

Parashat VaYeshev: Getting Close to Hatred

Rabbi Neil Cooper, December 5, 2015 / 23 Kislev 5776

The stories we tell and the way that we tell them are intended not to elucidate the past as much as to provide for us some guidance for the future. This is true with respect to the various narratives about Hanukkah. This is true, as well, with respect to the stories told in the Torah. In particular, this is true for the stories told in this week's *parasha*, *Parasht VaYeshev*.

This week's reading is a continuation of the longest narrative in the Torah, the story of Joseph. Joseph, as you know, is the youngest and favored son of the Patriarch, Jacob. Despite the fact that Jacob has twelve sons, it is Joseph who is clearly beloved, receiving attention and finery not shared with the others. In addition, Joseph has dreams of his brothers, eventually, bowing down to Joseph.

Having the dreams is one thing. Telling your brothers about your dream in which they bow down to you is something else. Some things might best be left unsaid. But that would not be Joseph's choice. And, Jacob is hated, in varying degrees, by his brothers. It is this hatred which motivates the events which are described in this week's *parasha*.

Toward the beginning of this *parasha*, Jacob's sons decide to take their flocks to Shechem, hoping to find there better land on which to graze. But the brothers tarry and, their father, Jacob becomes worried. He sends Joseph, who had stayed behind, to see if the brothers were okay.

(And here we might ask about Jacob's intent: Jacob knows that the boys don't get along. He knows, in fact that the others resent Joseph terribly and hate him. How could he not know? Yet, Jacob sends Joseph on a mission to find the brothers. What did he think would happen? Jacob is sending his beloved son into the lion's den, so to speak, to face his brothers who hate him. Our commentaries provide several explanations here about Jacob's rationale, but I prefer, this morning to focus on the events which follow.)

When the brothers see Joseph from afar, they begin to hatch their plan: We will kill him and throw him into a pit. When Reuven hears the plan to kill Joseph (37:21-22, p.230):

21: He said: Let us not take his life

22 And Reuven said to them: "Shed no blood! Cast him into the pit..."

What is interesting here is that **Reuven begins speaking**: Let us not take his life. And then (the Torah continues) **Reuven says**: Let's throw him into a pit. And here we ask: Why does the Torah tell us that (v.21) Reuven said....and he said (v.22) without anyone speaking in between?

The answer begins with an understanding the context of each of these two statements by Reuven, a context, according to the commentary of Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman, (Rabbinic leader of the Berlin Yeshiva and the beginning of the 20th century) which explains that these two statements by Reuven actually occurred with a significant amount of time between them.

Joseph, according to Rabbi Hoffman, is coming far away, barely visible as he made his way across the field. Only because he was wearing his colorful coat could the brothers know that it was Joseph. And, while still far away, the brothers begin to hatch their plan and express their desire to kill Joseph. Reuven, in the context of this discussion tries to persuade the brothers not to kill Joseph and says: Let us not shed blood. (This is not an argument. Reuven simply voices his opinion). All this taking place as Joseph is walking toward them.

As Joseph nears, however, the tension mounts and the theoretical discussion about Joseph's fate becomes much more real. Reuven gets more nervous. Reuven knows that he must do something to prevent the violence and murder the others are planning. Reuven is the oldest and feels it his responsibility to look out for all of his brothers. It is his job to save Joseph from his brothers.

At this point, therefore, Reuven speaks a second time: "Don't kill him. Throw him into a pit, but do not harm him." As Joseph drew near, Reuven speaks a second time, this time as a demand, not simply as an opinion.

The brothers insisted on killing Joseph when he first came into sight. Reuven, in response, voiced his opinion when Joseph was far away, barely visible. But as Joseph came closer, when it was easy to see Joseph's face, Reuven demands that Joseph not be harmed. And, the brothers do not respond to Reuven.

