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*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

**Parashat Vayigash**

*B'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadel lihyot ish.* In a place where there are no people, try to be a man. So advises Hillel in Pirkei Avot. Hillel seems to be saying that being an “*ish*” is a good thing. And I suppose that as we read the story of Yosef, we can credit him with “manning-up” to that challenge in a positive sense. There are any number of early commentaries that consider the word *ish* to indicate something super-human as well. Before being sold into slavery, when Yosef becomes lost on his way to find his brothers at his father’s command, he meets an *ish* who gives him directions. Rashi tells us that it was the angel Gavriel. When Jacob wrestles with the *ish*, it is also perceived as an angelic visitation. The *anashim* who visit Lot are also angelic messengers.

It might be surprising then that Joseph’s brothers are referred to as *anashim* repeatedly throughout last week’s *parasha* of *Mikketz*, until Joseph’s revelation to them in our *parasha* of *Vayigash*.

טו) ויקחו האנשים את המנחה הזאת ומשנה כסף לקחו בידם ואת בנימן...

And the men took the gift; and double the money they took in their hand, and

...Benjamin

טז) וירא יוסף אתם את בנימן ויאמר לאשר על ביתו הבא את האנשים הביתה וטבת טבח והכן כי אתי יאכלו האנשים בצהריום:

And when Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the one in charge of his house, “Bring the men into the house, and slaughter animals and prepare (them), for “the men will eat with me (this) noon

יח) ויראו האנשים כי הובאו בית יוסף...

...And the men were afraid, because they were brought into Joseph’s house

לג) וישבו לפניו הבכר כבכרתו והצעיר כצערתו ויתמהו האנשים איש אל רעהו:

And they sat before him, the first-born according to his birthright, and the youngest according to his youth; and the men marveled with one another.

(Genesis 43:15, 16, 18, 33)

If we look back closely at Chapter 42, verses 3, 7, and 8, we’ll see that until Jacob’s sons return to Egypt, this time with Binyamin, they are referred to as *achim* or *achei Yosef* – Joseph’s brothers.

ג) וירדו אחי יוסף עשרה לשבר בר ממצרים:

...And ten brothers of Joseph went down to buy corn in Egypt

ז) וירא יוסף את אחיו ויכרם...

...And Joseph saw his brothers and he recognized them

ח) ויכר יוסף את אחיו...

...And Joseph recognized his brothers

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But from the time they leave their father Jacob the second time, headed for Egypt, the brothers are referred to by the Torah only as *anashim*.

Why this sudden change?

One answer is that this is a very sophisticated literary tool. To heighten the impact of the story, the Torah begins referring to the brothers the way they are viewed by outsiders, by the Egyptians, for instance, and the way they *think* they are viewed by “the man” who is actually their brother. They are unknown “others,” identified only in that they are human beings ...*anashim*. Indeed, they are on their way to try to prove to *ha'ish*, the man, that they are real people with families and problems of their own, and not the spies he accuses them of being.

By speaking of the brothers as they perceive themselves through the eyes of others, the Torah increases the tension as we build to the climax of Joseph’s revelation. The juxtaposition of Joseph as *ha'ish*, the man, and his brothers as *anashim*, men, is almost unbearable as Joseph plays out his seemingly harsh game.

If we use Hillel’s standard for being a man, it is Joseph who qualifies. He is repeatedly tested, from the beginning of the story until his ascendancy over Egypt. It is he who refers to God’s role in all of his contacts with the Egyptian hierarchy from Potifar’s wife, to Pharaoh’s servants in prison, to Pharaoh himself. And it is he who assures his brothers in our *parasha*, after he reveals himself to them, that they need not fear for all of this was God’s plan.

ה (ועתה אל תעצבו ואל יחר בעיניכם כי מכרתם אותי הנה כי למחיה שלחני אלהים לפניכם:

But now, don’t be saddened, and don’t be angry with yourselves that you sold me to here; for in order to preserve life, God sent me before you. (Genesis 45:5)

On the other hand, the Torah implies that the brothers had not earned the right to be called brothers during the test. Until the moment that Yehudah stands up to *ha'ish* and offers himself to save Binyamin and shows compassion for their father’s suffering, these were simply men of no particular merit. Once they pass Joseph’s test, they are immediately and ever after again referred to as *achei Yosef*, Joseph’s brothers. In fact, when Joseph could no longer contain himself after hearing Judah’s plea he cries:

הוציאו כל איש מעלי ולא עמד איש אתו בהתודע יוסף אל אחיו:

“Remove every man from me!” And no man stood before him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. (Genesis 45:1)

In this case it was the stranger, the other, the anonymous *ish* who had to be removed from before Joseph so that the only ones left were family.

In referring to Joseph’s brothers only as *anashim* during their test, the Torah emphasizes the “otherness” that characterized these men, until they passed the test that qualified them for “brotherhood”.

I suspect that the Torah is not only telling a riveting tale of historic import; it is also teaching our modern Jewish community that God would prefer us to behave as *achim*, rather than *anashim*.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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