

Parshat Vayigash
December 31, 2022
Rabbi Cheryl Stone

Tonight is New Year's Eve, about the time when people start discussing their New Year's resolutions. I don't know about you, but I'm not such a fan of this type of pledge. I have never found this to be particularly productive. "I promise to do the very things that I ought to have been doing all along, but haven't had the determination to do until now, and which I have placed very little structures of support so that I am setting myself up for failure and will resort back to the thing which I said I wouldn't do in just a matter of weeks, if not days." I find that New Year's resolutions are generally an excuse to beat one's self over something, and, frankly, I have enough of things that I berate myself for.

Reproaching myself for my actions or missteps seems to be an ongoing battle, even more so as I grow older. In my younger days, I would say things like, "I have no regrets." or "What's done is done." I am certain I believed that, or, at least, tried to. However, these days, more of these nagging thoughts creep into the corners of my mind. Actions I should have taken, paths that I should have walked, where I should be in life but am not, all of which come crashing in when I finally try to get some sleep. The "shoulds" can become all-consuming if I let them.

In this week's parsha, we reach the pinnacle of the Joseph story. After decades of separation, and months of trials contrived by Joseph to test his brothers' contrition, Joseph reveals himself to his estranged siblings. Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his older brothers rather than looking out for their younger, albeit spoiled, brother; Joseph who sat in prison for years for an unjust cause; Joseph, who has every right to be angry at his brothers for abandoning him, takes a different approach, something truly revelatory.

After releasing a wail that had been pent up since childhood, a wail that was heard throughout the house of Pharaoh, Joseph turns to his brothers and says:

גַּשְׁוּ-נָא אֵלַי

Please, come closer

אָנִי יוֹסֵף אַחֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִם:

I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.

וְעַתָּה אַל־תֵּעָצְבוּ וְאַל־יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה,

Do not be sad now, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here,

כִּי לְמַחְיָה שְׁלַחַנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם:

for it was to preserve life that God sent me before you.

(Genesis Chapter 45:4-5)

Joseph has matured. From the childish braggart, he has stepped up to take on the mantle of responsibility of providing sustenance to an entire nation and the regions beyond. He has had the time, perspective and station to see God's hand in all that has happened.

Still, that is pretty magnanimous, to absolve his brothers of all blame and say that everything had been God's will. Joseph has come out on top. I wonder if he would have said the same thing if he had suffered in servitude the rest of his life rather than becoming Pharaoh's second in command.

There is a belief in Judaism that God is involved in the details of our lives, God is the mover behind the scenes. What is obvious in the Torah in stories such as these whereby a chain of events leads to the desired outcome, becomes more subtle as we move through our Tanakh. What begins as cosmic, God as the creator of the Universe becomes personal through the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and then national, the birth of a nation, the Israelites. Even as God's relationship to humankind, or, for that matter, the Jews, grows ever distant, this idea continues to persist. For example, in Psalms (34:13-14) we say: "From heaven, God looks down, God sees all humankind. From God's dwelling place. God oversees (*hishgiach*) all inhabitants of the

earth." *Hashgacha Pratit*, Divine Providence, that God is moving the wheels, causing the events that shape and alter our lives is a part of our faith structure.

However, this can be a problematic concept for us to swallow, especially when life is difficult. If God is concerned about the minutiae of each and every life, then we quickly bump up to our greatest theological challenge, how can God let bad things happen to good people?

For each of us, I would assert that we have felt the hand of God, a moment when we were guided, led in a certain direction, and could look back and see the chain of events that brought us to a desired place. But, just as likely, there has been a time for each of us when we have felt abandoned, wondering where God has gone, and why we have been left all alone. There is truth to both.

Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Those are facts, but for most of us sitting in this room or watching this morning, we have a choice on how we view those facts. We can choose to lean into faith, *hashgacha pratit*, this notion that God is paying attention to what is going on in our lives, God cares, God is personal and we can build a relationship with God.

And, if we are interested in creating a relationship with God, we must look not only at the overt ways in which we can see how God has shaped our lives, but also the more subtle maneuvers. This is not an easy practice. Remember, a spiritual practice is a practice, like learning to play an instrument or a foreign language. It takes practice. As Rabbi Art Green shared, "Even after that initial experience of seeing, faith and trust in the truth of such a moment are key to the mystic's ongoing religious life. As every God-seeker knows, the insight we had yesterday is worth little to us, except as a reminder when we struggle for it again tomorrow."¹

¹ Leyb Alter Yehūdā Aryē, et al. *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*. Jewish Publication Soc, 1998. Pgs 70-71

I have found in my life, I am far better at letting go of the actions of others towards me than I am at letting go of the things I have done to myself. Both, however, play into the same narrative, the “shoulda, woulda, coulda.” What if we could take on this belief in *hasgacha pratit*, that God is the moving force behind our lives? That is not to say that we should sit around and do nothing. Joseph must have worked very hard to organize the Egyptian agricultural workforce to preserve enough food to be rationed for seven years of famine. We must still be active participants in moving forward towards the goals that we desire for our lives. But, it means that there are times when things are out of our control, beyond what we are capable of foreseeing, doing, preventing, or causing. In those moments, we can lean into faith.

I invite you to take that leap of faith with me. One way to make resolutions work is to take on partners, the buddy system. Want to go to the gym more often? Get a buddy. Want to eat healthier? Find a partner. So what say you? Want to believe with me that God has a plan, that things happen for a reason, and that God places us in exactly the space we are supposed to be? Come, partner with me and let's see if this is a New Year's Resolution that we can make stick!