

Favorite Son

Jacob has returned to the Land of Israel and once again there is tension within the family. Conflict between brothers runs right through the book of Bereishit, but in each case the conflict is resolved in the end.

Joseph is Jacob's favorite. Not only but he tells tales, he brings reports of the bad things they do, to their father. This cannot have endeared him to them. By giving him a striped coat (the Torah doesn't say it was "multicolored"), Yaakov is in effect appointing him his heir. Naturally, the older brothers are envious and Yosef doesn't help matters by telling everyone his dreams of how one day they will all be subservient to him.

The brothers have gone off with their flocks towards the town of Shehem and Jacob sends Joseph to go and check on them. Didn't he know how much Joseph was hated, and that Joseph's presence would be seen as him spying on them? Didn't Joseph himself, realize he was walking into trouble?

Some commentators say that Jacob hoped the brothers would realize that Joseph was only being a good son and was being sent only to show them that their father really cared for their wellbeing. Others say that Yosef himself wanted to go on a mission of reconciliation. Perhaps by going back to Shehem, where previously the brothers had massacred the population, they were themselves on a mission of reconciliation and atonement. Perhaps that was why Jacob thought that sending Yosef there would be a good way of getting them back together, because that the location might remind them how destructive hatred can be.

But the brothers had left Shehem. A passing traveler told Yosef they had gone on to Dotan. Joseph should then have turned back. Except he might have sensed that superior forces were at work and that his fate was part of a Divine plan. Something of Isaac's acceptance of his fate seems to have influenced him. Sometimes we think we can plan everything. On occasion we can, but not always. The reality is that often we are pawns in a much larger game.