

Dvar Torah Vayeshev 2015

We all have had people in our lives that have been very influential and helped shape who we are. Our lives would be very different if we had not had a relationship with them. Rabbi Arnold Goodman at Adath Jeshurun saw something in me that I didn't see in myself and nurtured me on my Jewish journey. Neil Newman, the Cantor at Beth El asked me 25 years ago if I wanted to learn High Holiday Chazanut which started me on a journey that has given me great joy. Pediatric role models influenced my career choice.

Some people have an influence on us far larger than they may realize. For example, near the beginning of medical school, as I was panicking that I couldn't handle 6 science classes and would flunk out, my Dean of students, Joe Kiley, told me very reassuringly, that the school would do whatever it took to make sure I succeeded. A simple sentence, but it made all the difference in the world to me.

In this week's Parsha we hear about such a person.

In Genesis Chapter 37, Jacob sends Joseph to see how the brothers are doing pasturing the sheep in Shechem. When Joseph arrives, it says va-yim-tza-u-hu ish, a man finds him as Joseph was Toe-eh . Blundering in the field and the man asked him, Mah Tvakesh? "What do you seek?"

Joseph answers, et achai anochi mevakesh, my brothers I seek, Please tell me ayfo hem ro-eem. Where they are pasturing?

The man answers, Nas-u me zeh, they have journeyed on from here, for I heard them say let us go to Dotan.

Who was this man?

What's the significance of what he said?

How would Joseph's life have been different if Joseph had not met him?

Did the man realize what a life altering role he was playing in Joseph's life?

Without this chance meeting, would Joseph have returned to Jacob and never been sold into slavery?

Last week, Rafi Geretz spoke of angels; and the most common interpretation is that the man was the angel Gabriel. Rashi tells us that this is derived from the book of Daniel 9:21 where it says "and the man" ve ha ish, Gabriel, since it uses the word, Ha Ish, the man, in both places, the man in our Parsha must also be Gabriel.

If we accept this view, then of course the man was there since God sent him to make sure Joseph didn't give up on his mission. This interpretation highlights the hidden hand of God. If

Joseph didn't find his brothers on that day, God would have found another way to get Joseph down to Egypt and test the brothers.

Viewed as an angel, the rabbis read deeper significance into the dialogue. They notice that the man opens the conversation without waiting to be asked and he seems to know all the answers.

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk finds significance in the angel's words, "Ma Tevakesh", what seek you? Menachem Mendel says that the angel taught Yosef that whenever he was lost in knowing what to do with his life, at a time of confusion, he should seek himself, ("seek you") he should first clarify to himself what he wanted and was striving for.

But not all of us accept the notion that actual angels are roaming the earth doing God's work. Rambam sees the man as an unwitting messenger, a chance passerby. He changes the notion of the angel Gabriel to an abstract concept of divine messenger. The man didn't know the significance of his own words and actions.

I prefer this approach. Because it potentially makes all of us into God's messengers, including Dr. Kiley, my medical school dean and the other people who have shaped my life.

Take a minute to think: who has influenced you in ways they may not realize? What made them influential? What personal qualities stand out for you? Anyone care to share their thoughts?

Often it is qualities such as kindness and compassion that we remember.

This leads to the obvious question, who have I had an influence on that I may not realize? When I see someone blundering around lost, do I stop to help? And lost can mean many things besides being directionally challenged.

One of the great joys of Pediatrics is when a patient or their parent returns and thanks me for something I said or did years previously. They sometimes say that it turned their life around. Usually, I don't remember the conversations and sometimes I think it is the same conversation I had with countless other patients with seemingly no effect as I give advice on diet and exercise, behavior or relationship issues. Why did this particular message make an impact? I suspect I happened to be the right person at the right time but usually, included in the feedback I get, is that they felt I cared.

A few weeks ago we read in the Torah about the death of Rebecca's nurse Deborah. It is strange because most deaths, including Rebecca's, are not recorded in the Torah so why record Deborah's death? I like to think that maybe she too was a minor character with a major influence. Perhaps she showed Rebecca great kindness. She was the one person who knew

Rebecca from her childhood and knew her in ways no one else did. Perhaps listing her death is a hint that a person can be very important without playing a history altering role.

Back to our Parsha, if the man was a chance passerby and his words had such a huge impact, that implies that there can be great significance to any of our daily interactions. What would it be like to go through our day with awareness that we are, potentially, God's messengers? How would you act? (Pause for comments)

I am going to try and be more conscious of the words I choose and be more present when I am in conversations. I am going to try to listen more deeply especially for hints that the person may be lost in some way and may want direction or just a kind ear.

I encourage you to each take a moment and think about one way you could act differently as a messenger of God.

Now, to quote Jean Luc Picard, make it so.

Shabbat Shalom.