

Toxic- Vayechi 5779¹
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Recently, I read a fascinating book titled “The Royal Art of Poison.” I know what you are thinking: why is my Rabbi reading a book about poison? I assure you that I was reading it as a work of history, not as an instruction manual...In this often hilarious and always disgusting book, Eleanor Herman describes the many creative ways in which European monarchs and political figures, even to this very day, have terminated their rivals. The prospect of meeting a gruesome demise through poison-induced agony so heavily preoccupied royals over the centuries that popes and potentates alike took dramatic steps to prevent this from happening. Any self-respecting European court featured a phalanx of testers who picked at the king’s food at each stage of preparation to determine if it had been contaminated- and any one of these testers could be bought off, threatened or otherwise induced to add poison themselves. The same court would also boast a retinue of royal doctors who had a host of useless antidotes at the ready, including so-called “unicorn horns”, that were often tested on condemned prisoners. The royal garments were also tested for poison, including undergarments. Ironically, while trying to protect themselves

¹ Thanks to Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg of Beth Tfiloh Congregation in Baltimore, who delivered a sermon a few weeks ago that inspired this topic.

against poisoning from others, royals were routinely and unwittingly poisoning themselves. Women wore makeup that contained lead, which actually ravaged women's skin. This necessitated further makeup, and the vicious cycle continued. It is speculated that Queen Elizabeth I's volatile temper was caused by the lead based white makeup she is often depicted as wearing. Physicians prescribed arsenic skin cream and clothes were treated with mercury. And it was not just moral decay that festered in the glittering palaces of Europe; while they looked glamorous on the outside, they were, in fact, cesspools of filth, vermin and pestilence. As I was reading this book, the Oxford English Dictionary revealed their "Word of the Year" for 2018: "Toxic." It is derived from the Medieval Latin *Toxicum*, which means "poison," which has its origins in the Greek *toxikon pharmakon* – lethal poison used by the ancient Greeks for smearing on the points of their arrows² (a technique updated by the Bulgarians in their umbrella-tip assassination of dissident Gregori Markov in 1978). In the year 2018, there has been a 45% increase in the frequency of this word's usage on [oxforddictionaries.com](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com). Among the top 10 "toxic" collates included toxic substance, toxic gas, toxic environment and, at the top of the list, toxic masculinity. I can't help but think, *lehavdil*, that this word is also appropriate as we bring the book of Bereishit to a close this week.

² <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2018>

The epic story of Yosef and his brothers concludes mirroring its beginnings; everyone is together surrounding their father, old feuds have been resolved and now, Yaakov blesses his family one last time before he passes. Reading this story, we might think this is a happy ending. Decades of dysfunction disappear, and death dissipates divisions. Yet a closer look reveals that all is not well. With Yaakov's passing, it seems that the brothers are concerned that Yosef will exact his revenge.

Genesis 50:16-17

וַיֵּצֵאוּ אֱלֵי-יוֹסֵף לְאֹמֶר אֲבִיךָ צְוָה לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ לֵאמֹר:

So they sent this message to Joseph, “Before his death your father left this instruction:

כֹּה-תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנֵנּוּ שָׂא נָא פְּשַׁע אַחֶיךָ וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי-רָעָה גִמְלוֹךְ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפָשַׁע עֲבָדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ
וַיִּבְרַךְ יוֹסֵף בְּדִבְרָם אֵלָיו:

So shall you say to Joseph, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

There is one problem with this poignant entreaty: *It never happened.* Yaakov never commanded his children to make this request of their brother. How could he? He didn't even know the degree to which his children had

mistreated his favorite son! Why did the brothers lie to Yosef? The Medrash Tanchuma offers a rather shocking interpretation:

אָמַר רַבֵּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל, כַּמָּה דְּיוֹ מִשְׁתַּפֵּר, וְכַמָּה קוּלְמוֹסִין מִשְׁתַּבְּרִין, וְכַמָּה עוֹרוֹת אַבּוּדִים, וְכַמָּה תִּינוּקִין מִתְרַצְעִין לְלַמֵּד דְּבַר שְׁלֵא הָיָה, בְּתוֹרָה. רָאָה כַּמָּה גְּדוּל פַּח הַשְּׁלוֹם.

Tanchuma Vayikra 7:1

Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel said, "See how much ink was spilled, how many pens²⁴ were broken, how many skins were prepared, and how many children were whipped in order to learn something which did not happen which is in the Torah. See how great is the power of peace!"

Leave aside the anachronistic references to corporal punishment. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel is proclaiming the virtues of an thorough education that studies and imparts a falsehood- because this lie was concocted by the brothers to satisfy their splenetic sibling, foster his forgiveness and preserve the peace.

This may explain why the brothers lied; it does not explain why they felt they had to. Didn't Yosef already forgive them last week? After he revealed his identity to his brothers, Yosef reassured them that his descent into Egypt and ascent to the Egyptian throne was all divinely ordained, and for their benefit:

Genesis 45: 7-8

וַיִּשְׁלַחֵנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֶיכֶם לְשׁוֹם לָכֶם שְׂאֲרֵית בְּאֶרֶץ וְיִהְיֶינָה לָכֶם לְפָלִיטָה גְּדוּלָה:

God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance.

