

Don't Take the (Rage) Bait

Genesis 45:3-5

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Shabbat Shalom! In our Torah this week, we find our ancestor, Joseph, in the middle of a dramatic scene with his brothers. As a reminder, Joseph's brothers have been jealous of him throughout their childhood and they eventually choose to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Joseph is later-on framed for a crime and imprisoned. He is released for his abilities to interpret dreams, eventually becoming the right-hand-man to Pharaoh. In this position of power, Joseph now meets his brothers again, years later, because they have come to Egypt to receive food during the famine that has stretched throughout the region. But, so many years have passed that the brothers do not recognize Joseph, and he chooses to keep it that way until this week's Torah portion.

In coming into contact with his brothers, Joseph has every right to be angry with them and to act with rage; and yet, in a moment of deep discernment, he chooses a different path. He reveals his true identity, he comforts his brothers, so shocked they are in that moment, and then he reinterprets all the events, the horrible, awful events of this life, in one sentence:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְפָנָיכֶם...

“God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance.”¹

¹ Genesis 45:7

According to Joseph, being sold into slavery was just God's way of making sure he got to Egypt ahead of his brothers, and now he's in the position to help them survive. Instead of rageful vengeance, instead of reading them the riot act, instead of doing any number of things that the brothers probably deserved, Joseph chooses a different path. He chooses restraint; he chooses forgiveness; he chooses loving kindness. Bible scholar Dr. Naomi Steinberg notes that Joseph "performs an act of interpretive courage: he reframes injury as responsibility. His words are neither resignation nor piety; they are a deliberate attempt to create relationship where rupture had reigned. Joseph models a kind of moral agency in which memory is not erased but placed in the service of life."² Interpretive courage, choosing to act courageously in a moment of deep distress in order to reframe events and change their meaning. As Dr. Steinberg notes, Joseph is not forgetting all that he has been through; rather, he's choosing discernment over distance, healing over hatred, reconciliation over rage.

² The Torah: A Women's Commentary; Naomi Steinberg on Vayigash

I was drawn to this part of our Torah portion after reading about Oxford's word of the year for 2025. Each year, Oxford chooses the "word of the year", or in some cases two words that make a phrase, based on thousands of votes, a panel of experts, observations from public commentary, and a data analysis of word usage. And for 2025, the word of the year is rage bait. Rage bait can be defined as "online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage by being frustrating, provocative, or offensive, typically posted in order to increase traffic to or engagement with a particular web page or social media content."³ Use of the term ragebait has tripled over the past 12 months, signifying how much we as a society are talking about these people, organizations, accounts, posts, and ideas that are filling us with rage. And looking back over the past year, there are too many to name, personal, societal, and global parts of our lives that enrage us because they are annoying, unfair, too difficult to manage, or wildly unjust. Although rage bait is usually referring to posts on social media (things that may be true or completely fake, created by artificial intelligence), we can understand its phenomenon in real-life too, navigating interactions with family members, friends, co-workers, and community members that are difficult to say the least.

³ Oxford Word of the Year: Ragebait.

<https://corp.oup.com/news/the-oxford-word-of-the-year-2025-is-rage-bait/#:~:text=Rage%20bait%20is%20defined%20as,page%20or%20social%20media%20content%2E%20%9D>.

There is much to be rageful about in our world. And yet, I can't help but think that sometimes we take the bait, that we get so angry, so rageful at something or someone that we fly off the handle rather than responding to these annoyances or injustices in a responsible, calm, and strategic way. This moment we are in right now calls upon us to be discerning in our actions, discerning in how we respond to everything around us. The goal is *not not* to be angry, but to keep focus on what is needed, right now, what we are called upon to do, right now, in our relationships, in our community, and throughout the world. This is where the wisdom of Joseph can be a guiding light for us, helping us understand the various ways in which we can respond to challenging situations and encouraging us to respond with discernment, healing, and reconciliation.

If 2025 was the year of “rage bait”, which word will encapsulate the year to come? I ask this question not only because the word of the year is fascinating in its right, demonstrating the focus of our broader society, but looking at it from a Jewish lens, words are paramount. Just look at the very beginning of our Torah, in which God created the world by speaking it into existence with words. We are the people of the book, insisting that our legacy will not be created through sculptures and great palaces, but instead through the written word of our people as seen in the Torah, the Talmud, our prayer books, and an endless line of commentary. When we pause to make an action or event holy, it is through words that holiness comes to life. In Judaism, quite simply, words create worlds.

In 2026, what will be our word of the year? What concept or idea will spread throughout our society so much so that it rises to the top? We could think of the classics like “community”, “love”, or “hope”. What about some more creative options like “stupendous”, “collective”, or even “joy bait.” There are so many options to choose from. And just like our ancestor Joseph using interpretive courage, we have agency in the choices we make in the world. So let’s build this world from words...words that articulate our truest hopes and dreams for the future. And may it be so in this year to come.

Shabbat Shalom!