

Dear Chavraya,

For all of its complicated underlying historical themes, Thanksgiving has come to represent homecoming and being together. In its uniquely American key, it sings of a universal yearning for connection. As family and friends gather, perhaps even disparate parts of our selves drawn together, the day and its themes of gratitude and acknowledgement come to represent a dream of wholeness. Sometimes the dream itself becomes cause for heartache, as well as heartburn, when reality does not reflect the imagined perfection, of family, of food, of one's own sense of place and belonging.

When our own families disappoint, sometimes a genuine failure of understanding or sensitivity on the part of others, and sometimes our own rush to judgment, we would do well to look at the archetypal families of our biblical ancestors. One of the beauties and comforts of Torah is its earthy realness, people presented as they are without effort to sanitize, human faults and triumphs easily recognized. Interpersonal dynamics are often in the extreme, as though to provide a backdrop from which to evaluate those of our own families with a little more compassion. In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayeshev*, a family is torn apart, Ya'akov having sown jealousy among his sons through the favoring of one. Already standing apart in his richly embroidered coat, Yosef dreams a dream of all of them harvesting in the field, his brothers' sheaves forming a circle around his own, bowing down in obeisance.

It is a complicated dream, reflecting on the one hand ego and narcissism. At the same time, it speaks to difference and loneliness, of Yosef's yearning to be embraced by his siblings. In reality, Yosef's brothers are shepherds, not farmers. So it is that he is sent out by his father to see how they are doing while following their flocks. Events are set into motion now that will see Yosef sold as a slave and brought down to Egypt, where he will indeed one day provide wheat for his brothers, bowed down before him then, the viceroy of Egypt. On the first steps of this journey, that will become our journey as well, Yosef becomes lost, wandering about in a field when a mysterious man finds him, and asks not "where are you going," but *what are you seeking/mah t'vakesh*. Yosef answers, *et achai anochi m'vakesh/I am seeking my brothers*. Yosef's words speak to his deeper search, not only a path to the pasturelands, but a path that will bring him home, to a place of belonging in the family sphere, a dream of wholeness fulfilled.

In Yosef's words of seeking his brothers, *et achai anochi m'vakesh*, there is an unmistakable echo of Cain's response to God's question, "where is Abel, your brother?" Answering with perhaps the most famous question in the Bible, Cain asks facetiously, *ha'shomer achi anochi/am I my brother's keeper?* Following the first murder, a fratricide – as all other killings have been ever since, we have not yet turned Cain's words into a statement of "I am," from facetious question to emphatic imperative.

It is the dream of family, whether of our own or of the human family, to be joined in caring one for another. Not to anticipate perfection as we seek the way home, for there is no such thing in life lived with people, anticipation fulfilled is in our reaching out from who we are to others as they are, a place at the table for

all. In the dance of family, of community, of peoples and nations, none are as sheaves bowing down, but each one to stand tall, together the glory of God's harvest and its thanksgiving.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor