

December 24, 2020

Vayigash - Message from Rabbi Wexler:

I know that we are still about a week away from New Years, but I must say, I am eager for the year 2020 to end. To say that 2020 has been a difficult year is an understatement. Winter has begun and the Pandemic continues to rage. We hope that the year 2021 will bring healing, new beginnings, and a return to some sense of “normalcy.” In these last days of 2020, we see glimmers of hope and light at the end of the tunnel, underscored by the photos and Facebook posts of doctors, nurses, and other healthcare providers and front-line workers receiving their COVID-19 vaccination. The year 2021 is on the horizon and with it will certainly come both new opportunities and sustained challenges. As we look towards the new year, the names of last week and this week’s Torah portions help us to frame this moment. Last Shabbat we read the Torah portion, Miketz, which means “at the end.” Meanwhile, this Shabbat we will read the Torah portion of Vayigash, which means “and he approached.” Together these two Torah portions highlight pivotal moments in Joseph’s life. Last week marked an ending in Joseph’s life; the end of two years of physical imprisonment, but also the end of Joseph living an immature, self-centered existence, in which he searched for meaning. This week Joseph assumes a new mature existence in which he takes it upon himself to create meaning. Joseph’s brothers have come down to Egypt in search of food. Joseph frames his younger brother, Benjamin for theft and threatens to hold him hostage. Judah approaches Joseph to plead for mercy for Benjamin. His approach opens Joseph’s heart. Joseph begins to cry and then reveals himself to his brothers after years of estrangement.

What was it about Judah’s approach that moved Joseph so deeply? A midrash teaches that in his approach, Judah was determined in his heart to resolve the conflict no matter what it took, no matter the challenge. As we approach the end of one year and the beginning of another, our Torah portion this week is a reminder of the many challenges that await us. There is of course, the challenge of the Pandemic, the challenge to remain safe, to maintain social distancing, and to remain patient, despite the Pandemic fatigue. And there are other challenges as well: personal challenges, interpersonal challenges, and the challenge of living in a fractured world in which kindness and understanding are in desperate demand. Like Judah, even though we are unsure of how the coming days will play out, we know we must approach them with courage and resolve. Each year, when I read of Judah’s approach in Vayigash, I imagine he must have been quite scared. Stepping up and stepping forward can be terrifying. Yet, by choosing to engage, by finding the resolve within to approach, Judah brings his brothers closer together. May we, like Judah, lean in (note: make sure that in doing so you still maintain social distancing). May we bring one another closer, so that together we can face the challenges of the New Year head on. And in time, may the challenges evolve into blessings and may the end mark a new beginning. Shabbat Shalom.