

VAYEISHEV (GENESIS 37:1-40:23)

## Yes, Brothers, Joseph DOES Love You!

2006 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

*These are the chronicles of Jacob: Joseph, age 17, was a shepherd with his brothers... Joseph would bring evil reports about them to his father... and they hated him; they could not speak to him peaceably. (Genesis, 37: 2, 4)*

***(Before I continue with this article, I should make my annual “Joseph-and-his-brothers disclaimer”: I am always apprehensive about citing Biblical or Talmudic references that are critical of Biblical personalities. We must be extremely wary of viewing the Patriarchs in the same way that we look at our contemporaries. It is important to remember that Jacob was a man who wrestled with an angel. Judah and Joseph and his brothers were chosen by G-d to lead the Tribes of Israel. These people were barely mortal; the Talmud says that we would be more accurate in viewing them almost as angels. When the Torah speaks of misdeeds by these spiritual giants, it refers to conduct that might not even be recognizable to us as inappropriate. Rather, it is just that G-d holds the righteous to a higher standard. Therefore, actions that are “microscopically” incorrect are magnified in perspective. For a fuller discussion of this concept, see “Holy Gangsters” and “Watch your Step!”)-----***

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Joseph’s brothers never did understand him. They didn’t realize how much he loved them. They thought he was out to get them. They didn’t understand that when he discussed their shortcomings (as he perceived them!) with their father, it was with the intent of getting them to correct their ways. He wanted them to be the best they could be. They assumed that he was out to discredit them in their father’s eyes. They thought that he wanted to eliminate them from the Nation of Israel, making himself the sole heir to the legacy of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore, they fought him.

Even years later, in Egypt, after the death of their father, they thought he wanted to hurt them. Joseph loved his brothers. He honored them and he respected them. He had to explain to them that everything was part of G-d’s plan, and it was all for the best. (See “Payback Time”.)

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The eleventh son of Jacob was the first Joseph to be misunderstood. But he was not the last.

When I was a student in Jerusalem over a quarter century ago, I occasionally had the opportunity to visit Rabbi Yoseph Sholom Elyashiv, Shlit"a. Rabbi Elyashiv, now in his nineties, is, as he was then, basically the final word in Israel in matters of Jewish Law. He used to take an hour or two out of his day full of Torah study to make himself available for people to come and seek his advice in all areas of Jewish thought and practice.

When entering this great Torah Sage's presence, I always felt like I was addressing a king. No, he didn't have airs about him; on the contrary, he was the essence of piety and humility. However, I always felt that there was something regal about him.

One time, I went with my wife to ask him a question. I asked her to come along because it was to discuss an issue that would affect her as well as myself and our future family. However, I had never seen a woman go to meet with Rav Elyashiv. In many Torah circles, it is not common for women to meet with Torah Sages.

I had planned on doing all of the talking. But it was not to be. The Rav turned to my wife a few times and asked her opinion. He wanted to be sure that we were on the same page before he issued his ruling. When we left, we knew clearly what the right thing to do was; we had received advice from one of the greatest contemporary Sages of Israel.

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The Sages of Israel are our greatest national treasure. In our murky path through life, our leaders serve as a beacon, showing us the way, applying Torah Law and thought to the modern dilemmas we face.

Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with my assessment. Like Joseph of old, this Yoseph is maligned and despised by many. Some of his biggest critics are in the secular Israeli media. I will not dignify them by quoting or linking to them. I will, however, discuss the current issue that has irked the anti-religious press.

The State of Israel is a secular state. There are no pretenses of fidelity to Torah values. However, at the time of the founding of the State, there were certain understandings between the founders of the State and its religious citizens. For example, in Israel, as in the U.S. (when the draft was in effect) and elsewhere, "divinity students" are exempt from the military service. Were you aware of the fact that Israeli Prime Ministers do not publicly desecrate the Sabbath? What they do in their private residence is their business, but even anti-religious Prime Ministers like David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir did not ride in cars on Shabbos. The government doesn't engage in "non-essential" activities on Shabbos.

As well, EL AL Airlines, which was, until recently, owned by the government, usually doesn't fly on Shabbos. Even now, as a privately owned company, that is supposedly the policy. There have been, as there should be, some exceptions. If lives are in danger, there is a Mitzvah to fly people to safety. The

problem is that El AL is not limiting its exceptions to situations of danger.

Two weeks ago EL AL didn't fly for two days due to a strike. Once the strike was over, they decided to make up for lost time by flying on Friday night. This was not a life-or-death emergency; it was a financial decision.

EL AL has repeatedly made the verbal claim to the Torah community that it is a Sabbath observant company. They have repeatedly broken that commitment. The Torah community has now asked EL AL to sign a binding legal document obligating itself not to fly on Shabbos without a ruling from a rabbi acceptable to the Torah community. EL AL continues to maintain that it is a Sabbath-observing company, but refuses to sign the agreement.

Therefore, leaders of the Torah community are telling the community to take their business elsewhere.

Rabbi Elyashiv and other sages have signed a declaration, which has not yet been officially released, that people should not fly with EL AL until EL AL agrees to be legally bound to the policy that they claim to maintain. Negotiations are continuing, but EL AL refuses to sign the agreement.

Watch for lower prices from EL AL. Cancellations continue to flow in. While the ban on flying with EL AL has not yet officially gone into effect, the community is demonstrating its loyalty to its leaders and to Sabbath observance. Many customers are telling their travel agents to book them with any airline but EL AL.

