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received an email response that said: "I did not know how to respond, but would be happy to meet and chat." I knew.

In Parashat Vayeshev, we begin the Yosef story, one dream is shared with Yosef's family and we meet an anonymous character. The unnamed one. In perfect Jewish counter-intuitiveness, the one who is unknown and unidentified, unlabeled and uncategorized, is the humble keystone of a castle. Israel (Yaakov) encourages Yosef to go out and check on his brothers and their flock and Yosef happens upon an איש a person or man. Yosef is wandering in the fields of Shechem where his brothers should be and the person asks him, "מה תבקש" – what do you seek or request or colloquially, "what are you looking for?" Yosef hears in response that his brothers have gone to another town, and ventures on to find them there. He goes off to them and falls into the trap of brothers conspiring to kill Yosef.

Is this a coincidence? Is it a lesson waiting to be learned? Is the person a Divine character helping a story progress a certain way? This person moves Yosef closer to his brothers and their torment, but also moves him toward a future of blessing and significance.

The Netziv, from 19th century Europe, comments on this unidentified stranger as a messenger from Heaven "to encounter Yosef and bring him to [his brothers]. However, the Netziv continues to say that the Torah should have written that Yosef found this person. Yosef was the one wandering and happened upon the איש who was just walking this way, coincidentally.

The person outside my garage did not know that I lived there. Coincidence. The person is receiving help, living in a home and is the catalyst for our community building a food pantry for our own food insecure. Coincidence. That person has the attention of helpful "strangers", nameless ones. Coincidentally Divine, perhaps. We need to focus more on those who are unidentified. But we need to relate many more such "coincidences". We need to seek out an unraveling livelihood or family. Don't assume that everyone is ok. Look and listen. Even if you know their name, do not assume that you can "tell." This anonymous person in the Yosef story began the narrative that acquired for us a people and a homeland. The person was not the coincidence; Yosef trusting and following instructions was the coincidence. Lean in, ask a deeper question, and follow unsolicited advice. We are a family, a people, and a home all because of coincidence.

From January 31 to February 2, 2020, Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles will be hosting **Kol Tefilla 2020**, the third iteration of the conference and Shabbaton that focuses on truly elevated prayer, featuring the Hadar Rising Song Institute's Rabbi Yosef Goldman (also a CY alum), and singer, composer, and multi-instrumentalist, Chava Mirel. More information can be found at: uscj.org/connect/kol-tefilla-2020

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayeshev

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

December 21, 2019 | 23 Kislev 5780

Annual | Bereshit 37:1-40:23 (Etz Hayim p. 226-245; Hertz p. 141-151)

Triennial Bereshit 37:1-37:36 (Etz Hayim p. 226-233; Hertz p. 141-145)

Haftarah | Amos 2:6-3:8 (Etz Hayim p. 246-249; Hertz p. 152-154)

D'var Torah: Happy Happenstances

Rabbi Rebecca Schatz, Conservative Yeshiva Alum, is Assistant Rabbi at Temple Beth Am in Los Angeles, CA

Coincidences can be wonderful, surprising, meant-to-happen, *besheit!* We can't rely on them to occur but we love it when they do. We feel well-fated, the beneficiaries of Divine intervention. Maybe it's a little of all of those things. But maybe, really, it's partly due to something uniquely **us**. Maybe we can be prone to creating coincidence, attracting happy happenstances.

I came home from a late synagogue board meeting Monday night to find a car blocking access to my assigned garage off the alley behind my home. The car was facing me and I wondered how to approach without startling or angering whoever was behind the wheel. I inched forward, leaving space to get around me, and making clear my intention to enter the garage. As the car moved away the young driver smiled at me. And I saw that the car seemed overfilled with unusual things--lots of clothes, books, and household things. And I thought maybe I recognized the smile. I sat in my garage, texting and emailing people closer to this community member to find out whether or not it could, in fact, be who might have been able to verify my suspicions, and finally emailed who I guessed the person to be. The last email was to this person who fashioned a similar grin. I wrote that I hoped it was just a look-alike and that we could catch up over coffee, but that if it was, in fact, the case that their car was home that I wanted to help. The next day I

