

Parashat Vayigash5781

Shabbat shalom!

I know I'm repeating myself, but I particularly love the book of *Bereshit* (Genesis) because it is filled with such classic stories and many of the stories depict such human behavior, conflict and emotions. Today's portion, *Vayigash*, begins very dramatically. Last Shabbat we were left with a cliffhanger – Joseph was demanding that his younger brother, Benjamin (*Binyamin*) be left behind as a slave with Joseph - the very thing that would be the most tragic for their father, Jacob, back in the land of Canaan.

As usual in the Torah, things are not as simple as they seem. The story is depicted with a few strokes. So often it seems to be asking us to fill in and consider the gaps in the narrative which is much of the job that the rabbinic literature known as Midrash takes on. Last week's Parashah (*Miketz*) has Joseph's brothers coming to him for food in Egypt because of the famine in Canaan with Joseph concealing his identity from them. We are never told why. He has an interpreter between himself and his brothers so that they never know that he can understand the Hebrew they speak among themselves.

A quick summary: Joseph has created a situation in which he is about to keep his younger brother, Benjamin, there with him and send the other brothers back to Canaan with food to return to their father. As always, the Parashah acquires its title from the first important words of the portion which begins: *Vayigash aylav Yehuda...* (And Yehuda – Judah – approached him i.e., Joseph) to plea with Joseph to take Yehuda as his slave in place of Benjamin because he could not bear to bring that kind of pain upon their father. One element that makes this so striking and reveals the growth that Yehuda has gone through over the course of the Torah portions is that it was Yehuda who originally had suggested to the other brothers that they sell Joseph into slavery (instead of killing him as some of the brothers seemed to want to do). I'm sure that Joseph witnessing this incredible change in Yehuda must make a deep impression on him. We should also note that Yehuda is offering himself in place of Benjamin, the other son of Jacob's great love, his deceased wife Rachel. Joseph, unable to control his emotions any longer, bursts into tears and reveals his true identity to his brothers who stand there dumbfounded. Joseph sends them back with food and chariots to bring everyone back to Egypt where they will

survive the famine thanks to Joseph's closeness to Pharaoh. This is all a very emotionally powerful scene.

Part of making peace is recognizing our own shortcomings and asking for forgiveness while also forgiving those who have wronged us. One of the most dramatic moments in all of the Torah is this scene of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers in this week's Parashah.

Joseph seems to have totally forgiven his brothers explaining that it was G!d who brought him down to Egypt so that his family could survive the famine, it was not the brothers responsibility. On the other hand it's not as clear that the brothers are able to trust Joseph. Joseph senses that and says to them before they leave to bring food to their father and to return to Egypt with him, that they should not get angry on the way back to Israel. What would they argue about?

Would they argue about who was responsible for doing what they did to Joseph? Or is the issue more that they still had the same personalities that could lead to conflict?

Could they acknowledge their own wrongdoing and forgive themselves?

How hard it is sometimes to forgive others and to forgive ourselves.

Nelson Mandela is quoted as having said: "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."

Finally, Jacob comes to Egypt and Joseph presents him to Pharaoh who asks essentially "How old are you?" Maybe he was impressed by Jacob's apparent age. But I'm guessing he didn't expect the answer he received. "One hundred and thirty years have been the days of my sojourn (on this earth) - few and bad have been the years of my life and I have not attained the age of my ancestors (i.e. Abraham lived to be 175 and Isaac 180).

Let's contrast this response to Joseph's words to his brothers after he reveals himself to them. His brothers might be feeling some apprehension that their now immensely powerful brother, Joseph, might do them harm since they sold him into servitude in Egypt (and some even wanted to kill him). However Joseph says – "don't quarrel about it, it was all G!d's doing to help bring about the survival of our family during this famine.

You might say that Jacob is a glass half-empty kind of guy and Joseph is more of a glass half-full kind of guy. At the same time, you cannot deny that Jacob has been through a lot of hardship. His father has clearly favored his twin Esau. He ends up running away from his home because Esau is planning to kill him. He works for 14 years for his father-in-law, Lavan, who

after the first seven years tricks him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. He comes back to Canaan and is frightened that Esau still may kill him. His son Joseph disappears and seems to be dead. His beloved wife Rachel dies giving birth to her second child, Benjamin. He has gone through a lot. It reminds me of the phrase that sometimes paranoid people really are being pursued.

Joseph on the other hand also has undergone a lot of hardship. He was sold into servitude; he was thrown into jail for something he did not do. He was forgotten by Pharaoh's butler after the butler was returned to his post and promised to mention Joseph to Pharaoh to get him out of prison. Yet Joseph is so moved by his reconnection to his brothers and does not blame them but tries to reassure them that this was all something way beyond their plans and that G!d was behind all of it. From Joseph's perspective everything is good now. He has a position of power and his family will now be secure.

But maybe Jacob sees something that Joseph does not. Jacob's last wish is to have his bones returned to the Land of Israel and not to remain in Egypt. Even though things seem well for them at the moment, he still sees their future in their own land rather than as guests in Egypt. Joseph, in a way, is the prototypical Diaspora Jew – he's very content living outside of the homeland. His father, who also spent many years abroad is not. Ultimately according to Jewish history, Jacob's sense that things may be good now, but they may not always be, is correct. The one exception seems to be the United States. Though there has been and still is anti-Semitism in the United States, it certainly has never approached the level that it did in other places in the Diaspora. At the same time, living in the Land of Israel was not always the safest place either, which all of the times Israel was conquered and our people sent into exile seems to argue.

Is the glass half-full or half empty? I'm reminded of a story about Thomas Edison and his quest to invent the light bulb. Somewhere along the way a college journalist interviewed him and said: Mr. Edison, you've tried 5,000 times to invent the light bulb and failed. Everyone knows it can't be done. Edison responded saying: my dear young man, you do not understand. I have merely eliminated 5,000 possibilities.

I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet. None of us knows what the future holds. How will we deal with the conditions we find ourselves in? What is the future of Yiddishkeit, Jewishness, in the United States or in Israel? None of these are easy questions. How will we deal with the aftermath of the pandemic? Will we create an infrastructure to help respond well and

quickly at the first signs that a pandemic is possible – something which President Obama attempted to do by creating a department to address such issues during his tenure, but which was eliminated as a waste of money in 2017? Will we learn from our failures in responding to the pandemic? Can we learn from our mistakes, can we grow in response to adversity? Can we see that a united United States is our best hope for the future and find a way to overcome the increased divisions we've witnessed over the last number of years? Can we grow and become better versions of ourselves, as we witness Yehuda do in this Shabbat's parashah? I hope so. Shabbat Shalom.