

Echoes of Eden

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A Contentious Coat

Parshat Vayeshev

To some it seems to be a story about a coat, a dazzling coat of many colors, but in truth, it was never about the coat; the coat was merely a symbol. It symbolized love, it symbolized hatred, and it symbolized jealousy. Funny how an inanimate object can generate so much emotion and passion, how it can tear a family apart, and lead to the very brink of murder.

The coat was striking, regal; it made whoever wore it look royal, like a sovereign. Yaakov gave the coat to Yosef because he loved him, but that striped symbol of favoritism meant many things to many people. His brothers hated the coat and its implication of subservience, and they hated Yosef. And even though they may have denied it, they had no respect for their father who gave the coat and determined that Yosef alone should wear it. Though they may not have seen it that way, the brothers' perfidy was not only toward Yosef, it was also toward their father.

We can imagine that Yosef wore his coat of many colors with pride, strutting about like a peacock. When his brothers ripped it off of him in a fit of murderous rage, they added one more color: stark red, the color of blood.

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Yosef survived, humiliated and humbled but alive: What could easily have deteriorated into a murderous lynching was tamed, and murder averted. Yosef was “only” sold off as a slave. His airs of importance were tempered, but only temporarily: Later, Yosef would once again be dressed in royal garb, and his leadership and superiority would be recognized and celebrated far and wide. Whether or not his brothers were willing to acknowledge it, Yosef looked good in royal clothing.

Of all the brothers, it was Yehuda who suggested that they sell Yosef rather than kill him, despite the fact that, of all the brothers, Yehuda may have had the most to lose from Yosef’s preferred status. It was Yehuda who was destined to rule, Yehuda’s descendants who would establish the unending chain of Jewish monarchy. The Davidic line would emerge from his family. Perhaps he,

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more than the others, realized that Yosef wearing the clothes of royalty was an historic error. If anyone was to be anointed, dressed in royal garb and set above the others, it should have been he. The coat of many colors should have been his, and Yosef was usurping his rightful place, staging a sort of coup. Yehuda could have been the first to justify putting his younger

brother to death. However, in a gesture of benevolence befitting a king, Yehuda suggested that it would be sufficient punishment to sell Yosef as a lowly slave and remove his undeserved trappings of royalty, the coat. This was Yehuda’s attempt to restore order. Far from feeling that he had perpetrated an act of horrific cruelty on an undeserving younger brother, Yehuda must have felt like a benevolent monarch.

History has a way of evening the score. Centuries later, a descendant of Yehuda named David would be anointed as king of Israel. He would wear the royal clothing. In one of the Torah’s great ironies, the only other biblical characters who wear coats of many colors are King David’s children, Yehuda’s

descendants – most notably, Tamar. But in tragic, haunting irony, the beautiful coat did not bring her any more joy or dignity than it brought to Yosef.

At face value, Tamar suffered from a problem that was the opposite of Yosef's: Her brothers did not hate her, they loved her. Her half-brother, Amnon, loved her in a way that a brother should not love a sister; in reality, the love he professed for his half-sister was no more than carnal lust. In a fit of violence, Amnon ripped off Tamar's clothing and raped her. After he had his way with her, Amnon discarded and humiliated her, and came to hate her, as she was now a constant reminder of his own weakness. Tamar tore her colorful coat as a sign of mourning, her royal clothing desecrated to reflect her own desecration.

Soon enough, her other brother Avshalom, who loved her in a more normal, fraternal way, exacted vengeance and killed Amnon. In time, Avshalom mounted a full-scale rebellion against his father David; the cycle of jealousy, treason and betrayal comes to its tragic close only with the death of Avshalom.

The story of Amnon, Tamar and Avshalom is intricately bound up with the story of Yosef and his brothers. Both stories revolve around a beautiful, favored child who is loved – and hated, a coat of many colors denoting royalty, and rebellion against the father. The family of the perpetrator in the first story becomes the victim in the second episode. Karma can be cruel:

Sometimes the very same crimes we perpetrate on others have a way of coming back to punish us. Such was the story of the coat of many colors, the coat of love, hate, jealousy, rebellion and murder.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2013/11/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayeshev.html>