

## **A Light in the Darkness**

TBE Dvar Torah Vayeishev 2022

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It's hard to believe but somehow it is already December 16th. It feels as though just a few weeks ago we still had the air conditioning on, and the long days meant that the sun didn't set until quite late. Summer and cicadas seem like a dream, which are at the center of this week's Torah portion, and not just because the cold front and weather have us dreaming about warmer climates, warmer locales and warmer feelings.

Those long days are over. It's getting darker much earlier. It's getting much darker out there in other ways, as we know all too well. The divisiveness and hatred and antisemitism we are seeing in our civic life and in the media are also casting a dark pall over much of society. It's hard to believe it is happening, though in some ways, we would have to have been sleepwalking not to notice it until now. And it is not enough to merely hope that we or society will snap out of it.

For as we learn, dreams are not merely a product of the unconscious mind, but also hold potential for the future in this world. They can be prophecies. They can be instructive. They can also be destructive. For dreams happen in the cloud of sleep but mostly in the dark of night.

The cover of darkness is what allows our worst fears to skitter about in the dimly lit corners of our minds. And a similar darkness allows those who formerly only crept about in the shadows to come out into the open and say aloud, with little to no consequence, what was only once whispered.

The shameful and disgusting hate visited upon racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, including we Jews, was until recently only heard sneeringly at socialite cocktail parties or mid-swig by uninformed rural rubes. But no more. Now anyone who is ill-informed, spiteful, or hateful can say what they want, when and where they want, and if they have a few million Twitter followers, share it with half the world.

As the saying goes, a lie can travel across the globe before truth even puts on its pants. It doesn't have to be that way, though, and people don't have to behave that way. As B'nai Yaakov, the Children of Jacob, we have to work to show them how.

In this week's Torah portion, Vayeishev, we are reintroduced to Jacob and his children, namely, the adolescent, immature and self-centered Joseph. In what has become the norm of upending the norm, Joseph, the 2nd youngest of 13 children, is treated with favor and granted a *ketonet pasim*, a striped cloak, which was the traditional sign of leadership and birthright in near eastern cultures. It was the role, and garb, that Reuben, as oldest, should have been granted.

And to make matters worse, Joseph, has a rare gift—the ability to have vivid dreams, as well as to interpret them as prophecy. Unfortunately, as a bratty teenager Joseph has another not so

rare gift. He has a way of saying things in a way that are spiteful, self-serving even, if when they are true.

And so, when he shares his dreams with his brothers, they hate him.

וַיִּרְאוּ אָחָיו כִּי־אֵתוֹ אָהַב אֲבִיהֶם מִכָּל־אָחָיו וַיִּשְׁנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלֵם:

“When his brothers saw their father loved him best, they hated him and could not speak to him peaceably.” One might also interpret this as their anger made it so they could not even speak in complete sentences. They were so consumed by their rage their words did not make sense when they spoke.

Rashi in his commentary in Genesis Rabbah 89, says that at least the brothers were not dishonest about their feelings. They were true to themselves and saying aloud in public what they also said in private.

וַיִּאֱמָרוּ לוֹ אָחָיו הַמְלִיךְ תִּמְלִיךְ עָלֵינוּ אִם־תִּשְׁוֹל תִּמְשָׁל בָּנוּ וַיִּוֹסְפוּ עוֹד שְׁנָא אֹתוֹ עַל־חֲלֹמֹתָיו וְעַל־דְּבָרָיו:

“They hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.” We know what that’s like, to have dreams and to be hated for them. For trying to make this world better and being attacked for it.

There’s a whole lot of crazy out there. And sometimes it seems those with the loudest mouths, the most Twitter followers or even if you own Twitter, means you get to say whatever you want. But that doesn’t make it true, or right or good.

Say what you will about Elon Musk, but a little bird told me he’s no Joseph. Yes, he made a fortune with Tesla electric cars; yes, he created SpaceX and the eponymous Boring Company. These are all good things, but in the end, like young Joseph, he is all about himself.

So too with others spewing hate, antisemitism and corrosive rhetoric that is destructive to our democracy, even in the halls of Congress. It’s enough to make this Space Laser Operator board my rocket and take aim with my satellite.

But unlike the conspiracy theory which envisions my doing so in order to burn down a forest, my aim would be different. I would prefer a more enlightened approach—literally, to spread the light over the world, to increase the light, for as the saying goes, sunshine is the best disinfectant.

We can dream of a better world, a world without pain and hunger and hate. We can try to fix those problems, and even the ones directed at ourselves. And sometimes people hate us all the more for it, for daring to dream, for daring to protect ourselves to envision a world where people behave respectfully and without bigotry. They hate us for even raising the question or for pointing out their hypocrisy.

Now, Joseph the adolescent, the child with the famous striped cloak, contains many more lessons for us, about favoritism, sibling rivalry, leaving children unsupervised... And these are important issues.

This week, as we celebrate Hanukkah, we remember that in every era there come along those who wish to silence us, to keep us from being a light unto the nations, to diminish the light we bring into this world.

We cannot allow that to happen, and we will not allow it to happen. For so many of those who tried to put out the flame of Jewish light are no longer here to remind us. We can remind the world of the evil empires that have come and gone—the Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, Persians, Syrians—all those alluded to in *Moaz Tzur*, they are gone. Our light remains.

As the story of Joseph concludes, he has learned to use his gifts for the betterment of the world around him. Joseph embodies the notion of being an *Ir l'Goyim*, a light unto the nations. Joseph learned from his mistakes—that serving only oneself puts one at risk of the pit. Serving another might realize a short-term benefit, and in using one's words and station to serve all humanity, we ourselves are elevated. Shining that light in our dark world is the lesson we can learn from Joseph.

When his brothers finally come looking for help in Egypt, we hear the impassioned pleas they offer, their contrite attitude and how they've changed. They learn from their mistakes. They too learned to speak words of peace.

On Sunday, we will do the same. In the morning, we will pack bags of food for the annual holiday Tzedakah Project feeding over a thousand people. In the afternoon, we will gather with other local congregations at the Sid Jacobson JCC to light candles and celebrate the first night of Hanukkah. I hear there will be a "Hanukkah Gelt" drop. I'll be there to help lead some songs. I do hope you'll join us there.

On Monday evening, TBE members will travel to Manhattan for a special event in Times Square sponsored by UJA Federation, ADL and AJC to celebrate Hanukkah, light the menorah together, to publicize the miracle that happened *Bayamaim hahem bazman hazeh*, in ancient days and in ours as well. We will gather, we will demonstrate our pride together, to shine a light on antisemitism.

There will be music, and festivities to be sure, and together with thousands of attendees in the most visible place on earth, we will making a statement to the world that even when we are under verbal and even physical assault more than at any time since World War II, our response is not to hide, but to go out in public, to light the lights that shine upon the world, to rededicate ourselves to making it a better place not just for us, but for all of humanity.

I hope you'll join us to help make that dream our reality.

Shabbat Shalom.