

**VAYEISHEV (GENESIS 37:1-40:23)**

## Pro-choice!

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Jacob's sons were jealous of their second-youngest brother Joseph. Due to a misinterpretation of each other's intentions, the brothers thought that he was "out to get them." They assumed that he wanted to be the only one of Jacob's sons who would become a father of the nation of Israel. (There was ample precedent for such a concept. Isaac was the only one of Abraham's eight sons who carried on the tradition of their father. Of Isaac's two sons, only Jacob led the Nation of Israel. Joseph's brothers, all of whom were destined to become the Tribes of Israel, felt that he was looking to eliminate them as well.) Therefore, they plotted to kill him. (An explanation of their actions can be read at "Blessings and Curses on the West Bank".)

One voice of reason was Reuben, the oldest brother. He advised against physically murdering him. According to the Talmud, the pit contained poisonous snakes and scorpions. Reuben suggested throwing Joseph into a pit and letting nature take its course. The brothers would thereby avoid doing the dirty work themselves.

Big deal! What difference does it make whether you kill someone with a weapon or you throw him in front of a train to be run over? Regardless of who pulls the trigger, the victim is equally dead!!

The Torah tells us that Reuben's intentions were honorable. His plan was *to rescue him from his brothers and bring him back to his father*. (Genesis 37:22)

Bring him back to his father? Did Reuben actually intend to deliver a dead or dying snake-bitten, scorpion-stung favorite son to Jacob?! What was he thinking?!

The NETZIV, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin of Volozhin, answers this question, based upon a statement from the Zohar. Reuben knew that since Joseph was righteous, G-d would protect him from the snakes and scorpions in the pit.

But what about the brothers? If G-d would save righteous Joseph from the attacks of wild animals, wouldn't He also protect him from his brothers? (In other words, why does G-d sometimes let bad things happen to good people?)

Rabbi Berlin answers that one of the main tenets of our faith is the fact that G-d gives every human being the option of choosing between good and evil. We are not robots (as the angel said in last week's Torah Talk "Name that Angel") who are programmed to always do the right thing and never stray from the path

of righteousness. If we WERE so programmed, there would be no such thing as good and evil, because we would be acting by rote, not by active decision. If a person decides to sin, G-d does not stand in the way. He allows us to make our choice. If we decide improperly, we will have to face the consequences later, in this world or in the next!

Snakes and scorpions, on the other hand, act upon instinct rather than judgment. Therefore, Reuben reasoned, there was a better chance that G-d would "bend nature," and prevent them from acting upon their natural tendencies to attack.

In short, Reuben assumed that Joseph was safer in a pit of poisonous vipers. G-d **might** miraculously save him from the snakes, but He would not prevent Joseph's brothers from sinning.

One of the differences between people and animals is that animals act upon instinct. If you put a lamb in front of a hungry lion, the lion will not show compassion. That is nature. We, on the other hand, possess the G-d-given ability to overcome our instincts and emotions.

G-d will, on occasion, manipulate nature; but he will not manipulate our thoughts and actions. He will not stop us from sinning if that is what we want to do. (But He WILL assist us in our desire to do what is right, if that is what we want to do.)

When a person chooses to do what is right, there is nothing in the world as great as a human. If he chooses to do what is wrong, there is nothing worse.

Have a great Shabbos.

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