

Drash for VaYeishev, Todd Silverstein
Sat. 12/13/25, Congr. Netivot Shalom
Leyned: Gen. 37

In today's parshah, *VaYeishev*, we heard Gen. chap. 37, the story of the conflict between Joseph and his brothers. In order to understand this conflict and its ramifications, I want to start with a key High Holiday and Festival prayer, the *shlosh esrei midot*, the 13 attributes of God: "*hashem, hashem, eil rachum v'chanun*; God who is merciful and compassionate"... followed by 11 more attributes, ending w: "God extends kindness to the thousandth generation, forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin, and pronounces us innocent..." . *Nosei avon, va'fesha, ve'chata'ah, ve'nakei...*"

This line from Exod. 34:6-7 is comforting line for sinners like us – our sins won't affect our children; each generation starts out with a clean slate. The problem is that this is a classic example of altering meaning by stripping away context. Verse 7 of Exod. 34 actually ends: *venakei lo yenakeh, pokeid avon avot al banim...* But God will NOT pronounce all of us innocent, but will visit the iniquity of parents upon their children, and their children's children, to the 3rd and 4th generation." This is dramatically different from the truncated quote in our prayer: The sins of ancestors can in fact come back to haunt their descendants.

Today's *parshah* is a good example of this sad reality. Three weeks ago, in *parshat Toldot*, we were introduced to Jacob, who came out of his mother Rebecca's womb struggling with his twin brother Esau, grasping Esau's heel. The Hebrew root of *Ya'akov's* name, *ayin-kuf-bet, akav*, means heel, but also to deceive or provoke. Although these seem like two very different definitions, recall that even in English, someone who is untrustworthy or inconsiderate can be called a "heel". *Akav* also has two other meanings in Hebrew: to follow behind (in English we say "to follow at someone's heel"), as Jacob followed Esau at birth; and the final defn: "because of", or to follow as a consequence of... We will see later how this last meaning follows from Jacob's story.

So this is our namesake ancestor, *Yisrael/Ya'akov*, a deceiving untrustworthy heel. And as a teenager he showed his "heel"-ness by deceiving his brother and his father (with his mother's help), stealing Esau's birthright. But the stories that follow show how Jacob, the deceiver, was **himself** deceived. We read in last week's *parshah* that his father-in-law Laban switched brides on him (Leah for Rachel), and made Jacob work 14 yrs instead of 7 in order to finally marry Rachel. And we read this

morning how Jacob's sons, Joseph's brothers, hated Joseph so much that they sold him into slavery, then lied to their father Jacob, deceiving him into thinking that Joseph, his favorite son, had been killed by a wild beast.

In this morning's reading, when Joseph's brothers saw him coming toward them in the field and decided to kill him, Reuben, the eldest, attempted to save Joseph. But the Talmudic sage R. Isaac ben Marion was unconvinced. Verses 21-22 stated, "When Reuben heard [the brothers' plot to kill Joseph], Reuben came to the boy's rescue... 'Let us not take his life... shed no blood...[we can] cast him into that pit... but do not lay a hand upon him,' **intending to save** [the boy] from them and restore him to his father." So Reuben interceded to save Joseph, and risked incurring the wrath of his brothers. But R. Isaac ben Marion wondered why the Torah had to specify for us Reuben's "intention"; isn't it obvious? His answer: because Reuben didn't "do it w/ his whole heart.... [If he really wanted to save Joseph, Reuben] should have carried Joseph on his shoulders and brought him to his father." {according to this midrash in Ruth Rabbah 5:6} If Reuben had been more decisive, there would've been no need to add the explanation of his motive "**intending to save** [the boy] from [his brothers]..."

According to this midrash then, we learn that, “When a person performs a *mitzvah*, she should do it w/ her whole heart.” Another version {*Vayikra Rabbah* 34:8} “... she should do it w/ a joyous heart.” {beautiful phrase: *simkhah shel mitzvah*}. R. Yerucham Leibovitz wrote that: “The fact that God is watching means that we can live in the profound joy of knowing that we matter, and that our actions matter. Though we may not believe that every single action we take matters, the Torah testifies to... the enormous significance of even one action...”. R. Chaim Ziatchik noted that We doubt our power to act forcefully and definitively. Thus, like Reuben, if we don’t believe in our abilities, we will fail.

