

Vayechi 5781

Parshat Vayechi

A lesson from Biblical times on how to overcome family discord and conflict.

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Every family has examples of family feuds and sibling rivalry. Chances are pretty good that everyone has some situation in their family where this one won't talk to that one, sometimes for reasons that have been lost in the mists of time.

Sometimes the reason for the start of a feud is a misunderstanding – those can be tragic stories. German shoemaker brothers “Adi” and “Rudi” Dassler started the Dassler Brothers Shoe Factory in Herzogenaurach, Germany in the 1920s. The feud between the brothers started in WWII. The two had very different politics during the war; Rudi joined the Gestapo, but Adi sheltered Jews. According to legend, the final straw came during an air raid, when Adi and his family went into a bomb shelter where Rudi and his family were hiding. Adi said, “The dirty bastards are back again,” meaning the Allied forces. Rudi thought Adi meant him and his family, and a few years later they split the company into two: Adi's company, Adidas, and Rudi's company, Puma. The two vowed to never speak again. The feud lasted for 60 years with both townspeople and sports figures choosing sides: David Beckham, Muhammad Ali and Madonna all wore Adidas while Pele, Boris Becker and Usain Bolt were signed by Puma. It wasn't until 2009, long after both brothers had died, that Puma and Adidas, still headquartered in the same Bavarian town, agreed to a soccer match for charity to support a non-profit organization. But they made a point of saying the match was a one-time thing. They weren't going to be embarking on any joint ventures.

Sometimes there's a good reason for a feud: Eppie Lederer got started writing the “Ask Ann Landers” advice column in 1955. A few months later, her identical twin sister Pauline Phillips decided to start her own advice column under the name, “Dear Abby.” Naturally this caused some tension between the sisters, but when it became a “I'm never talking to you feud” was after Pauline offered to write Dear Abby for their hometown newspaper for less pay, if only the paper promised not

to print “Ask Ann Landers.” Not only did the sisters never reconcile, the decades-long feud continued through their children.

The book of Bereshit, which we finish reading today, is one tale of sibling rivalry after another. Yet if we look at the stories, we can see a progression.

The first case of sibling rivalry in the Torah is the story of Cain and Abel. A feud that started because of jealousy, it ended in the death of Abel.

Abraham’s sons Isaac and Ishmael never speak to each other after they leave home; they do, however, come together to bury their father. It may not be a warm reunion, but at least no one got killed. Progress?

In the next generation, Isaac’s sons Jacob and Esau have a very powerful family feud. Jacob steals Esau’s blessing, and flees for his life because Esau is not happy about it. Yet after a 20 year cooling off period, they have an emotional reconciliation, with hugs and kisses and weeping on each others’ necks. Afterwards they go their own separate ways. It’s better than the silent treatment we see from Isaac and Ishmael, but it’s not exactly a close family after.

And then we have the story we’re concluding this week, the story of Joseph. The first example of true family reconciliation in the Torah.

Joseph clearly has good reason to hold a grudge against his brothers. They sold him into slavery! They considered killing him. If anyone would be justified in holding a grudge, it would Joseph.

In this week’s Torah portion, Vayechi, Jacob dies, and Joseph’s brothers are worried that they’re going to be in BIG trouble now. They assumed Joseph was only being nice to them because he didn’t want to upset his father. But with Jacob dead, the brothers were afraid that Joseph would take his revenge and punish them.

But instead of being vindictive, Joseph’s response is truly remarkable. He says,

Fear not; for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it to good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now therefore do not fear; I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them and spoke straight to their hearts.

Why was Joseph able to behave so magnanimously toward his brothers? Maybe his heavy responsibilities in the administration of Egypt helped him learn about the power of peace and forgiveness.

Joseph hasn't forgotten what his brothers did to him. He still carries his pain with him, as he points out to his brothers, "you thought evil against me." And we saw a reminder of how Joseph carried his pain in last week's parsha, when he revealed himself to his brothers and said, "I am your brother Joseph, who you sold into slavery." That last bit is a little superfluous isn't it? There wasn't any other brother Joseph. He was still hurting.

But he was able to get past his pain. He was able to see that despite his pain, everything turned out OK in the end. He was spiritually developed enough to see that it all comes from God, and to cultivate an attitude of *gam zu l'tovah*, this too is for the best. He was able to speak to his brothers straight from his heart, to their hearts – no deception, no games, carrying both love and pain in his heart.

If we look at the stories of sibling rivalry in the Torah, we might conclude that it's inevitable; are there any brothers in the Torah that don't have some kind of rivalry? We see many different ways to deal with family tension – from murder, to ignoring each other, to being peaceful but separate, to true reconciliation.

The inspiring story of Joseph we read this week is our role model.

Are you mad at your brother or sister? Think what they did is unforgivable? Was it worse than selling you into slavery?