Being a Supporting Actor
Parashat Vayeishev Gen. 37:1-40:23 5780
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I am a rabbi because of a game of catch I played at camp with a Rabbi more than three times my age. I found love and happiness and my partner in life, because my best friend and my family helped me through a very difficult time. I survived the social pressure cooker of High School because my woodshop teacher took a personal interest in my well being. I am alive today, I truly believe, because an anonymous man pulled me back from the curb as I was about to step into on coming traffic in Manchester, England. (I was looking in the wrong direction for British traffic patterns.

We have all sorts of names for these people in our lives, some call them Guardian Angles, some call them Heroes, our tradition calls them *shlichim*, messengers from God, I call them Supporting Actors. A Rabbi, a Friend, Family, a Teacher, and an Anonymous man, in the movie that is my life, these are the people that have enabled me to play a staring role, these are the people, intentionally or not, that gave the trajectory of my life a nudge at just the right moment that kept it on track or steered it in a new and better direction. If awards were given to supporting actors in life, as they are given to them in the movies, then they are each deserving of the Oscar, for the role they played and for how their playing of that role enabled me to play mine.

Who are the supporting actors in your life? Who are the people past or present that at critical cross roads in your life's journey gave you directions, held your hand and walked a bit of it with you? Who are the people, that upon reflection, were it not for them everything would be different, and so much would not have been possible?

Consider for a moment that story of Joseph and his coat of many colors in this week's Torah Portion Vayeishev Genesis. 37:1-40:23.

Here we meet Joseph, son of Jacob, grandson of Isaac, great grandson of Abraham, by all accounts a leading man in the story of the Jewish people. Joseph in my estimation is the second most pivotal person in Jewish history, the most pivotal is a man, whose name we never know and the Torah never records, but whose role as a supporting actor in one scene of Joseph's life changes the arc of Jewish history.

As we will read in synagogue this week, Joseph goes out searching for his brothers who are supposed to be in the field tending the flock, he searches all the usual places but can't find them. Along the way he meets this man, whose name we never know, the torah refers to him simply as *Ha Ish b'sadeh* (the man in the field). There is an allusion here to the nameless man or angel that Jacob, Joseph's father wrestled with in the previous parsha. The reader takes note, that sometimes when the Torah does not give a character a name that character will come to play a pivotal role in the unfolding story.

Such is the case agin in this instance. The man see's Joseph appearing to be lost and approaches him. He asks: "What are you looking for?" Joseph responds, "I am looking for my brothers. Can you tell me please where they re tending their flock?"

The nameless man remembers seeing Joseph's brothers and overheard them talking about heading toward a place called Dothan. On the anonymous man's advice Joseph seeks his brothers there and finds them. Shockingly, they are not happy to see him, they conspire against him, abuse him, threaten to kill him and eventually sell him into slavery to a band of traveling nomads who are headed to Egypt. Arriving in Egypt; and through a series of events Joseph the boy who was looking for his brothers in a field, becomes the chief advisor to Pharaoh and ascends to the second most powerful position in all of Egypt.

Meanwhile a famine occurs in the land of Israel, and these same brothers are sent by the leader of the Israelites, there father Jacob to find food. They travel to Egypt and this time it is they who are surprised to find their brother, not only alive but in a position to help them. Joseph embraces them, asks after his father and makes all the arrangements for the entire nation of Israel to immigrate to Egypt. His position and power save the Jewish people, and for 400 years they live well in Egypt and thrive.

Then a new Pharaoh comes to power, throws the Israelites into slavery. A prophet named Moses rises from amongst them, frogs, lice, boils, splitting of the Red Sea, and then the giving of the Torah and ultimately the return to Israel. And that's pretty much the story of our people, as the old joke about Jewish history goes, they tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat!

But what about this nameless man, who or what was he?

11th Century scholar Abraham ibn Ezra reads the text in the *p'shat* (straight forward interpretation" and concludes this was a passerby. Rashi on the other hand reads more into it and concludes that the man is [the angel] Gabriel, as it says (Daniel 10:21) 'and the man Gabriel.' He is drawing inference from the definite article that is used to identify "the" man.

The Ramban explains that the man here was an ordinary man (a passerby) yet he was unwittingly fulfilling G-d's design. He was actually "sent' by G-d to guide Joseph, though he himself was not aware of the significance of his actions. In Hebrew the word "malach" means both angel and messenger. Because every "malach," human or supernatural are G-d's messengers activated to implement His will on earth.[1]

Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk, aka The Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859) goes in a completely different direction.

"The angel taught Joseph that whenever one is straying in the ways of life, when one is downtrodden or downcast, one should speak to oneself and clarify for oneself what one is

[1] Ramban on Genesis Chapter 37:15

really asking for/looking for/seeking (מבוקשו), and what one really desires (שאיפתו), so that one can return and first explain to oneself what one needs."

The Kotzker Rebbe and seems to disagree with the Ramban, Rashi and Ibn Ezra – its not a passerby, God or an Angel that points the way, rather he says that the supporting actor in this unfolding mystery is Joseph's inner voice. That sometimes our inner voice can be our own supporting actor.

Whatever or whoever The Man was, were it not for *Ha Ish* the man Joseph met along the way, the man who told Joseph where to find his brothers, how different it all could have and would have been?

We never know in present tense which people or events will be the most instrumental and transformative in our lives, but in hindsight, nothing is clearer. Upon reflection the pieces of the puzzle and that path of our life are perfectly clear, even if they may be filled with uncomfortable observations.

This week's parasha is a reminder to all of us to recognize the supporting actors who have guided us on our path and pointed us in our direction. It compels us to recognize them not only to give them an award and to honor and thank them for the important role that they played, but it teaches us something greater still. That in recognizing the transformative influence of supporting actors in our lives we also become powerfully aware of how important we are in the lives of others and the power each of us has to help our friends, neighbors, even strangers achieve wholeness in life and find what they are looking for.