

## Words from the Heart – Parashat Vayigash

Rabbi Baruch Cohen tells a story about the great rabbinic sage and ethicist, the Chofetz Chaim, who once had to go to a Czarist official and plead for relief from a particularly harsh decree against the Jewish people. Since the Chofetz Chaim spoke no Russian and the aristocratic officer spoke no Yiddish, an interpreter stood waiting between them. Once permitted to begin, the Chofetz Chaim delivered his message with all the feeling and sincerity that emanated from a heart as pure as his. When he finished, a pregnant silence filled the room. Finally the interpreter started to speak: “Your honor, this Jew claims...” Immediately the Russian official raised his hand and declared: “No translation will be needed. I understand completely.” As a result of the meeting, the decree was revoked.

*“Devarim hayotzim min halev nichnisin el halev,”* tradition teaches, “Words that come from the heart [have the unique ability to] penetrate the heart.” As the poignant story of the Chofetz Chaim illustrates, communication goes far beyond mere language and rhetoric but rather encompasses elements of tone, facial expression, body language, eye contact, and so much more. When we trust another person and feel connected to him or her, empathy and feeling allow us to understand the individual deeply even when we couldn’t possibly translate a single word that he or she said. And, of course, we notice in the story about the rabbi and the Czar that the Chofetz Chaim was able to save his people not through power or brute force but through the more subtle, and yet deeply effective, mechanism of vulnerability and appealing to the humanity of the other.

In our Torah portion this morning, *Parashat Vayigash*, we read the story of another character who is vulnerable indeed, another character who stands alongside an interpreter helping to translate the case of some Jews seeking mercy - our forefather Joseph, who in recent years has risen from his humble roots to become second in command over all of Egypt. In many ways, Joseph is more akin to the Czarist official in our story than the Chofetz Chaim for indeed he is the one with all the power, the one who through foretelling Pharaoh's dreams has made himself indispensable as trusted advisor to the highest ruler in all the land. At the same time, Joseph is also a man without father or brothers, alone in a foreign land and nursing the wounds of serious childhood trauma, in a position where his role and status doubtless separate him from the rest of the community and leave him few friends. When Joseph's siblings, the very ones who sold him into slavery so many years before, arrive before him seeking relief from the famine in Canaan, Joseph recognizes them immediately though they do not recognize him. Does he reveal himself to his brothers, potentially opening himself up to further hurt and rejection? Does he simply fill their food sacks and send them on their way? Or does he repay their actions with the same malice and lack of compassion which were once shown to him? The choice is both excruciating and monumental.

Joseph's dilemma and ultimate decision are even more interesting when considered in the context of the greater narrative of the Book of Genesis, for indeed Joseph and his brothers are not the first Biblical siblings to fight and part ways. In fact, as disheartening as the relationship between Joseph and his brothers may be in terms of the early enmity that divided them, the fact that they are eventually able to reconcile and make amends in our *parasha* this morning indicates vast improvement in comparison to other pairs of brothers throughout Torah as a quick trip down memory lane will show.

Our first set of sparring siblings, of course, is the tormented Cain and Abel. When Cain murders his brother in a fit of jealous rage, he eliminates any possibility of ultimate repair. His actions have killed not only his brother but also the relationship between them. With our next set of warring siblings, Isaac and Ishmael, the two brothers live apart for most of their lives but eventually reunite as adults to bury their father, Abraham. The Torah records no mention of dialogue between the two men after the painful episodes of their youth, and we can imagine that relations between them were most uneasy. Still, they are able to temporarily set aside their differences to perform a final act of love for their father. Through this action, their reconciliation becomes more complete than that of Cain and Abel before them.

The next generation of estranged brothers is Jacob and Esau who come together as adults in a genuine moment of connection, trading gifts, kissing, hugging, and crying on one another's necks. While there is some amount of affection and forgiveness that seems to be exchanged between Jacob and Esau, they, too, ultimately go off their separate ways, living in different parts of the world and raising separate families. While there is some amount of reconciliation, it is far from complete. Finally, we come to Joseph and his brothers. As many of us will remember, Joseph does ultimately decide to reveal his identity to these once-callous men, and the revelation sets in motion a chain of events that leads to actual reconciliation – not only crying and hugging, not only coming together for a short time or for a particular purpose – but what seems to be honest repair of a very broken family. The brothers move to Egypt with their father Jacob, settling in Goshen, and live out the rest of their lives reunited, their painful past put behind them. While there are isolated moments of distrust which hearken back to early ruptures, there also seems to be genuine healing between Jacob's twelve sons as they come together in a spirit of true forgiveness.

