The Great Nameless People that Change the World
Parashat Vayeishev Gen. 37:1-40:23 5780
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Every generation has its where were you when moment? Some have more than one.
For me it was the Challenger Explosion
For many it was the Kennedy Assassination
For all of us I would venture it was 9/11

Beyond the horror that unifies those moments, the sense of national, continental, global anguish there is something else. Each of those moments and so many others hinge upon the action or in action of often just one person.

With the space shuttle it was the engineer who wrote the memo about how cold would affect the o-ring seals on the fuel tanks. His warning ignored by his superiors.

For the assassination of President Kennedy; it was Lee Harvey Oswald, or Jack Ruby, or the man on the grassy knoll, or Abraham Zapurder who shot the film the that capture the images that are burned in our memory.

9/11 maybe it was the heroism of the passengers and crew on flight 93. Or a nameless first responder that went up the stairs as others came down, or an intelligence analyst or advisor that missed a tell-tale clue as to the plot that was about to unfold.

The point is we know some of their names and some we will never know but we are certain that history hinges on their actions or inactions.

This way of viewing history is called “The Great Man Theory”, a term clearly dated and chauvinistic in its limited conception of the influence of human beings of all genders, but if we can look beyond the 19th century gendered male centric world view, we arrive and a compelling question.

To what extent does the history of the world pivot on the actions of one individual?

In the mid 19th century, the era from which this theory originates two social commentators Thomas Carlyle and Hebert Spencer argued this theory.
Carlyle argued: "The history of the world is but the biography of great men", reflecting his belief that heroes shape history through both their personal attributes and divine inspiration.
Spencer said that such great men are the products of their societies, and that their actions would be impossible without the social conditions built before their lifetimes.
Times make the man or the man makes the times
Again apologies to the obvious chauvinism in that old saying.
Its an interesting question – who changed or charted the course of history?

In Judaism – Would anyone but Abraham have heard God's call?
What if Sarah got pregnant easily without the necessity for Abraham to have a child – Ishmael with Hagar?
Could we have had the Exodus without Moses?
And my favorite from this week's torah portion – what if Joseph never found his brothers in the field near Dothan?
Tell story of the Ish – the nameless man
The man asks Joseph – seeing he is lost
We it not for the man…
The tradition argues was this a man or an angel of God.
Rambam concludes that it was both
an ordinary man (a passerby) 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.
So the question of this week's parasha
Have you ever experience an angel of this kind?
Who changed the arc of your life?
Not where were you when?
BUT – Who was with you when?
Rabbi Larry Kushner said this:
"Each life time is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. For some, there are more pieces. For others, the puzzle is more difficult to assemble. But know this: you do not have within yourself all the pieces to your puzzle. Everyone carries with them at least one piece and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle. Sometimes they know it; sometimes they don't know it. And when you present your piece, which is worthless to you, to another, whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, you are a messenger from the Most High."
You can change history? You have the power to be a Malach an angel, an 'ish' the nameless person who says go left instead of right.
Hear the voice of the malachim in your life, be a malach an ish for others.
Reframe the question – where were you when? Indeed where were you? Where you headed and where did you end up and who pointed you there?