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Congregation Beth Am
Parashat Vayiggash

Our vulnerability is not a bug; it's a feature

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayiggash*, Joseph's broken family is brought back together and the fraternal conflict that began around a pit reaches its climax and resolution in a palace. The first words of the portion—*Vayiggash eilav Yehudah*—enters us directly into the drama as Judah approaches Joseph with a plea to allow his youngest brother, Benjamin, to return home from Egypt and to be reunited with his father, Jacob, in Canaan. *Vayiggash eilav Yehudah*, "Then Judah approached Joseph (44:18)." This moment of encounter reverberates with the aftermath of an earlier confrontation when Joseph was thrown into a pit by Judah. And the indeterminate meaning of the word *vayiggash*, he approached or drew-near, invites elucidation. In what manner was Judah drawing near to Joseph?

Rabbinic interpretation (BR 93:4) refracts the word *vayiggash* into three different modes of action: conciliation, prayer, and battle. So as Judah approaches Joseph, as he moves towards him, we hold our breath, wondering, will Judah attack his brother once again? Or will this be a moment of healing? And will Joseph, in response to Judah, enact revenge or effect a reconciliation?

There's an exquisite midrash (*Tanhuma Yashan*, 2) that compares Judah's encounter with Joseph at the climax of our story, to a deep well into which no one could climb down. Then a clever person came and brought a long rope that reached down to the water so he could draw from it. So was Joseph deep; but Judah came to draw from him and did not cease from answering Joseph word for word until, as one translation puts it, Judah penetrated to Joseph's very heart.

Judah does not attack him; instead in the opening of this week's portion Judah draws near to Joseph using words of conciliation and prayer. He selects details from the family's shared past, and weaves strand with strand to make a rope that draws Joseph up and out from the depths of his emotional detachment. It's a long speech—the longest in the Torah, which in essence says nothing that we didn't already know—but it's a plea for grace, an attempt to arouse compassion through words describing suffering: that of his brothers, of their father, Jacob, of Judah himself –

And he reaches his brother: Judah taps into his vulnerability. He makes Joseph cry; he provokes a response.

As our story tells us:

וְיֹסֵף אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְשַׁלֵּט עַל-נַפְשׁוֹ

Joseph could no longer control himself (Gen. 45:1).

This has been a week in which my colleagues and I, along with several lay-leaders, have confronted communal concerns regarding control and vulnerability. Exactly one week ago, during this, our Qabbalat Shabbat Service, internet trolls drew near to us, to Beth Am, and sought

to penetrate our hearts, to provoke fear, anxiety, and division by posting, in the comments section of our YouTube channel, a long string of anti-Semitic and racist slurs and memes. We are in the process of determining what our next steps may be in response to this anti-Semitic incident, and have held meetings with security experts, law-enforcement, and with YouTube.

I want to stress that although we should be concerned about what occurred, we should not be fearful. When I saw a screenshot of some of the comments, I was struck by the utter banality of the slurs, the tiredness of the tropes and images, and the postings contained no specific threats directed at Beth Am. To speak more about the content of the attack, would give a measure of potency to language, memes, and actions that must be rendered impotent.

Here's another story for this week: When inquiring of a YouTube executive as to how this incident could have happened even though we had turned off the comments section of our YouTube channel long before this virtual attack, our Executive Director, Rachel Tasch, asked if there was perhaps a bug in YouTube's platform, in its code, and was there a way to address this problem? The executive, who is an engineer, responded that the source of the problem is not "a bug, but a feature." A thoughtful congregant learned about the response from the software engineer, and productively transformed a technocratic, not altogether helpful answer, into a wise adage which I want to share with you. I think of it as a koan for Jews living in the age of the Internet. It goes like this: "Our *vulnerability* is not a bug; it's a feature."

Zen Buddhist koans serve to open minds and to challenge us to view our lives and world in new ways. When I reflected on this Jewish koan, "Our vulnerability is not a bug; it's a feature," I arrived at this realization, this small measure of enlightenment:

Unlike the brothers in the story of Joseph who encounter and reconcile with one another in a palace, we, Beth Am, we gather weekly, in a sanctuary, in our *Beit Tefilah*, where we weave together words of conciliation and prayer, binding us ever more closely together with one another, with God, and with our aspirations. But in this time of being a virtual community, when the Internet is our Temple, the comments sections on YouTube and Facebook, and the chat feature on Zoom, are vital spaces of interaction, of connection, where we can, in small, but meaningful ways, draw near to each other.

In response to what occurred last week, we could choose a path forward of greater *hitapkut*, of more control, more restraint. Other synagogues have chosen to share links to their services with only the members of their congregations and we could follow suit. So too, we could dismantle the comment feature on Facebook which is where most of our online interactions occur during services. Remember: we had turned off the comments section of YouTube long ago. We could take these steps, and others like it, and create stronger boundaries, defenses, around the online facets of Beth Am. But to change our standard operating procedures, to deviate from, or reign in, our communal proclivities to engage newcomers, and to be an open and welcoming congregation would signal that we have given in to an anti-Semitic attack which sought to alter our communal ways of life and the manner in which we engage with one another and with the wider world.

We aren't going to do that. Instead, I see this incident as a potential springboard to greater engagement with YouTube, Facebook, Zoom, and other internet companies, to impel them to

take greater accountability for the anti-Semitic content posted on their platforms, and to ensure stronger security for their customers. Arguably, we, Beth Am, are in a unique position to do so.

“Our vulnerability is not a bug; it’s a feature.” To be open to each other, and to the possibilities of connecting more deeply with one another and with individuals whom we have not yet engaged, requires vulnerability and entails risk; vulnerability is a necessary component, a feature, of the synagogue-community that we are continually constructing.

Near the conclusion of Judah’s speech to Joseph, the long peroration that opens this week’s Torah portion, in his efforts to elicit Joseph’s empathy, Judah describes the relationship between Jacob and Benjamin, between a father and his youngest son, as

נַפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְּנַפְשׁוֹ
His life is bound together with his life

In this hour, we have chosen to gather together in this virtual space, and through words of prayer and Torah, we see to bind our lives more tightly together. But now, as we move forward in our liturgy, we direct our intentions beyond ourselves. And in a week when we read a story of a broken apart family repairing itself, of brothers re-uniting with one another, we turn now to the *Aleinu*, and we speak our aspirations for an entire world in which sundered relationships are made whole.