

3. Guidance on the Journey

Genesis 37:12-18 and Commentaries



Synagogue2000

Joseph and the Torah's Narrative

The story of Joseph in the Bible has been likened to a novella. The line of the story displays the rising and falling movement of a novel, with critical moments on which the fulfillment of the narrative turns. These moments include Joseph's audience before Pharaoh and his brother Judah's powerful speech before the Viceroy of Egypt, i.e., his own unrecognized brother Joseph.

While the cycle of Joseph stories is a literary work unto itself, this story is also part of a larger narrative, the story of the generations of the first family of the People of Israel. The events of the Joseph narrative are part of the sweeping narrative vision of the Torah, in which every event ultimately finds meaning in God's unfolding plan. Events which may be relatively insignificant in the forward movement of the story of Joseph's adventures may come to assume larger meaning when we understand them as part of the Torah's larger story. Our texts and discussion zero in on a minor point in the story of Joseph and his brothers, but a moment that the later rabbinic commentators came to see as pivotal in the unfolding of the Torah's story.

An Earlier Prophecy of Descent into Egypt

Earlier, at a critical moment in Abraham's life, God affirms the covenant that God had made with him, in a cryptic and mysterious ceremony. Having prepared animals for sacrifice, "the sun was about to set, [and] a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended on him. And God said to Abram, 'Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve. . .'" The fulfillment of the promises to the Patriarchs, according to the Torah and its story line, can only be brought about through Egyptian bondage and the Exodus. We hear this echoed in the traditional text of the Haggadah for Passover: "He (Joseph) descended there (to Egypt)—compelled by the Divine decree."

Gen. 15:12-14

How would this descent into Egypt come about? What were the circumstances that would bring the family of Abraham there? Joseph's brothers sold him to traders who brought him there, but how did it come about that the brothers had the opportunity to do such a horrible thing? On this question the whole story turns. Who are the players in this incident? How did they come to be present for this critical scene?

We are accustomed to reading this passage and asking: How could the brothers do such a thing? The traditional commentaries also ask this question and others as well: How were God's plans realized? Where do we find guidance when we are lost on our way?

Genesis 37:12-18

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יוֹסֵף הֲלוֹא אֶחָיִךְ רְעִים בְּשִׁכְמְךָ לָכֵה וְאֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ
 אֶלֵיָּהֶם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הֲיֵנִי: וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ נָא רְאֵה אֶת שְׁלוֹם אֶחָיִךְ
 וְאֶת שְׁלוֹם הַצֹּאן וְהַשְּׂבִינִי דָבָר וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ מֵעֵמֶק חֶבְרוֹן וַיָּבֹא
 שָׂכְמָה: וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ
 לֵאמֹר מַה תִּבְקֵשׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת אַחֵי אֲנֹכִי מִבְּקֵשׁ הַגִּידָה נָא לִי
 אֵיפֹה הֵם רְעִים: וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נָסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֲמָרִים
 גְּלֻכָּה דִתְיִנָּה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֵר אֶחָיו וַיִּמְצְאֵם בְּדוֹתָן: וַיִּרְאוּ אֹתוֹ
 מֵרָחֹק וּבְטָרֵם יִקְרַב אֶלֵיָּהֶם וַיִּתְנַכְּלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמְיִתּוֹ:

One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father's flock at Shechem, Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "I am ready." And he 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. When he reached Shechem, a man came upon him wandering in the fields. 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, "They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan." So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.

Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 11A

וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ מֵעֵמֶק חֶבְרוֹן
 א"ר חֲנִינָא בַר פִּפְא בְּעֵצָה עֲמוּקָה שֶׁל אוֹתוֹ צְדִיק שְׁקִבּוֹר
 בְּחֶבְרוֹן דְּכָתִיב: יָדַע תִּדַע כִּי־גַר יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֶךָ.

Gen. 15:13
 The words for valley,
emek, and deep, *amuka*,
 come from the same root.

So he sent him from the valley (*m'emek*) of Hebron. Rabbi Hanina bar Papa taught: He sent him according to the deep advice (*etzah amuka*) of the Righteous One buried at Hebron, to whom it was said, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs."



Genesis Rabbah 84:14

וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַּעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה
 א"ר יַנַּאי: ג' מַלְאָכִים נִזְדַּוְּגוּ לוֹ, וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ,
 וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ, וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ: נָסְעוּ מִזֶּה.

