Dvar torah – Vayigash Lisa Benson

This week's parsha is filled with rich and riveting drama. In the first half, ten of Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt to buy food during a famine. Joseph disguises himself and perhaps in retaliation for the way they treated him, forces them to go through various ordeals and humiliations. One of those demands is that the brothers bring the youngest, Benjamin, when they returned to Egypt. When they arrive, Joseph frames them for theft of money and Benjamin for the theft of a silver goblet. Judah begs Joseph to imprison him in Benjamin's place, explaining that Benjamin's detention will kill their father, Jacob. Joseph, overcome with emotion, reveals himself to his brothers. In the second half, Pharaoh urges Joseph to bring all of his family to settle in Egypt. Joseph tells his brothers to say they are shepherds and breeders of livestock, in order to benefit from Pharaoh's plans to usurp all money, livestock, and lands from his own people. In addition, he forces all Egyptians to resettle and causes all Egyptians to become exiles.

I'd like to discuss two important outgrowths from this parsha. The first is forgiveness and the second, reframing.

When Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers he went on to say:

> "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that GD sent me ahead of you…it was not you who sent me here but GD."

This is the first recorded moment in history in which one human being forgives another.

Forgiveness is conspicuously lacking as an element in the stories of the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and Sodom. Abraham did not ask GD to forgive. His argument was about justice, that it would be unjust to kill innocents, that their merit should save the others.

Although Joseph does not use the word forgive, he told his brothers their act had resulted in a positive outcome, but still they worried he would seek revenge. So much so that they, years later, concocted a story:

> Your father left these instructions before he died: "This is what you are to say to Joseph, I ask you to FORGIVE your brothers for the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly." Now please FORGIVE the sins of the servants of the GD of your father.

Joseph wept when their message came to him. What they said was a white lie but Joseph understood why they said it. The brothers used the word "forgive," the first time it appears explicitly in the Torah. Joseph wept that his brothers had not fully understood that he had forgiven them long before. This journey toward forgiveness spans 3 encounters with his brothers. Forgiveness is not born of one dramatic moment but is a product of patience and time. In the first encounter, Joseph recognized his brothers but acted as a stranger and spoke harshly to them. Memories of his plight still haunt him and trust is absent altogether. "Joseph turned away and from them and wept" (Gen 42:24). Hiding, followed by a cry of pain is the initial response. In the second encounter, Joseph asks after their father

> "How is your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still in good health?" (Gen 43:27).

In addition, when he lays eyes on Benjamin, he is overcome by emotion.

> "Joseph hurried out for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there. Then he washed his face went out and restrained himself" (Gen 43:30).

It is through Benjamin, who did not participate in the conspiracy against him, that Joseph begins to reconcile with his past. He begins to let down his guard and show emotion. But he puts the brothers through a final test, by placing the silver goblet in Benjamin's belongings, Joseph has recreated something of the original situation, where the brothers are again in control of the life or death of a son of Rachel. This brings us to the third encounter, in which a repentant Judah pleads with Joseph on behalf of a father who has already "lost" a

child dear to his heart. Judah's genuineness and contrite spirit along with his moving words penetrate the emotional wall Joseph had built around himself and he can no longer restrain himself. The wall has collapsed and he weeps in the presence of his brothers.

> "His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace" (45:2).

Joseph's process of forgiveness and reconciliation comes full circle.

Forgiveness does not appear in every culture; it is not human universal. For instance, there was no concept of forgiveness in the ancient Greeks. There was something else, appeasement of anger. David Konstan's book, *Before Forgiveness: The origins of a Moral Idea*, explains that the Greek word, *sugnome* really means exculpation or absolution, not forgiveness. The classic example is that of Jacob's behavior towards Esau when they meet again after a long separation. Having overheard Esau tell Rebecca that he would kill Jacob after Isaac's death, Jacob fled. Prior to seeing Esau again, Jacob sends him a huge gift.

"I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me " (Gen 32:21). When the brothers meet, Jacob bows down to Esau, 7 times, a classic abasement ritual. They meet, kiss, embrace and go their separate ways, not because Esau has forgiven Jacob but because either he has forgotten or he has been placated. Appeasement as a form of conflict management exists among nonhumans, especially primates. There are forms of appeasement and peace making that are pre-moral and have existed since the birth of humanity. The first appearance of forgiveness, argues the author Konstan, is in the Hebrew Bible and in this parsha. Within Judaism, a new form of morality was born. Judaism has primarily an ethic of guilt, whereas most other systems are based on shame. Shame attaches to the person; guilt attaches to the act. In shame cultures, when a person does wrong, the person is stained, marked or defiled. In guilt cultures, what is wrong is not the doer but the deed, not the sinner but the sin, which is why there are processes of repentance, atonement and forgiveness. This explains why Joseph behaved the way he did when he first encountered his brothers in Egypt, putting them through a course in atonement, thereby teaching them what it is to earn forgiveness. First, he accuses them of a crime they did not commit, he accuses them of being spies, imprisons them for 3 days and then, holding Shimon hostage, tells the remaining brothers they must go home and bring back the youngest, Benjamin. He forces them to reenact that earlier occasion when they came back to their father with Joseph missing. What happens next is that although the brothers do not know that Joseph can understand their language they admit they have done wrong.

