

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Vayeshev)

Sometimes it takes someone else to show you what you should have seen all along...

I was driving home the other day in normal traffic when suddenly a car sped by on my left trying to overtake me and the cars in front of me. Only problem was he had not anticipated the truck coming round the curve and heading straight for him in his lane. There was nowhere for him to go and no space for him to get back into our lane; it was a two lane highway with only one lane in each direction and as he was parallel to my car there was no-where for him to go.

Suddenly realizing I was about to witness a really nasty accident and despite the car behind me I braked and threw my car onto the shoulder allowing him to get back into our lane just in time. The car behind me braked just in time to avoid hitting me and I managed to stop before hitting the guard rail; by some miracle no-one was hurt. And this small white car who almost got himself and probably some of us killed, just drove off.

Normally, that would be the end of the story, but we hit some traffic along with a traffic light and I could see him a few cars ahead. Keeping my eyes on him, I managed to pull up alongside him by driving into a turning lane at a traffic light and motioned to him to pull down his window.

After a moment, as we were both at a red light he finally rolled down his window, but before I had a chance to yell anything I suddenly realized to my surprise that it was a good friend of mine from the shul I attend every Shabbat! He was obviously embarrassed, realizing full well what a dangerous thing he had just done, so all I did was to plead with him : "Please; drive slowly; it's not worth it!" I blew him a kiss and drove off as the light turned green....

I'm not sure what and if I'll say to him when I see him on Shabbat, but I have been thinking about that moment all day. Because truth be told, it could just have easily have been him driving alongside to tell me to drive more carefully... Do we recognize how ridiculous we can sometimes be?

There is a fascinating moment captured, but easily overlooked, by the Midrash in this week's portion of Vayeshev:

Immediately after Joseph is sold to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver (Bereishit (Genesis) 37:28), the Torah tells us that:

"..Reuven returned to the pit and discovered Yosef was gone..." (ibid. v.29)

The obvious question is: where did Reuven go? And **Rashi** quotes the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 84:19) suggesting that Reuven was busy mourning (doing penance?) in sackcloth for having re-arranged his father's bed.

The event Rashi is referring to was Reuven's attempt (ibid. 35:22) in last week's portion of Vayishlach, to substitute his mother Leah's bed (after Rachel died) for Rachel's concubine Bilha's. (See Rashi ad loc.; and

Tractate Shabbat 55b; Reuven felt he was protecting his mother's honor...). In fact, it is this very event for which Reuven is taken to task by Yaakov on his deathbed (ibid. 49:4).

But one has to wonder: this event took place when Rachel died, just after Binyamin was born; so Yosef was eight years old. But Yosef was sold when he was seventeen (ibid. 37:2); so why was Reuven repenting for this mistake nine years later? What was it about the selling of Yosef that may have caused Reuven to reconsider his past actions?

It is clear from the context of the verses that Reuven actually was against the decision to kill, and even to sell Yosef. In fact, Rashi suggests it was his intention to save him which may be why he was so anguished, even tearing his clothes upon discovering Joseph was gone. (ibid. 37:29)

There is much discussion amongst the commentaries as to how the brothers could justify selling their own brother into a lifetime of slavery, originally even wanting to kill him. But to Reuven, perhaps it was a shock to realize how easily one can logically rationalize fratricide. Seeing the brothers assume they had a right to kill Joseph or at least get rid of him given the fact that they felt threatened by his relationship with their father, perhaps Reuven looked back and suddenly understood how narrow his viewpoint must have been, seeing only his mother Leah's honor, and not his father's pain.

On the one hand, with Yaakov's beloved Rachel dead, was it not time for Leah to assume the natural role as Yaakov's proper wife and share his tent? And Reuven, seeing only his mother's honor and pain acted on impulse viewing the world through his own narrow lens.

But what of Yaakov? Had Reuven considered how painful it must have been for Yaakov to have lost his beloved Rachel? And how eerily shocked must Yaakov have been to discover his bed moved and a woman he had not intended to be with, in his bed by trickery? Would this not have reminded Yaakov of the pain and anguish he felt when tricked by Lavan his father-in-law all those years ago, into marrying Leah against his will in the first place?

Perhaps Reuven, in shock at the turn of events regarding the sudden violent kidnapping of Yosef, took some time for some long overdue introspection regarding his own shortcomings?

All of which suggests a powerful idea. The **Baal Shem Tov** suggests that when we see someone, as an example, desecrating Shabbat, our first response should not be to scream at them regarding the sanctity of Shabbat. Rather, perhaps Hashem (G-d) wants us first to take a look and see what might be wrong in our own Shabbat.

Imagine a world where we first look to examine our own shortcomings, before rebuking our neighbors...

Maybe seeing my neighbor driving like a maniac was just as much for me to wonder if I can improve my own driving habits?

We are so quick to see everyone else's flaws; it's a little harder to hold the light up to our own.

It's actually fascinating how everyone seems to be calling everyone else intolerant these days; perhaps we all would do well to look inwards before casting any more stones...

And it's wonderful what some regular healthy introspection can do to improve relationships. If you see a flaw that really bothers you in someone you love, maybe it's the mirror of life you actually need to look at first; maybe that flaw is actually something you need to work on ...

Something to think about...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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