A man came upon him wandering in the fields. Rabbi Yannai taught: Three angels interacted with him (Joseph): "A man came upon him. . . The man asked him. . . The man said, "They have gone."

Nachmanides, "The Ramban" Torah Commentary on Genesis 37:15

וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תַּעֲהָ בַשָּׂדֶה:
 לֵאמֹר כִּי הוּא תַּעֲהָ מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ וְלֹא הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ אָנָּה יֵלֵךְ,
 וְנִכְנַס בַּשָּׂדֶה כִּי בַמְּקוֹם הַמְּרֻעָה הָיָה מִבְּקֵשׁ אוֹתָם.
 וַיִּאָּרֶיף הַכְּתוּב בְּזֶה, לְהַגִּיד כִּי סְבוֹת רַבּוֹת בָּאוּ אֵלָיו
 שֶׁהָיָה רָאוּי לְחֻזּוֹר לוֹ,
 אֲבָל הַכֹּל סָבַל לְכַבוֹד אָבִיו. וְלִהְיוֹדִיעֵנוּ עוֹד,
 כִּי הַגְּזֵרָה אִמְתָּה וְהַחֲרִיצוֹת שֶׁקָּר,
 כִּי זְמַן לוֹ הַקַּב"ה מוֹרָה דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֵא מִדַּעְתּוֹ לְהַבְיֵאוֹ בְּיָדָם.
 וְלִזְוָה נִתְּפֹנְנוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ בְּאִמְרָם
 כִּי הָאֲשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה הֵם מַלְאָכִים,
 שְׁלֵא עַל חֲנָם הָיָה כָּל הַשְּׁפוּר הַזֶּה,
 לְהוֹדִיעֵנוּ כִּי עֲצַת ה' הִיא תְּקוּם:

A man came upon him wandering in the fields. The Torah tells us that he had strayed from the path, and he did not know where to go. He went into the fields, since he was looking for his brothers in pasture-land. The text elaborates on this scene to tell us that many forces were at work here, since he could have decided to give up his mission, but for the sake and honor of his father he struggled onward. And, it further wished to teach us that only God's decree is faithful and human diligence is flawed. For the Holy One occasioned a guide (*moreh derekh*) to appear before him, without Joseph's seeking one, in order to bring him into his brothers' hands. This is what the Sages had in mind when they taught that the



Prov. 19:21

people he met were angels. This story was not for naught, but to teach us “(Many designs are in a human’s mind, but) it is the ETERNAL’s plan that is accomplished.”

Probing the Text

1. Rabbi Hanina bar Papa bases his teaching on a play on words, connecting “*emek* (valley)” with “*amuka* (deep)”. What conclusion does he draw from this connection? Who is the “Righteous One” buried in Hebron? What is the “deep advice” that the “Righteous One” gave Jacob?
2. What prompted the Rabbis to suggest that Joseph was met by angels? How did they conclude there were three? Why were there three angels in this brief encounter? *Use your midrashic imagination! There is no “correct” answer!*
3. How did “the man” know who Joseph’s brothers were and how did he happen to overhear their conversation? After all, they were out in the pasture.
4. What lessons does Ramban learn from this story?
5. In what form do the angels appear in this story? The Hebrew word for “angel” is *malach*, literally, “messenger.” Where else in the Torah do *malachim* appear?

Ourselves and Our Congregations

1. How do you understand angels? Does this description of who and what angels are resonate with you?
2. Ramban says that Joseph had “strayed from the path,” and he identifies the man who meets Joseph as a “*moreh derekh*, a guide.” Have you ever had the sense that you had strayed from a path, that you were lost? How did you find your way back? Has anyone served as your guide at those times? Did you recognize your guide as such at those moments, or did you realize it later?
3. Did Joseph or his brothers have any idea that they were fulfilling a divine purpose? Would it have mattered if they had? Are they any less culpable for their actions from this point of view?
4. The Torah is quite emphatic in not identifying the person who gave Joseph directions as anything other than an anonymous “person.” It could have been anyone; for Joseph, it was just “anyone.” When you meet someone new at your synagogue, might you be that “anyone” who could serve as a guide for a wandering stranger? Is it possible that the newcomer might serve as a guide for you along your spiritual path? How can you know which role you are fulfilling at any given moment?

For Further Study

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