

A Nameless Man

Chapter 37 of Genesis begins the saga of Jacob and his children. We soon learn that seventeen year old Joseph is the favoured, gifted child, the dreamer who is given a special robe ('of many colours' say some translations). But he is also perceived as lording his gifts over others (37:2-9). His brothers hate him for it, and even his dotting father is concerned (37:10-11).

One day, Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers who are pasturing sheep at Shechem. On his way Joseph meets a man who asks him a question and points him in the direction of his brothers. What happens next is a complete breakdown in family relations. Joseph is betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, and taken to Egypt. While tragic, it is also a decisive turning point in the story of God's chosen people. As Genesis unfolds, Joseph's path ultimately saves his family from death during a famine. It also leads to the enslavement of future generations... giving way to the epic events of Exodus.

All this you can read in Genesis. Of particular interest here is the stranger whom Joseph meets on his way to that fateful meeting with his brothers.

A man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' 'I am seeking my brothers,' he said. (37:15-16).

Who is this unnamed man who appears out of nowhere and disappears from the story just as elusively? Why does the Torah record this conversation? Consisting of just two verses, it's easy to overlook. But, as the Jewish sages are so fond of demonstrating, when we 'slow down' our bible reading and ponder even tiny details, God's Word communicates powerful meanings. Where else does an unnamed man enter the bible story? In Genesis 32 Jacob wrestles with a mystery man, thought to be angel. Is the man who questions Joseph also a divine representative? Is there more to his question "What are you seeking?" than is immediately apparent? Is this a question to be answered by the reader?

The text tells us that Jacob sends Joseph "from the valley of Hebron" (37:14). 'But isn't Hebron on a mountain?' asks Rashi, the 11th century Torah scholar. Why would the Torah describe it as a valley? Rashi answers that the text signifies that from this moment the *depths* of God's designs are being realized. In fact, the Hebrew words for 'valley' (*e'mek*) and 'profound' (*a'mok*), 'deep' (*o'mek*) share the same root. Why is this such a significant moment?

Humanly speaking, it is significant for Joseph. From the status of a spoilt teenager found 'wandering' [another translation: 'blundering'] in the fields, he begins the painful journey to maturity, even rising to power in Pharaoh's household. Will he find what he is truly seeking?

On another level, this moment is highly significant for the history of Israel. As the sages repeatedly observe: *On this day, the exile of Egypt began.* The day Jacob unknowingly sends Joseph to near-death at the hands of his brothers, events are set in motion that will lead the Israelites to exile in Egypt and their consequent liberation which remains central to Jewish faith, and to Christian faith too. In what appears as chance encounters, God's designs are perfected.

By now we can see that Joseph's meeting with a divine figure signifies a dramatic 'pause' in the sacred story. The Torah affords us a moment to 'catch our breath' and reflect on the hand of God guiding human events. Are we awake to the sacred 'pauses' in our own lives? •

Reflection: Sometimes people appear in our lives for a short time, they awaken us to important truths, open doors, point the way...Then they are gone, leaving us with a sense of being in a 'new' place and on a divinely ordained journey. Have you had an experience like this?

Sources: Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (New York, 1999); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York, 1994). Scripture: NRSV.

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