

WHAT'S RIGHT IN MY BROTHER'S EYES

A Devotional Meditation on Vayeshev (And He Settled)

Genesis 37:1-40:23; Amos 2:6-3:8
Judges 21:25; Romans 12:16-18; James 4:1-12

Albert J. McCarn
December 17, 2022

If my brother or sister has a problem, then it is also my problem. That's an axiom of compassion and empathy my Creator has been helping me understand for a very long time. A major lesson is the importance of knowing the sensitivities of other people so that I do not create a barrier to relationships by causing offense. It doesn't matter how pure my motives, or how able I am to help, if my words and deeds bring offense and anger, then I have created a barrier that keeps us apart until we find a way to restore our relationship.



Photo by Matthew Hale, January 13, 2009, [via Flickr](#).

I learned this at the cost of a relationship. It happened midway through my Army career, when I told a joke to some of my friends and colleagues. My Messiah probably would not have told that joke, not only because of the subject matter, but because it made fun of Asians in an unflattering way. It never occurred to me that my Chinese-American friend among those listening would be offended at a joke made at his expense. That's how he took it. I realized that when he immediately confronted me. The anger in his voice and the pain in his eyes told me he had lived through years of such humiliation. His reaction hit home. In my shame and embarrassment, I realized that this man would continue to be my colleague, but he would no longer be my friend.

My lack of compassion and empathy cost me the privilege of relating to my former friend in any way other than professional. He would thereafter do his duty, but he would not go out of his way to be kind to me, nor allow me into his confidence. I had violated his honor and lost his trust, all because I was so wrapped up in myself that I never bothered to learn his story. I never knew what triggered him – the problems he faced, and how he coped with his troubles. I was oblivious to his problems, and therefore could not help him carry his burdens, or try to shield him from further hurt. Moreover, I had cut myself off from any help he could give me. As friends and brothers, we could have found ways to make ourselves stronger together, but we went our separate ways, weighed down by our separate burdens.

I hope I have made progress in this area of human interaction. At least I'm more sensitive to others, although offenses still come. They are inevitable among beings so complex as humans. We cannot possibly know all the triggers of every person we

encounter, but we can try to minimize offense, and take corrective action when offenses happen. That seems to be the meaning behind Paul's words:

Live in harmony with one another; do not be proud, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own eyes. Repay no one evil for evil; give thought to what is good in the eyes of all people. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live in *shalom* [peace] with all people.

Romans 12:16-18 TLV

We go a long way toward minimizing offense if we “give thought to what is good in the eyes of all people,” as Paul says. That’s the work of compassion, empathy, and selflessness. It’s the opposite of what happened in the time of the Judges, when “there was no king in Israel” and “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

It would have been nice if humanity learned from the example of ancient Israel, but we haven’t. It would also have been nice if Israel had learned from the examples of the Patriarchs, but they didn’t. Since the beginning, we have chosen, individually and collectively, to do what is right in our own eyes rather than consider what might be right or wrong to our brothers and sisters. Part of the reason is immaturity: we simply haven’t accumulated enough wisdom and discernment to realize the importance of living at peace with others, and how to do that. One might think we would acquire some of that wisdom and discernment with the experience of age, but there are still multitudes of adults who continue to live by the toddler’s rule: what’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is mine.

This gets to the main reason we have such trouble living at peace with others: we don’t want to. We would much rather live in a world crafted to our preferences, where we are the center of all things. That’s not possible since there are billions of other humans on this planet who all have the same desire. None of us can be the center of all things, and none of us can have a world customized to our liking, but that doesn’t stop us from trying to make such a reality happen. That’s the point of every argument, lawsuit, insult, dirty joke, callous comment, petty theft, and simmering bitterness.

This is an aspect of humanity that has connected us through the ages. The same dynamics of our families are what we see operating in the families of the Bible, such as Jacob’s. We have no problem understanding why his older sons couldn’t even speak peacefully to their younger brother Joseph. It didn’t matter that he had the skills and abilities to take leadership of the family, and therefore received special attention and favor from their father. All they saw was a snotty teenager who took every opportunity to parade his status in front of them.

It's unclear whether Joseph intended to offend his brothers, or was simply naïve and insensitive to them. It really doesn't matter; he was young and needed correction. We see that in the way he shared his prophetic dreams with the family – dreams that foretold how his parents and brothers would all bow down to him. Jacob recognized the problem, according to the story:

Then his father rebuked him and said to him, “What’s this dream you dreamed? Will we really come—your mother and I with your brothers—to bow down to the ground to you?” So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the speech in mind.

Genesis 37:10-11 TLV

Let's read between the lines and consider what actually happened. Jacob was no fool. Decades of strife with his brother Esau and his father-in-law Laban had taught him a few things about human interaction. He was aware of the tensions between his older sons and his designated heir. The prophetic dreams were only one indication of Joseph's extraordinary abilities, but the fact that he related those dreams in ways that angered his brothers prompted Jacob to rebuke Joseph for his adolescent indiscretion.

Joseph learned from his father's rebuke, and from his brothers' anger. He suffered grievous harm after that, being assaulted and nearly murdered by his brothers, and then allowed by them to be sold as a slave. In his new home in Egypt, he continued to suffer one outrage after another, both while serving as his master's steward, and after being imprisoned through the false accusation of his master's wife. Yet he seemed to have taken these matters in stride, learning from them rather than letting them fester and transform him into a bitter, angry man. Perhaps he remembered his father's rebuke during those hard years as a slave, knowing that the injuries he suffered were partly his own fault. That's what made him a suitable companion for Pharaoh's butler and baker when they were thrown into prison. He was sensitive to their needs, and trustworthy enough in their eyes to hear the dreams they had about their own fates. A man unseasoned by the suffering Joseph had endured might not have possessed the wisdom, discernment, and empathy to help his fellow prisoners, and a man still holding on to offense might have been bitter at seeing one of those prisoners promoted to freedom ahead of him.

That's the difference of Joseph the teenaged dreamer and Joseph the humble man of God. He had learned the importance of seeing what's right in his brother's eyes, and it made him ready to help his brethren carry their burdens.