"They said to one another "surely, we deserve to be punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us" (Gen. 42:12). After Joseph plants the silver goblet in Benjamin's sack, upon its discovery, Judah says "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? GD has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lords' slaves- we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup" (Gen. 44:16). This is the second stage of repentance - they confess and admit collective responsibility. When the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, it was Judah who proposed the crime but they were all complicit (except Reuben). At the climax, Judah says:

> "So now let me remain as your slave in place of the lad. Let the lad go back with his brothers (Gen. 42:33).

Maimonides and the Sages regard this "complete repentance", that when the circumstances repeat themselves and you have the opportunity to commit the same crime again, you refrain from doing so because you have changed. Joseph can forgive his brothers because they have gone through all the stages of repentance: admission of guilt, confession, and behavioral change. Forgiveness only exists in a culture in which repentance exists and repentance presupposes that we are free and morally responsible agents who are capable of change, specifically the change that comes about when we recognize that something we have done is wrong and we are responsible for it and must never do it again. The possibility of that kind of moral transformation simply did not exist in ancient Greece or any other pagan culture. The idea of forgiveness was

then adopted by Christianity, making the Judeo-Christian ethic the primary vehicle of forgiveness in history. Repentance and forgiveness transformed the human situation, establishing the possibility that we are not condemned endlessly to repeat the past. Forgiveness breaks the irreversibility of reaction and revenge.

The other "first" for this Parsha is Reframing.

> "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for GD sent me before you to preserve life…GD sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So, it was not you who sent me here but GD" (Gen. 45:4-5).

Joseph had reframed his entire past. He no longer saw himself as a man wronged by his brothers. He had come to see himself as a man charged with a lifesaving mission by GD. Everything that had happened to him was necessary so that he could achieve his purpose in life: to save an entire region from starvation during famine and to provide a safe haven for his family.

Judaism is famous for producing what Rambam called "a sage" or "rofeh nefesh" (healer of souls).

Today we call those people psychotherapists, coined from *psyche* meaning soul and *therapeia* meaning healing. Amazing how many of the early psychoanalysts were Jewish: Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Otto Rank, Melanie Klein. In Nazi Germany psychoanalysis was called "the Jewish science". More recent contributors are:

Solomon Asch on conformity, Lawrence Kohlberg on developmental psychology, Bruno Bettelheim on child psychology, Leon Festinger - cognitive dissonance, Howard Gardner - multiple intelligences, Peter Salovey and Daniel Goleman - emotional intelligence. Abraham Maslow and motivation, and Walter Mischel and self-control. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky - prospect theory and behavioral economics, and more recently, Jonathan Haidt and Joshua Green studied moral emotions. However, the most important figures for the purpose of this analysis are: Victor Frankl, Aaron Beck and Martin Seligman. Frankl was a therapist who developed Logotherapy, Beck the creator of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Seligman - Positive Psychology. These different approaches have one thing in common: they are based on the belief in Chabad Hassidism - Rav Schneur Zalman of Liadi's Tanya - that if we change the way we think we will change the way we feel. A radical idea at the time when other theories proposed that genetics determined our characters, others that emotional life was governed by early childhood experiences and unconscious drives and others like Ivan Pavlov, that human behavior is determined by conditioning. Victor Frankl showed there was another way: As a prisoner and survivor of Aushwitz, he discovered that the Nazis took away almost everything that made people human: their possessions, their clothes, hair, their very names. In the camp, he devoted himself to giving his fellow prisoners the will to live. There, he made the fundamental discovery:

> "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in numbers but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

What made the difference, what gave people the will to live was the belief there was a task for them to perform, a mission for them to accomplish which was waiting for them in the future. Frankl discovered "it did not matter what we expected from life but rather what life expected from us". This mental shift came to be known as reframing. Just as a painting can look different when placed in a different frame, so can life. Reframing tells us that though we cannot always change the circumstances in which we find ourselves, we can change the way we see them and this itself changes the way we feel.

Joseph was the first to reframe: He was sold into slavery, lost his freedom for 13 years and separated from his family for 22 years. It would be understandable for him to seek revenge but he rose above those feelings by shifting his experiences into a different frame.

"… It was not you who sent me here but GD" and years later, after Jacob has died "Though you intended to do me harm, GD intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people,"

Joseph no longer sees himself as a man wronged by his brothers. He came to see himself as a man charged with a lifesaving mission by GD. This single act of reframing allowed Joseph to live without a burning sense of anger and injustice. It enabled him to forgive his brothers and reconcile. It transformed the negative energy of the past into focused attention to the future. We cannot change the past but by changing the way we think about the past we can change the future.

With respect to the present: may the hostages that are released alive be able to reframe their experience, giving them the strength to survive, the courage to persist, and the resilience to emerge on the far side of darkness into the light of a new and better day.