

D'var Torah – Parshat Vayeshev

By David Schertz

In this week's parsha (Torah Portion), Vayeshev, Yosef's (Joseph) brothers are jealous that their father Yaakov (Jacob) gave Yosef a fancy coat to wear. The obvious question is, why would Yaakov show such blatant favoritism to Yosef? Did he not realize how cruel that was to the other brothers?

The Abarbanel, gives the following explanation. He first notes that the Torah gives us a number of descriptions of Yosef. The Torah states that Yaakov loved Yosef because he was his "ben Zekunim – child of his old age. Rashi first explains that this merely means that Yosef was born at a time when Yaakov was already old. However, Rashi brings a second interpretation (quoting from Onkelus) that Ben Zekunim means Yosef was very wise (i.e. he was wise beyond his years). Thus Yaakov loved Yosef because Yosef was so wise and passed onto him the Torah he had learned.

The Abarbanel also points out that the Torah describes Yosef as being 17 years old, and that he was a "Na'ar" or "youth" with his stepbrothers. Why does the Torah need to tell us was a "youth" once it already told us he was 17? So the Abarbanel explains that the Na'ar description was that when he was with his stepbrothers he behaved like a youth (i.e. immature) even though he was already 17 years old.

Before I conclude the Abarbanel's interpretation, I would like to give a parable to explain what he is getting at. There once was father who had many sons whom he would take to shul. The older sons would sit and daven nicely, but one son, was always outside running around. At first, this son was young, so the father put up with it. But as the son got older, the father realized that the son was acting younger than his age. The father asked his wife what to do. The wife said, even though we do not have much money, let's buy him a fancy suit. This way, he will not want to run around and get it dirty. Also, once he dresses his age, he will start to act his age. (To complete the parable, the other sons became jealous because they were wearing hand-me-downs. They did not realize why their father bought their brother the suit and assumed it was because of favoritism.)

The Abarbanel explains that when Yosef was with his father, he was a Ben Zekunim – a wise son. But when he was with the other brothers, he acted like a na'ar, a youth. Yaakov thought if he gave Yosef a "grown up fancy coat" he would act his age. Thus, the purpose of the coat was not to show favoritism, but to convince Yosef to act his age and act like the Torah scholar that he was.

Similarly, in our lives, sometimes we see someone has a something special. We may say, "oh they are so lucky," but in truth, we do not know what other problems they may have. Perhaps this special item is to help them overcome some difficulty.