

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

## Nowhere Man

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

I was listening to a "Torah tape" in the car last Friday when the "news alarm" went off. I had set the alarm clock in my cell phone to me know when it was two minutes before the hour. I wanted to know what was going on in the world. There was, after all, a war going on. There were constitutional issues of military tribunals and detaining terror suspects. We're looking for anthrax in the mail and Osama in his rat hole. I HAD to listen to the news.

The announcer at WCBS told me that it was eight o'clock, and then I heard it -- "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." I was surprised because I thought I was listening to a news station; why are they playing music?! I was waiting for news from George W. Instead I got news from George H. After the musical introduction, the anchorman told us that now "the world gently weeps" at the loss of George Harrison. He spent a minute or two of the five-minute news report talking about the Beatles, and finally moved on to discuss a bit about Afghanistan.

[I want to be perfectly clear; the death of ANYONE at the age of 58 is a tragedy. Mr. Harrison was a musician of world renown, and his demise was certainly newsworthy. But the main story on the "World News Roundup?!"]

This, of course, was nothing compared to the reaction of the world to the shocking murder of fellow Beatle John Lennon several years ago. New York and the world went into mourning over the death of an icon.

Lennon and Harrison et al were the heroes of the '60's and '70's. They were the architects of the Woodstock Generation. Their lyrics and lifestyle ("All Ya Need is...Lust") celebrated the drug and free love/lust culture and made it acceptable in the minds of many.

Who are our heroes today? To whom do we turn when seeking role models for our children and ourselves? Do we hope that our children will grow up to be like baseball hero Mark McGuire, who sells autographs for free cups of Starbucks? (See "Big Mac Strikes Out in the Garden of Eden".) Like the rich and famous whose dysfunctional lives stare us in the face from the tabloid covers at the checkout counter? How about the Clintons? O.J.? Is there ANYONE out there whom we can encourage our children to emulate???

(By the way, speaking of heroes, shortly after 9/11, there were two cartoons that appeared in the New York Post that were widely distributed. One, entitled "The Other Twin Towers of New York," shows the New York skyline with a skyscraper-sized policeman next to a skyscraper-sized fireman. The other one depicts Superman, Batman, and Spiderman asking a fireman for his autograph. Even now, three months later, these cartoons bring a chill to my spine and tears to my eyes. You can see these cartoons here. Select September 14 and 19, 2001)

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Did you read about John Walker Lindh? He's the 20-year-old Taliban soldier from California, who now calls himself Abdul Hamid. You really have to wonder about what values his parents taught him. His father is a Catholic corporate lawyer. His mother is a commercial photographer who, according to the New York Times, has "dabbled in Buddhism." Rather than push their values on their son, they encouraged him to "choose his own spiritual path." The closest they came to giving him a role model was naming their then-Catholic son "John." Why John? The Baptist, perhaps? Nope. An Adams or a Kennedy? Try again. Give up? That's right, the Times article tells us that when choosing a name for their future terrorist, they decided to name him after John Lennon.

John/Abdul fulfills "All You Need is Love" by celebrating the carnage at the World Trade Center. How does "Give Peace a Chance" lead to joining the Taliban, who expressed its love for all people this week by stopping a bus and cutting off the noses of men who had shaved or trimmed their beards?

It has been said that tolerance is a virtue for those who have no principles. Perhaps that's an overstatement, but not by much. When you live a life that accepts ALL values, it means you have NO values. If everything and every philosophy is right, then there is no such thing as wrong. Would it have been so terrible if John Walker Lindh had been encouraged by his parents to be a devout Catholic, a "righteous Gentile?" Instead, they gave him no guidance. They told him, "Whatever you do is fine." The result was treason.

[I AGAIN WANT TO BE PERFECTLY CLEAR: I do not mean to oversimplify this painful situation. I am certainly not trying to suggest that naming a child after a rock star is what made him into a bloodthirsty fanatic. Nor do I wish to absolve the son of blame for his criminal actions. What I am suggesting is that this is an extreme illustration of the consequences of lack of value instruction by parents.]

Joseph was in trouble. He was in Egypt, far from his family. He had been sold as a slave, and was the head servant in the home of an Egyptian nobleman. He was bright, handsome and charismatic. He had caught the attention of his master's wife and was now the subject of her advances.

Joseph was firm. *He said to his master's wife, "...no one has more status in this house than I. He (your husband) has denied me nothing! How then can I perpetrate this great evil?! It would be a sin against G-d!!"* (Genesis 39:8-9)

She wouldn't take no for an answer. She tried every possible way to seduce him. She dressed attractively and tried to convince him that no one would find out. She threatened him and attempted to bribe him, all to no avail. Joseph was a Jew -- actually a Hebrew -- the term "Jew" didn't exist yet. He would not violate the teachings of the Torah.

Human nature being what it is, Joseph's resolve began to weaken. The daily onslaught took its toll. He was alone in the house with his master's wife. It was an Egyptian religious holiday, and everyone had gone to the temple. She had stayed home, claiming to be sick. Joseph began to waver. He was considering the possibility of compromising his moral values when he saw it -- he saw the picture.

A picture of his father appeared before him. He suddenly remembered his father -- his role model. "What would my father say?" he asked himself. "What would he do in a situation like this?"

The crisis was over. He ran away from the woman and saved himself from transgression and eternal humiliation.

One question. He saw the image of his father. He based his decision on the values of his role model, his hero. What if Joseph had seen an image of John Lennon? What advice would Joseph have received from THAT paragon of virtue and self-control?

Walk into the home of a Torah-observant family. You will see pictures of Torah scholars. Go to the Bris of a Torah-observant family and listen to the names that are given to their children. A month ago, the world said farewell to the hundred-and-?-year-old Torah sage Rabbi Eliezer Shach, of Blessed Memory. By now, there are dozens, if not hundreds of newborn Eliezers whose parents pray that their little boy will grow up to be a Torah scholar.

The Talmud tells us *"in every generation one is required to ask himself, 'when will my actions reach the level of the actions of my ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'"*\* In reality, this is a naive question. The Torah teaches that the previous generations of prophets occupied an exalted spiritual position that we can never hope to duplicate. They were people who saw miracles and spoke with G-d. There is no comparison between them and us.

The message, however, is that we must set our sights high. If we aim to emulate mediocre people, we will, at best, accomplish mediocrity. If we reach for the stars, we will not get there. But we will hopefully surpass the bounds of mediocrity. My middle name is *Avraham*. I can never hope to achieve Abraham's level of righteousness and holiness.

But that doesn't exempt me from my obligation to try.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

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