

It was, I believe, Walt Whitman who first articulated the notion “I contain multitudes,” in “Song of Myself.” The fuller context is, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then, I contradict myself. / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”

Reading this week’s parashah, Vayeshev, I was struck by the multitudes that we all contain, which are only sometimes noticed explicitly.

Before I explain, I want to briefly summarize the story of Yosef and his brothers that we encounter in this story. We learn that Yosef is his father’s favorite, and that his father displays that by giving Yosef a striped coat. Yosef takes for granted his own superiority, literally dreaming dreams in which his brothers, in form of sheaves of wheat, all bow down to him, and then dreams in which his whole family, including parents, symbolized by the sun, the moon and the stars, all bow down to him. He is seemingly oblivious to the consternation that he creates in his household by talking about these dreams.

One day, when his brothers are pasturing their sheep far away, Yosef’s father sends them to him, and they vent their resentment first by stripping him of his fine coat, and ultimately by selling him to passing traders, such that he winds up enslaved in Egypt. He will wind up in next week’s parashah interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams and becoming the second most powerful man in Egypt, eventually bringing his whole family down there, where they will live through a famine in relative comfort and privilege – but also ultimately become slaves, fulfilling the promise made of Avraham back in Chapter 15 that his descendants would be strangers in a foreign land, and ultimately come out with great wealth.

Two participants in Torah study yesterday, Howard and Gail, noted that the parashah opens at the beginning of Chapter 37 by telling us that *Yaakov* settled in the land of his fathers. But in the third verses, which introduces the story of Yosef as the favorite child, the verse tells us that *Yisrael* loved Yosef, switching the name of Yosef’s father. *Yisrael* is the name Yaakov earned in last week’s parashah, after wrestling with an angel. It is *Yisrael* who sends Yosef to find his brothers in verse 13, setting in motion everything that follows.

Some of us in Torah study were outraged that Yosef’s father, by whatever name you wish to call him, could be so dense as to set Yosef up as the favorite and then send him alone far away to brothers who despised him. But the medieval commentator Rashi suggests that *Yisrael* “sent him in consequence of the

necessity of bringing into operation the profound thought of the righteous man who was buried in Hebron,” that is Avraham. That Yisrael knew exactly what he was doing, and that (as another Torah study participant noted), Yaakov was behaving rather like his grandfather, Avraham did when he was willing to sacrifice Yitzhak – putting his son’s present well-being at risk for the sake of a future promise.

Yosef’s answer to his father’s demand that he go get his brothers is “Hineni.” While some commentators assume that Yosef’s enthusiastic response was based on naivete about the depth of his brother’s hostility towards him, Rashi again insists that “Yosef was zealous to perform his father’s bidding, although he was aware that his brothers hated him.”

Yosef arrives in Shechem and quite literally goes astray in a field, unable to find his brothers. And at this point, unnamed שׂר, a mysterious stranger, either human or divine finds him and asks him “What are you seeking?”

Yosef answers “I am seeking my brothers.”

This is all very portentous – the use of name Yisrael, the response *hineini*, the mysterious stranger who helps Yosef find his way. There are strong hints throughout that these characters are aware of violent and cosmically significant events that are about to unfold.

And yet, they also are not. Many commentators discuss how the stranger makes a veiled hint to the danger facing Yosef, which he ignores. And as Gail notes, at the end of the chapter, when the brothers, having stripped Yosef of his striped coat and sold him into slavery, return the coat to their father, “Yaakov rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son many days.” We revert to the name of Yaakov, describing his response to his son’s disappearance.

Yisrael has a hint of the prophetic destiny that his son will fulfill, and sends him off to it. And same person, by a different name, Yaakov, seemingly has no idea, and just believes his son to be lost to him.

I don’t think this is all that strange. As Whitman noted, we contain multitudes. Yaakov/Yisrael conveniently has different names for two of the multitude within him. It could very well be that as Yisrael, Yosef’s father has an insight about the great role that Yosef has to play in history, and is ready to send him off to fulfill it.

And on the level of Yaakov – which is not a lower level, by the way – Yosef’s father is primarily a father, loving his son, wanting to have Yosef by his side and devastated when his son is gone.

Similarly, it can be that Yosef himself, though he doesn’t have two convenient names to signify different aspects of his consciousness, has a certain insight that he is walking towards danger, and that within that danger there is a destiny that he is called to fulfill – and at the same time, he is still the bratty teenager who thinks that the world revolves around him and has no clue that his grandiose self-conception might cause others to resent him.

What if the mysterious stranger had explicitly said, “Your brothers went that way – and by the way, they are planning to kill you!” Even if some part of Yosef knew, it is doubtful that he could have walked towards his brothers with that explicit knowledge. But with just an inkling, layers within his own self-importance – he could take those steps.

It’s a delicate balance, to move through this world aware of the potential significance- and sometimes insignificance – of our actions. But like our forefathers, we all contain multitudes: on one level, awareness of a much bigger perspective, on another completely caught up in eye-level concerns. One is not better or worse than the other, but it is important to be able to move between these perspectives – just as it was important for Yisrael to be able to send his son into danger to fulfill their family’s destiny, for Yaakov to mourn the son he had lost. But on a less cosmic level, we all have experienced times in our lives when something seems devastating, and yet, we can occasionally catch glimpses either that we will be transformed on the other side for the better – or that the devastation is just not that significant in the long term. Being able to access those multitudes of perspectives is what allows us to be grounded in the present while also envisioning a possible, different future.

May we be unapologetic about the multitudes we contain. And like Yosef, may we have enough insight to be willing to meet our destiny, and enough naivete to not be too afraid of it.