

Parashat Vayigash 5774 (2014)

Dear Chavraya,

One of the great challenges of leadership, and for all of us as human beings standing before God and people, is the nature of our values as expressed in the private and public realms of our lives, the spheres both personal and political. There are times when for leaders and for common folk alike we express greater understanding and compassion for the needs of people beyond our own homes than for those within. Whether for lack of vision or reasons of personal pain and sorrow at home, greater success may be found with those further afield than with those closest to home. More often, there is greater effort, as there should be, to meet the needs of our own loved ones. The challenge is to draw from the same love and loyalty felt for those closest to us in responding to the needs of all people.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayigash*, a tension plays out between the personal and political in the apparent dichotomy between Yosef's response to his own at the beginning of the *parasha*, and to the Egyptian people, over whom he is next to Pharaoh in authority, at the end of the portion. Seeking reconciliation and wholeness within his family, yearning to embrace the brothers who years before had thrown him into a pit and seen him sold down to Egypt as a slave, Yosef's heart now overflows with compassion. Having tested these his flesh and blood and seen the depth of change in their souls, he finally bursts with tears and cries out, *ani Yosef, ha'od avi chai/I am Yosef, does my father still live?* He goes on, seeking to reassure, to set at ease and open the way to unimagined possibilities, *And now, do not be troubled, nor let it be disturbing in your eyes that you have sold me into this place, for God sent me before you in order to preserve life.* In the telling of Yosef's story, of his nobility toward those who stole away so many years of his life, it is impossible not to think of Nelson Mandela upon his death this week, of the nobility of his legacy as a model toward truth and reconciliation. He is one who struggled to find peace at home, seeking an elusive harmony among those closest to him. Drawing people together in the world beyond his own home and family, he affirmed the possibility of bringing people together across the deepest chasms of hate. May his memory be a blessing and an inspiration toward change unimagined.

Having found wholeness with those closest to him in the Torah telling, the dynamics are reversed as Yosef goes out among the people, the nobility of spirit so present at the beginning of the portion seeming to be absent at its end. The starving masses yearning to breathe free plead with Yosef for bread, for seed with which to plant even in the parched ground of the famine years, *purchase us and our land for the bread*, they cry. The land now belonging to Pharaoh, the people are reduced to sharecroppers, moved off the land in a population transfer. Yet, only one fifth of their produce is to be for the state, four fifths to remain their own. Yosef takes their land, but does not enslave the people. He is powerful, yet beholden, compassionate but manipulative. He does not weep for the people as he did for his brothers, but he seems to recognize their pain and know that it needs response. There are conflicting views among the commentators. A *musar/ethical* teacher cries out for the oppressed, horrified, *Yosef led the Egyptians during the famine years with great cruelty/b'achzari'ut g'dolah.* An ancient midrash sees

quiet compassion in the way Yosef conducted himself with the people, explaining that he knew of each one's means and sold to the well-off at greater cost and to the poor for less, *to each one according to their means/l'chol echad k'fi mah she'hayah lo.*

The question of Yosef's behavior as leader at the end of the portion is left open. We can easily see him as a cruel and heartless tyrant, which on one hand he is in that moment. At the same time, with close reading of the text and commentary that draws from between the lines and from the lives of people living in extremis, there are expressions of compassion and understanding. We are left with a tension and then we realize it is the tension in which we live. We are challenged to transcend the disconnect between the personal and the political, for our selves and for the leaders whom we put into power. We are challenged to want for others just what we want for our selves and our families and to enact policies that allow all people to live with dignity. Why is it so hard to understand the need for a living minimum wage? Why is it so hard to feel the pain of an immigrant facing deportation? Why for us is it so hard to feel in our souls the pain of Palestinians living under occupation, or of Bedouin facing population transfer, no less a great cruelty today than that of long ago which so horrified the *musar* writer.

Revealing the depth of change that has occurred among and within the brothers, demonstrating the possibility of reconciliation, Yehuda approaches the ruler he does not know yet to be Yosef. With exquisite nobility and eloquence he pleads on behalf of Binyamin, the youngest brother now in danger, having been framed by Yosef for stealing his goblet and to be held in consequence as a slave. Pleading in poignant detail to be taken in the younger's stead, Yehuda stands as surety for his brother, *For your servant received the lad from my father only upon his being surety for him.../ki av'd'cha arav et ha'na'ar....*

As Yosef now weeps for his brothers, so moved by Yehuda's plea, so are we to weep for all people, to stand as surety for those who are in need, who yearn to feel the sunshine of freedom and justice. Compassion is the bridge between our response to those closest to us and those who live upon the land in places beyond. Yehuda's name is the root of Yehudi, of Jew, the name by which each one of us is called.

Shabbat shalom,
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