Yasher Koach, Dash.

You've led us so beautifully this morning. Chanting Torah and Haftarah and teaching us those words of wisdom. The story you shared about racing with your cousin feels almost taken straight from Genesis. A tale of mischief and competition among young relatives. That current runs deep in our tradition. But as you taught us, equally central to our story are forgiveness and reconciliation. You learned from your mistake, which is almost as important as anything else you did today to demonstrate your entryway into Jewish adulthood.

I'm going to return to the idea of forgiveness, but first I want to emphasize the significance of this parsha, Vayechi, being the final chapters of the book of Genesis. For three months now, we've been reading through our ancient origin story. The creation of all things, humankind, and, in short order, the people of Israel. It's poetic and mysterious. But above all, more than any other book of the Torah, it's filled with drama.

Nobody gets off easy in Genesis. People lie! They're jealous! They cheat their brothers out of their birthrights! And nearly sacrifice their sons. And this is just our patriarchs. Before then, Adam and Eve explicitly do what God tells them not to. Cain murders his brother. And Noah, the most righteous man of his generation, gets drunk and humiliates himself. Even dear, wise Joseph, to whom we return this week, is self-absorbed and arrogant with his brothers early on.

Why, then, do we tell these stories right off the bat in our most foundational text? Why is this the preamble to our Constitution? Why are these the ancestors we claim? Rashi says famously that since most of these stories take place in the land of Israel, the Torah uses Genesis to establish the Israelites' history in that land. Which is plausible, but doesn't answer my question. Other commentators argue that these tales show the beginnings of the unique relationship between the Israelites and God, emanating from God's early encounters with our patriarchs and matriarchs. And that makes

sense, too, gesturing at God's relationship with these Hebrews *despite* their flaws.

But the most basic answer as to why Genesis is filled with imperfect characters is that it feels real! Unlike other traditions, which glorify perfect people, heroes, and demigods, we get relatable figures. Who struggle and fail. And have to find some way through life anyway.

If the Torah ends by saying "I set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life," Genesis sets this up as an actual choice. If we can do horrible things, then pursuing a life of peace or morality really is a choice. Judaism is the pursuit of that choice, through the wisdom and mitzvot we've inherited.

I mention all of this because of what you came to teach us, Dash. The importance of forgiveness. Which is a choice to move beyond the very human impulse toward revenge. Genesis knows that impulse well. And if we only read Genesis without its final chapters, we might come away believing that people are doomed to be vengeful forever in an eternal cycle of violence. But here I want to return to the Joseph episode you recounted for us. Many believe that the Joseph story is the first instance of forgiveness in recorded literature. And after the climax last week, of Joseph revealing himself to his brothers, and forgiving their treatment of him…this week, we get confirmation that that forgiveness was real.

After reassuring his brothers that they do not need to become his slaves, Joseph spoke kindly to them. You pointed out, Dash, that "he spoke from the heart." And that he wept. Proving the emotional authenticity of his approach, setting the standard for any of *us* seeking to forgive or be forgiven. And as we seek to understand this as a model for true forgiveness, there may be something more to learn from the tears Joseph sheds this week.

Focusing on the brothers' fear in this episode, a medieval midrash known as the Midrash Tanchuma, says that when the sons of Jacob were all

assembled in Canaan to bury their father, with Joseph with them, the brothers looked out and saw Joseph in the distance…approaching the very pit into which they threw him when they were young. And when they saw this, they panicked. They'd assumed that seeing that pit would remind him of his anger and that they would be punished without their father there to protect them. But unbeknownst to them, precisely the opposite happened. Joseph approached the pit and paused for a moment. And then he offered a prayer. Baruch HaMakom she'asah li nes. "Blessed be the place where God performed a miracle for me."

It's a kind of incredible reading. Joseph revisited the most traumatic place of his childhood, and instead of wallowing in that pit of sorrow, or being reminded of his anger, he chose instead to offer thanks to God.

You could view this as a kind of exposure therapy. And it is, in a way. But I like to imagine that in this moment Joseph smiled. Knowing, from the vantage point of adulthood, that without that pit, he never would've become the Joseph who saved his family and all the Egyptians from famine years later. This is, after all, what Joseph says in the actual text of the Torah, that God *chashava l'tova*, that God intended it to turn out for the best. This raw and powerful realization may have been one reason why he cries.

Or, as another midrash from Breishit Rabbah suggests[1], he cries because despite his full transformation, his brothers still don't trust him. Immediately thereafter, Joseph turns to his brothers and tells them not to fear. And maybe he would've done so anyway. But I think that what we might learn from this is that Joseph needed to consider fully what it meant for him to be an adult, now without his father. To make peace with his own demons, his *deepest* pains, in order to forgive from the *deepest* parts of himself. Perhaps true forgiveness requires more than magnanimity towards those who hurt us. Maybe instead it requires integrating the hurt we felt into our very being. So that when we make peace, *shalom*, it is from a place of wholeness, *shlemut*.

[1] Breishit Rabbah 100:8

This Shabbat, we may not find ourselves in our High Holiday season of forgiveness. But it is a new secular year. Maybe the *second* best time for us to consider whom we need to forgive, or from whom to seek forgiveness. And as we do that, we might think about revisiting whatever that hurt might be that we're still holding onto. How we've grown from it. How it's become a part of ourselves, among so many other parts that make us who we are. And from that place, perhaps…to forgive.

What I appreciate literarily about this text coming at the end of Breishit, is that after so many tales of siblings being jealous and unkind toward the other, this parsha finally sets things right. After Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, Joseph and his brothers, after Jacob (in this week's parsha!) blesses Joseph's younger son *before* the older…seeming to perpetuate a cycle of sibling rivalry til the bitter end…this last chapter of Genesis says that some unhealthy patterns can be corrected. That origin stories – the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves – can change. Even after generations pass.

And if sibling rivalry was otherwise the centerpiece of Genesis, the book ends with Joseph on his deathbed entrusting his legacy not to his children, nor to his wife, but to his brothers. In almost the very last verse of the book, Joseph asks them to bring his bones back up to Canaan after he's gone. Which their descendants do centuries later. Taken as a whole, then, Genesis is not just the story of people behaving badly. But that of a family getting good with itself.

Tomorrow we'll begin a new book. We'll enter Egypt and be fully in Mitzrayim. The narrow places. And after we're freed from there, we'll be bamidbar, in the desert. With a pause to talk about sacrifices here and there. But before we do any of that, entering the narrows and wandering the desert, we need to get good with ourselves and the people with whom we'll travel.

Shabbat Shalom.