

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Vayeishev

This week brings us both Chanukah and Genesis II. The story of our forefathers, Avraham & Sarah, Yitzchok & Rivkah, and Yaakov, Rachel and Leah comes to a close as we move on to the second half of Genesis: the tragedy of Yosef and his brothers. As always, the reading of Yosef's story coincides with the delightful holiday of Chanukah. Is this some calendrical quirk? Or might there be a deeper link?

The parsha begins with the elder brothers' hateful envy of Yosef, Yaakov's favorite child. But instead of finding a way to cool tempers, G-d exacerbates the situation. One night, Yosef has a dream. He sees his brother's sheaves of grain bowing down to his sheaf. And then another dream, even more provocative: This time it is the sun, the moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. The analogy is obvious. It is his father, mother and eleven brothers bowing to Yosef.

His brothers are not amused. They don't perceive the prophetic quality of the dream; maybe their hatred of Yosef deafened them to it. They interpreted the dreams as mere fantasy, the castle in the sky of an arrogant teenager. "Do you want to be our king? Do you intend to rule over us?!" (37:8). Assuming that Yosef was power hungry, harboring dark plans to control and subjugate them, the brother's hatred of him intensified.

On Chanukah we celebrate the Jewish victory over the Assyrian Greeks in 164 BCE. The enemy had conquered Jerusalem and occupied the Holy Temple, transforming it into a pagan house of worship. The Jews retreated to the hills for a time, but eventually they regrouped as the Maccabees and counterattacked. Miraculously, a small band of Jewish insurgents defeated the Greek army and recaptured the Temple.

Upon their return to the Temple the Jews discovered that the pagans had defiled the oil reserves. Only one jug of olive oil could be found and it contained enough fuel for only one day's lighting of the golden Menorah. They lit the little that they had and it burned on and on for eight days. The Shechina was back and Chanukah was born.

But what is the Menorah really about? Turning on the lights is a mitzvah? What is the meaning of this strange Temple service?

It would be tempting to say that the Menorah represents the light of Torah. But then we would run into a problem. Shouldn't the Holy Ark fill that role? After all, the Tablets are in the Ark. But if the Ark represents the Torah, what does the Menorah represent?



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The answer is that they're both true. The Ark and the Menorah both represent the Torah. We need two symbols because there are two Torah's.

The Ark with the Tablets is the written Torah, etched in stone, untouchable in the Holy of Holies. We can have no input into the written Torah. But there is another Torah - the Oral Tradition. And this is where the Menorah comes in.

The Oral Tradition is an interactive Torah. We have a hand in interpreting the divine law. Of course, there are rules and regulations. There is a framework. But ultimately, we light it. This is the beauty of the Oral Torah; it's just like a Menorah.

However, there is one prerequisite. If you want to light the Menorah you must use pure oil. No agendas, no preconceived notions, no manipulations. Just pure intellectual honesty in search of G-d's will. Light a Menorah like that and it'll burn forever.

The brothers read Yosef all wrong. As time would tell, those dreams were not fantasies of power or dominion; they were bona fide prophecies that turned out to be a blessing for everyone. But the brothers misinterpreted the dreams because they carried negative feelings for Yosef. Their interpretation wasn't pure; it was based on false assumptions. That's no way to judge a dream. And it's no way to interpret Torah either.

The search for the elusive jug of pure oil never ends. We must discover it within ourselves and bring it to light. When we do, our relationship with Torah and family will be transformed.

Shabbat Shalom!

