



Rabbi Weinreb's Weekly Column:

VAYEISHEV

Man Plans, God Laughs

You thought your life would run smoothly, right? We all do. Then, something comes off, tragic or happy, which proves to us that life is not smooth at all, and probably is not supposed to be.

Somehow, each of us has a personal script which envisions what our lives will be like in the near and even distant future. I remember a friend from college who had his life planned out. He knew who he was going to marry, what his career path would be, where he would live, and which friends would be loyal to him.

My friend, like all the rest of us, soon found out that life had many surprises in store for him. His fiancée ended their relationship, he was offered a very different job than that which he was trained for, he moved to a part of the country he had previously never heard of, and his friends soon became but memories.

There is a passage in T'hilim 30, and it is one of my favorite biblical quotations, which says this better

than I can. It reads, "I said in my tranquility (shalvi), I shall never fall down."

Of all the fifty-plus weekly Torah portions, it is this week's parsha (Vayeishev) that conveys this message most powerfully, in a manner designed to leave an impression upon us all.

"And Yaakov dwelled..." Rashi comments that Yaakov sought to dwell in SHALVA, tranquility. He thought that he had finally made it home, the dwelling place of his fathers, and that his encounters with Lavan and Eisav were now over. It was clear sailing from here on in.

But wouldn't you know, his troubles with Yosef soon "jumped on him". He never anticipated that his life would be completely disrupted and changed forever because of his favorite son and his internal family dynamics. From this point on, Yaakov experienced no tranquility; only surprises, which eventually climaxed in exile to Egypt. Not only could he not live in the land of his fathers, but he was destined not even to die there.

There is a Yiddish saying which captures this lesson in four brief words: "Mentsch tracht, Gott lacht." Literally, this means, "Man plans, God laughs." I have seen it paraphrased as, "Man proposes, God disposes."

At this point, dear reader, I want to

introduce to you the second most important traditional Jewish biblical commentator. In previous columns, I have referred to Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, who is unanimously acclaimed as the chief traditional commentator. Second to him is Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman.

Ramban uses the narrative of Yosef's search for his brothers and their plot to sell him into slavery as a primary example of how man's plans usually go awry. He, too, formulates a four-word phrase which conveys this idea, but his is in Hebrew: HAGEZERA EMET, VEHACHARITZUT SHEKER. This means that God's design is true while man's efforts are futile. Sounds pessimistic, but it has the ring of reality.

Ramban points out that Yosef was sent by Yaakov to the brothers but could not find them. Ordinarily, if he would be convinced that his search for them would be unsuccessful, he would have returned home. But lo and behold, a strange man (an angel, according to rabbinic legends) appeared on the scene and guided Yosef to his brothers, who promptly sold him to the next passing caravan.

This lesson is a profound existential one for all of us. But it has needed implications for the way we tend to raise our children in this day and age.

Many of us parents are guilty of trying to arrange our children's lives so that they will never experience problems or difficulties. We are protective to a ridiculous extreme in the hope that our children will never have to face the challenges and obstacles which we faced.

But we delude ourselves and, more importantly, are not fair to our children. Their lives will contain unpredicted and unpredictable circumstances, negative and positive, and we cannot make their lives fool-proof.

How much better off they would be if we taught them not how to avoid problems, but how to cope with problems. Problems are unavoidable. They are the very stuff of life. A good parent, and a good teacher, conveys the lesson that life will have its challenges, but that these challenges can be met and that, by meeting them, the individual grows.

We, as observers of current youth, particularly in the Jewish community, have identified a sense of entitlement in our children. They feel entitled to leisure and comfort and an environment free of restriction. We would be well-advised to dispel this sense of entitlement, and instead enable them to face the unanticipated surprises that life has in store for all of us. 🚫