

Seeking our Brothers (Vayeshev)

- Basil Herring.

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Seeking our Brothers

When in the biblical narrative, Joseph goes out at his father's request to seek the welfare of his older brothers, he comes across a mysterious man who asks him what he is looking for - and Joseph answers, et ahai anokhi mevakesh, "it is my brothers that I seek." It is in these four words that not only the drama and the pathos of Joseph and his brethren is compressed, but beyond the Joseph tale itself, the full sweep of Jewish communal and fraternal existence as well. And whenever in Jewish life the descendants of Abraham have found themselves in conflict and contention with one another, it is the echo of Joseph's fateful formula that has reverberated in their ears. And if ever there was a time in recent history that those words have come to haunt us, it is now, in the current furore in Israel and in this country over the issue of "Who is a Jew."

For today it seems that there is another response on the part of Jews and their brothers. Rather than seeking each other out, we have reached the point where the overriding concern is to dethrone and deligitimise each other, perceiving them as we do to be the enemy within. Not just distrust, but hatred, pure and unadulterated, rules the day. There is no reasoning with the parties to this conflict; they cannot be convinced that there might be another side to the equation; and as far as each is concerned, the other has diabolical intentions to usurp the strength and the rights of its opponent. Sadly enough, in this respect, they are probably both right, in that each side sees itself alone as bearing the banner of truth, itself as the embodiment of all that is good in Jewish life and Jewish history.

Now there is no question that this confrontation over Jewish identity has been long in coming, and perhaps inevitable. Surely it is true that when the Reform movement some years ago adopted its patrilineal decision, they must have anticipated that the orthodox were not quite going to roll over and accept such a revolutionary change as a fait accompli. And when, even prior to that they established their own standards for conversion, standards that were in direct opposition to the time-honored laws and procedures, surely they knew only too well that the traditionalists bound by Jewish law and precedent would not, indeed could not, accept the end products of such conversion procedures, and would seek to exclude them from the mainstream of Jewish life. Yet apparently these non-traditionalists thought that they could do an end run "around" the traditionalists, or over their head, to receive legitimation from a secularist majority in Israel and elsewhere.

But what they, and most others, did not anticipate was the renaissance of traditionalism, not just in the most recent election, but over the past number of years, and not just in Israel, but in the United States as well. And so, faced with this new situation, they now realize that their very legitimacy is threatened, their standing in the world-wide Jewish community under attack. And so what do they do? Understandably they scream "gevalt," and press their views on the

politicians in Israel. They gather their petitions and issue public statements in opposition. All of which is to be expected and understood.

But they go beyond that: such is their hatred, that they resort to open threats of blackmail to withhold financial and political support of the State of Israel and the UJA; they shamelessly distort the true nature of the debate in Israel by implying, or allowing the impression, that the orthodox deny that Reform Jews are Jews altogether, something which is absolutely not true, and which no orthodox leader has ever said. Yet they use it to whip up popular support among the ignorant masses. And they use misleading statistics to inflate their own constituency, as when they inform the media that more than 90% of American Jews are either Conservative or Reform Jews, when the truth is that while only 10% may be orthodox, 30-40% or more of American Jews are neither Orthodox, or Conservative or Reform, but unaffiliated, semi-assimilated, and take no sides anyway, but rather say "a plague on both your houses!"

And then there are those in the orthodox community who have chosen to take their own stand over the "Who is a Jew" issue. Now there is no doubt in my mind that the problem of personal status as a Jew, given the patrilineal decision, is a major threat to the Jewish people. I have long felt that in light of the widespread rate of Reform conversion, without the use of the mikveh, without commitment to the Torah, and even minimal standards of Jewish observance, and the readiness of many Reform Rabbis to officiate at intermarriages, that a de facto split in the Jewish community is inevitable; that traditionalists concerned that their own grandchildren be unquestionably Jewish would sooner or later have to take extreme caution in mixing and marrying with others claiming to be fellow Jews. Of course such concerns if publically pursued, as they will have to be, will eventually create real communal schism and resentment. Clearly it is an issue that the Jewish community has ducked and avoided, preferring instead to believe that somehow each side will accommodate the other with minimal fallout to communal life. But the figures are starting to add up, with hundreds of thousands of people considering themselves Jews without blemish - but whose status is, to say the least, questionable as far as Jewish law and tradition is concerned. And so, I am certainly sensitive to the problem of establishing some consensus on the issue of Who is a Jew, and of arriving at some means to resolve this vexing and serious problem.

