

Rabbi Lisa Edwards**Shabbat Vayeshev, 12/7/01****Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles**

Today is not only Becky Weinreich's birthday, and not only the anniversary of the day Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. It's also the anniversary of another day that will live – if not exactly in "infamy" – at least "without fame": today is the 17th anniversary of the day I defended my PhD dissertation. [Oh and hey – When the story of Joseph begins in this week's Torah portion, Joseph is 17 years old: 17 years old, 17th anniversary of my defense -- is it a coincidence? . . . yes. . .]

I think the most notable thing about my dissertation defense is that during it one of the five professors on my committee began the session by saying, "There is a chapter missing."

"Oy," I remember thinking, "this isn't starting out well at all." It turns out that he thought there should be an afterward in which I declared my intentions to become a rabbi. To my surprise, but not to theirs, he was the third member of my committee to independently arrive at the notion that that's what I should do next. Oddly enough, such a thing had not occurred to me, and after my looks of confusion and my polite, but firm dismissal of the idea, it took me another few years (and a lot of life rearranging) for me to take them up on the idea. They all wrote references for me when I applied. So I want to thank them for pointing me in the right direction. It isn't every dissertation defense, I suspect, that sends people away from their chosen field, and chosen profession. Perhaps I should take it as a not so subtle hint that they just didn't want me as a colleague. But in fact the one who said the chapter was missing is himself also a rabbi as well as a professor.

Strangely enough, what finally sent me "over the edge," over three years later, was somebody else's dream. My friend Julie invited me to breakfast to say she'd had a dream about me in which she and I were both studying in a yeshiva to become rabbis (Julie, by the way, isn't Jewish). "You were really enjoying it," she said, "me, not so much." And then came the kicker: "What are you doing with your life?" she said. It goes to show, among other things, that you never know what or who is going to change your life, or when, for that matter.

In this week's Torah portion we begin reading the stories of Joseph and his brothers. Stories that will last us for the next month and take us all the way through the end of the Book of Genesis – and well into my sabbatical (not that I'm counting the days or anything). This first portion about these 12 siblings kicks off something that we learn to expect throughout the Joseph stories: that you never know who or what is going to come along and change your life, or when, for that matter, provided you're open to new directions. In the case of me and my dissertation, it might be more accurate to say not that others had come along and changed my life, but rather that I was the one changing my life, and that those other folks just had to help me notice that my direction was changing. Some people would take it a step farther than I am, they would say it was God who was bringing about the change in my direction, and that those other folks were just malachim, God's messengers, sent to help re-route me. Certainly some people say that about Joseph – that

his surly brothers, and the lustful Potiphar's wife, and the baker and candlestick maker Joseph met up with in prison, were all just servants of God, helping to get Joseph where he needed to be.

Although it's easy in these early chapters of the Joseph story to side with Joseph's brothers against the cocky, tattle-telling, self-assured younger brother Joseph, who "Dad always liked best" . . . and treated best, I think we would do well to notice where Joseph's security came from. Even though the Higher Power we've come to know earlier in Genesis keeps a low profile during the Joseph saga – one of the longest and most detailed stories in the Bible – God doesn't actually appear as a separate character playing a visible role. Still Joseph makes it pretty clear that God is the key to his self-assuredness. And the narrative voice let's us know that Joseph is correct in his assessment. Not everyone in the Joseph stories feels the same connection to God, and that's a problem for them. Take Joseph's eldest brother, Reuben, for example. Reuben, one of the two brothers who tries to save Joseph's life when the other brothers want to kill him, leaves the scene long enough for the others to sell Joseph into slavery. Returning to find his brother gone and not knowing what happened, Reuben tears his clothes in an act of mourning, and utters some ambiguous words – ha-yelid aineinu "The boy is gone" va-ani, ana ani-vah? "And I, where can I go?" [37:30]. Ostensibly, Reuben is referring to the missing Joseph, but the word he uses for "boy" – "yelid" – is a term typically used for a child younger than the 17-year-old Joseph. Perhaps Reuben is talking as much about himself as about Joseph. Maybe it is at this moment that Reuben loses whatever still remains of his own childhood, knowing that, as the eldest, he is the one who will have to break the news to his father and be held responsible. Interestingly, Reuben, in tearing his clothes and screaming out, acts exactly as his father will act when he comes to believe, a short time later, that Joseph is dead.

The second half of Reuben's cry is even more ambiguous than the first. The Hebrew can be translated a number of ways: some translations say "And I, where shall I go?" [Hertz]; others say, "Now, what am I to do?" [JPS] Literally, the Hebrew says, "And I, where have I gone" or "where am I going?" Reuben has not only lost Joseph, as well as his ability to lead his other brothers, Reuben has also lost himself: "Where have I gone?" Suddenly, in this moment of great despair, he asks: "Where am I going?" If only Reuben had had access to some good therapy! Alas, poor Reuben didn't have the resources we have.

Nor, unfortunately, did he seem to have the sense of God in his life that his brother Joseph had. Take Joseph at one of his low points a few chapters later. Finding himself unjustly imprisoned in an Egyptian jail with no reprieve apparent, Joseph says to his two fellow prisoners, puzzled by the meaning of their bad dreams: ha-lo leilohim pitronim? "Don't meanings belong to God?" and then he says: sap-ru na li "tell me." [40:8 verse of the week] In the pit of prison, no hope in sight, Joseph knows he speaks for God, that he is an interpreter and a servant of God. Unlike his brother Reuben, when things don't go according to his plan, instead of saying "what will become of me?" he turns himself over to a Higher Power. For Joseph strongly believes that God has a purpose and a plan for him. And yet, just like in lots of our lives, he and we don't see God's presence exactly. God doesn't come speak directly to him, as God did to his ancestors.

Had Reuben been able to admit that he was a spiritual being and that he needed help to get in touch with that side of himself, had he been able to open himself up to a relationship

with God, and learned how to maintain such a connection, who knows how his life might have changed? And indeed, when years later, Jacob and his sons are finally reconciled with Joseph, they do seem to feel strongly the presence of God in their lives. And their lives certainly do improve in those later years. More on that in the weeks to come.

You know, I don't often think about my drift toward rabbinical school or the influence my committee members and my friend Julie's dream had on me so long ago. Just once in awhile – on an anniversary maybe. Or maybe it's for some other reason. It's been an unsettling year, hasn't it? or few months, anyway. And I've spoken with more than a few of you about your shifts in thought – your musings about what is important in your own life and what you want to be doing and why and with whom. Is it really any wonder, I wonder, that this year's reading of Joseph and his dreams and his family is taking me in this direction? When faced with a renewed awareness of the ways we are not in control of our lives, is it really so surprising that we look for comfort or explanation in something else . . . someone else . . . beyond our control a little, but really just there to push us one way or another? In these times of uncertainty, may the lights we will light all next week for Hanukah shed new light on our lives and bring us new direction. Shabbat Shalom . . . and pleasant dreams.