

## Vayigash 5781

This week's Torah portion opens with Yehudah's impassioned plea to his brother Yosef on behalf of his brother Binyamin. Yehudah offers himself up as a slave in place of his brother, and Yosef, overcome with emotion, reveals himself and the brothers have a heartfelt reunion. Yosef lets his brothers off the hook for selling him into slavery, telling them, "It wasn't you who sent me here, but God," in order to ensure their survival. The brothers go back to the land of Israel to fetch their father and bring him to Egypt. The family will ride out the famine on choice land in Goshen, close to the border between Egypt and ancient Canaan.

Yosef brings his father to introduce him to King Pharaoh. Now if you were the King or Queen and were being introduced to the father of the prime minister for the first time, what's the first thing you would ask him? Probably not "how old are you?" Which is exactly the first thing that came out of the Pharaoh's mouth to Yakov; "How many are the days of the years of your life?" A wordy way to say, "how old are you?" But why start out with that as a question? Why not, "how are you?" "welcome to Egypt", it's an honor to meet you, or "how do you like your new digs in Goshen?" or even, "so what was that Yosef like as a little kid?" Very strange question for the first words - How old are you.

Yakov's response was even more strange, for Yakov responds, *"The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns."*

Yakov had a hard life, and it was written on his face and in the way he carried himself. He may have been 130, but he looked even older. So, when Pharaoh saw Yakov for the first time, he was taken aback: "Dude you don't look so good, how old are you?" Yakov looked older than time.

Clearly like many of us, Yakov was judge his life too harshly. The stress and worry of going through difficult times may be an internal experience, but it's reflected externally as well. It shows on our faces, it shows on our skin, our bearing, in our eyes. The physiological response we have to stress – flooding our body with stress hormones – takes a physical toll.

Dr. Julie Russak, a dermatologist, describes the impact on our skin:

Our skin, hair and nails are of the lowest importance to our survival. So, at times of stress, valuable vitamins and minerals are prioritized for our body's vital metabolic processes and the production of stress hormones. Skin is an external barometer of what is happening internally, and we often see dull skin at times of fatigue and stress.

And we do get more lines and wrinkles from stress as well – the elevated levels of cortisol in our bloodstream result in more breaking down and failing to repair tissues. The same hormones can cause our hair to turn gray or fall out, our nails to weaken, we may grind our teeth, wearing them down, and carry tension in our neck and shoulders, possibly causing pain which will also show on our faces.

It's not always as obvious as it may have been in the case of the 130-year-old Yakov. But if you really see someone, if you really look, you can tell if they're struggling.

So many people are struggling right now. We're all struggling to a greater or lesser degree. For some of us the struggle is mostly psychological – we miss our normal lives, we miss socialization, we miss going out to restaurants, we miss coming together to pray and being together as a community at kiddush. People who live alone through these times often have a hard struggle with loneliness. And for many people the struggle is more than psychological. People have lost jobs, businesses, homes, loved ones. Some people have long term health effects from contracting COVID-19.

Pay attention. See the people around you, and if someone is struggling, be compassionate, give them whatever kind of support you can. Even if you're struggling yourself, you can still give a blessing to someone else, as we see in this week's Torah reading. Even though Yakov is old and has had many struggles, he still offers a blessing to Pharaoh. You don't have to be in perfect condition yourself to offer a blessing to others.

But why would Pharaoh want a blessing from Yakov? After all, Pharaoh is far more powerful. Why would the more powerful person want a blessing from the less powerful person?

The Jewish tradition teaches us that all blessings are powerful, and we all have the power to bless – and that everyone, even God, appreciates a blessing. In the Talmud, tractate Brachot, a beautiful story is brought of a time when the High

Priest, Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, entered the Kodesh Kodoshim – The sanctum Sanctorum - inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, on Yom Kippur, and he saw the Lord of Hosts seated on high, and God said to him, “Yishmael, my son, bless me.” The High Priest responded,

May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger,  
and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes,  
and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy,  
and may You enter before them beyond the letter of the law.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, nodded His head and accepted the blessing. This event teaches us that you should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly.

The Talmud in Chagigah brings another story with a similar message:

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and Rabbi Hiyya were walking along the road. When they arrived at a certain city, they said: Is there a Torah scholar here whom we can go and greet? The people of the city said: There is a Torah scholar here, but he is blind. Rabbi Hiyya said to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: You sit here; do not demean your dignified status as Nasi to visit someone beneath your stature. I will go and greet him. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi went with him anyway, and together they greeted the blind scholar. When they were leaving him, he said to them: “You greeted one who is seen and does not see; may you be worthy to greet the One Who sees and is not seen.” Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to Rabbi Hiyya: “Now, if I had listened to you and not gone to greet him, I would have missed out on that beautiful blessing!”

The Talmud also teaches us that even a poor person who depends on charity is obligated to give charity. Just as Yakov blessed Pharaoh, even though he was struggling, we too can show compassion, can offer a blessing or can be a blessing to someone else who may be struggling even more.

2020 has been a difficult year, but with the rollout of the vaccine there is hope. If we're kind to one another, we'll have an easier journey to the other side of this pandemic. Let us not judge our own lives too harshly. Jacob left behind a legacy arguably greater than that of the other patriarchs. May we spend this dark

time of year reflecting on the seeds of light we have sewn and shared with others, and may we be inspired to continue this in seasons to come.