

Vayigash 5784

December 22, 2023

11 weeks since October 7

Our parasha opens at the peak of drama. Joseph, having been sold into slavery by his brothers and risen to second in command in Pharaoh's court, has just put his brothers to the test. They came to Egypt seeking food in famine and, not recognizing Joseph, brought their youngest brother Benjamin with them to Egypt in accordance with the Egyptian leader's command. Joseph then sent them home to Canaan with full bags of provisions, but also had his men place a silver goblet in Benjamin's bag only to come after them and call Benjamin a thief. Now they are all in Joseph's home, as Joseph declares that he will keep Benjamin as a slave while the others can return to their father in Canaan.

This trickery has a goal. Joseph needs to know whether his brothers have changed since throwing him into a pit and selling him into slavery. Maimonides defines completed teshuva, or repentance, as finding yourself in the same situation again and responding differently. Last time, the brothers demonstrated that they did not care what happened to their younger brother Joseph, even whether he lived or died. Now, would they show the same lack of sensitivity to their youngest brother's fate?

All of this takes place at the end of last week's parasha. This week opens in the midst of the scene, as older brother Judah steps forward to respond to the moment. Sefer HaYashar, a medieval Hebrew midrash, imagines that Judah says this to the Egyptian vizier who is secretly Joseph: "You continue to speak of your cup, which you say he has stolen from you, while you have placed it into the bag of our brother. Far be it from our brother Benjamin, and from the seed of Abraham, to do such a thing....And now you should refrain from saying such a thing, lest your words be heard in the land and people will say, "On account of a little silver the king of Egypt had quarrels and fights with these men, and he has taken away from them their brother

for a slave.” And Joseph answered them: “Take then this cup and go your way from me and leave your brother to be a slave, for it is the judgment of a thief to be a slave.” And Judah said to him, “And are you not ashamed at your words, that we should leave with you our brother for this cup? Surely if you would give to us a thousand times as much as your cup we would not leave our brother even for all the silver of all mankind; rather we would first die for his sake.” In the actual Torah text, Judah offers to put himself in Benjamin’s place, to be kept as a slave in his brother’s stead. This is all Joseph needs to hear: he breaks down in tears and reveals himself to his brothers.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues that more than any particular words that Judah said, it was the act of drawing near that melted the brothers’ reserve and defenses. The parasha is called Vayigash after all, which means, “and he came close.” Sacks says, “How can we be sure that vayigash is the key word? Because it contrasts with another key verse, many chapters and many years earlier: ‘But they saw him at a distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.’ From far away,” Sacks says, “we don’t see people as human beings, and when we stop seeing people as human beings, and they become instead symbols, objects of envy or hate, people can do bad things to one another.”

For the last eleven weeks, I’ve called upon anyone who would listen to see the humanity of Israelis and of Palestinians, to draw ourselves close to their experience, to see and feel the shattering terror that Israelis are feeling. And to not look away from the mass killing of Palestinians, the unfathomable loss and cataclysmic humanitarian crisis that they are enduring. But tonight, I want to speak about a different distance, and a different closeness.

We have grown distant from each other, American Jews. In particular, we have grown distant from each other by generation. Old to young and young to old. Just as Joseph felt forsaken, distrustful, and not seen or understood by his older brothers, many younger Jews (perhaps some in this room tonight), feel betrayed, abandoned, alienated, and not seen or understood

by the generations of Jews older than them, including people like me. Younger Jews are screaming, protesting, writing, appealing, and in many cases just quietly feeling that we Gen Xers and above are insensate to this existential moral crisis. Many are feeling that there is no place for them in the Jewish world, and among the Jewish people, and in synagogues, and in Jewish community. And that is wrong.

Last Shabbat morning I said clearly and I'll say it again: our commitment to diversity at CBE is not just about national origin, culture, race, religious background, sexual orientation, gender, and ability. It includes diversity of perspective, ideology, and belief, including on Israel/Palestine. It is important, vital, to this community that we hold space for a broad spectrum of belief. We have got to be a place and a movement and a people who learn how to be in the midst of disagreement with respect and sometimes even love, how to be with views different from our own, how to tolerate discomfort, so that we can continue to hear each other, to see each other's faces, to draw near to one another, to be community to one another even when we strongly disagree.

