

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rick Rheins
Shabbat Vayigash 5781

Approaching Rapprochement

We come across the French term *rapprochement* whenever states, nations and parties in conflict seek to resolve disputes and repair their relationships. The origin of the word comes from the French *rapprocher* ("to bring together"). For disputants to resolve their differences it is necessary for them to approach one another. As is often the case, one party approaches first and that convinces the other that a reconciliation is possible. The gracious and often brave act of approaching is a central theme in this week's Torah portion.

This week's Torah portion is *Vayisash* (Genesis 4:18-47:27). It includes the dramatic and emotional reunion of Joseph with his brothers and then with his father Jacob. The word *vayigash* means "and he approached." It refers to Judah's courageous act of self-sacrifice as he approached the powerful Egyptian official (who was really the long lost brother Joseph, now known by his Egyptian name *Zaphenat Paneiach*). Joseph was concealing his identity in order to test his brothers who had sold him into slavery thirteen years earlier in a fit of jealousy. Judah thought that he was giving himself as a slave to the Egyptian so he could save his youngest brother Benjamin.

Joseph saw his brother Judah approach with a selfless offer that signaled that he and the other brothers truly were haunted with guilt by their earlier betrayal.

Yes, Joseph could have reached out earlier to his brothers, but until that last moment he wasn't sure that he really could forgive them. Perhaps he wasn't even sure that he wanted a renewed relationship with them. He had a new life in Egypt. He had a family, respect, and he was one of the most powerful men in the most powerful of nations. But Joseph's heart broke when Judah approached. He saw his older brother moved to tears at the prospect that he might cause their father Jacob grief. As it is written in the Torah:

Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him. (Genesis 45:1-3)

Seeing his brothers' confusion and hesitation, Joseph calls to them more emphatically, "Come here, approach me." Again we find the use of the

Hebrew root נגש (negash), “to approach.” Though Judah made the first step, Joseph wants all of the brothers to come near.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please approach me (g'shu-na eila]." And when they approached, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance." (Genesis 45:4-7)

Joseph not only forgave his brothers, he also told them that they should not feel guilt. Forgiving and forgetting are entirely different. We might forgive someone who has wronged us but we'll still remember what they once did. The old saying rings true to our instinct: "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." No one wants to be fooled twice. Instead, we will forever keep our guard up around a person who has caused us harm.

So, to forgive is one thing; but to forget? Forgetting a wrong seems a violation of basic street smarts. But if we are ever going to rebuild a damaged relationship we have to be willing to forget the hurt we once felt. In addition, we have to go out of our way to express that we really have

moved on; that we are no longer interested in holding onto your guilt and we will never again threaten to wave past misdeeds in your face just to shame and humble you. Of course, that's a lot easier said than done.

Joseph was able to accomplish the noble act of forgiving and forgetting his brothers' sins by creating a theological escape: "God wanted me to be sent to Egypt in order to ensure that we would all survive." While theologians can argue the soundness of Joseph's claim, he was able to achieve his ultimate dream: his family once again united in peace.

Next Friday is January 1, the beginning of the New Year 2021. I think that it is pretty safe to say that not too many people will be singing "*Auld lang syne*" next Thursday night as a tribute to 2020. This has been a year for us to forget. The COVID plague brought profound suffering to millions. In addition, this year's divisive political campaign exacerbated social stresses, broke some friendships and even strained family ties. We pray that a New Year will bring us opportunities to heal. We need it and this nation needs it. But can we forgive? Will we be willing to forget the hurt and let go of the anger? The act of *teshuvah*, often translated as "repentance," literally means "return." To forgive and forget is to return to the days before the offence, before the hurt. It's not easy. It wasn't easy for Joseph. However, he wanted his family back. He wanted reunion. Still, he waited for someone

to approach with a broken and contrite heart. “*Vayigash eilav Yehudah,*
And Judah approached.” Who will take the first step in the healing of our
relationships?

Shabbat Shalom,

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