

As we approach the holiday of Hanukkah, our Torah reading always enters the narrative of Joseph. There is a neat parallelism: the book of Genesis enters one of the most protracted narratives of family feud, as the year comes to its darkest, and we respond by kindling lights.

Many of us are familiar with the story of Joseph and his brothers in broad strokes, or maybe in the “Technicolor Dream Coat” version. Joseph tells his brothers of his dreams of ascendancy over them. His brothers, jealous of his dreams and of the special coat that his father made for him, conspire to throw him into a pit, sell him as a slave, and report to their father that he had been killed by a wild animal.

At a close reading, it appears that at least some of Joseph’s brothers hated him even before Joseph dreamed any dreams or received favoritism from his father. In Genesis 37, verse 2, the second verse of the parasha, it says that Joseph tended the flocks and was a helper to the sons of his fathers’ wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of his brothers to his father.

The text doesn’t say outright what those bad reports are, but they do in some way contribute to his father’s favoritism of Joseph, and the brothers’ hatred.

There is a nuance here that can only be understood through a closer examination of the family structure. Jacob had children by four women: the sisters: Rachel and Leah, and by their respective handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah. The text says Joseph helped the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, but that he brought bad reports of his brothers. The sons of Bilhah and Zilpah are not called his brothers.

There is some sort of implied status difference between the sons of the wives and the sons of the handmaids. Several of our commentators, including Rashi, say that he specifically brought bad reports of the sons of Leah, the sons who had equal status as sons of a full wife, rather than a handmaid. And Rashi says one of the things Joseph reported was that the sons of Leah mistreated the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, calling them slaves.

Through this commentator's lens, what at first seems to be a story of petty sibling rivalry, gets magnified to a much more severe extent. Joseph is not making trouble, by being a whiny tattletale. There has already been trouble. The mutual humanity, literally the brotherhood among the children of Jacob has been debased as children of Leah treat the children of the handmaids, their half-siblings - as slaves.

And so Joseph is hated, not just for the tattling, but because, he is in effect, a race traitor - allying with the children of the handmaids, speaking out against the oppression his brothers are enacting.

But of course, he doesn't speak in the right direction. He speaks to his father, instead of to his brothers. Perhaps he assumes that there is no potential ground for conversation, perhaps he assumes that his brothers are incapable of introspection and change. Instead of confronting them directly, he merely reports their behavior. And his brothers hate him.

There is a subtle turning point in Joseph's moral development in verses 12-13. Jacob instructs Joseph: "Your brothers are pasturing their flocks at Shechem. I will send you to them." Joseph's response is the one word, 'Hineni.' Literally, it means "Here I am." It also means, "I am ready." This same word is Abraham's response at the initiation and the end of the binding of Isaac. It is also Moses's response to God's call at the burning bush. The word "hineini," signifies a game-changing moment.

The commentator Rashi notes that instead of telling his father, "You know my brothers hate me," Joseph for the first time silences himself and seeks to meet his brothers. As the narrative unfolds, he fails to find them where he is sent, and only by the direction of a mysterious stranger does he manage to locate them at all.

Of course, it is too late for him to achieve an actual meeting. They see him coming and plot to kill him, they throw him in a pit. They sell him. It will be years before they reunite, and make peace. Joseph winds up learning his lesson in a reverse sort of way. At the beginning of the story, he postured himself as superior to his brothers - not just in his dreams and in his father's estimation, but in ethical behavior. As the parasha continues, he loses some of that ego. He loses the sense that he is at the center of his story, and he begins to display more compassion. We'll talk about that more in two weeks time.

But for now, I want to discuss what can be learned from Joseph's mistake, that he spoke about the brothers' wrongdoing, rather than to them. His brothers debased their own humanity, as well as that of their half-brothers, when they called the

sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah slaves. But Joseph, in speaking about them, rather than with them, also debased the humanity of the sons of Leah. When we assume that people are fundamentally other, motivated by utterly foreign impulses and therefore incapable of dialogue or of change, we contribute to violence in the world. When our response to wrong is to increase our curiosity, we contribute to humanity.

I remember an experience I had, on Tisha B'Av in 2004. I was praying at the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem, singing mourning songs with the group women of the wall, when a bunch of Orthodox women began to harass us for making noise. Their understanding was that a women's voice in prayer is distracting to men. We had been strictly instructed not to engage with anyone who might begin to yell at us, male or female – no good could come of it.

My friend Batya ignored our instructions. She got up, went over to the woman shouting the most loudly, and asked simply, "Why do you hate us?" I followed her, curious. I will always remember the scene: the fierce pious old woman, slightly stooped, every inch of her body covered modestly. My friend Batya, questioning. A modern Orthodox young woman who had been passing by volunteering to translate between Batya's English and the woman's Hebrew. The woman explaining vehemently that God cares about our prayers, but can hear them in silence. Batya saying that she couldn't believe that God would hate her voice.

No minds were changed that evening. But when Batya and the Orthodox woman had reached the limits of their mutual understanding, they hugged. And the women left without yelling further.

The effects of Batya's curiosity on that encounter made a profound impression. She was determined to find some common ground - and so she found it. Not much - but enough for a breathing space. Enough for a hug.

At the beginning of the parasha, Joseph is entirely unwilling to engage his brothers, and that is perhaps his downfall. And then, by the end of the parasha, when Joseph, now in prison in Egypt, expresses curiosity and concern about the dreams of his fellow prisoners, that caring curiosity leads to his own rise.

With all of the violence in the world right now, in action and particularly in rhetoric, we need that curiosity. Within our own community and in response to the events in the wider world, we need to respond to difference by speaking with others, rather than about them. We need to be determined to find common ground, determined to be curious. That is how we will bring light - and enlightenment.