

Parshas Vayeishev 5772

“SPIFFY THREADS” IN THE HOUSE OF JACOB

STIRRING THINGS UP

Getting underway in this week’s *parshah*, the epochal saga of Yosef and his brothers may seem somewhat perplexing – especially in light of the following Mishnaic teaching. Speaking of improper prayer-formulations, the Mishnah in Megillah (4:7) states:

האומר... על קן צפור נגיעו רחמיך... משתקין אותו.

“We silence one who makes the following declaration (of praise): ‘Your mercies extend to the nestlings.’”

The composer of this original hymn is obviously referring to the mitzvah of *shilu’ach hakan*, wherein one is enjoined to first send away the mother bird before taking the eggs or chicks for himself. This individual perceives in this injunction a great display of mercy, as Hashem seeks to spare the mother bird the pain of witnessing the removal of her offspring. In appreciation of this show of Divine compassion, the observer is moved to issue his own form of praise, extolling the Almighty for the fact that “His mercies extend to the nestlings.” But instead of approval, the Sages bestow condemnation upon the composer, instructing the listeners to silence his praise.

What, exactly, is so offensive about this seemingly innocuous offering of praise? One of the explanations offered by the Gemara (*Megillah 25a*) is that by singling out the birds as recipients of Divine kindness, this person is guilty of being *מטיל קנאה במעשה בראשית* (arousing jealousy amongst the creatures). That is, his focus on the fortune of the winged creatures causes consternation to other beings who might also pine for such special favor.

לזכר נשמת ברוך בן משה ע"ה

Against this backdrop, it is somewhat difficult to understand the actions of Ya’akov Avinu, for, on the surface, it almost appears that he did exactly that. The verse tells us that he “loved Yosef from all of his brothers, for he was his *ben zekunim* (commonly rendered as ‘child of his old age’); and he fashioned for him a coat of colors” (*Bereishis 37:3*). The rest of the *parshah* recounts the intense envy the brothers felt toward their favored younger brother and the ensuing disastrous consequences. The episode ends with Yosef being spirited off to slavery in Egypt and the offending coat being sent back to the patriarch, drenched in blood (to create the illusion that Yosef was killed).

How could the wise and righteous Ya’akov Avinu resort to what appears as a quintessential act of being *מטיל קנאה* amongst the brothers?! The whole series of events, in fact, hardly seems befitting (on the surface, at least) of the holy house of the noble tribes of Yisrael. Those with small minds would observe this scene and (Heaven forefend) accuse the patriarch of short-sightedness and needless provocation and the tribes of petty jealousy over some fashionable garment! What is really going on in this enigmatic episode?

The Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe, parshas Vayeishev*) offers an insightful explanation, demonstrating that, in fact, Ya’akov’s intentions were just the opposite: his offering of the colorful coat was an attempt to quell the jealousy, the root of which was far removed from mere material concerns.

THE YESHIVAH BOCHUR AND THE SLICK COSMOPOLITAN

To understand what was really transpiring in this sacred household, it is instructive to focus on the source of Ya’akov’s enchantment with his son. What did he see in

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Yosef to invest such enhanced care and attention in this child? The verse identifies the crucial factor as the fact that Yosef was the *ben zekunim*. This term is often understood as ‘the son of his old age,’ as *zekunim* does seem to reflect this aspect, stemming as it does from the root זקן (elder). The Ramban points out the difficulty, however, in translating the term as such in this context, for it does not appear that Yosef held a monopoly on this title. After all, Yissochor and Zevulun were only a year or two older than Yosef; technically, they were all *beni zekunim*.

Pointing to the rendering of Targum Onkelos, the Ramban explains that *ben zekunim* can refer to the other aspect associated with *zikhna* – namely, wisdom. Ya’akov possessed an incredible amount of Torah knowledge, having studied diligently for years under the contemporary sages Shem and Ever (offspring of Noach). The patriarch needed someone from his progeny to whom to transmit these vital Torah secrets, and he recognized Yosef’s unique ability to comprehend and absorb the sacred material. Ya’akov felt that in Yosef – a *ben zekunim* – a “young genius,” if you will – he had found the perfect link to succeeding generations, the student through whom his Torah teachings would be faithfully preserved. And so he set about the task of instructing the young prodigy in these important lessons, imparting to him his vast wisdom.

For their part, the brothers were not ones to be taken by petty jealousies. They were also men of stature and seekers of spiritual refinement and elevation. Ya’akov was definitely astute enough to know to avoid kindling within them any spirit of envy, but he also knew that the situation with Yosef was wont to pose a challenge. The danger existed that the righteous brothers might feel threatened or left out of the immense spiritual and learning opportunities that were afforded to Yosef. And so Ya’akov devised a unique strategy in an attempt to forestall any such potentially envious sentiments.

This is where the coat of colors came into play. Straight, plain apparel is the mark of an individual who is truly imbued with Torah. “Why is it that the scholars of Babylonia dress so fashionably? Because they lack real stature in Torah” (*Shabbos 145b*). As Rashi (*ibid.*) explains, the students of

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that locale did not truly excel in their Torah studies; as they were not highly regarded for their erudition, they sought recognition from fancy attire. It was for this reason that Ya’akov specifically provided his son Yosef with special, eye-catching clothing. It was an attempt to downplay and conceal Yosef’s true elevated Torah stature by portraying him not as a pre-eminent Torah scholar immersed in his learning, but as a youth caught up in the latest fashion. In short, the coat of colors was a deliberate ruse intended to quell the brothers’ fears.

For their part, though, the brothers’ fears were not assuaged. As people appreciative of spiritual values, they were able to detect true Torah greatness when they saw it. They were sensitive to the great spiritual endeavors in which Yosef was involved and desired to take part as well.

This, as the Chasam Sofer explains, was the real source of their envy, which set in motion the cataclysmic events that unfold in the remainder of Sefer Bereishis.