

The second was that participation in the festivity was as important for my own spiritual well-being as it was for the fulfillment of my obligation to the bride and groom. Participation gave meaning to those moments of my life; it transformed me from a spectator to a partner in the important work of bringing joy to two people and their families at this important juncture in their lives. It connected me to everyone else who was rejoicing; each in his or her own way was engaged in the same holy task, and together we produced an expression of joy that surpassed the individual acts of which it was composed.

Our lives are full of mitzvah opportunities if we but have eyes to see them. Greeting a stranger, tempering a criticism so that it does not sting, or complimenting someone on a new haircut, each small act helps tip the cosmic scales toward the side of goodness and merit; each one binds us closer to God and to our fellow human beings; and each one is an instrument for making meaning in our own lives. No, we do not know the ultimate consequences of our actions; as mortals, it is enough that we do mitzvot in the hope and belief that each mitzvah brings another in its wake.

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Vayeshev 5780

וישב תש"ף



To Fulfill a Mitzvah

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There is an interesting moment in this week's parashah during Joseph's search for his brothers. Initially, Joseph seeks them in Shechem, where Jacob supposes them to be. As Joseph fruitlessly seeks his brothers, a man who perceives that Joseph is wandering aimlessly asks Joseph the purpose of his search. When Joseph replies that he is seeking his brothers, the man tells Joseph he has heard that they are headed for Dothan. (Gen. 37:14-17) Joseph then follows his brothers there, and the story unfolds of his sale as a slave and his descent to Egypt.

One wonders what purpose this episode serves. Rashbam and others suggest that the Torah intends to praise Joseph for assiduously seeking his brothers in accordance with Jacob's wishes despite his own knowledge of his brothers' hostility toward him. Read this way, the inclusion of the anonymous supplier of information is simply a device to highlight Joseph's fidelity to his father's request in the face of obstacles that might have deterred a lesser human being.

However, the Midrash (*Tanhuma*, Vayeshev 2:3) identifies the anonymous informant as the angel Gabriel; behind this identification lies the assumption that Joseph's encounter with his informant is not coincidental but rather divinely ordained. God sends a celestial messenger to ensure that Joseph finds his brothers; his consequent descent to Egypt is a vital part of the divine plan to lead Jacob's descendants into enslavement there as had been foreordained.

The Midrash puts it as follows: "[Joseph's descent to Egypt] can be compared to the case of a cow that refuses to be led to the slaughterhouse. What did they do? They led her calf in front of her and she followed against her will." (*Tanhuma* (Buber ed.), Vayeshev 15:3) So too it is Jacob's love for Joseph that

compels Joseph to journey to Egypt and slavery. One is reminded of Banquo's dark observation in *Macbeth*: "The instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence." (I.iii)

The above exegeses notwithstanding, I wish to propose an alternative reading: The man was in fact a mere mortal. Just as Joseph was divinely directed to his encounter with him, the man himself was an instrument in God's hands, placed in the right location and time to be able to lead Joseph to his brothers.

Adopting, for argument's sake, this interpretation, let us imagine what goes through the mind of this man as he walks away from his encounter with Joseph. No doubt he is pleased to have helped a fellow human being; and indeed from a human perspective this is unquestionably the case. Yet when we view this incident from the perspective of subsequent events, it is clear that, however unintentionally, he has pointed Joseph in the direction of disaster. This dissonant juxtaposition of good intent and evil consequence is a reminder of man's inability to decipher the relationship of his actions to God's master plan. The words that Isaiah prophesies in God's name remind us of the gulf that separates human and divine perception: "For my plans are not your plans, nor are my ways your ways" (Isa. 56:8).

However, despite the words of Isaiah, man is periodically tempted to believe not only that he can anticipate God's designs, but that through human action these designs can be frustrated. The rabbinic gloss to Isaiah's prophetic declaration to the ill Hezekiah, "You are going to die, you will not live" (2 Kings 20:1 and Isa. 38:1), cautions against falling prey to this illusory notion. The Rabbis account for the apparent redundancy in Isaiah's words by interpreting them as "you will die—in this world; you will not live—in the next world." The reason for this is that Hezekiah has failed to fulfill the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Hezekiah defends himself, saying that through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he had seen that his offspring were destined to be evil—as indeed his son Menasseh was. Isaiah rebukes him in reply, saying, "What concern of yours are God's secrets? Your obligation is to do what God has commanded, and God will then do as He sees fit" (BT Berakhot 10a).

In this rabbinic narrative, Hezekiah refrains from fulfilling a mitzvah in an attempt to forestall his divinely decreed fate. Isaiah observes that in so

doing Hezekiah trespasses the boundary separating human obligation from divine reckoning. The human role is to carry out God's commandments; the resulting consequences are part of a larger scheme that transcends both our control and our understanding.

There is an important corollary to this axiom. Just as one cannot forestall the possible negative consequences of a good deed, one cannot anticipate the magnitude of the good that may result from a seemingly insignificant act. "Be as careful to observe a light precept as you are to observe a weighty one," says Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, "for you do not know the recompense of reward for each precept" (M. Avot 2:1). Therefore one must fight the inclination not to perform a mitzvah that seems to be of little consequence. The temptation to do so may reflect one's disdain for the seeming pettiness of the mitzvah itself; alternatively, one may feel that engagement with "light precepts" feeds one's own sense of insubstantiality.

I once had reason to meditate on the truth and relevance of this teaching while attending the wedding of a friend's son. At one point during the dancing I stood at the outer periphery of several large concentric circles of men and boys who were singing and dancing with great joy. I had already danced a great deal myself and I needed some respite. At that moment I felt entirely irrelevant to the celebration and it seemed to me that I might as well return to my table with the hope that my salad plate had not been whisked away by an overzealous waiter.

All of a sudden the words of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch flashed through my mind: "for you do not know the recompense of reward for each precept." I realized that my thinking was skewed; in a way it was a form of hubris. It was not for me to calibrate the degree to which my presence or absence increased or decreased the intensity of the rejoicing. My obligation was to gladden the hearts of the bride and groom in whatever way I could. That meant, at the very least, being part of the entourage of celebrants, whether or not the bride and groom, or anyone else for that matter, were aware of my presence.

This realization led to two others. The first was that if the Torah thought my presence significant enough to demand it of me, then I needed to take the obligation more seriously. True, I was too tired to dance; could I not at least clap, or in some other way actively join in the celebration? Indeed I could, and I began to clap and sing.