



A 17-Year-Old Boy
Parshas Vayeshev

I was astounded as I entered the massive auditorium in Sao Paolo. Thousands of youth greeted me with energetic singing. I did not think I would encounter so many young Jews interested in their heritage.

I was visiting Brazil, the guest of a local youth group, which is headed by my close friend Meir Nigri. The organization has been operating for years to benefit Jewish youth in the country, caring for their education and wellbeing.

I was moved by the impressive gathering, which represented the broad spectrum of the local Jewish community.

I chose to tell them the story of a young man their age who found himself in a trying and perilous situation, a boy who was forgotten in a hostile foreign environment.

The excitement in the hall was tangible when I recounted the story of a youth who was despised by his siblings because he was preferred by their father, till the point that they decided to dispose of him. They ambushed him, put him in a pit and then sent him down to Egypt.

The audience finally caught on. "It's Yosef," they called out.

"Yes, it's Yosef," I said, describing to them the emotions he experienced in exile, a youth who was sold into slavery, far from home and facing constant adversity in an unfriendly atmosphere.

Despite his hardships, Yosef knew he was not alone. He represented the Israelites. While mustering strength and courage, he was paving the way for his brethren.

A Jew is never alone. Every positive action taken by a Jew, every obstacle overcome, serves to pave the path for coming generations. Yosef was aware of this, and it gave him the drive to persevere and overcome all the challenges that Egypt presented to him.

We read a wonderful commentary on the parting of the Red Sea, that it parted when it encountered Yosef's coffin.

Why did the coffin cause it to part?

When the Israelites exited from Egypt they took Yosef's bones with them.

The sea is not static, and yet the Israelites arrived at its shore and demand that it change its nature and become solid like the land.

The sea initially claimed that its nature, as prescribed by G-d, is to be fluid and in constant movement. When it saw Yosef's bones, those of an individual who surpassed his nature and overcame the temptations of Egypt, it too realized that it could change its nature.

Yosef overcame his natural inclinations in Egypt, and his descendants were saved when the sea changed its nature for them. His actions influenced generations to come.

I stayed in Brazil for another few days, and at some point, Mr. Nigri asked me to speak with one of the students. I obliged.

His story broke my heart. He came from a broken home and experienced an adverse childhood. He spent his time passing from one institution to the next.

He finally decided to settle down and get married, but turning his back on his past, he decided to marry a gentile woman.

I was shocked, but before I could respond he told me that he had decided to call off the marriage after hearing my address.

"I am not giving up on my right to belong to the Jewish people. If Yosef could, so can I," he told me.

You faced the difficulty bravely, I told him excitedly and kissed him on the head. I praised him for continuing Yosef's legacy.

He subsequently immigrated to Jerusalem and established a beautiful Jewish family.