So we can learn this from Reuben’s (partial) failure to protect Joseph: It is a religious imperative to believe in our ability to act and impact the world... and to recognize that the task before us, no matter how trivial, matters.

Let us now return to Exod. 34:7 -- the sins of ancestors are visited upon their descendants. Thus, Jacob’s deceit, lies, and cunning were repaid not only to him, but also to his son Joseph, all the way down to us today, the thousandth generation. Recall that key antisemitic tropes are that Jews are greedy, grasping, clever, cunning, and deceitful. So, did the Torah give us

the deceitful ancestor Jacob, the heel, in order to explain this reprehensible racial prejudice? Recall the final meaning of *akav*, the Hebrew root of *Ya'akov*: to follow as a consequence. Does modern antisemitism then follow as a consequence of Jacob's deceit? And what can we do with this racial history of ancestral Jewish deceit?

Consider Joseph, the beautiful 17-year old young man we were introduced to in this morning's *parshah*, who seemed quite pleased with himself. His father's favorite son, Joseph had a spectacular coat of many colors, and dreams of his pre-eminence over not only his brothers, but also his father and mother – dreams that he found necessary to freely share with them. There are many midrashim along these lines: The rabbis really went to town ragging on poor Joseph. For example, one midrash says that Joseph behaved like a spoiled, self-enamored boy: He mascara'ed his eyes, curled his hair, and wore shoes w/ lifted heels. Rashi suggested that: "As soon as Joseph found himself in the position of ruler, he began eating and drinking and curling his hair...".

But what if this interpretation is all wrong? What if Joseph was simply an innocent young boy, devoid of all cunning and deceit. He was given a

beautiful coat, so he wore it all the time, oblivious to his brothers' jealousy. Having marvelous, spectacular dreams of his future ascendance, he simply shared them with those closest to him. Perhaps Joseph was just the opposite of Jacob: straightforward and lacking any deceit.

If this is true, then the Torah seems to be telling us, via Jacob, that deceit is bad, but also, via *young* Joseph, that credulity and lack of deceit is also bad. So what is a Jew to do? Perhaps the answer lies with *grown-up* Joseph. According to Joel Kaminsky, during his time in prison in Egypt (due to the deceit of Potiphar's wife), Joseph learned two things – First, he finally realized that “his gifts came from God and were given to him so that he could be of use to others.” When offering to interpret the cup-bearer's and baker's dreams, Joseph specified that interpretations come from God: “*halo l'elohim pitronim?*” {40:8}. Later when Joseph was summoned by Pharaoh to interpret his dream, Joseph insisted that the interpretations and the subsequent blessings come from God: “Not I, but God will see to Pharaoh's welfare.” {Gen. 41:16}.

Joseph's transformation climaxed with his second lesson, when he revealed himself to his brothers: “Do not reproach yourselves because you sold me

hither [down to Egypt]; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.”

{Gen. 45:5}. God singled Joseph out not so that his family would bow down to him, but so that he could protect them (and also the Egyptians). As Joel Kamnsky wrote, “Divine favor is not to be used for self-aggrandizement.... But for divine service which benefits the elect and the non-elect alike.”

Or.... As the great comic book rabbi Uncle Ben said to Spiderman, “With great power comes great responsibility.”

This realization was echoed in today’s *Haftarah* from the prophet Amos:

“You alone have I singled out, of all the families of the earth.” This sounds so promising – we are favored! But Amos then added: “Therefore I will call you to account for all your iniquities.” {Amos 3:2} Thus, Hubbard wrote that Israel’s great privilege of election **by** God, and of relationship **to** God through the covenant... **exposes us to** judgment, rather than **exempting us from** it. Or, according to Kaminsky, Election carries w/ it a duty to help others. And finally, Shai Held wrote: “God gives, so that we too may become givers.” -- *Shabat shalom*