

What Jacob, Joseph and His Siblings Can Teach us About Family Reconciliation: VaYechi

With this week's Torah reading, the story of Joseph which we have been reading for the past number of weeks comes to a conclusion. In fact, it marks the conclusion of the story of the family of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, the first family of the nation of Israel, of the Jewish people, making this an appropriate time to reflect on what we learn from the Book of Genesis about the meaning of family and what the Torah wants to teach us about these most intimate of relationships.

In many respects, the narrative that follows their wanderings and meanderings resembles one of those British BBC sagas that traces a family across many generations. Each of the characters in these opening chapters of the Torah has their share of challenges and struggles, hardship and suffering to overcome, not least of which are the interpersonal family dynamics.

So what can we learn from their experiences?

One observation we notice is that they are tethered to the land of Israel, which exerts a pull on them as they wander throughout the region.

Another recurring theme found in every generation is sibling rivalry. Jealousy and jockeying for position and priority are the primary means by which siblings interact throughout the Book of Bereshit – and that is when they are on their best behavior and aren't trying to kill each other!

In several instances the poor family dynamics can be attributed to poor parenting or neglect, or as the result of different approaches and a lack of unity among the parents. You can't help but read these stories and wonder – How strange that all of this appears in the Torah? Is this what God wants us to follow? Where is the notion of Biblical figures being role models and exemplifying ideal behavior?

In certain respects, just like the BBC series, all the discordant threads come together in this concluding parasha of the Book of Genesis. For one, we have Jacob, the last of the patriarchs granting a double portion of inheritance to Joseph – and significantly, none of his brothers objects to this obvious show of favoritism. Their reaction is a far-cry from

how they felt about him getting that special coat of many colors. Their acceptance of the extra inheritance and lack of resentment shows tremendous growth on the part of Joseph's siblings.

Next, Ephraim, who is the younger of Joseph's two children receives the predominant blessing, and is granted precedence over his older brother, Menashe – and although he should have been the one to get that first portion, Menashe does not object. Again – showing great progress.

In a poignant deathbed scene, all the brothers surround Jacob who gives a blessing to each of them. In some instances, what he says can hardly be called a blessing. And yet, no objection is expressed! It is as if they have come to realize that they each have their own unique qualities and that the fate and destiny of each of them need not be identical.

The scene has always reminded me of the joke from the classic album, on which I was raised – “When You're In Love the Whole World is Jewish” – where a father who is dying gives his wife instructions as to what to give to each of their children and how he wants to dispose of his belongings once he is gone. Every time he designates and expresses his wish, his wife interrupts him. She objects and corrects and changes each and everything he says. Finally, in desperation, after awhile he blurts out to his wife – “Sadie, who's the one who is dying – me or you?!”

One midrash imagines that when Jacob, who after all is also known as Israel, is surrounded by his sons, they reassure him that they will be faithful to his wish that they continue to be good Jews and affirm their belief in one God. According to this midrash, this is the origin of what becomes known as the watchword of our faith. The 12 sons say to their father, Yisrael as they are around his death bed – *Shema Yisrael* – Listen Israel, meaning -- Hear us Jacob – we want to reassure you that we affirm and will proclaim throughout the ages, as will our children and their descendants -- *Adonai Eloheinu* – Adonai is our God, *Adonai Echad* – and we recognize only that one God. Furthermore when we say Adonai Echad, God is one, we mean that God is unique, there is none other comparable or like God.

Perhaps the most important verses which show how the family has grown and evolved is what happens after Jacob's death. Although 17 years have passed since they were reunited with Joseph and have lived together and under his protection and been the beneficiaries of his largesse in Egypt, after Jacob dies, they worry that Joseph will now exact revenge on them for having thrown him into a pit, and selling him into slavery so many decades ago.

The Torah tells us that Joseph wept when he heard their words. He cries because he is sad that they feel so insecure and disappointed that they still harbor doubts about his having forgiven them. He moves to reassure them and tells them that he wishes them no harm and does not hold a grudge. He says, “Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good.” He lets them know that he will continue to sustain them and their children. As the Torah states, “*venahem otam vayedaber al libam*: He comforted them and spoke to their heart.”

And with this everything comes together. It is the denouement, the penultimate moment. The Torah is teaching us important lessons about family and resolution and reconciliation.

Until Menashe shows magnanimity, every instance of favoritism resulted in enmity and conflict between brothers. Now for the first time each of the brothers accepted the intrinsic worth of the other. Rabbi Steven Prusansky in his book, “The Jewish Ethic of Personal Responsibility” comments how difficult it is to reconcile. It can be done he writes, “if each focuses on the positive qualities of the other rather than ... the source of friction. (Think instead about) tender memories of their pasts and consider the conflict from the perspective of the other... If both parties desire a relationship more than they do holding on to their respective grievances, then reconciliation is possible.”

And so at the end of Sefer Bereshit, the Book of Genesis, the family of Yaakov has reconciled. They are healed and whole and have learned to overcome their differences and to set aside their resentments. They achieve a modicum of harmony and accept each for who they are. They have achieved *shalom bayit*, peace in their family.

This unity is crucial for the days ahead, for as the story unfolds, soon they will be enslaved in Egypt.

But they will face this adversity as a family united and who yearns to return to their homeland, Eretz Yisrael. So may we learn from Joseph and his brothers, that in the end, it is possible to grow and to change. We can find domestic peace and tranquility with our family and loved ones – if we but want it and are willing to work to achieve it.

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