

Shabbat Vayigash 5782
Rabbi Peter W. Stein

There are two powerful descriptions of this week's Torah portion, which in many respects is the climax of the Joseph story.

This is the portion where Joseph is reunited in Egypt with his brothers and ultimately, the entire family comes down to Egypt to escape the famine.

Robert Alter, biblical scholar and author, see this portion as exploring the dynamics of human growth: "What is it like...to be a human being with a divided consciousness...caught in an unstable vortex of greed, ambition, jealousy, lust, piety, courage, compassion and much more?"

Dr. Naomi Steinberg, Professor of Religious Studies at DePaul University in Chicago, sees this parasha as "a study in the human capacity for lasting change."

Remember the backdrop...in the last portions, we read of the grave betrayal by Joseph's brothers. They attack him, leave him for dead, and then sell him off into slavery. Joseph ends up in Egypt, is abused and manipulated, sent to prison, and ultimately and miraculously becomes one of the chief ministers to the Pharaoh.

I can't even imagine how I would have responded if I were Joseph when his brothers suddenly appear. I think I would have more than a few choice words for them! Joseph gives an extraordinary response. He says to his brothers, "Do not be distressed...it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you."

There is considerable debate in the commentaries, that even if this is all part of a divine plan, that the brothers are somehow still accountable for what they did.

We are each responsible for our own actions and the choices and decisions we make. The famous images used at Yom Kippur tell us that our role is to “choose life”. The rabbis consistently teach that we have the ability to follow our *yetser tov*, good inclination or our *yetser ra*, evil inclination. And, it is taught, that we human beings are creatures of habit and momentum, so when we perform a mitzvah, it will lead us to perform another...and another...and another.

I think of the concept of accountability as I follow the news.

In the spring of 1999, as I was literally onsite at my first congregation making arrangements for my move there upon ordination, the tragic shooting happened in Columbine, Colorado. 12 students and 1 teacher were murdered at the high school.

Next Tuesday is the 9th anniversary of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School. 20 young children and 6 teachers were killed. One of my dear college friends is a school librarian in Newtown, and to this day carries the names of those victims in her wallet.

And not even 2 weeks ago, 4 students were killed in a shooting at Oxford High School in Michigan.

These tragedies have happened again and again, throughout the entire time of my rabbinate and beyond. This isn't even close to a complete list, not even including all of the school shootings and not even mentioning other acts of gun violence.

I think about how we can finally and fundamentally make a change. I think about the idea of accountability and what we are called to do in response to the violence.

I'm not concerned about target shooting and I'm not particularly concerned about hunting. I am concerned when children go into what should be a sanctuary for learning and growth and lose their lives. I am concerned when a generation of children lives with fear and the normalization of things like lockdown drills.

I am concerned about apathy, when I have no more than a momentary response when I watch the news.

I want us to take action.

Joseph responds to his brothers, the ones who treated him so badly, and says "I am Joseph, your brother."

I want us to recognize that the victims of gun violence are our brothers and sisters, our parents and children.

This isn't really a hypothetical statement, for there are members of our temple family who have lost loved ones to gun violence. I speak to honor them.

I speak to honor my friend Michael, a physician who was murdered in his hospital in Boston.

I want us to read the newspaper and see those stories as personal.

There is a bundle of complexity to confront. There are issues of mental health and bullying and stress and anxiety. There are issues around a culture that has desensitized us. And, there are structural issues around the manufacturing and distribution of guns.

One example of an action we can take is connected to a piece of legislation. There was a federal bill introduced into Congress in March of this year, seeking to create universal background checks. Estimates are that 1 in 5 guns is sold without a background check and 1 in 3 mass shooters would have been unable to purchase a gun if there had been background checks in place.

I want us to raise our voices, recognizing the Jewish value taught in the Torah that tells us we should not stand by when blood is being shed. It is insidiously easy to keep these tragedies at a distance. My own personal work has been focused on taking things personally when I read the news.

There are over 100 deaths a day due to guns. And the Talmud teaches us that when one single person dies, it is as if the entire world is destroyed.

My prayer on this day of peace is that we will find the wisdom and courage to create peace in our world. Let us work to change the culture and let us work to end this tragic plague of gun violence. I pray that one day we will live in peace.

Shabbat Shalom.'