

## JOSEPH'S, AND OUR, YOUTH

בראשית לז:ב. אלה תלדות יעקב יוסף בן שבע עשרה שנה היה רעה את אחיו בצאן  
והוא נער את בני בלהה ואת בני זלפה נשי אביו ויבא יוסף את דבתם רעה אל  
אביהם:

These are the generations of Jacob: when Joseph was seventeen years old, being a shepherd, he was with his brothers with the flocks, and *he was a lad with [a helper to] the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah*, his father's wives; and Joseph brought evil tales about them to their father.

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Youth has much to do with Joseph's fate -- his sale and exile, his fall and rise. He exhibits some of the wonderful qualities of youth - curiosity, dreaminess, exuberance -- while also displaying the naivete, self-absorption and impulsiveness that characterize its missteps. He is punished harshly for his youthful mistakes, perhaps unfairly. He's just a kid. Blessedly, as he matures, he rallies from the pit of his punishment, because he is extraordinary gifted and bright.

This makes me think about the many youth in our world who aren't so lucky, who are buried in that pit for life, unable to recover from the mistakes of their youth. Kids in the inner city, sent to juvenile detention facilities for minor offenses. Students in the suburbs, reputations sullied forever by one instance of cheating. And so many more.

One of the messages I glean from this parasha is that our approach to kids can never be primarily punitive. Our approach always, even when our kids do wrong, as is the sacred privilege of their childhood testing ground, needs to be educative, and needs to reflect the understanding of who they are and what they need as young people.

The Biblical commentators, explicating the direct mention of Joseph's youth in the above verse, make a great case for the educational mandates of youth -- the learning that contributes, in the long run, to lives of *menschlichkeit* and *derekh erez* that we would like to see our children lead. What are some of these mandates?

אבן עזרא

TUTELAGE, BY PARENTS, SIBLINGS AND OTHERS

והוא נער את בני בלהה ואת בני זלפה - בעבור היותו קטן שמוהו בני השפחות שמש להם כי אם ישרת אחיו בני הגבירה לא היה דבר רע וזאת היא דבתם רעה.

Because he was young, the sons of the handmaids *made him a helper* to them.

If he had been assisting his brothers the sons of the mistresses, it would not have been a bad thing

[report], therefore *the bad* report.

אונקלוס

כי מיום היותו נער הוא עמהם, הם גדלוהו כאב והם ישרתוהו...

From the time he was a lad he was in their company, *they raised him as a father would*, and they served him.

רמב"ן

#### SUPERVISION AND SENSITIVITY, BY PARENTS, SIBLINGS AND OTHERS

ומשפטו והוא נער והוא את בני בלהה ואת בני זלפה נשי אביו, יאמר כי הוא נער, והוא עם בני בלהה ועם בני זלפה נשי אביו תמיד, לא יפרד מהם בעבור נערותו, כי להם ציווה אביהם שישמרוהו וישרתוהו....

The verse thus states that *because he was a lad he was constantly with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, never being separated from them on account of his youth, for their father had commanded them to watch over him and serve him....*

ספורנו

#### EMPOWERMENT, TO LEAD AND TEACH

הָיָה רָעָה אֶת אֶחָיו בְּצֹאן -- הָיָה מְנַהִיג וּמוֹרֶה אוֹתָם בְּמִלְאֶכֶת מְרֻעָה הַצֹּאן.

*He led them and taught them the work of shepherding.*

רש"י

#### UNCOMMON SENSITIVITY

את בני בלהה - כלומר ורגיל אצל בני בלהה, לפי שהיו אחיו מבזין אותן והוא מקרבן:

with the sons of Bilhah: That is to say, *he was frequently with the sons of Bilhah, because his [other] brothers would demean them, while he acted friendly toward them.* [From Tanchuma Vayeshev 7]

רש"י

## EXPERIMENTATION

והוא נער - שהיה עושה מעשה נערות, מתקן בשערו ממשמש בעיניו, כדי שיהיה נראה יפה:

and he was a lad: *He behaved childishly*, fixing his hair and touching up his eyes so that he would appear handsome. [From Gen. Rabbah 84:7]

ספורנו

## TATTLE-TALING

והוא נער -- ומפני נערותו חטא להביא דבת אחיו

It was *because of his youth that he sinned in bringing bad reports* about his brothers.

רמב"ן

## PHYSICAL WEAKNESS

כי בעבור היותו קטן מכולם יקראנו כן, לומר כי לא היה מתחזק כאחיו ויצטרך להיותו עם בני בלהה וזלפה מפני נערותו... והוא נער והוא מרבי עם בני בלהה....

*He was not as sturdy as his brothers* and therefore needed to be with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah on account of his youth....

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Tutored, supervised and empowered by others, blessed with the innate curiosity and sensitivity of youth, Joseph's story could be much more positive, much more quickly. Alas, he is not given the slack to be a callow and maturing young person, both emotionally and physically. In the Rabbi's view, Jacob's primary failing in this regard is that he places too much of the educative responsibility for Joseph in the hands of the brothers, and not enough in his own. Jacob leaves Joseph alone to learn his lessons -- taking a remarkably distant hands-off approach to his son's excesses, and berates him when Joseph instead needs his paternal tutelage and compassion. *Am I and your brothers all to serve you?*

We've raised, and we're raising, kids at home, and we are all raising a village here at shul. Blessedly, there are tens of Josephs amongst us who need us, as exemplars, teachers, empowers, learners and bearers of sensitivity for them as youth. That's not to say our have no responsibilities -- that's a drasha for another time. But we're the parents, we're the adults -- there's enormous responsibility on our shoulders -- and opportunity in front of us -- as we, together, shape our wonderful next generation of Jews.