וְעַתָּה לֹא־אַתֶּם שְׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים וְיִשְׁיִמְנִי לְאָב לְפָרְעֹה וּלְאֲדוֹן לְכָל־בֵּיתוֹ וּמִשָּׁל בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם:

So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.

Isn't that forgiveness? Yosef is telling them that it all worked out in the end!

Rabbeinu Bachya makes a startling point. Yosef started crying at his brothers' entreaty, but that was out of his love and compassion for his recently departed father. At no point, anywhere, does the Torah use the word "forgiveness" to describe Yosef's reaction, because *to his dying day, Yosef never actually forgave them*. This is why the sin committed against Yosef was later invoked in Midrashic accounts of the Ten Martyrs, which we read in poetic form in the Mussaf of Yom Kippur; the sin had never been forgiven, and the debt had yet to be paid.

The great Italian biblical commentator Shmuel David Luzzato, or Shadal, expands further on this, pointing out that the language the brothers used in their request seems designed to elicit the forgiveness they knew they had

not yet received. Using the phrase “forgive the iniquity of your servants who serve the God of Yaakov” was meant to heighten a commonality between them. They could not appeal to his mercy as his brothers, because they, as his brothers, had demonstrated no mercy toward him. Instead, they appealed to him as coreligionists and fellow believers, knowing that even if they weren’t deserving of the title “brothers,” he might still forgive them.

לפשע עבדי אלהי אביך: לפי שהיותם אחים לו לא היה מועיל לשיסלח להם, כי הם לא נהגו עמו כאחים לפיכך הזכירו לו אחוה אחרת שהיתה להם עמו, והוא שהם ביעלי דת אחת עמו, כי המצרים היו מחבבים בעלי אמונתם, ושונאים בעלי אמונה אחרת, לפיכך קרוב היה שיסלחו לפשעי אנשי אמונתם והנה השליחים חשבו שכן יעשה גם יוסף, ע"כ יסלח לבעלי אמונתו אעפ"י שאינם רואים להקרא אחיו.

We are all familiar with Alexander Pope’s aphorism³, “To err is human; to forgive, divine.” Why *didn’t* Yosef forgive his brothers if they sought it sincerely?

I’d like to suggest that Yosef never forgave his brothers because their relationship between Yosef and his brothers had become irreparably toxic. And the reason it reached that point was that each party had finally and irrevocably written off the other as being toxic. Yosef did tearfully reveal himself to his brothers, but listen to how he does it:

³ Line 525, *An Essay on Criticism*

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו גִּשְׂו־נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי
מִצְרָיִם:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come forward to me.” And when they came forward, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt.

This is not a revelation- it’s an accusation! In his mind, he was always the innocent brother, and they would always be the ones who sold him into slavery. It’s no wonder we have no record in the Torah of Yosef and his brothers living together at all or interacting for the final 17 years of Yaakov’s life, aside from caring for the needs of their father. And it’s no surprise that Yosef sent them to live far away from him, in the farmland of Goshen. Yosef managed well without them for several decades, and he didn’t need that kind of negative energy in his life any longer. And the brothers still held on to their narrative of Yosef as conniving, obsequious and opportunistic; why else would they suspect him of holding a grudge and settling scores now that Yaakov was out of the picture? For them, too, Yosef was still a toxic person.

It is no surprise that “toxic” is the word of the year. We are surrounded by toxicity- not just the industrial waste we pump into the water and the ground, or the gases we spew into the atmosphere. Even more than the

increasing toxicity of our physical environment, our discourse and our relationships have become poisonous as well, with that word, “toxic” as the go-to adjective branding politicians that we despise and their followers we distrust, or in our regular lives, people we want nothing to do with. All because of the same behavior that condemned Yosef and his brothers to a lifetime of alienation: we have written an unalterable script about other people. The kid who bullied us in fifth grade will always be that bully, no matter what else happens to in her life to make her more compassionate; the serial dater will never be ready to settle down, no matter how ready he is now for commitment; the ardently liberal or staunchly conservative friend is not worth talking to, because anyone who holds a different political opinion from our own is a toxic person who won’t listen and is unworthy of our custom. Never mind that *we* are no longer the immature, inconsiderate and intransigent person we used to be, and that of course *we* are people of worth who contain much more within us than our political views. *They* are toxic, end of story. To be sure, there are relationships that really are poisonous and should be ended, for the emotional, physical and financial well being of all involved. But so much of the *zeitgeist* that has led to this “word of the year” stems from interactions between people with good intentions and bad execution, people who have written one another off and refuse to tear the script they’ve already written.

Let us learn the lesson of Yosef and his brothers, and learn to press the “reset” button, setting aside toxic narratives and preconceived notions. The Talmud (Megillah 31b) uses a phrase to describe our hopes at the end of the Jewish year, before Rosh Hashanah.

תכלה שנה וקללותיה, תחל שנה וברכותיה

Let the year and its curses conclude, and let a new year and its blessings commence. We, of course, are not ending *our* year at this time.

Nevertheless, let us- *lehavdil*- wish this blessing upon the broader world.

Maybe 2018 was a rough year, one bad enough that “toxic” was its hallmark word. May 2019 bring with it better words between people, and a better word to symbolize it.

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