It was in that time, between the moment Joseph came into view from afar and when Joseph drew near and became clearly visible, that Reuven and his brothers realized something crucial: it was easy to hate Joseph from afar. It was much more difficult to look him in the eye and carry out the violence against him. From afar, they spoke in theoretical terms about killing Joseph. But when he was nearby...that's another story.

Hatred is often inversely proportional to proximity. You can hate much easier from afar than from close up. And more: Hatred, when it takes root, undermines our sense of right, justice and even morality. From afar we are very clear-eyed and certain. From afar we can say: He deserves to die. But if we take a step toward those we hate, the hatred not only dissipates but the arguments against violence becomes stronger. I can hate some people in general. But it is more difficult to hate a single person. And hatred, as justifiable as it may be, can lead us to do bad things, things that we otherwise might oppose. Hatred has the ability to convince us that our hateful response is, in fact just, right and proper, even though it is not.

I wrote a letter to our congregation last week in which I spoke about the hatred of Israel in the world. While the world cries out against injustice and violence elsewhere in the world, the world is silent when it comes to Israel. When an act of terrorism rocks France, the world stands in unity. But when such a deed is committed against Israelis, the silence we hear smacks of hatred, self-righteousness and a double standard when it comes to morality. It seems that, in this world, there is such a double standard: one for Israel the other for the rest of the world.

Jews, however, must have no double standard. Even when we hate, and fight and oppose and resist, neither hatred nor irrational fear can be decisive in determining our moral response to others in this world. Yet, these are the hateful sentiments which dominate the responses, seemingly from the world over, to Syrian refugees.

In this context, I want to say that I really don't like Syria in general, nor their President, in particular. Syria is a country ruled by despotic leader, Bashir Assad, who is a murderer, a liar and a terrorist. He has authorized the Syrian military, that part which remains under his control, to fire on and kill his own people. He has created, hidden and used chemical weapons against civilians in his fight to retain his grip on power. He has consorted with the worst and most despicable tyrants in the world. And, this hatred has, since the 1940s, waxed and waned, depending on the current agenda of Syria with respect to Israel. In fact, the extent and depth of Syria's hatred of Israel became further documented with the release of files over the last several years which make explicit the collaboration between the Nazis and Syria. Syria likes Israel no more and no less than Israel likes Syria.

And so we must ask the question, as Jews, as supporters of Israel, why on earth should we have pity on Syrian refugees? Why should we allow these people from such a hateful country into our country? My answer: we must. We have no choice, not because of who they are, but because of who we are.

The crisis of Syrian refugees has become a worldwide problem. The notion of a million people fleeing for their lives, fleeing from their own army is hard to imagine. Perhaps, then, we can say that, it is the Syrian leader, Assad, not the hatred of the Syrian people *per se*, whose hatred for Israel we see. We can point out that those fleeing refugees certainly hate the same leader we hate. But, whether or not such sentiments can be determined, I believe that a position which bars all Syrian refugees from entering the US is unjustified, un-American and un-Jewish. I want to tell you why this country, no stranger to terrorism, must take its share of Syrian refugees.

1. 'Avadim Hayinu Lifaro B'mitzrayim

We, Americans, are part of a great nation the population of which is comprised by people, the large majority of whose ancestors were refugees and were lucky enough to be taken in by this country. We, Jews, are a people which began as refugees. The story of Joseph in this week's *parasha* carries the Children of Israel to Egypt, setting the stage for, what would eventually become, 400 years of slavery before our People were redeemed and taken out of Egypt.

The first reason to take in Syrian refugees is because we were once refugees. We understand the struggle they face. Moreover, we did nothing to deserve the benefits of our lives in this country, a country which took in our ancestors when we needed safe haven. We did nothing to suggest that we deserve all of the gifts this country has given to the Jewish People. This life is a gift. It is a gift not to be squandered or taken for granted. This is a gift to be shared. That we were slaves motivates, on the deepest level, our responsibility to help the imperiled, the enslaved and the refugee.