But what I do have difficulty understanding, is why this issue has got to be injected into the political process in the land of Israel, especially at this time. Why should it be the secular Israeli Knesset that should legislate resolution of the issue? Why should the whole web of diaspora relations with Israel, complex as they already are, be further compromised in a way that seriously threatens to undermine the consensus in support of the state? Why should this issue become a political football between Labor and Likud, both of whom have their own motives and agendas? Do the Israeli religious parties, or their American mentors and supporters really believe that by taking a stand over there, they can intimidate the non-orthodox over here? What is necessary is for the leaders of American rabbinical groups to get together over here, and somehow come up with a workable resolution, one that will accommodate the demands of halakhah, but that will also take into consideration the sensitivities of the non-orthodox rabbinate. Of course ideology is important - but there are times when practical considerations must come into play too, choosing to tolerate certain circumstances that are less than ideal, until a better circumstance or condition will prevail leading to peaceful resolution of such conflict or crisis.

For now is not a time for orthodox triumphalism, for an institution or ideological hubris that ill becomes us. What we are here talking about is an attempt to reach out to many millions of non-orthodox, and sometimes non-committed, Jews, to show that our tradition can be both principled and flexible, both unyielding on substance and imaginative in overcoming obstacles to Jewish unity, so that together we can avoid the catastrophic consequences of reading hundreds of thousands of Jews out of the fold.

Now in considering this whole sad episode of religious factionalism and kulturkampf, there is an interesting comment of Rashi, in this context, in the incident in which Joseph seeks out his brethren. For when Joseph informs this stranger, who was, according to the midrash actually the angel Gabriel in human form, of his purpose in finding reconciliation and solidarity with them, the man answers him as follows:

They have gone from here, for I have heard them say "let us go to Dotan." Gen. 37:17

In commenting on this, Rashi sees a play on words in the place name of Dotan, as holding a hidden allusion to the Hebrew term for religion, which is dat. It is, he says, as if the man said to Joseph "They are not interested in fraternal relations, for I heard your brothers say that they were going to find doctrinal grounds (nikhlei datot) on which to put an end to your life." How interesting, that even here there was an ideological dimension to their deep personal animosity against their brother, whose life they were seeking to destroy! Their jealousy and hatred for Joseph was one thing - another entirely was their attempt to justify their nefarious actions as being necessary to preserve the spiritual integrity and legitimacy of the family of Jacob. And so they invoked what was in effect a religious argument, as they went about what was in the end the entirely unholy and irreverent business of reading out, and removing a brother from their midst. In the final analysis, the story of Joseph and his brethren stands as eloquent testimony the potentially catastrophic effects of fraternal hatred, especially when it is a hatred that is articulated in religious or spiritual terms, or one that claims an overriding and selfless concern for the wellbeing of the family of Israel.

And so as we contemplate the present turmoil, animosity, and hatred in organized Jewish life, with the daily schemes and strategies of oneupmanship undertaken in the name of this or that ideological position, such Jews would be well advised to reconsider what all of this might be doing to the cause of the faith and the people of Israel. Rather let them - and us - follow the example not of the brethren, but of Joseph himself, whose response to the sad tidings of the man/angel, is as the Torah puts it, to put aside every consideration of his own self-interest and endangerment, so as to "follow after his brothers, until he found them in Dotan," determined as he was to bring reconciliation and peace, true brotherhood as well as unity, in place of a blind and bitter mentality that brought blessing to none.

If we will do that, then I have no doubt that in the end like Joseph we too will in spite of our enemies become a source of true blessing, to live to see the time when brother will not stand opposed to brother, but rather will come together to strengthen one another in body as in spirit, in Israel and in the diaspora, united forever under the will of God.

