, as you think about your *neshamah* work for the week ahead?