

The Lesser of Two Evils

Decision making is difficult; we are often left to make choices that we don't want to make. If you're like me, you might make a list or weigh the pros and cons of each decision. When it looks like there might be no "good" outcome, we're forced to make a decision based on which choice leaves the least negative outcome.

Being caught between a rock and a hard place is exactly where a few of Joseph's brothers find themselves in *parshat Vayeishev*. In this week's *parshah*, we are once again regaled with Joseph's imagination and the sibling rivalry it causes between him and his brothers. The brothers decide to sell Joseph, Jacob mourns for his son; Joseph ends up in Egypt and eventually in jail for a misunderstanding with Potiphar's wife, and Judah gets into trouble with a woman named Tamar. Throughout this section of text, we see the brothers deciding in their own ways how to treat Joseph.

But let's not jump too far ahead. While the brothers are out to pasture with their flock, they conspire against Joseph. When they see him approaching from a distance, they whisper to each other that they should kill him. As the brothers are plotting, Reuben chimes in. In Chapter 37, verse 21, the text teaches us that Reuben tried to save Joseph from them. He suggested, "Let us not take his life; Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves." The text finishes this passage in verse 22, adding that Reuben intended to save Joseph from the brothers and restore him to his father, once he was able to return and help him out of the pit. While we do not know for sure the reason behind Reuben's actions, we can infer that as the oldest son, Reuben would be held accountable for Joseph, so he faced a decision: either become an outcast among his brothers for standing up for Joseph or face the wrath of Jacob. Neither sounded too pleasant to him.

Judah, on the other hand, suggests that the brothers not kill Joseph, but rather sell him to the traders passing by. Both Judah and Reuben, in their own ways, suggest compromises, neither of which is particularly brotherly, but each would prevent Joseph's death. While they might be praised for looking out for the life of their brother, Joseph, the Babylonian Talmud teaches in tractate *Sanhedrin* that while Judah saves Joseph's life with his suggestion, he is to be condemned. One is not to be praised merely for being less wicked than one's companions. While Judah chose the lesser of two evils, he was still choosing an evil action.

Our tradition also teaches that Reuben returns to the scene of the crime and sees that Joseph is gone. Thinking that his brother is dead, Reuben tears his own clothing in mourning. Reuben assumes that despite his efforts, Joseph has died, but in fact it was Reuben's suggestion in verse 22 that saved Joseph's life. *Sfat Emet* teaches that often we despair that the good deeds we have done have made no difference, when often they have made a great difference.

Ideally, we wouldn't have to make choices between the lesser of the two evils, but the real lesson is knowing that all decisions matter to some degree. The best choices we make, while they might seem small, could mean the world to someone else.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** This week's *parshah* shows us how siblings can both protect and harm one another, and how our actions, even with good intentions can have a serious effect on others. The Jewish value *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh b'zeh*, "all of Israel is responsible for one another" reaches us that if we see something wrong happening to our fellow, we must stand up and act now. In this season we often hear about others who have trouble finding warm clothes, food to eat or a job. And yes, sometimes this is because of their own poor choices, but in the end we are responsible to help others when we can. Talk with your children about their decision making process, map out Reuben and Judah's decisions and see together where the faults are. And then, try to spend a few minutes helping others in whatever way you can.