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D'var Haftarah: Privilege & Responsibility

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Prophets were not very popular. They said things that people did not want to hear, often in ways which were biting. They turned prideful messages into societal challenges and privilege into accountability. Here is an example of Amos' approach to the idea of "choseness": "Hear this word which the Lord has spoken to you, O Israelites, concerning the entire clan that I brought up from Egypt, saying: Only with you was I intimate of all of the clans on earth. Therefore, I will make a reckoning with you for all of your crimes." (3:1-2)

In these two sentences, Amos reminds the people of God's great act of mercy, the redemption from Egypt and with it the founding of the nation. But, instead of touting it as a badge of honor, a claim to a unique and special identity, with an expectation of future acts of grace and mercy, he turns this story into an indictment and expectation of a turnabout in the nation's behavior.

The classical commentators try to characterize the exact nature of Amos' plaint. According to Rabbi David Kimche (12th century Provence), "since [Israel] saw the signs and wonders that God did for them, it seems an appropriate legal expectation that God as King should be angry [at them], for when servants stand before the king, he pays greater attention to their transgressions than he would to the sins of others" (abridged) Rabbi Yosef Kara (12th century Northern France) also notes that since God took note of their troubles [and saved them from them], he also pays special attention to their sins.

Today, we might call Amos' message to his fellow countrymen an examination of the nature of "privilege". The people likely concluded from their shared history that they should enjoy the perks and benefits of a favorite child or member of an exclusive club. Amos delivered to them a rude awakening. Their "choseness" carried with it not privilege but obligation and added attention to how they act.

These days Jews are very much on the defensive, aspersions cast upon them from left and right. Still, we cannot let the distorted voices of others define us. We need to define ourselves according to our own moral and religious compass. Amos reminds us where we come from and what its true implications are for who we are and how we are to behave.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.

Parashah Study: When Reuven (almost) Saved Yosef

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Text: Bereshit 37:19-30

(19) They said to one another, "here comes that dreamer! (20) Come, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits... We shall see what will be with his dreams!" (22) When Reuven heard, he saved him from them; he said "let us not take his life." And Reuven said to them: "Shed no blood! Cast him into this pit which is in the desert, do not lay a hand upon him" – intending to save him from their hand to restore him to his father... (26) Yehudah said to his brothers... (27) Let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, let not our hand be upon him... (29) Reuven returned to the pit and behold! There was no Yosef in the pit!... (30) Returning to his brothers he said: The boy is gone! Now what am I to do?!"

- Reuven hears his brothers' plan and speaks to them twice. What do you think happened in the pause between his first statement "we shall not kill him" to his second: "do not shed blood, throw him into this pit in the desert but do not lay a hand upon him"? Why did he need to provide the pit plan?
- Why do you think that, out of all the brothers, it is Reuven that steps up to save Yosef?

Commentary: Ramban (Nachmanides) Bereshit 37:22

Do not shed blood – *He said to them: 'I tolerated it when you thought to kill him through your trickery, for I too hated him and wanted him killed by others, but you shall not shed blood with your hands!' Reuven's intention was to save him to return him to his father, and the text tells what Reuven said to them and they listen to him, but other things that he said to them originally they did not accept, as it say (later, 42:22) "Did I not speak to you saying 'do not do wrong by the boy', and you did not listen?!" When he saw that they did not listen and would not leave him alone, he said to them, 'if so, do not shed blood with your hands.' ...*

- How does Ramban suggest that Reuven got his brothers' willingness to listen to him initially? How does Ramban know that he spoke to them before the words recorded in our Parasha?
- Nonetheless, why is Reuven forced to speak twice?
- What is the weak point of Reuven's plan/argument? In your opinion, what could he have done differently?
- Which reading seems closer to the meaning of the Torah text? Which is closer to your understanding of Esav at this point?
- How should Yaakov proceed at this point according to each of the scenarios presented by the commentaries?