

The Man in the Field: An Exemplar for Helping Abused Children

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Of all the literary flourishes in the Joseph story, the Man in the Field (Genesis 37:15-27) is perhaps the most remarkable. It would have been entirely possible to tell the tale without the Man. Here's how it would read without the Man:

And [Jacob] said to [Joseph]: Go now and see how your brothers and the flocks are faring and send me back word and he sent him from the Hebron Valley and he came to Shechem.... And Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dotan. (Genesis 37:14, 17)

That is the story without the Man in the field. So why are the three verses about him there? Here's how the text reads with the verses included:

And Israel said to Joseph: Aren't your brothers shepherding in Shechem? God and I shall send you to them. And Joseph said: I am ready (hinei). Go now and see how your brothers and the flocks are doing and send me back word and he sent him from the Hebron Valley and he went toward Shechem. A man found him man came upon him wandering in the field and the man asked him, saying: What do you seek? He said: I am looking for my brothers. And the Man said: they have traveled from here and I heard them saying that they were going toward Dotan. And Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dotan. (Genesis 37:13-17)

Could the Torah really devote so much airtime to a man who is just giving directions? In the reading of the text we're exploring, Joseph is wandering through the Judean hills in this *k'tonet passim*, the garment with long sleeves and/or a train. The sight of Joseph, wandering alone in this garment must have been startling. To the Man's eyes he must have appeared as strange as a boy wearing a gold lame Elvis outfit would look stumbling into a cattle ranch in Montana or a boy in drag on an oil rig.

Here, we have to listen carefully to the text's silence. Joseph has been under Jacob's control for 17 years. When Joseph meets the Man he is free, truly free, for the first time in his life. If this man is truly the angel most commentators believe him to be, isn't it logical to posit that the Man asks Joseph how he comes to be wandering in such rough territory in such strange dress? I hypothesize that a conversation ensued and that Joseph was able to unburden himself for the first time and tell this Man what has been going on at home. I think it is possible that the Man is the one to suggest that Joseph could use this opportunity to get away and to further suggest that Joseph's brothers could help him make his escape. It may be he who suggests the ruse of showing Jacob the bloody coat as a safeguard to forestall any attempt on Jacob's part to go looking for Joseph.

I understand that we are in the realm of eisegesis here but it is a reading that makes the Man's role clearer than just a giver directions. More importantly, it shows us how we can look at a person, pause, and see if that person is in trouble and then, come to that person's aid.

If our reading is besmirching Jacob, it also reveals new heroes and exemplars for helping those who are experiencing childhood sexual abuse.

Let me know your thoughts!

Shabbat shalom!