

Shabbat Parshat Vayigash: January 6-7, 2017

By: Ellen Silber



This D'var Torah is dedicated in honor of my father, Solomon Silber, may he live and be well, and in memory of my uncle, Joseph Silber whose first yahrzeit is 27 Shevat 5777.

The family reunion of Joseph and his brothers, along with their father, Jacob, is one of the most powerful and emotional writings in all of Tenach. After twenty-two years of pain and mourning, Jacob experiences the ecstatic joy of unification with his beloved son.

Joseph's brothers rightly feared that even mere hearsay that Joseph was still alive would be too much of a shock for the elderly Jacob to bear. A beautiful and poignant midrash teaches us that Jacob's granddaughter, Serach bat Asher, played her harp to her grandfather Jacob and brought the news slowly, singing "My uncle Joseph is alive..." Only then could Jacob's sons approach him and relate the full story of Joseph's ascent to power over the entire kingdom of Egypt.

This story of separation, a tale of years of mourning followed by jubilation is not limited to the pages of Tenach. Rather as we sang last week for Chanukah-bayamim hahem bazman hazeh- in those days as in our own, the post- holocaust and post -communist era of our history is filled with stories of modern day Jacobs.

As a nine year old girl, I first learned this parshat in my Talmud Torah class. For me the ancient story of our forefathers separated for decades, is something I had known and lived with in my own family.

My father grew up as the eldest of five brothers in a small town outside of Lublin, Poland. Miraculously, all of his siblings as well as his parents survived the shoah. Subsequently, the family traveled to America. Nevertheless, one brother, my uncle Joseph, remained in the Soviet Union to complete his studies. As the iron curtain tightened, communication with my uncle ceased. My father lamented and was certain that he would never see his brother again.

Wonder of wonder, miracle of miracles, in July 1993, a plane landed from Russia at JFK airport. My uncle Joseph arrived accompanied by his wife, accompanied by one of his daughters, accompanied by his son-in-law, and accompanied by two grandsons. I stood in awe as I watched my father and uncle embrace after 47 years apart. The emotions experienced at that moment were indescribable. Not only in biblical times, but in the 20th century, Jewish brothers resided together in America after being separated nearly half a century.

My uncle Joseph passed away almost a year ago. The Talmud teaches us that Joseph's bones accompanied the Jewish people through the desert until they reached the land of Israel. May my uncle Joseph's memory and miraculous story accompany us as we anticipate the arrival of mashiach speedily in our days. Shabbat Shalom!