I had already written this d'var Torah when today I received a letter signed by 35 people who became bnei mitzvah at CBE. They range in age from 16 to 32. They wrote me a strongly worded, very well researched, heartfelt and heartbroken appeal. They feel that I have not adequately used my position and my voice to stop the war and protect Palestinian lives.

Obviously no one likes being criticized, and we might not agree about everything, but I bet we agree on more than they know. Regardless, I was really, truly, glad they wrote to me. I responded immediately and asked them to come here to meet with me next week, to draw near, so I can listen, so I can hear them with an open heart.

This week a mentor of mine introduced me to the phrase "moral injury," which I had not encountered before. According to the organization called Disabled American Veterans, "moral injury is when one feels that they have violated their conscience or moral compass when they take part in, witness,

or fail to prevent an act that disobeys their moral values ...” The definition and diagnosis of moral injury are being rapidly expanded and extended to fields like health care, social work, education, and the law. Most definitions focus on people who are present in high stakes situations in which they did or witnessed acts that caused serious harm or failed to prevent serious harm. This includes situations without clear right and wrong choices; or where there is a clear right and wrong and the wrong thing is done; or in which doing the right thing is impossible and doing nothing feels terrible. According to a compilation of studies published by the National Institutes of Health, symptoms of moral injury include “guilt, shame, spiritual/existential conflict, and loss of trust, with secondary symptoms of depression, anxiety, anger, self-harm, and social problems resulting from it.”

Few definitions of moral injury extend to people who are not physically present at the event. There is obviously a massive difference between the experience of someone on site in a moment of moral injury and someone on the other side of the world. However, I know that many young Jews and Jews of all ages are in acute moral distress. They are experiencing guilt, shame, spiritual/existential conflict, and loss of trust. Many are depressed, anxious, and angry, and some feel deeply harmed by those of us with power, who they feel have failed to prevent grievous immoral harm.

The primary question they have is Joseph’s question for his older brothers: do you care? Do you actually care?

Meanwhile, on the other side, we have many Israelis in our community, who feel that we have failed, that I have failed, to care about Israelis, to defend Israel adequately with our language and our actions. That I have expressed too much empathy for Palestinians, that I have cared too much about Palestinians and not enough about Israelis. In our CBE census so far, among the handful of members who’ve expressed unhappiness with the way we’ve navigated these last eleven weeks, people are exactly split between those two poles.

All I can tell you is that I care very very deeply and that I'm trying as hard as I can, as we all are in our own way. Starting in January we want to hold a series of three listening or healing circles, in which we can hear each other across our differences and practice seeing the diversity of opinion, perspective and belief in our congregation, to make clear to one another that we are strong enough to handle the discomfort of disagreement, and there's enough room here for all of us.

We are not all going to agree with each other. But we must do as Judah did, take risks to draw near to one another. We must open ourselves to listen, to hear, and to care. I want to say to every young person in here and out there, you have a place here. No matter your views. You have a place here. I am listening to you, deeply. That is who we are, a community who can hold deep difference and still be a community. Here at CBE you will meet Jews from all kinds of backgrounds and with all kinds of views, and the only thing you can assume, the only thing you should assume, is that every person you meet at CBE belongs here exactly as much as you do.

As the prophet Joel said:

וְהָיָה אַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֶשְׁפּוּךְ אֶת־רוּחִי עַל־כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר וַנְּבֹאוּ בְנֵיכֶם וּבָנוּתֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם חִלְמוֹת יַחְלְמוּ
בְּחֻזֵיכֶם חֲזִינוֹת יִרְאוּ:

And it will be after that,
I will pour out My spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy;
Your elders shall dream dreams,
And your youths shall see visions.

May we turn toward one another, may we listen for the prophecies of our children, the dreams of our elders, and the vision of our youth. So that we can, please Gd, find our way quickly to justice, to life, and to peace.