

**PARSHAT VAYESHEV**  
**NOVEMBER 23, 2013**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

Sometimes all it takes is being in the right place at the right time. In our Torah reading of this morning this seems to be exactly the case.

We learn of the rivalry between Joseph and his brothers, a rivalry which eventually leads to disastrous consequences. After the dreams of Joseph, we are told that his brothers went out to take care of their flocks. Jacob says to Joseph: “Go and see how your brothers are and how the flocks are faring and bring me back word.” According to the story, Joseph set out to find his brothers and “When he reached Shechem, a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, ‘What are you looking for?’ He answered, ‘I am looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?’ The man said, “They have gone from here, for I heard them say: Let us go to Dothan.”

This man had an enormous impact upon Israelite history and the saga of our people. We don’t know who he is, we have no mention of his name, and he never appears any other time. According to some of the commentators, he was the angel Gabriel, who was placed in this particular area to instruct Joseph where to find his brothers. But, the text does not give us any clue as to who this person may have been.

My colleague Rabbi Jack Moline writes: “Think about it for a minute. If this mystery man had given the wrong directions, or if he said, ‘I don’t know,’ or if had sent Joseph home, the rest of the Bible wouldn’t have happened – no Moses, no Exodus, no Torah, no Promised Land, no King David, no Akiva, no Maimonides, no Einstein, no Andy Sandberg, no you.” In other words, this man changed all of Israelite history. While it was not all for the good, Joseph learned where his brothers were and this chance encounter led to the descent into Egypt, the Exodus, the revelation at Mount Sinai, and eventually the entry into the Land of Canaan.

One individual with a kind gesture had an enormous impact upon an entire people. This small act, reaching out to help a confused teenager find his way, was a small act of kindness which made a difference in someone’s life. Sometimes we never know what a little kindness may do. Sometimes it changes history.

For Joseph this man fortuitously was in the right place at the right time, whether placed there by G-d or simply by happenstance. Joseph, the dreamer, the schemer, the egotistical teenager, had to learn the lesson over the course of his lifetime that one person can make a difference and that, in many cases, if not in most cases, there is no such thing as coincidence.

It took Joseph many years to learn this lesson. When the brothers travel from Canaan to Egypt he is the viceroy of Egypt, his dreams have come to pass. He tests them to see whether they have repented. After they passed the test, he reveals himself to them. Joseph seems to have learned his lesson. He says to them: “Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that G-d sent me ahead of you.” In other words, Joseph learned that he had a purpose in life and that was to save the Israelite people. He had matured

from a capricious teenager self-involved in his schemes, to now become a servant of G-d and his people. It took him most of his lifetime to learn the lesson.

Last week I returned from a visit to the State of Israel where I attended meetings of the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, as well as the General Assembly of the Jewish Federation of North America. The WZO was established at the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1896, the brainstorm of Theodor Herzl, a dreamer, a writer, and ultimately a leader of the Jewish people. My first set of meetings was held at Mount Herzl. As President of the American Zionist Movement, I joined Zionist Federation heads from around the world. We toured Mount Herzl and stood by his grave where he was reinterred from his resting place in Vienna in 1949. At the request of the then Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, Herzl's remains were placed on a high hill to become the new home of a modern Zionist story. Today, Mount Herzl borders on one side, the military cemetery of Jerusalem and on the other side, Yad VaShem, the memorial to the six million. These three places stand as very meaningful ones for the modern State of Israel and its ethnos.

Herzl became involved in Zionism after the Dreyfus Affair in Paris and for a short six years from 1896 until his death in 1904, led the Zionist movement. If one reads his diaries, one gets the impression that he felt that his dream would succeed, that he was the right person at the right time, and that he would persevere with every ounce of his strength in order to be successful.

Today the Herzl Museum on the mountain tells his story and, especially, the first meeting of the Zionist Congress. His was not an easy task, to bring together western and eastern European Jewry, to bring together the religious and the non-religious, to bring together those who believed in a nation state and those who believed in a cultural home. Many times he was dismayed in his endeavors and sometimes seemed both despondent and depressed. Yet, he never gave up hope. As he famously wrote after the 1897 Congress in Basel: "In Basel I created the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted with universal laughter. In five years, perhaps, and in certainly 50 years, everyone will perceive it."