Here we can see a big difference between EL AL and its customers. EL AL broke its promise not to fly on Shabbos in order to save a few dollars. Customers in droves are willingly paying cancellation fees and flying with other carriers, rather than go against the wishes of our Torah leaders.

Some have threatened that if the Torah community, which is the source of 20%-30% of EL AL's business, decides to go through with the boycott, EL AL may respond by dropping Sabbath observance entirely, and start to fly seven days a week. Former Chief Rabbi Ovadya Yosef (another Joseph!) has responded that we are not allowed to sin in order to prevent another Jew from sinning.

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The criticism is already flowing in. Who are these rabbis to tell an independent business how to run their airline? Why can't these religious Jews mind their own business? If they want to keep Shabbos they are entitled to, but what right do they have to force their beliefs on others?

Jewish anti-Semitism is alive and well. The websites of some of the "Jewish" media outlets have comment boards filled with responses like, "Let them fly w/other companies... Let us finally enjoy a quiet fly w/o their unbearable use of the plane as a big Yeshiva. Let us all decide that from now on we

only fly EL AL in support of its brave stand and let them join the club of boycott-hating arab (sic) countries.."

Or, "Yesterday I booked a trip to the UK. I normally fly with British Airways, precisely because I don't like being disturbed by fat, smelly primitives who insist on making a lot of noise during their illusory interactions with some deity, and whinge (sic) about seating arrangements. (sic) But because of what's been happening lately, I decided to book with EL AL."

Or, "Dear EL AL, Cut your losses by flying 7 days a week like any other normal airline and serve proper milk with the coffee to anyone who asks for it."

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Where will this dispute lead? Probably to financial disaster to the airline.

This is not a new issue. Back in September of 1982, Torah leaders issued a ban on flying EL AL due to Sabbath desecration. EL AL then suffered several setbacks due to strikes by employees. These employees demanded, among other things, that the airline fly on Shabbos so that they could earn astronomical rates of overtime. Various "coincidental" labor disputes led to a wildcat strike and a complete halt to ticket sales and reservations right before Rosh Hashanah, in the peak of the travel season. Air traffic into Ben Gurion airport continued as usual, with the EL AL ticket counters sitting empty. By October, the company was in receivership.

The court receiver announced that that EL AL's new flight schedule would exclude Sabbath flights, and the court approved. The rabbinic ban on flying with EL AL was lifted. After four months on the ground and a loss of about \$100 million, EL AL resumed flying.

In spite of the doom-and-gloom prediction of losses due to Sabbath observance, EL AL came back amazingly. The operational deficit, which in the past had reached as high as \$45 million, fell by over \$20 million within a year. In 1984, EL AL turned a profit for the first time in five years. On Erev Rosh Hashanah of that year, the receiver announced, "I hope that our relatively good year is connected to closing EL AL on Shabbat."

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Our People have given up much in order to observe the Sabbath. Many immigrants to the U.S. used to look for new jobs every Monday after being fired for not showing up on Saturday. Senator Lieberman (another Joseph!) has demonstrated that Shabbos is more important than personal ambition. (See "Way to Go, Joe! (Lieberman)".)

We believe that our income for the year is determined on Rosh Hashanah. All we gain by working on Shabbos is that it takes us longer to earn the same amount of money. (or less!)

It has been said that more than the Jews have kept Shabbos, Shabbos has kept the Jews. It is our commitment to Shabbos, among other things, that has kept us who we are. If we abandon that which makes us unique, what is the point of having Israel? Our right to Israel is based upon the fact the G-d tells us, in the Torah, that Israel is ours. It is that same G-d, Who tells us, in that same Torah, that we must observe the Sabbath.

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Isn't it amazing that we are about to begin the celebration of Chanukah? Chanukah, contrary to popular belief, (see "The December Dilemma -- Bah! Humbug!") is about the commitment of Torah-dedicated Jews who made great sacrifices in order to continue observing the Torah, rather than watering it down with non-Jewish culture. (Like December "holiday parties.")

EL AL is, without doubt, the most targeted airline in the world. Security is nice. But does it not behoove us to do whatever we can to insure that G-d watches over us in everything we do? (No, I am not, G-d forbid, suggesting any cause-and-effect. I am not a prophet. I am simply saying, as our Torah Leaders have said, that as we ask G-d for His protection, the least we can do is listen to His Commandments.)

Are the religious Jews engaging in religious coercion? One could make that argument if they wanted to. But there is another way to look at it. Why should religious Jews spend their money to support a business that sees money as more important than Shabbos?

Let me be clear. The State of Israel is in a constant state of war. When lives are in danger, Shabbos considerations MUST be set aside. But this is NOT about danger; this is about the financial bottom line. If EL AL's bottom line is more important than Sabbath observance, that is their decision. Not supporting such a decision is OUR bottom line. I believe that it is a Mitzvah to support the Israeli economy in any way we can. But if my support of EL AL is support of a Jewish company that doesn't care about Shabbos, I'd rather walk!

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Joseph's brothers despised him because he thought he was out to get them. In the end, our people survived a famine by settling in Egypt, due only to Joseph's concern for his brothers and their families. Rabbis Yoseph Sholom Elayashiv, Rabbi Ovadya Yoseph, and all the other "Josephs" care deeply about the well-being of ALL of Israel, religious or otherwise.

EL AL, although it is now a private company, is still viewed as the airline of Israel. The Land of Israel was given to the People of Israel as a place to observe the Torah of Israel. If the Torah is not important, why bother?

Have a great Shabbos.