So what is it that allows Joseph and his brothers to succeed at genuine repair in a way that preceding sets of siblings did not? In my mind, the quality that makes this brotherly reunion different is the same quality that caused the Chafetz Chaim to be able to speak across language, the same quality that convinced the Czarist official to have mercy on the Jewish people – Joseph’s words came straight from the heart. Joseph - the rich, powerful, well-fed vizier over one of the world’s most significant nations – did not lead with status or might but rather with vulnerable authenticity. He didn’t peacock or thunder or threaten or boast; he didn’t seek to scare his brothers or to make them feel guilty for the terrible things they had done to him so many years ago; he didn’t lord his good fortune over them and make them feel small. Rather, no longer able to contain his emotion, Joseph sent his attendants out of the room and then said simply: “I am Joseph. Is my father still well?” He assuaged his brothers’ guilt, promising that this was all God’s plan, and allayed their fears that he might secretly seek revenge. He cried and cried and cried and cried.

While Joseph is not the first Biblical character to be associated with tears, his weeping is mentioned no less than eight times in Torah - more than any other figure that we see – and these sobs are described as so loud that all of Egypt could hear them. Joseph’s willingness to cry openly - even as a high ranking official in the Egyptian government, even knowing that this status could potentially be jeopardized when his subjects heard such raw emotion and learned from whence he had come – seems to me exceptional. It is rare indeed that we see someone in a position of high power shed a single tear.

The Biblical commentator Rashi points out that Joseph’s act of self-revelation captures not only a willingness to make himself vulnerable but also a sense of true compassion, for although

Joseph was willing to express emotion openly, he acknowledged that his brothers might not be similarly comfortable. For this reason, he asked that his Egyptian attendants clear the room – so that his brothers not be humiliated when he revealed himself to them. Clearly Joseph was not worried about his own honor – he himself cried loudly enough for all of Egypt to hear. But even at this poignant moment he sought to protect his brothers’ honor – allowing them privacy at this most emotional of times. Compare Joseph’s actions to those of Jacob, who upon approaching his estranged sibling Esau tried to overwhelm his brother with the sheer magnitude of his camp. Compare this to Isaac, who never even ventured from his place of security as the favored son to seek out the brother that his father banished. Compare this to Cain who, when feeling jealous and threatened, resorted to violence with devastating results. While we generally think of strength as emanating from wealth or brawn or status or power, the story of Joseph teaches us that true strength lies in the ability to be kind and even vulnerable in the pursuit of human connection. Making ourselves open might put us in a position of susceptibility. It also indicates our confidence and courage.

But what of Joseph’s behavior *before* this revelation, the careful reader of Torah might ask? What of Joseph’s insisting that Benjamin come down to Egypt and holding Simeon as surety, what of his accusing the brothers of being spies, of putting a goblet in Benjamin’s sack by which to frame him, of placing extra money in the brothers’ bags which ignited fear that they’d be thought thieves? Where is the kindness and vulnerability here? Rather, it looks very much like Joseph is trying to exact revenge.

Not so! say many of the commentators including Lord Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of the UK. Rather, what Joseph was trying to determine before revealing himself to his brothers was

whether or not his siblings were really changed men. The great philosopher Maimonides explains that true *teshuvah* (repentance) occurs only when an individual is placed in a situation where he once chose to sin and this time makes a different decision. Says Sacks, Joseph was attempting to “construct a scene – one could almost call it a controlled experiment – to see if his brothers” have become different (Covenant and Conversation: Genesis, p. 308) by putting them in circumstances quite similar to those he once experienced – a youngest, favored brother suddenly imperiled; the rest of the family in a position to choose either to protect or to ignore. Joseph even stokes his brothers’ jealousy by giving Benjamin extra money and changes of clothing; he is trying to see if, once provoked, the brothers will revert to their previously evil ways. Fortunately, for all involved, Joseph’s brothers *have* changed which is the second thing that makes this reconciliation successful and complete – Joseph’s words from the heart are accepted in kind. Everyone lives happily ever after in the land of Goshen!

And then there’s us! While we, hopefully, do not come from families quite as fractured and dysfunctional as Joseph’s, we all, too, avoid or maintain relationships with people who have hurt us in the past, with whom we have struggled or argued or competed or fought, with people who have done us wrong and people whom we, ourselves, have mistreated. The lesson of Parashat Vayigash is not that we should blindly welcome all such people back into our lives with full trust – indeed Joseph, himself, put his brothers to the test to determine whether they were truly changed men before embracing them. In those rare and wonderful situations, however, when we’ve learned that repair may be possible let us follow the example of a vizier who let down his guard and a rabbi who spoke from the heart. Let us choose vulnerability and human connection over power and distance.

*“Devarim hayotzim min halev nichnisin el halev”* – Words that come from the heart tend to be met in kind. May *Parashat Vayigash* inspire us to reach out to others in a spirit of openness and compassion.

Shabbat Shalom!