

“What if these are the last words we ever exchange...?”

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I'll never forget the argument that I had with my father when I went to my college orientation the summer before my freshman year. I had a pretty strong inkling that I was going to become a rabbi. It started really at my bar mitzvah, but by the time I was entering college the feeling had only grown stronger. So it was d-day at the registrar's office (or so I thought); this would be the beginning of my preparation for the dream of *all of this* coming true! And I was ready to declare a major in religious studies or something similar. But my father, the lawyer, who never really understood my interest in religion to begin with, argued that I should choose a major that would be more applicable should I change my mind about my career goals, and say, decide to go to law school. He insisted that I major in something that would benefit a rabbi or a lawyer. So we settled on speech communications...a major that was essentially all about how to give any different kind of speech or oral presentation you can imagine. I lasted for exactly one year in that major, which was pretty devoid of anything remotely intellectually stimulating. In every class you were either giving a speech...persuasive speeches, informative speeches, extemporaneous speeches...or you were listening to other people give speeches. It was like having to sit and listen to a sermon every day of the week, not just Saturdays! The truth is that while I did change my major, I admit I did pick up a few pointers. A speech has to leave the audience with a message. I have to know what the speaker needs me to take away from the presentation when it is over. The speech should have some kind of new information that the listener likely hasn't considered before, or that sheds a different light on the subject matter.

Which is why Judah's speech at the beginning of this morning's Torah portion is so baffling! This is the speech that forces Joseph to reveal himself finally to his brothers. This is the speech that overwhelms Joseph with emotion...*v'lo yuchal Yosef lehistapeik*, Joseph couldn't control himself any longer, the Torah says. *Vayitein et kolo bivchi*, his sobbing was so loud, *vayishme'u Mitzrayim vayishma beit Paro*...his sobs could be heard by the Egyptians and by Pharaoh's entire household! The speech is an appeal by Judah for Joseph to have mercy on Benjamin, who was found with the supposedly stolen goblet. But the speech is really a review of information

everyone already knows...Judah reminds Joseph of their past conversations, about how and why they came to Egypt, about their elderly father back in Canaan, about their elderly father's attachment to his youngest son Benjamin. Joseph already knows all of this, and so does everyone else...Why is this speech such a game changer?

As I attempt to answer this question, I want you to think back to the days of sending your kids off to sleep away camp in the summer. If you're like me, you don't have to think back very far, it was just 5 or 6 months ago. If I don't get a letter from my kids at least once a week, I get antsy. Every night I sit in front of my computer and look at all the pictures that camp posts of them, and I run to the mailbox every day that they're away looking for letters from them. Joseph has been "away" for over 20 years. Not only were there no pictures to post, but Joseph doesn't send one *farshtunkeneh* letter to his father that whole time. Surely the prime minister of Egypt could have dispatched a messenger to go back to Canaan and inform Jacob that his son is still alive. But no! Jacob doesn't hear one peep from his son, who he anyway imagines is dead! Why doesn't Joseph let him know that he's okay? Not only that, but Joseph names his first born son Menashe, which means *nashani Elohim et kol amali ve'et kol beit avi*...God has caused me to forget all my suffering and my father's house! Why does Joseph want to forget his father's house? His brothers, we could understand wanting to forget, *but his father?* In order to understand that you have to remember the very last conversation Joseph and Jacob had before they are separated from each other for so many years. The last conversation was about Joseph's second dream, when the sun and the moon and eleven stars are all bowing down to him! The 11 stars are of course his brothers, but who are the sun and the moon? Jacob and his deceased wife Rachel. Jacob is still grieving over Rachel, and here comes the impetuous, insensitive Joseph and relates a dream where she and his father are bowing down to him. To say it was insulting is an understatement. To say it was hurtful is putting it lightly. And Jacob lets him have it...What kind of dream is this, he shouts at him. That your dead mother and I are bowing low to the ground before you! And the next thing that Jacob does is send Joseph into the wilderness to find his brothers. Jacob had to know that was a dangerous mission. Jacob had to know that Joseph was unfamiliar with the desert (in fact he gets lost out there), and he had to know that the brothers wouldn't exactly be happy to see Joseph. Isn't it possible that Joseph all these years thought that Jacob was in on the plan to get rid of him along with the brothers? Their last conversation was in anger, and then he sends him out into the dangerous wilderness to find his

hostile brothers. That's why Joseph wants to forget everything about his father's house...because he thinks his father wanted to get rid of him!

But when he learns, years later, that his father has been grieving Joseph's supposed demise; when Judah tells him in this impassioned speech that Jacob has spent all these years thinking he was viciously killed, torn apart by a wild beast, he knows once and for all that his own father was not complicit in what happened to him. That's why he bursts into tears; that's why he tears off his Egyptian headdress and exclaims in Hebrew rather than Egyptian, *Ani Yosef!* I am Joseph. And the very next thing he says: *Ha'od avi chai?* Is my father still alive? I'll tell you the whole thing almost brings me to tears.

Joseph wasn't torn apart by a wild beast, but this family was torn apart for so many years, and why, because of words exchanged in anger and misunderstanding. Because of the failure to communicate; Because of assumptions and suppositions and conclusions drawn without really knowing what the other person thinks or feels. The next time you're in a heated exchange with someone you love, ask yourself, *What if these are the last words that I say to this person for a very long time*; what if these are the last words I ever say to this person. Are those the words you want to remain and live on in perpetuity? Do you think you'll come to regret them some day or wish that you could have taken them back? Joseph and Jacob get a unique opportunity for reconciliation. They are so fortunate and blessed to be able to clarify so much hurt and misunderstanding. But many people are not so lucky. Don't walk away from another person in anger; don't let harsh words spoken in the heat of the moment be the cause for years of estrangement and misunderstanding. Anger is a natural, healthy human emotion. But it should be conveyed constructively and in a way that doesn't leave us feeling regret and the residue of words we wish we would have never said.