



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeishev

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 24, 2016
Vayeishev/Chanukah

Dissenting Voices



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do you ever argue with your siblings or friends? Are those arguments beneficial?

It seems natural, especially for Jews, to disagree about things. Just witness a Shabbat table, a Chanukah party, a Seder or any other Jewish function. One opinion at a table would be boring, and not very Jewish...

But how do we ensure that dissenting voices don't divide us but always unite us? How to ensure that all the voices of Judaism are perpetuating one unified vision?

The answer lies in Joseph's two dreams, his brothers' reactions to them, and the pen Jacob took in hand to write down the exact moment and place this historic moment occurred.

Like the various branches which were all part of the one solid Chanukah Menorah, the various voices of Judaism and individual paths of serving the Creator are lamps that make up one great candelabra.

The key is to find harmony within diversity; to preserve the one larger unifying vision, and ensure that the many voices are focused on this larger vision.

We do this by taking pen in hand to write about the oneness, not about the discord.

DISSENTING VOICES ARE THEY GOOD FOR THE JEWS?

1. Brotherly Love (Joke)

Yenta was making donuts as a treat for her two young sons, Nudnik and Schmendrik. The boys began to argue over who gets the first donut.

“Shame on you boys,” said Yenta. “If the wise King Solomon were here today, he would say, ‘Let my brother have the first donut.’”

Nudnik looked at Schemndrik and said, “OK, Schmendrik, today you be King Solomon.”

2. Ten Commandments (Joke)

A Hebrew School teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her six year olds.

After explaining the commandment to honor your father and your mother, she asked, “Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?”

Without missing a beat one little boy answered, “Thou shall not kill.”¹

3. Sibling Rivalry? (Joke)

The professor of the college course on wills and trusts posed this question to the students: “Why do people choose to have their children, rather than their siblings, inherit their estate?”

¹ <http://www.aish.com/j/j/51477082.html>.

After students offered various reasons, one fellow raised his hand.

“This may be a bit off topic,” he said, “but when I was little, when my siblings finished playing with me, they would stuff me into the dryer.”²

4. Siblings With Dissenting Views

Do you ever argue with your siblings or friends? Are those arguments beneficial?

It seems natural, especially for Jews, to disagree about things. Just witness a Shabbat table, a Chanukah party, a Seder or any other Jewish function. One opinion at a table would be boring, and not very Jewish...

But how do we ensure that dissenting voices don't divide us but always unite us? How to ensure that all the voices of Judaism are perpetuating one unified vision?

The answer lies in this week's Torah portion which documents the sibling rivalry between Joseph and his brothers. This begins with Joseph's two dreams, his brothers' reactions to them, and the pen Jacob took in hand to write down the exact moment and place this historic moment occurred.

The Jewish people are a family – quite literally.

In a family, siblings have different personalities, different perspectives and – of course – dissenting views. In a healthy family, the differences lend texture and depth to the mix. In an unhealthy family, the differences could lead to feuds and rifts between brothers and sisters.

The objective then is not for every sibling to speak with the same voice (for individual expression is special) but rather, for each unique, inimitable voice to share the same message, and respect the perspective of the other voices.

Unfortunately, such is not always the case in the Jewish world today.

² <http://www.wnd.com/2016/10/sibling-rivalry/>.

5. Jewish Divergence

This past week, The Atlantic published an article³ in which it highlighted the dissonant relationship between Israel and the United States, and also addressed the oft-divergent views among the Jews on the subject:

In fact, dissonance also permeates the discourse between Jewish communities in Israel and the United States, which are key arbiters of the relationship between the two countries. Jews in America vote overwhelmingly Democratic and mostly subscribe to liberal streams of Judaism; the State of Israel is not created in their ideological image. Employing a formal association between religion and state, Israel extends full recognition to only Orthodox Judaism, further alienating members of other denominations heavily represented in America, as fierce clashes between Orthodox and non-Orthodox worshippers over equal Jewish prayer rights at the Western Wall have demonstrated compellingly...

Concomitantly, in a twist of historic proportions, America's First Family will now include Jews of its own. Trump's daughter Ivanka, her husband Jared, and their children affiliate with Modern Orthodoxy - a minority among American Jewry - whose political sentiments skew markedly more conservative than the majority of the Jewish community in the United States. (Jews favored Clinton over Trump by an almost three-to-one ratio.) While this may shift the White House toward greater appreciation of Israeli thinking on issues of religion and state, it will ironically widen the void between the dominant forces of contemporary Judaism: progressives in America and traditionalists in Israel, though of course neither country is monolithic.

This, of course, is the opinion of one writer - an opinion that many of us would disagree with, arguing that the unifying force in Judaism is our time-tested tradition, which has endured for thousands of years and withstood many challenges. Today, Jewish observance may sadly be in the minority, but that is a relatively recent phenomenon.

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/us-israel-trump/511019/>.

