

Vayeshev: Mystery Man

Bereshit/Genesis 37:15-17

A man found him (Joseph), and there he was wandering in the field. The man asked him, "What are you seeking?" He said, "My brothers I seek. Tell me please, where are they pasturing?" The man said, "They have journeyed from here, for I heard them say 'Let us go to Dotan.'" And Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dotan.

וַיִּמְצְאֵהוּ אִישׁ וְהָיָה תֹעָה בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּשְׁאַלְהוּ הָאִישׁ לְאָמֹר
מַה־תִּבְקֶשׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־אֶחָיו אֲנֹכִי מִבְּקֶשׁ הַגִּידָה־נָא לִּי
אֵיפֹה הֵם רְעִים: וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ נִסְעוּ מִזֶּה כִּי שָׂמַעְתִּי
אֲמָרִים גִּלְכָּה דַת־נִינְה וַיֵּלֶךְ יוֹסֵף אַחֵר אַחֵיו וַיִּמְצָאֵם
בְּדוֹתָן:

Ibn Ezra on Gen. 37:15

A man found him. The plain meaning is a passerby

וימצאהו איש. דרך הפשט אחד מעוברי דרך:

HaAmek Davar on 37:15

From where would he know who he (Joseph) was and who his brothers were? And furthermore, what is this question "tell me please where they are pasturing"? From where would he know? Rather, (it must be) one of these two possibilities: Either he was a well-known man to them in his importance, or, he recognized him as an angel or prophet that knew everything to do with his brothers. And in truth, the Torah should have said "and he [Joseph] found a man", for it was Joseph that was wandering alone searching and found the man, not the man who was walking on his way. Rather, the text comes to teach that the man was a messenger from Heaven, to encounter Joseph and bring him to such, and the man went and found him in that place.

Rashi on Gen. 37:15

A man found him. This is (the angel) Gabriel, as it was said "the man Gabriel" (Daniel 9:21)

וימצאהו איש. זה גבריאל, שנאמר והאיש גבריאל
(דניאל ט:כא):

Daniel 9:21

While I was speaking my prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had previously seen in the vision, was sent forth in flight and reached me about the time of the evening offering.

ועוד אני מדבר בתפלה והאיש גבריאל אשר ראיתי
בְּחִזּוֹן בַּתְּחִלָּה מֵעַף בִּיעָף נִגַע אֵלַי כְּעַת מִנְחַת־עֶרֶב:

Ramban on 37:15

A man found him (Joseph), and there he was wandering in the field. The verse states that Joseph was straying from the road and did not know where to go, and he entered a field since he was looking for them in a place of pasture. The text mentions this at length to tell that many events befell him which could properly have caused him to return, but all he suffered was for the honor of his father. It also informs us that the Divine decree is true and man's industry is worthless. The Holy Blessed One sent him a guide *without his knowledge* in order to bring him into their hands. Our Rabbis intention when they said¹. that these men were angels ("And 'a man' found him ... and 'the man' asked him ... And

¹ Bereshit Rabbah 84:14

‘the man’ said ... Gen. 37:15, 17), for these events did not occur without purpose, but rather to inform us that “God’s counsel is fulfilled” (Proverbs 19:21).

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks <https://rabbisacks.org/vayeshev-5780/>

I am not sure whether Ramban meant without Joseph’s knowledge or without the guide’s knowledge. I prefer to think both. The anonymous man – so the Torah is intimating – represented an intrusion of providence to make sure that Joseph went to where he was supposed to be, so that the rest of the drama could unfold. He may not have known he had such a role. Joseph surely did not know. To put it as simply as I can: he was an angel who didn’t know he was an angel. He had a vital role in the story. Without him, it would not have happened. But he had no way of knowing, at the time, the significance of his intervention.

I believe that there are times when we feel lost, and then someone says or does something that lifts us or points the way to a new direction and destination. Years later, looking back, we see how important that intervention was, even though it seemed slight at the time. That is when we know that we too encountered an angel who didn’t know he or she was an angel. That is what the story of Joseph’s stranger is about.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, *Honey from the Rock*, 1977

Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

For some there are more pieces.

For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.

Some seem to be born with nearly a completed puzzle.

And so it goes.

Souls going this way and that

Trying to assemble the myriad parts.

But know this. No one has within themselves

All the pieces to their puzzle.

Like before the days when they used to seal

jigsaw puzzles in cellophane. Insuring that

all the pieces were there.

Everyone carries with them at least one and probably

Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.

Sometimes they know it.

Sometimes they don't.

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.