Bring Your Gifts (Genesis 39:3)

Parashat Vayeshev 5786

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Shabbat Shalom! In the Mishnah, our rabbinic commentary on the Torah, there is a discussion about the true nature, the very essence of human beings. The rabbis tell of a person who, as their job, creates coins, stamping them with the same seal, making them almost exactly alike. The rabbis then compare this process to the creation of human beings, in which each of us is stamped with the seal of Adam, the very first human being; and yet, this stamp is different. With this stamp, each of us receives the divine connection that Adam received in the creation of the world. We are imbued with the goodness, the holiness of the divine; but, each of us is still different from one another. Therefore, the rabbis tell us:

לְפִיכָךְ כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד חַיָּב לוֹמַר, בִּשְׁבִילִי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם.

"Each and every person is obligated to say: the world was created for me."[1]

[1] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

This rabbinic discussion raises up two ideals: First, that each of us are endowed with the holiness of the divine, just for being human, not for anything we've done or achieved; our humanness in and of itself is a sign of holiness. And second, that each of us is a unique human being, with skills, talents, and gifts we bring to this world that was created for us. And if each of these ideals is true for ourselves, then they're true for each and every person in this world. But understanding these ideals and living them out in our daily lives are two different things.

Over the past several weeks, I've had conversations with members of this community who feel stuck. They want to get involved here at CBE, they want to have more meaningful conversations and relationships with their loved ones, they want to do something, anything, to address the political moment we find ourselves in right now. But they're not sure where to turn or what to do. They shared about their cooking skills, their organizing skills, their ability to facilitate groups, their professional expertise, and so many different ways that they could serve a larger purpose. But they're not sure how to best put those skills to use, how to best serve themselves and others. Perhaps to pick up where Rabbi Timoner left off a few weeks ago in her sermon challenging us to explore the connection between prayer and our response to the world around us, I'd like to suggest that one way for us to more forcefully, more courageously bring our gifts forward into this world is by recognizing the divine presence within ourselves.

Let's just look to the story of our ancestor, Joseph. In our Torah portion this week, Vayeshev, we meet Joseph and all of his brothers. We quickly learn that Joseph is favored by their father, Jacob, and Joseph flaunts this status amongst his brothers by wearing a beautiful, colorful, ornate, amazing technicolor dreamcoat. We also learn that Joseph is a dreamer, that seems to be one of his gifts in life. Except, in the beginning of this Torah portion, Joseph uses his dreams to again make his brothers jealous, telling them of dreams in which they will bow down to him in the future. With reckless abandon, Joseph only puts his gift of dreaming to use in order to serve himself and antagonize his brothers.

Fast forward to the end of this week's portion, and we find Joseph in a terrible situation. His brothers, jealous of Joseph in every way, sell him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph is then framed and thrown in jail. He has reached the very bottom; he is stuck, not unlike many of us trying to navigate our way through this moment in the history of the world. It is here, in the depths of prison, that Joseph again puts his dream interpretation skills to work; however, this time, it's different. When Joseph is brought to Egypt and stationed in the Pharaoh's palace, we read:

כִּ֣י יְהוָ֣ה אִתּ֔וֹ וְכֹ֨ל אֲשֶׁר־הֽוּא עֹשֶׂ֜ה יְהוָ֗ה מַצְלִ֥יחַ בְּיָדֽוֹ׃

"For יהוה was with him and יהוה lent success to everything he undertook…"[2]

[2] Genesis 39:3

Rashi, our commentator from the 11th century, interprets this verse to mean that “the name of God was a familiar word in his mouth.”[3] This is later confirmed when Joseph interprets the dreams of other inmates, saying:

הֲלֹוא֙ לֵֽאלֹהִ֔ים פִּתְרֹנִ֖ים סַפְּרוּ־נָ֥א לִֽי׃

“Surely God can interpret! Tell me your dreams!”[4]

This time, Joseph is using his gift to provide helpful ideas, instead of serving his own interests. At the center of this move from selfishness to selflessness is Joseph’s recognition of God and God’s role in his life. In other words, just like the rabbinic discussion about the very essence of humanity, Joseph has remembered that he was created in the divine image and must use his skills, gifts, and talents to make a difference in the world. That remembrance, that recognition of the holiness inside him turns Joseph from a self-centered and pompous person, to someone who truly cares for others and wants them to thrive.

[3] Rashi on Genesis 39:3
[4] Genesis 40:8

Before we continue exploring this idea through our tradition, I'd like to say a word about God. Throughout this story and throughout Torah, God is omnipresent. And for many people, God is omnipresent, loving, and supportive in their daily lives. And, for many people, the language of God is difficult. It brings up outdated pictures of an old man in the sky, or negative experiences learning about God when you were younger, or any number of things that make the term and the overall concept challenging. So the invitation, as we consider ideas of godliness, holiness, divinity, and the word God itself, is to translate it. God has many names throughout our tradition - so pick one. Instead of considering a separate holy entity, think of God as the oneness of the universe, the spark of holiness within each of us coming together to repair and renew our broken world. One must not believe in God in order to understand godliness, holiness, and the divine.

This understanding is what Joseph learns throughout his life and enables him to change the ways in which he uses his gifts in the world. The Haftarah for this week, our prophetic wisdom aligned with this Torah portion, also asks us to understand the holiness within each and every one of us and then challenges us to put those special powers to use. The prophet Amos exclaims to the people:

רַק אֶתְכֶם יָדַעְתִּי מִכֹּל מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה

"You alone I have singled out among all of the families of the earth…"[5]

[5] Amos 3:3

Through the prophet Amos, God reminds the Israelites of their unique history and the expectations placed upon them through the words of Torah. By singling them out, by ensuring they remember the unique responsibilities they have to each other and to the world, God is calling upon the people to put their gifts to use.

As I mentioned earlier, many of us in this community are considering how to best use our gifts, skills, and talents to make a difference in this community, this city, this country, and in this world. And the wisdom from our Torah, our ancestor Joseph, from our Haftarah, the prophet Amos, is to seek out our connection with the divine. To remind ourselves of the holiness within us. That reminder could be tonight or tomorrow, during our Shabbat prayers. It could come through individual prayer, meditation, and reflection. It could be found through Torah study and learning about our tradition. It might be found by pursuing justice, doing the work of repairing our broken world. It could also come through looking into the eyes of our loved ones, seeing their inherent holiness. All of these examples and more. Anything to help us know, beyond a doubt, that goodness, holiness, and divinity are inherent to who we are as individuals. And perhaps that acknowledgement, that reminder, can give us that extra encouragement to use our gifts and bring them into this world. As we confront so many challenges, both personal and societal, we all need to bring our gifts right now.

In just two days, we will begin our practice of bringing physical light into our homes and neighborhoods. Just as we increase the light of the Chanukah menorah each night, may we also increase the ways in which we bring our gifts, our talents, our skills, into the world. And may they shine ever brightly. Shabbat Shalom.