

Parashat Vayigash

December 7, 2013

Let us begin with last week (or maybe it was 2400 years ago), when Joseph was brought to Pharaoh to interpret his dreams. Two dreams that none of his wise men or symbolists were able to explain.

In the 1st dream,

Pharaoh was standing near the Nile, when suddenly seven handsome, healthy-looking cows emerged from the Nile, and grazed in the meadow.

Then, seven other cows came up after them out of the river, very sickly and lean; and stood by the *other* fat healthy cows.

And the ill and lean cows ate up the seven fat ones. And after having devoured them, it made no difference. They remained ill and lean.

In the 2nd dream,

He saw seven fat, good ears of grain growing on a single stalk.

Then, suddenly, another seven ears of grain grew behind them, thin and scorched by the [hot] east wind.

The seven thin ears swallowed up the seven fat, full ears.

Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams have a single meaning. God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do:

There will be seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt:

And then there will be seven years of famine; and all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine shall consume the land."

Joseph then advises Pharaoh what to do and how to protect Egypt from the famine. He suggests that they gather and store all the food during the seven years of plenty and that food will then protect the land from the seven years of famine.

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you about all this, there can be no one with as much insight and wisdom as you.

You shall be in charge of my government, and **food will be distributed to my people by your orders.** Only by the throne, will I outrank you.”

And after the seven years of plenty passed, and the seven years of famine began, the Egyptians would go onto Joseph to ask that he sell them food from the storehouses, and in Egypt there was bread.

And it came to pass that all countries came into Egypt, to Joseph, to buy corn; because the famine was so great in the land.

As we sit here, it is easy to take comfort in all that we have, perhaps even take it for granted, that we have food, that we have plenty. In fact, we know with great certainty that within the next hour, we will be going downstairs to enjoy a beautiful Kiddush luncheon. When we approach the buffet table and see the spread of bagels and breads and salads, and fruits, and sweets, do we stop and ask ourselves, “How was this food grown? Who harvested these grains? Who plowed the corn fields? Who picked the crops? Who sold the crops? Who purchased the produce? Who delivered it here? Who prepared it?”

Do we think about any of this? Are we being mindful?

Some of you may know that I do fieldwork on a Mayan language, Q’eqchi’, and in order to understand the culture and the beliefs, I collect and translate oral narratives; a very rich oral tradition which is at risk of extinction. Q’eqchi’ is spoken in Guatemala and it is also spoken in Belize. Last month, I had an opportunity to travel to Belize to continue my fieldwork, collect more stories, and help produce the stories for broadcast on a community-based Q’eqchi’ radio storytelling program.

While I was there, I stayed with the Q’eqchi’ Radio manager, Aurelio, and his family. His parents live in the thatched hut next to his. His parents are old traditional Maya. His mother would wake at 5:00am and begin grinding corn; she would have her *masa*ⁱ for corn tortillas that she would make on a *comal*ⁱⁱ that was burning over a wood-fed fire burning on the mud floor of the kitchen. Her husband, Sylvano, is an organic farmer. He planted his corn in April and just picked it. It is drying out in a pile. He will husk the corn and use it for different purposes, depending on the quality of the ear. Small ears will be used to feed the animals, the larger ears will be used for food for the family. Before he plants his corn, he follows a ceremony that was taught to him by his uncle. He follows it precisely. He burns his incense and says his prayers, and asks for a good crop...a crop of plenty...a crop that will sustain his family and yield a surplus so that he can sell some. Before he picks his corn, he burns his incense and says his prayers and thanks *Tzuul Taq’a*ⁱⁱⁱ for a good crop. He has a healthy crop. It is plentiful. If you ask him why – he will tell you it is because he follows the Maya ways, the ways that his uncle taught him. He will tell you about his neighbors or other farmers that did not have a good crop, and he will tell you it is

because they just did this – or that – without asking permission. In essence, they were mindless. In Maya life, there are consequences for being mindless.

Every morning I would sit with Sylvano and we would have breakfast together and we would talk. His wife, Delfina, would serve us. Sylvano would always pick a ripe banana from his tree and give it to me. It was the sweetest banana I had ever tasted. Then Delfina, would bring me a bowl with rice, and she would put an egg on top of it. There would be a warm bowl of tortillas, and we would eat. When Aurelio, her son, would arrive, he would receive a bowl of rice, but there would be no egg. She gave the egg to me rather than to her son. Sometimes she would prepare corn tortillas and sometimes there were flour tortillas. Sometimes there were no eggs. She would give me a bowl of beans and there would be a piece of cheese. I know that she did not save a piece of cheese for herself. She always remained in the back room where the fire burned and she would come out and serve us, but she did not sit down.

Many of my friends know that I have allergies and that I have an intolerance to eggs, dairy, and gluten. It was the first time in seven years that I have eaten an egg. If Delfina offered me an egg, a piece of cheese, or flour tortillas, I ate them and relished every morsel. I was profusely and sincerely grateful. I knew what she was giving up in order to feed a stranger. I also knew that Sylvano had grown the corn to make the tortillas and that she was raising the chickens to hatch the eggs.

Most of us here may not be able to relate to that. It is humbling. It is humbling to be in the midst of people who have so little and are willing to share so much.

Joseph was charged with the order by Pharaoh to distribute food to the people of Egypt and throughout the land.

“Distribution” is a noun meaning: the act of distributing or the state or manner of being distributed; a thing or portion distributed; an allotment.

