

I remember the greatest tears and shame came when we were putting the couch together. In the last year of my first Rabbinic job in Mamaroneck, I was very intent on leaving the pulpit. I was excited for the opportunity that lay ahead of me. Freetime on Shabbat and holidays to just be a regular Jew. No more late night meetings. I was dreaming deeply of working a normal hour'd job.

Then, it ended, and as transitions usually go in life, it was TOUGH. The Talmud's ever present wisdom, "all beginnings are hard" was very real. I missed the comforts of the past life, none symbolized more than our couch. You see, we had a massive sectional that was the center of our house in Mamaroneck. It was **the** gathering place. It represented stability.

So when we downsized to our 1 bedroom in Brooklyn, the couch had to be shrunken down. As it transformed from a 4 piece to a 2 piece sectional, we were putting it together in our apartment. As it got put together, I was falling apart. There was so much unknown in my head. I didn't love my new job. Our apartment's air conditioning wasn't working well in the sweltering summer heat. I heaped all the responsibility on my shoulders. All the uncertainties were playing themselves out. Doubt is insidious in that way. It starts off with a small thought and then it slowly affects all other thoughts. This is what I was feeling in my uncertainty of what was to come. Playing out all the potential worst cases in my head.

As Lauren helped calm me down, we realized with the passing of each day, things improved slightly. We had a home. We had lives outside of work. We had our health. Thankfully, we had certainties that we could focus on, milestones on the calendar that we could mark as progress. While the rupture of transition was felt, its stranglehold dissipated. We learned to live in the “what is” and less in the “what if.” This dynamic and one of its challenging but useful solutions are apparent in our parshah this week.

This week, we enter into the next stage of the dramatic and tumultuous family narrative that is Bereishit. From the get-go, Joseph stands in contrast to his brothers. In physical looks, in life interests, and certainly in love and affection from this father. The text tells us this explicitly. Not just that Yaakov loved Joseph but that Jacob loved him “mikol echav,” more than all of his brothers.

So it is perplexing when, after further provoking them with his dream interpretation where he professes to rule over them, Jacob sends Joseph after his brothers who are shepherding in Shechem. Last we hear, the brothers are immensely jealous of their brother and Jacob “shamars” the “davar,” he protects or guards the issue at hand. The gears seem to be turning in Jacob’s head. If so, why would the following happen? “Israel said to Joseph, “Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “I am ready.”

Nothing leading up to this moment makes the reader think it’s a good idea for Jacob to send Joseph on this journey. One potential answer has to do with the location of where the brothers are, which is Shechem.

Last we read of Shechem, the city has been plundered and the men had been massacred by Shimon and Levi in retaliation for their sister's rape. This is what then animated Jacob's thinking here according to the Rosh, Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel, the great 13th Century Rabbi

“And if you ask: How did Yaakov justify sending him (*Yosef*) to his brothers? He certainly must have known that they hated him. Ibn Ezra responds: Because they were shepherding in a dangerous place (*Shechem*), for they had killed the men of Shechem, Yaakov said: Lest they be punished! (*See Ibid. 34:30.*) Regarding you it is doubtful whether they will punish you; it is a certainty that the people of Shechem, should they find them, will kill them. Go and tell them to return here, lest the people of Shechem put them to death by the sword!

Riffing on the rabbinic concept of “Ein Safek Motzee Mee’dai Vadai” (*a doubtful situation cannot negate a sure thing*,) The Rosh argues that given the events of last week’s portion, Joseph’s brothers are in dire straits. It’s not a question of if but when they will be directly in harm’s way. Given his apparent belief in Joseph’s skills of diplomacy which may be doubtful, he believes that Joseph can cool the temperatures in Shechem. While the enmity between his brother is a worry, it’s still in the category of doubt. The rest of his children’s safety is in peril so off he sends Joseph. Maybe they hurt him. Certainly though, they will be hurt.

It is what I referenced earlier as living in the “what is” as opposed to the “what if.” Sure, at first glance, we are flummoxed as to why Jacob does what he does. But then again, Jacob, taking in the full view of what’s happening, understands that while there is a worry of a potentiality, he knows with certainty that the residents of Shechem will wreak absolute vengeance on the brothers.

This is hinted to us with the usage of Yisrael as his name here. His name manifests differently in this portion. Sometimes he is Jacob. Sometimes he is father. Here, he is Yisrael. Yisrael is the name of Jacob that implies he is at his highest level of attunement to God. He’s not earthbound Jacob. He is Yisrael who is living with Ruach Ha’kodesh. He has the holy spirit. Or, in this case, someone who has both past and foresight. This is someone who has lived enough to know what to worry about and what not to worry about.

The value of that type of mentality is instructive. How one gets there is the challenge. One potential pathway to that actually is hinted at a few verses earlier from an unlikely source. In this case, it's Joseph who needs to learn something from his brothers. As he tells his brothers about his sheaves of wheat ruling over theirs, they say the following: **הַמֶּלֶךְ תְּמַלֹּךְ עָלֵינוּ אִם־מִשׁוֹל תְּמַשֵּׁל בָּנוּ וַיּוֹסֶפוּ עוֹד שְׂנֵא אֹתוֹ**
עַל־תְּמַלְמְלֵנוּ וְעַל־דְּבַר יוֹ:

“Do you mean to reign over us? Do you mean to rule over us?”

And they hated him even more for his talk about his dreams.”

You can hear the peculiarity of this verse in both the Hebrew and the English. Hamaloch timloch and Mashol Timshol, the doubling here in this grammatical form implies a certain emphasis. And in English, will you **rule and reign** over us?

It would've sufficed to have just said "will you rule over us?"

The extra-ness of this verse begs for interpretation. This one, from the Ishbitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, in his seminal work the Mei Hashiloach, resonates powerfully.

"A person needs to be on guard against themselves to not fall prey to their inner voice that beguiles them. After that, they can then be on guard against others for this person will then have inner courage and strength from their self-reflective practice. This is what the brothers say to Joseph here, rule over yourself first before you do so over us. If you can control your own spirit, then maybe you can have control over us."

Even they, at the time, have an awareness of a certain amount of maturing that Joseph needs to do. With all his favoritism from his own house and that to come from Pharaoh, it's only after a rigorous maturation that Joseph finally reaches this level of self-awareness nearer the end of his story. At this point though, all he seems to want to do is worry about other people's stuff at the expense of his own.

When you are so immersed in external doubts and potentials, you lose sight of the things right in front of you and those that are internal to you. Joseph is so enticed by his potential material and political gains that he doesn't take into account his own development to get there. He reports his brothers' action back to his father. He naively tells them of his dreams. Nothing happens in an inward direction.

This advice from the brothers to Joseph is one that I think can also aid a person when they find themselves consumed with the “what ifs” of the world. When you can get a handle on those inward things, you focus less on what may be. Even if the maybes become real, you’re that much more prepared because you now know yourself better. There are many avenues to reach this but this I think is a deeply important one.

Work on your stuff. What are the things that you do to live in uncertainty? What habits do you have that get you caught up in the potentials. That’s the part of the process to delve into. That’s how I worked toward getting out of my own rut. That broken down couch represented the maybes and the what could be-s .

What I needed to work on was, what could I control? I didn't need to worry about my long-term career or decisions that were way down the road. In the moment, I had to focus on what was happening inside of me. Before I could control my external, I needed to control my internal. Once I did that, what **could be** became much less important than **what was**. That is a dream to dream.

Shabbat Shalom,

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