

Fear, Courage, and Forgiveness

Parashat Vayiggash

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

Back in the early 2000's the late Charles Krauthammer coined the axiom: "Everyone is Jewish until proven otherwise."¹ This was around the time when Madeline Albright revealed her Jewish ancestry, and a whole host of others did too: Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Nicolas Sarkozy, former Virginia Governor George Allen, General Wesley Clark...even Fidel Castro speculated that he was descended from Marranos! It seemed like people were actively seeking to prove that they had some connection to the Jewish people...For any student of Jewish history, this is an incredulous, inconceivable turn of events after so many centuries, millennia of Jews having to conceal their identities or scrub their family trees of any hint of Jewish association to avoid all kinds of persecution, discrimination, and even death. It's actually become fashionable to have Jewish ancestors...even the controversial, newly-elected member of Congress from New York, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently announced at a Hanukkah party that she too has some Jewish heritage! But not everyone has been happy to discover that they are part of the People of Israel.

Consider the case of Csenad Szegedi. This is not a name I was familiar with until last week when I watched a documentary about him on Netflix. Csenad Szegedi skyrocketed to fame in Hungary when he became a founding member of the Jobbik Party, one of the nativist, xenophobic, ethno-centric, ultra-right wing parties that have been popping up of late across Europe. As a college student in Budapest Szegedi was burning European Union flags, and growing more and more radical. "Hungary belongs to Hungarians," they would chant...and by Hungarians they meant white, Christian Hungarians...not Communists, not Gypsies or Roma, and certainly not Jews. Szegedi once declared that all Jews have ever given humanity was a dusty stone tablet. As Jobbik became more and more popular, it is now the second or third most supported party in Hungary, it became more and more anti-Semitic, and trivializing of the Holocaust. "I have to listen to Jews whine about the Holocaust day after day as if it was my fault," he once said. "Ok, some Jews were killed in the war. So what? Many other people were killed too." Jews were blamed for everything from communism to capitalism; and the party took on a pro-Palestinian bent, not out of any particular love or allegiance to the Palestinians mind you, but out of a collective distaste for anything Jewish. Czegedi said that he viewed Jews as "a monolithic group, as greedy, hunchbacked, hooknosed bankers." Now I am about to reveal a spoiler, so if you were planning to watch the Netflix movie tonight, you may want to step outside...

Soon after Szegedi was elected to the Hungarian Parliament and then the European Parliament, an associate of his who had a grudge against him revealed that Szegedi's own maternal grandmother was, you guessed it, a Jew. But not only was she a Jew, she was a survivor of Auschwitz, a little secret she never revealed to her fascist, neo-Nazi grandson. Of course, this

¹<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/24/AR2006092400947.html>

meant that according to Jewish law both his mother and he were also Jews. Nothing could have been more devastating to him than this revelation. His first thought was that his grandmother was blond with blue eyes. That's not what Jews look like, he thought. But then he realized that she always wore long sleeves with her cuff buttoned up. When we went to confront his elderly grandmother about this news, she unbuttoned her sleeve, and rolled it up to reveal the numbers from the concentration camp tattooed on her forearm. It was true. Everything was true. Magdolna Klein was a Jew. Szegedi's mother was a Jew. And he was a Jew. Effectively this meant that his career was over, but his entire identity—which had been wrapped up in far-right jargon and politics—also began to implode. It was then that he decided to do what would have been totally inconceivable before...He went to visit with a rabbi to inquire about what it means to be a Jew.

Now what in the world do you think you would do? A virulent, recognizable, outspoken Jew hater shows up at your doorstep wanting to learn more about Judaism, and claiming that he is in fact a Jew himself? It's like Louis Farrakhan or David Duke showing up at my office! Rabbi Baruch Oberlander, himself the son of Hungarian Holocaust survivors, was deeply conflicted. His community was up in arms when they saw Szegedi frequenting the synagogue for meetings with the rabbi. There was widespread doubt and concern about his motives, his authenticity, his claims, and even if it was true, could he ever be welcomed into the Jewish community given the damage that he had done.

The rabbi acknowledged that he devoted a lot of prayer to this issue. He prayed that he was doing the right thing. He prayed that Szegedi would not disappoint him. And he began meeting with him, and studying with him on a regular basis. He told his community and the press, that the concept of t'shuva in Judaism is so significant, that he just couldn't deny Szegedi the opportunity to return and to make amends.

Forgiveness first enters the Jewish value system in this week's parasha. It's interesting, when Abraham prayed to God to spare the cities of S'dom and Gemorrah, he didn't ask God to forgive them...he appealed to God's justice and sense of fairness. For the first 40 chapters of Genesis people don't forgive. Nobody forgives until Joseph says to his brothers that he forgave them for selling him into slavery, for all the deception and jealousy and plotting that resulted in him ending up in Egypt. And they were terrified that their brother, now one of the most powerful men in the world would exact vengeance upon them. Presumably the Grand Vizier of Egypt could have had their heads on a platter with the snap of his fingers. But instead, he told them not to be afraid. That everything was meant to be; that it was bashert that he should be in Egypt, in this position to save lives including his own family's, by devising the plan for saving food during years of plenty so that there would be sustenance during years of famine. It seems like Joseph bears no grudge, harbors no anger, seeks no revenge. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes² that prior to the Hebrew Bible, there was not a concept of forgiveness, say in Greek culture. There were

² "The Birth of Forgiveness," <http://rabbisacks.org/birth-forgiveness-vayigash-5775/>

other rituals of appeasement or abasement that existed since the beginning of humanity, but nothing like forgiveness, which separates the wrong from the wrong-doer. In other words, the wrong-doer is not permanently stained with his or her transgression. It can be removed, and the wrong-doer restored and rectified by the act of forgiveness. This doesn't come cheaply for Joseph's brothers. They had to pass a battery of tests first...they had to prove to him that they had changed; they had to verbally acknowledge that they sinned, which they do in Genesis 42...Surely we deserve to be punished, they say, because of our brother. And when Benjamin appears to have Joseph's stolen cup in his knapsack, Judah offers to take his place and his punishment, demonstrating that *t'shuva gemura*, a complete transformation had taken place.

In the case of Csenad Szegedi, the rabbi, acting as the representative of the Jewish people, courageously decided to allow him to repent. Szegedi not only studied with him, but he began to embrace his Jewish identity. Gradually Szegedi began to take on various mitzvot, began *davvening* and keeping kosher, and in case you still had your doubts, even underwent an adult circumcision! He eventually dropped his Hungarian given name, and adopted the name David. But that is not all...he went on a speaking tour, sharing his story, and asking Jewish audiences to be understanding, to be forgiving, and to have mercy on him. I would like to think that I would have the courage of Rabbi Oberlander to open my heart and my mind to someone so sincerely penitential, no matter what they did in their past.

Forgiveness is scary; what if by forgiving we are opening ourselves up to be hurt all over again? What if by being forgiving we give the appearance of excusing the offenses of the past? I believe that Joseph's magnanimous act of forgiveness of his brothers, and Rabbi Oberlander's ability to be open to a former anti-Semite because of the value of sincere *t'shuvah* are nothing less than heroic. Both the brothers and Szegedi demonstrated their commitment to changing their ways and making amends. The revolutionary idea that people have the capacity to change by means of repentance, and that we have the power to grant that liberating forgiveness began all the way back in *Parashat Vayiggash*. I pray that it continues to be a factor in our relationships to this day...because when one person sincerely repents and another person sincerely forgives, the result is all kinds of unforeseen blessings.