

Joseph and the “Man”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Then a man (*ish*) found him [i.e. Joseph], and behold, he was straying in the field, and the man (*ha-ish*) asked him, saying, “What are you looking for?” And he said, “I am looking for my brothers. Tell me now, where are they pasturing?” And the man (*ha-ish*) said, “They have traveled away from here, for I overheard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers, and he found them in Dothan. (*Sefer Bereishit* 37:15-17, all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The terms “*ish*” and “*ha-ish*” appear three times in our narrative. This repetition is highly significant, particularly since the first verse could easily have been written, “Then a man (*ish*) found him [i.e. Yosef], and behold, he [i.e. Yosef] was straying in the field, and asked him, saying, ‘What are you looking for?’” If so, why did the Torah repeat *ish* yet again? Then, too, who was this mysterious individual who appeared seemingly out of nowhere? These are crucial questions regarding the exegesis of our passage, as it was none other than this anonymous *ish* who set into motion the divinely ordained process eventuating in events that steered the course of our history: Joseph’s sale and travel to Egypt, his regency as second-in-command to Pharaoh, Yaakov’s sojourning in that land, and our nascent nation’s exile in Egypt. In a word, the enigmatic *ish* transformed Jewish history and destiny for evermore.

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, explained the three-fold use of *ha-ish*, and identified him in the following fashion:

... the repetition of the term *ha-ish* comes to emphasize the unusual character of the coincidences, the strange man who knew neither Jacob nor Joseph... why did Joseph confide in the *ish*, an anonymous stranger? And how could the man relate Joseph’s cryptic answer, “I seek my brethren” (Gen. 36:16) to the ten people he had met before? It is a strange coincidence that the *ish* knew the brothers moved from Shechem. The Torah repeats the term *ish* to emphasize that the *ish* was not just a man. He was more than that. The *ish* was the angel who watches over Jewish history, who as the plenipotentiary [Hebrew: *shaliach*] of the Almighty, guides its events and pursues its objectives. He met Joseph, and because of this meeting, Joseph’s drama became more complex, more puzzling, and awesome. Joseph was hesitant. Ultimately, he simply surrendered to the *ish*, to his destiny. The *ish* made the decision for Joseph to go to Dothan; in so doing, he sealed the fate of Jacob and his household and exposed them to bondage, affliction, and loneliness. He sent Joseph to be the first Jew to experience the tragic experience of *galut*, exile. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*, Eli D. Clark, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler editors, pages 157-158, underlining and brackets my own)

The Rav, like most commentators, embraced Rashi’s (1040-1105) Midrashically-based interpretation of *ha-ish*’s identity as being none other than the angel Gabriel, and expanded upon this interpretation in the following manner:

Rashi (Gen. 37:15) says that the *ish* is the angel Gabriel and not a human being. Had he been an ordinary human being, he would not have asked Joseph, “What are you searching for?” We get the impression that the *ish* eagerly wanted Joseph to interrogate him; he wanted to tell Joseph where his brothers were, as if the *ish* wanted to inform Joseph correctly and precisely where they were: “And Joseph went after his brothers to Dothan, and he found them at Dothan.” [Gen. 37:17] The impression we get from between the words is that the *ish* gave him specific instructions on how to journey to Dothan and find his brothers. He was eager that Joseph should meet his brothers...” (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler editors, page 14, brackets my own)

In all likelihood, one would have thought that *ha-ish*’s objective in arranging the meeting between Yosef and his brothers was to facilitate a rapprochement between them. Yet, nothing could have been further from the truth. As the Rav noted, “He [i.e. Gabriel] was eager that Joseph should meet his brothers, not for the purpose of reconciliation, but for

the purpose of complete alienation.” Therefore, and seemingly quite paradoxically, *ha-ish* was the motive force behind the fulfillment of the purpose of Creation – albeit through the pain and suffering of the house of Jacob:

The Almighty had sympathy, of course, with the house of Jacob, which was about to split and enter into conflict with itself. However, if the Jews were to become a chosen people, Joseph needed to be sold into slavery. This would lead to the Jews’ eventual enslavement and redemption from Egypt. Since the Almighty was determined that Jewish history should be actualized, He needed to do something very unpleasant, namely, to allow the sale of Joseph. Preventing this would have meant the complete annulment of all the covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There would not have been a Jewish historical experience, the experience of a community chosen by the Almighty in order to implement the purpose of Creation. (*Vision and Leadership*, page 16, underlining my own)

We are about to celebrate Chanukah. As the “community chosen by the Almighty in order to implement the purpose of Creation,” may we witness, in our own time, the realization of the stirring words from the *Al Hanissim* prayer of Chanukah: “You [Hashem] took up their grievance, judged their claim, and avenged their wrong.” (Translation, *The Artscroll Siddur*, brackets my own) May we be *zocheh* (merit) to see the ultimate fulfillment of Judaism’s vision with the arrival of the *Mashiach* (Messiah), the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) and the ingathering of all the exiles.

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.