Just 300 years ago most Jews were observant. Assimilation is a product of the modern era. Thus, Israel's embrace of the Orthodox standard is consistent with our long history of seeing the Torah as the guide for Jewish life.

However, we all can agree that our challenge today is to communicate that message in ways that can unite Jews of all backgrounds. A message that transcends our differences.

6. The Ailment

To treat any ailment, the doctor must first diagnose and identify the problem. For us, the Jewish people to become the best, healthiest nation possible, we must diagnose and identify any ailment that we may have.

So let us ask: How did we evolve into people with so many different opinions and perspectives?

And how do we have views that are in actual conflict? How is this possible? And how can we remedy this divergence?

As mentioned: In a healthy family, diversity and even dissent are not negatives but simply unique ways of serving our Creator. The problem arises when these dissenting voices generate animosity within the family.

Perhaps by understanding the history of dissent and different channels of serving G-d in Judaism, we can come to remedy any rifts in the family of Israel today and forever.

² Sanhedrin 38a.

³ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Face_book.

7. The History of Jewish Dissent

The place in the Torah where we begin seeing differences of Jewish opinion is among Joseph and his siblings. In this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Vayeishev* – we get the first inkling of discord among the twelve sons of Jacob, who would become the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

The discord begins with a dream.

Long before Martin Luther King, Joseph, the eleventh son of Jacob, had a dream. And he dreamt about himself and his brothers working in the field, as he told them the next day:

“Behold, we were binding sheaves in the midst of the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright, and behold, your sheaves surrounded it and prostrated themselves to my sheaf.”⁴

The brothers didn't much like what Joseph's dream seemed to be implying, so they asked him for clarification: *“Will you be king over us? Will you indeed rule over us?”⁵*

Then Joseph had another dream:

And he related it to his brothers, saying, “Behold, I have dreamed another dream, and behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were prostrating themselves to me.” And he told this to his father and to his brothers, and his father rebuked him and said to him, “What is this dream that you have dreamed? Will we come – I, your mother, and your brothers – to prostrate ourselves to the ground before you?”⁶

Jacob rebuked the boy for sharing these visions because he didn't want the brothers to be jealous of Joseph. But it didn't work, as the Torah relates:

His brothers became very jealous of him, but his father preserved the matter (shomar et hadavar).⁷

⁴Genesis 37:7.

⁵Genesis 37:8.

⁶Genesis 37:9-10.

⁷Genesis 37:11.

What does all of this mean?

First of all, how is it possible for the brothers to be jealous, aren't they all holy men? Second of all, what is the meaning of the two dreams – would all the tribes bow to Joseph? But most of all: what does it mean that, after his brothers became jealous of him, his father *preserved the matter*?

8. The Midrash

The Midrash hones in on the words, *his father preserved the matter*, and says something very interesting:

[This means that Jacob] took a quill (or a pen) and wrote down which hour, which day, and which place.⁸

After the dreams, Jacob took pen in hand to write down exactly when and where this occurrence happened. Initially, this act seems perplexing. Why was the exact moment and place in time of this single episode so important? Why did Jacob focus on those details instead of what actually transpired?

9. The Birth of Individuality

One beautiful explanation given for this:⁹

The sibling rivalry between Joseph and his brothers – which began with Joseph's dreams and his brothers reaction in this week's Parsha – was a watershed moment in Jewish history.

This moment in time gave birth to the diversity of the Jewish people, as reflected in the differences between the twelve tribes.

⁸Genesis Rabba 84:11.

⁹For the following, see Likkutei Sichot vol. 25, pp. 204-212 and sources cited there.

Until this point, each prior generation had its single spiritual leader: Abraham, followed by Isaac, followed by Jacob. But with the twelve tribes began a new stage in divine service – one that diverged into twelve different paths. Every tribe has its unique way of serving the Creator.

For the first time in Jewish history, distinct paths of divine service were forged. Each path of each tribe was righteous in its own right, each one a legitimate way of serving G-d in a powerful way. When there was one patriarch, there was one voice articulating one vision. Now with twelve tribes, there were suddenly many voices, many sheaves, many bundles, many planets, articulating the one vision.

This diversity is what led to Joseph's brothers' jealousy: It is wrong to think that the jealousy of these holy men was of the petty sort. They were people whose every fiber was committed to G-d. Rather, their envy is called "holy envy," as in the envy of scholars which motivate them to grow – *kinas sofrim tarbeh chochma*,¹⁰ the way one righteous soul is "envious" of another.¹¹

So though they had diverse approaches, each path, each sheave, each bundle of grain (so to speak) bows to one vision.

On the other hand, however, this "positive" diversity has the potential of leading to divisiveness. Their so-called holy jealousy had the potential of giving birth to different opinions and ultimately to conflicts. With all the importance of individuality, care has to be taken that it not turn into anarchy, with every individual choosing a separate path to follow.