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I don't know if you grew up with this rule, but we had a saying in our home that when we entertained, it was always “family last.” The idea was that our guests should always be served first, and family would be served last. Others that I have spoken to have shared that in their family they were told to apply the “divisibility” rule. Basically, you would assess how much food there is and divide the portions in your head, and take a suitable portion.

Whether you grew up with this type of rule or not, the idea is related to the notion of a fair allotment; a distribution of food—whether it is being saved in a storehouse to stave off a famine, or not. The use of such a formula is the distinction between being mindful and mindless. Joseph had to be mindful. If he was not mindful, how could he know how to save enough food to last through the seven years of famine? He was given what he considered to be

a divine command to preserve his brethren and to save their lives by a great deliverance. That is why he was sent to Egypt.

That's right. He forgave his brothers. He lets them off the hook and he says that it is God who caused him to be in Egypt because he was meant to save them from famine.

And so I ask you now to consider applying this formula in your head as you approach the Kiddush table. Look at the table and the spread of food. And although we are not experiencing a time of famine...before you heap portions of food on your plate, check yourself: take a look around at your community, your fellow brethren, and apply the "divisibility" rule. I am asking that all of us, regardless of how old we are (young children, parents, adults, and elders, alike) practice mindfulness.

When you are home and you finish your meal, do you just get up and leave the table? Or do you clear your dishes and utensils? Do you throw away your waste, or do you just leave it on the table? TBZ is your home. Treat it as your home. Help us to keep our home the way you would keep yours. This is your family. Help us to nourish the TBZ family as you would nourish yours.

It is very simple if we work together. It is difficult to do alone. At a recent Kiddush Committee meeting, we discussed what a possible mission statement might look like. All of us put forth phrases of what our committee stands for; what our goals are. I'd like to share some of these ideas with you: "nurture and nourish connections;" "create time for others to have a Shabbat meal together;" "provide a sacred time and sacred space, fulfilling a mitzvah of having the 2nd meal of Shabbat;" "elevate mindfulness around what it means to nourish your body."

I would like to ask now that our Oneg/Kiddush Committee members please stand up; or if you are related to an O/K member; or if you are one of our devoted volunteers. These are your leaders. In addition, there is one other person who is invaluable, Maira, our TBZ Facilitator, who is still in the kitchen. We are part of your community. We can only nourish you, if you help us. It takes a team. The true essence of team relies on volunteers; volunteers, like yourselves. That is how we can continue to nourish our TBZ family.

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I am going to close with one final story from my trip in Belize. As I was going home, I met a man at the Belize Airport while waiting for my flight. I asked him if he was here on vacation and he said, "Oh, no, I am part of a group of Rotary Club members. We come here three times a year to help the children who are starving in Belize." Gil then proceeded to tell me how his team volunteers to work with four schools in the district where I was working: The poorest communities. These children have no food. They score at the bottom of the scholastic testing: 49th out of 49 schools. As Gil remarked, you cannot learn when you are starving. His team helps

to till garden space for new school gardens; purchases garden seed and fruit trees for the gardens; and provides the corn seed for their crops. They request only that one row of the crop be dedicated to feed the school children in each community.

Recently, they have begun installing PVC pipe in order to run water lines to get clean water to the kitchens (which they have helped to construct). The Rotary Club pays for the pipe and manages to deliver it there. They ask only that the community members volunteer to install it. Gil said that on the day that they were to lay the pipe, no one came. He went to the *alcalde*^{iv} and he said he was very disappointed. They are working hard to provide all of the tools so that the community can sustain itself, and when it came time to lay the pipe for clean water, no one came. The *alcalde* did not respond. Gil then asked him, “Do you know how many children in your school sit at lunch time without any food and have to watch while the others eat?” The *alcalde* did not know. Gil said, “There are 40. 40 children who sit without any food every day while the other children eat. Why is it that I know that, and I live in Tennessee, and you don’t know that as *alcalde*?” The next day, the people came.

While the *alcalde* was mindless. Gil was mindful.

In order to sustain ourselves at TBZ, I am not asking that you lay any pipes, but on a parallel note, I am asking that you come. We need you to come and volunteer and join us in the kitchen. Do not take it for granted that it will be done without your assistance; that others can sustain Kiddush without a community effort. Even Kiddush Leaders can grow tired and weary. We too have extenuating circumstances, full time jobs, and ailing parents. Just come. Together, we will listen to the service through the speakers in the kitchen, we will clean, chop and prepare salads, we will schmooze, and maybe even sing. We remain very, very grateful to our devoted volunteers but we are hoping to engage everyone. Regardless, of one’s ability to cook, you can make a difference by volunteering for Oneg or Kiddush and signing up online, after Shabbat. Help your family nurture and nourish the community. You will be surprised to find how helping in this way, can feed your own soul; can help eradicate emotional famine, and can be enriching in so many unexpected ways. Let us, today, make a concerted effort to act as Joseph... and to become more mindful.

Thank you. Shabbat shalom.

ⁱ *Masa* is a maize (corn) dough made from grinding dried corn and is used to make corn tortillas.

ⁱⁱ A round flat griddle used for making tortillas

ⁱⁱⁱ Lit. “the divine valleys and the mountains,” most closely akin to “mother earth.” The land consists of valleys and mountains; that is the earth; the world; *Tzuul Taq’a* is the world. If you ask the Q’eqchi’ they will tell you that without *Tzuul Taq’a*, they would not exist; that is what takes care of us.

^{iv} Every town has an elected *alcalde*, a municipal magistrate, who oversees the administration of the town and is the head of a council of 10 -12 members.