2. Gerim Hayinu

Even when we were not fleeing brutal enemies, even when we were fortunate enough to find a place to live, we have been outsiders, *gerim*. To live as a *ger*, as an outsider means to live with one foot out the door. It means to live with the uncertainty that your home is not really yours, that your host country might turn on you, that you are in but not of the place you live. And to that history we can respond in one of two ways:

- a. We have lived with uncertainty, wandering from place to place to find a country that would allow us to live in peace, only to be uprooted by the pogroms or Crusades or laws to outlaw being Jewish. This has been our story and for centuries no one intervened to help us to get

where we are. Since we have endured this and prevailed, it is up to you, the new refugees of the world to do solve this problem on your own. Or:

- b. We know what it is like to be a refugee, because we have had this experience. Therefore, we will stand with anyone whose lives are controlled by dictators, whose homes and property are taken from them, or who have been sent away as refugees. We would not wish, even our worst enemies, to suffer as we have.

And you and I know that this is the Jewish way.

3. *Danim Adam LeKaf Zichuto*

We must give people the benefit of the doubt. And what is the doubt? The doubt is the claim that some of those who enter the US are terrorists, sneaking in, in order to perpetrate acts of terror and violence. And this issue cannot be taken lightly. For, in one instance in Paris, it may have been the case that one perpetrator had come into France as a refugee with a fake passport.

There is no doubt that care must be taken. And there is no doubt that a high degree of background checking is necessary, obligatory for our government to assure, as much as is possible, that those granted refugee status do not have criminal records and pose no obvious threat to this country or its citizens. That is not even controversial.

But what has happened around this issue is a degree of hysteria and fear which is unwarranted and un-American. For that reason, I am astounded at the Congress for pulling together, both sides of the isle, to unite in hysteria and prejudice in order to stop the flow of Syrians. (Our congress can't agree on daylight savings time and yet here they are united).

I don't like Syria in general. And, I will confess that the fighting in Syria, with the military attacking the insurrectionists and opposition forces, (which might, if they win, choose a leader even worse than Assad), as well as the ascendancy of ISIS in Syria, have brought me to the point of not knowing for whom to cheer, who would I like to see win. And so, unable to decide who should win, I wish success to them all.

But hatred destroys perspective and order. Hatred from afar enables us to ignore pain, circumstance or rationale. Hatred has the power to remove from us our own sense of compassion and humanity. Secure our homes and communities in the greatest country in the world, we can, to our hearts' contents, hate all we want from in the comfort of our living rooms.

But, at least for me, when the streams of people are seen flooding the country sides, when children are walking, not knowing when they will eat next, where they will sleep, who will take them in, hatred must be silenced by a sense of humanity. When hatred becomes less theoretical and more personal, we can begin to see through the generalities to the specifics. When we see real people, not just hated enemies, our calculus should and must change.

That was what I learned from Reuven. Seeing Joseph from afar, the consequences of virulent hatred were theoretical. But when Reuven saw that person approaching from afar, his brother, Joseph, flawed to be sure, but human nonetheless, he could not allow the hatred of his brothers to determine Joseph's fate. Indeed, when his brothers saw Joseph close up, they no longer spoke of killing him. They offered no retort to Reuven's insistence that Joseph not be harmed. They remained silent, unable to muster the hate they had expressed from afar, as Joseph approached. Proximity had caused the hatred to dissipate.

In this world of immediacy, of visual and informational access, physical proximity matters less and less. Today we can see our enemies close up. It would seem, therefore, that the world should be getting less rather than more hateful. It is not. And for that, I have no answer. I do not know how to heal this world of its hatefulness and prejudice. Perhaps, when hatred is implanted and rooted so deeply, proximity cannot undo its poisonous consequences. All that I and we can do, is to read the stories of our tradition as they written, not so much to learn about our past, but to hope that, the message, the meaning and the morality of the story as we tell it will help to light, for us and for the world, the way for the future.