Since this episode of Joseph and his brothers was the birth of spiritual diversity, with all its blessings and challenges, and its potential for it being misunderstood and abused, and it veering off in the wrong direction and leading to divisiveness – Jacob understood that at this watershed moment he needed to infuse this diversity with a safeguard that would preserve the integrity of the one vision where all the paths converge.

¹⁰ Bava Batra 21a. See Ohr HaTorah Breishis 218a.

¹¹ See Bava Batra 75a. Likkutei Sichot ibid. p. 209 and sources cited there.

Jacob therefore “*preserved the matter*” – he “took a quill and wrote down which hour, which day, and which place” this historical moment transpired, he preserved the singular moment and place, the singular vision, the point of departure from which all paths diverge, so that no matter how many voices, how many siblings, the core voice of oneness remains the same.

Jacob’s effort was like the artist preserving the integrity of one exquisite piece of art, ensuring that no matter how many colors, shapes and hues, they all serve to reflect one beautiful portrait.

This is why, when Joseph’s *brothers became very jealous of him*, then and specifically then *his father preserved the matter*. Jacob felt compelled to document the *davar*, the matter, the word – the date, time, and place.

Jacob did not relate to division. As far as he was concerned, there was simply one objective and everyone had to do his part to fulfill it. Jacob knew only the service, not the individuality or uniqueness of the server. So Jacob took a pen and wrote down, not the narrative of Joseph’s dream, but all of the elements of service as articulated in *one* specific moment and *one* place in time when this dream occurred. This effectively demonstrated for all generations that there is only one truth, and that all the dissenting voices exist simply to implement oneness.

Thus Jacob documented for all eternity the oneness of the moment and the oneness of the place – the unity and reality of the oneness of Israel.

10. Two Brothers (Story)

Many years later, two brothers lived and farmed on that site. One was married and had a large family, while the other was single. They lived in close proximity to each other, and each worked his land growing wheat. When harvest time arrived, each was blessed with a bountiful crop and piled up his grain for long-term storage.

The unmarried brother, observing his good fortune, thought to himself that G-d had blessed him with more than he needed, whereas his brother, who had a large family, could surely use more. He arose in the middle of the night and secretly took from his grain and put it in his brother's pile.

Similarly, the married brother thought to himself that he was fortunate to have children who will care for him in his old age, while his brother will depend on what he saved. He, too, arose in the middle of the night and quietly transferred grain from his pile to his brother's.

In the morning, each pondered why there was no noticeable decrease in his own pile, and so they repeated the transfer the next night. These nocturnal activities went on for several nights, until one night the brothers bumped into each other. In that instant, in the dark of night, the glow of brotherly love lit up the mountain sky; they each understood what the other had been doing and fell into each other's arms in a loving embrace.

11. Practically Speaking: When Dissenting, Preserve the Matter

The problem today is not dissenting voices – that is normal when you have many siblings. The problem today is that we sometimes forget to preserve the matter – or, more literally, *shomar et hadavar*, to preserve the “word.”

Jacob had a good memory. More than wanting to write down the exact date, time and place for himself, Jacob took pen in hand to write down the fact that he, Jacob/Israel, the father of the Nation of Israel, had preserved, the matter, the word, the vision that every single unique voice and perspective is meant to perpetuate.

The tribes were selfless, they served a higher cause; they served a divine vision, never serving themselves.¹² I submit here that if every single Jew today approached his or her individual path in this way, then the individuality would not divide us but preserve the matter, the word, as Jacob demonstrated to us.

The problems occur only when we place the servant over the service. The key is to make primary the one vision as articulated in the Torah, and to see the various individual paths for implementing that vision as implementers of that primary unity.

Jacob wrote the matter down to preserve it, in order to ensure that we never make our individual paths more primary than the one divine vision. And, we the Children of Israel, we never will.

12. Chanukah

Nothing in life is random, certainly not something holy. Tonight, after Havdalah, we light the first Chanukah candle, Shabbat transitioning into Chanukah.

The Temple Menorah – which the Chanukah Menorah seeks to commemorate – perhaps more than any other Jewish symbol or mitzvah, exemplifies the idea we have been discussing here today: many voices sharing the same message. Harmony within diversity.

On one hand, the Temple Menorah has many branches, on the other, it was one solid entity.

We Jews each have our individual branch in the Menorah, and our individual lamps will light up the night of this cold world. Yet, we can never forget that each branch and lamp is part of one Menorah, made of one solid piece of gold.

¹² This principle sheds powerful light on all of the seemingly perplexing actions between the tribes and Joseph, a conversation beyond the scope of this sermon.

Reminding us of Jacob's vision, the Menorah ensures that each of our individual branches and paths will never lead to dissent but to a synergy of greater unity and light.

May this usher in the year when the literal Menorah in the Holy Temple will once again be kindled by the High Priest daily, as a *ner tomid*, a perpetual light for all to see. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah!

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