

JOSEPH AND HIS DREAMS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The story of Yosef and his brothers always raises questions. Righteous people become involved in a dispute that tears apart the family and leads to great pain and near tragedy. The rabbis in discussing this parsha portray for us two stories unfolding at once. One concerns the will of God - that Jacob and his family descend into Egypt thereby fulfilling the covenant made with Yakov's grandfather, Avraham. The entire story of Joseph and his brothers is only a description of the mechanism, so to speak, used by the Lord to affect the descent of Israel into Egypt. The second explanation is the human one. The Talmud points out to us that it was Jacob's overt acts of favoritism to Joseph that enraged the brothers and caused them to look askance at every action of this precocious teenager. Thus the Talmud taught us "because of two measures of silk (the multicolored tunic that Jacob bestowed upon Joseph) our forefathers were forced to descend into Egypt [and eventual bondage.]" These two approaches to the story - of the rabbis and commentators, are not meant to be mutually exclusive. Both are correct. Heaven works through human beings, their accomplishments and weaknesses. God's will is expressed through human behavior and actions.

Though freedom of choice and action is always reserved for humans, at the very same time God guides the world in His unseen and unfathomable fashion. That is the lesson here of the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph is a person who lives by his dreams. His dreams and ambitions dominate his life and those of the entire family. To him, his dreams are reality. The brothers treat his dreams as fantasies. They deal in the real world where dreams do not often translate into reality and fulfillment. Here too both views are correct. A Jewish world without dreams would long ago have perished and been consigned to the ash heap of history. The entire story of the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel over the last century is nothing but a dream; but it is a dream come true. Yet, without looking reality in the face, dealing with the world as it is and not as we would wish it to be, all of our dreams will crash about us in failure and frustration. Thus the balance between reality and dreams is the heart of the Jewish experience. Both Joseph and his brothers will emerge from the matter vindicated but yet bruised by the experience. We cannot live without dreams. But we cannot survive if we have only dreams and no realistic sense of events, actions and possible consequences. This lesson of two different views, represented in the story of Joseph and his brothers, which are both correct and yet seemingly antithetical to one another, provides the key to our understanding of Jewish history and destiny.

Shabat shalom.

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