

This week's torah portion, Vayigash, is about reconciliation and forgiveness. Reconciliation is the act of accepting or resigning one's self to something not desired. In previous parshiyot, Joseph (one of Jacob's twelve sons) has been sold into slavery. The reason behind that is that Jacob (Joseph's father) had children with different women -- Rachel, Leah, and two maids (Zilpah and Bilhah). Now, Rachel was Jacob's true love, and therefore, his favorite wife. Jacob and Rachel had two children; Joseph and Benjamin. Because Joseph was the firstborn of Jacob's true love, Jacob was treated better than the rest. Joseph's half brothers were jealous of the favoritism Jacob showed to Joseph, and so they wanted to get rid of him. Some of the brothers thought they should put Joseph to death, but Judah (the strongest of the brothers) suggested selling him into slavery. The brothers agreed and traded Joseph for twenty pieces of silver. Because they wanted to figure out a way to tell Jacob that his favorite son died without getting in trouble themselves, they put some goat blood on Joseph's coat, and their father -- believing their story that a wild animal had killed Joseph -- mourned his beloved son's death.

Joseph, meanwhile was sold as a slave in Egypt and then ended up in prison after a wrongful accusation. In prison, Joseph figured out that he could interpret dreams, and he put this skill to work for fellow prisoners. His ability to interpret dreams was so right on the money, that it eventually worked its way up to the Pharaoh. Joseph ended up interpreting the Pharaoh's dream, and the Pharaoh was so impressed by, and grateful for, Joseph, that he made Joseph the Vizier -- the second-most powerful man in all Egypt.

In this parsha, Joseph's half brothers were sent to Egypt by Jacob to buy goods during a very severe famine. As they stood in front of the Vizier begging for food, they did not recognize the Vizier to be their half brother Joseph, for Joseph was now in his late thirties, and it was more than twenty years since they had sold him into slavery. However, Joseph *did* recognize them.

I found it interesting that, despite the fact that his brothers sold him into slavery -- and even considered killing him -- Joseph made excuses for their jealous behavior, saying things like "Don't be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me here," and "It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." I feel that Joseph let his brothers off too easy. According to Nehama Leibowitz, Joseph believed that "[i]t was not the brothers, but rather God, who had directed all of the events." I feel that, if this is the case, Joseph rewrites history to make it seem like the brothers didn't do anything wrong to begin with. Therefore, he thinks that there's no need for them to apologize. However, it makes me think that maybe, Joseph is only being nice and letting his brothers off that easy because there was an accidental good thing that came out of it (after all, he did become the second most powerful man in Egypt as a direct result of his brothers' actions). Perhaps, if Joseph actually had remained a slave, he would have been really upset when he saw his brothers again, and he definitely would have made them apologize. In general, we humans feel that, despite the fact that someone tries to hurt us, if it backfires, then it's okay. Therefore, I agree with Don Isaac Abravanel (ah-BRAH-vah-nel) when he said: "The fact that by a fluke the sale turned out well did not lessen their offense. A person is not judged by the accidental results of his deeds but by his intent. The accidental results are irrelevant."

However, I also found it thought-provoking that, while Joseph's brothers did not really officially apologize to Joseph, they did miss him and they did appear to feel guilty about selling him into slavery and lying to their dad about it. You would think that, considering their rocky history, they would try to repair their relationship and discuss their reason(s) for doing what they did. But, all they did was weep and hug Joseph. The brothers *could* have said that Joseph was wrong when he said they should not feel badly, and they *could* have expressed remorse.

Every journey begins with a single step. What I mean by that is that, in order to fix a relationship or a friendship, you need to take that first step of moving towards the other person and apologizing. You cannot just say: 'Oh, I'm afraid that this relationship will never be the same, so it's over and I shouldn't even bother trying.' That's like saying, 'I have six tests to study for, so I won't study for any.' Thinking along those lines won't get you anywhere!

My questions are, is there such a thing as crossing the line when it comes to family? And, should there be unforgivable offenses in families?