

Re'eh et Sh'lom Ahekha, Seeking to Understand and Appreciate the Other

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Looking at my watch, I think it appropriate to begin with an apology. I don't think we are going to finish by 11:30. I did try, though. When I realized all the extra stuff – Hallel, two Torahs, a long Haftarah, *bentching* the new month – I stopped telling Gila to slow down. Which, as any parent of a *bat mitzvah* knows, is a big deal. But there is a lot to celebrate this Shabbat Hanukkah.

And in addition, our Torah and Haftarah readings covered the totality of Jewish history. Joseph marks the beginning because he is the one who gets us to Egypt. And the Haftarah from Zechariah covers the end. Zechariah speaks to a people returning to rebuild the Temple; and generations of Jews, beginning with the Maccabees, read his words with an eye towards a messianic future.

The motif that weaves the story together from Joseph to Zechariah to the Messianic Age is clothing. Joseph received a special coat from his father. He ran from Potiphar's wife and left her holding his cloak. Next week Joseph will trade his prison garb for the clothing of Egyptian royalty. And in the Haftarah, an angel instructs his attendants to remove the filthy garments from Joshua the High Priest and dress him in priestly robes, a sign that exile is ending.

If there is one thing we have learned through this pandemic, it is what exile means. Exile means that the world is not working as it should. Exile is the opposite of Shabbat. Exile is the world as it is, and Shabbat is a reminder to hope in a new tomorrow. We will turn the corner. Indeed, hearing of the first vaccinations, maybe we can relate to Zechariah's message. Maybe we want to start changing our clothes. Soon we will have to trade in the sneakers and jeans of the virtual office and start wearing ties and even shaving again. That day will come.

But the vaccine will not solve all our problems. And neither will the inauguration. These polarizing times. There are inequities, disproportionate suffering, unequal access, unequal opportunity. Liberals vs. conservatives; Republicans vs. Democrats; Blacks vs. Whites; scientists vs. economists; Fox vs. MSNBC. Sometimes it feels we are living in different worlds, each with its own experts, its own agenda, its own reality. We are convinced of the righteousness of our convictions, and we *know* the other side is completely wrong. Some say clueless, some say evil, some say fraudulent; the divisions are real. And so is the mistrust; so is the fear; so is the confidence that the other side started it. This didn't begin with the pandemic and it won't end with a vaccine.

Let's look closer at Joseph. Why did the brothers hate him so much? Was it Jacob's fault for giving him the coat? The Talmud notes the consequence of favoring one child over another. "Because of those few ounces of wool, our people were enslaved in Egypt."

Was it Joseph's fault? He was a tattletale and a braggart. Nobody likes tattletales or braggarts.

Maybe it was the brothers' fault. Why could they not understand what every child knows? Life is not fair.

The truth is that assigning blame is a fool's errand. It depends where you start. Each side has its own grievances and its own narrative.

But what did Jacob do to control the situation? The Torah says the brothers became increasingly angry, *v'aviv shamar et ha-davar*, and the father just kept the matter in mind. Why didn't Jacob intervene? Why didn't he send Joseph to boarding school instead of into harm's way? The brothers went out to pasture in Shechem and Jacob thought, "Let me send you too. *Lekh na, re'eh et sh'lom ahekha v'et sh'lom hatzon*, go and see how your brothers and the flocks are faring and bring me back word." Why did Jacob send him?

The 18th-century Hasidic master Rabbi Simha Bunam picks up on the Hebrew, "*re'eh et sh'lom akheha*, see how they are doing." Jacob asked Joseph to try to see their *sh'leimut*, completeness. Try to understand their admirable qualities and not just their deficiencies. In this reading, Jacob didn't send Joseph to spy on the brothers so he could come back and tattle. Jacob sent his son with the hope that he might come to appreciate them, that he might understand them and their worldview a little better. It didn't work – the brothers were too peeved and Joseph didn't even open his mouth before they threw him into the pit.

But the Torah doesn't condemn the effort. The Torah doesn't write off the brothers. Instead, the Torah describes how circumstances conspired, how God intervened to bring the family back together. We are the descendants of Judah – the one who came up with the plan to sell his brother into slavery – not the descendants of Joseph. Judah's misguided act doesn't condemn him to irrelevance; poor innocent Joseph does not win out. The Torah brings the family back together, which becomes a foreshadowing to all those other times in Jewish history and human history when people come to realize that we are much more powerful as a band of diverse groups who disagree on some things but share common larger values than we are as victors who emasculate all potential rivals in our midst.

Only one team can win the championship. But it is telling that the other teams don't quit or blow up the league. They retool. They prepare for the next fight. Because in sports, the victors and the vanquished alike understand that there is always next season. And so you respect the other. Learn from the other. Love the other.

I learned that lesson in college when I was asked to write papers explaining other people's positions. It is one thing to advocate for your own opinions. But a wise person, a learned person understands that there is a certain logic to the other view as well. The Talmud does it all the time. It is said that Rabbi Meir was the greatest of all scholars. And what was his distinguishing trait? He could tell you 100 different reasons why the impure animal you were holding was actually pure. And when he was finished, he could offer 150 other reasons why it was really impure. It confused his colleagues, but that is the nature of scholarship. The *halakhah*, the law follows Hillel, but let's take the time to understand why Shammai ruled as he did. It wasn't because Shammai was stupid and Hillel is smart. The law is not a competition between the absolutely right and the undeniably wrong.

We've been hearing some of this since the election. "How could 74 million people have voted for President Trump? Some were even people I know, people I respect. How could they do it?"

Really?!? We can't think of a single issue or a single reason why a person just as smart and just as ethical and just as compassionate as I am might have voted differently than I did?!? And is there no way to explain President-elect Biden's victory besides corruption?!? We don't have to agree, but we aren't doing any favors by retreating to our corners, reading only selected newspapers, choosing only some channels, hiding behind metaphorical walls and pointing fingers at the other guy who can't do anything right.

Is it fear? Are we so afraid of the solutions to problems like climate change or poverty or systemic racism, as to think that even discussing the topic is "being political"?!? Is everyone who believes we have to confront society's most pressing problems, sometimes by calling for certain sacrifices or reassessments, a socialist?!? Are we already living in the world as it should be?!? Maybe we need to spend less time pushing away, less time pointing fingers, less time assigning blame, and more time working together and trying to understand, more time learning and teaching.

Zechariah's angel was right. If we want to build a more perfect world, we have to start by changing our clothes. It's time to reach out to someone with whom we disagree. Take Jacob's advice: *"re'eh et sh'lom akhekha*, inquire about the well-being of your brother." Try to understand not only where he is wrong but also where she might be right. Try to imagine a congregation, a community, a society that draws its strength from diversity, not division. This Hanukkah, may the light of unity and understanding overshadow the darkness of division and mistrust. *Ki ner mitzvah v'torah or*, Let the commandments be our lamp and the Torah become our light. Shabbat Shalom and Hag Hanukkah Sameah.