While Herzl understood that European anti-Semitism was a danger to the Jewish condition, there is no way he could have perceived the dark years of the Shoah from 1933 to 1945. There was no way he could have conceived of the United Nations vote on November 29, 1947 to partition the British mandate into a country called Israel and a country called Palestine. There is no way he could have envisioned that with enemies all around it, the State of Israel would be successful in its war of independence. Yet, his prophecy did come to pass and in 1948 the modern State of Israel was reborn. Mount Herzl today is the place of major government commemorations and celebrations. Herzl's picture dominates the walls of the Knesset and government offices. His story and that the Zionist movement changed Jewish life.

Like Joseph, Herzl realized that he was at the right place at the right time and had to make important decisions for the welfare of his family and his people. In our Torah reading of this morning Joseph grows up and matures to realize that truth.

Yet, there is something Joseph never really had to learn, for he seemed to understand it from the very beginning. When he asks this man where his brothers are situated, he states: "I

am looking for my brothers.” He understands that he is part of a larger family and that searching for his brothers is emblematic of his continuing relationship to that family and later his people.

That particular motto continues to be an important message for all of us. We search for our brothers and sisters. We are there for them in time of distress. We are concerned for their welfare, both physical and spiritual.

The first night of the Jewish Agency Assembly was spent commemorating the final chapter of the aliyah of Ethiopian Jewry. From the camp in Gondar the last remnants of the Jews from Ethiopia have come to the State of Israel. Their saga will be told for generations to come as it is the only time that black people from Africa have been brought to another land, not in chains but in freedom. We will remember Operation Moses, Operation Solomon and now the Wings of Doves. We listened to a young woman whose family walked through the Sudan until they reached the place where the Israeli air force brought them to Israel. While the aliyah may be over, the absorption still continues and the search for our brothers’ and sisters’ welfare continues to have an impact upon us, for their needs are our needs as well.

I was also present at a meeting detailing a new initiative of the government of Israel and world Jewry represented by the Jewish Agency. We heard a report of a two-day summit representing a joint commitment between the government of Israel and world Jewry to ensure a thriving Jewish future. Especially after the Pew study here in the United States, there is great concern not only in American Jewish leadership but in Israel, as well, as to the future directions of our people. Will young Jews remain Jewish in the future? Will they understand the centrality of Israel? Will future generations be conversant in the Jewish vocabulary, knowledgeable of the Jewish heritage, and ready to sacrifice for the Jewish future? The government of Israel has recognized that the welfare, not only physical but spiritual as well, of world Jewry is important to its future and is investing money in Birthright, MASA, semester and year-long programs in Israel, and now in this joint initiative. The planning has only begun and there is much left to do.

On my last day in Israel I was invited, along with approximately 20 leaders of the Jewish Agency, to meet with Prime Minister Netanyahu, three of his ministers, and some of his aides, in his offices in the government secretariat. He stressed the importance of this initiative and asked that it move quickly apace finding appropriate resources to establish worthwhile programs for the welfare of both Diaspora and Israeli Jewry. We listened to a report on a fund for emergency terror victims in Jewish communities. It was established by the Jewish Agency with the help of the government of Israel. This fund has helped secure Jewish communities in Europe and Latin America through physical improvements of their security arrangements, especially after the terror in Toulouse, France. And we also heard a report on the difficulties of French Jewry and the need to be open to a greater interest in their aliyah to Israel as anti-Semitism has grown in that country.

It is the mission of the State of Israel and the worldwide Jewish community to continue to search for the welfare of our brothers and sisters wherever they may reside. We are ultimately one people dependent upon one another. This was Joseph’s statement to the man and remained one of the foundational pillars of his life.

Joseph is known as Joseph the Righteous, though as we know he had many flaws. Perhaps learning to respond to the welfare of his people, much as Esther did in her day, and Theodor Herzl did in his day, allows him to be called by such nomenclature. His continuing interest in the welfare of his brothers and sisters stands as a paradigm for all of us.

May we learn the lessons well and may the Jewish world thrive well into the future.