

Dear Chavraya,

There was a certain tension around the learning table, not at all a negative tension, but that which comes of shared introspection, the sharing of wrestlings from within our selves, that are about ourselves. Such sharing can only happen when there is trust, and I am grateful that it can happen among us. The Torah offers a mirror in which to see our selves, at times our selves as individuals and at times our selves as part of a people. We may not always like what we see, but that is why we are blessed to have such a mirror. If we don't look, we cannot reflect on what we see, we cannot make changes, we cannot strive toward wholeness.

Following from last week's reading, in this week's portion, *Parashat Vayigash* (Gen. 44:18-47:27), the famine Yosef had warned Pharaoh of is now fierce in the land and throughout the region. In predicting the famine through his interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, Yosef also boldly offered a plan to Pharaoh, to gather up grain through seven years of plenty so that there would be enough in storage when the seven years of famine came. Effectively nationalizing the means of agricultural production and centralizing the distribution of food through state apparatus, Pharaoh was taken with the plan and appointed Yosef as its overseer.

As the famine unfolds and masses of people from the surrounding region come down to Egypt for food, Yosef's brothers appear before him to buy food. As the family drama plays out in the midst of a national and international drama, perhaps underscoring that all relationships are ultimately familial, the question of human need and the way of our response appears in the mirror before us. As the famine in all of its harshness grips the people, Yosef sells them bread for money. When the people run out of money, they sell their herds to the state through Yosef. When they have no more animals to sell, they ask Yosef to buy their lands and take them as slaves. The land is purchased by the state and population transfers take place, entire communities relocated city-by-city, relationships thereby remaining intact. Seed is distributed to the people and they become more as share croppers than slaves, one fifth of their produce now to be given to the state and four fifths to remain with them, as spelled out by Yosef.

As the Jew who has risen to the top, we struggle with Yosef. Imagining how different the course of history had he died in the pit, we are cognizant that he is a survivor, a reality that informs his being and all that he does. Encountering him in the moment, long since a victim, we vacillate, unsure whether to feel pride in his accomplishments or shame when he falls morally short. That becomes the locus of our discomfort, the source of tension felt around the learning table. There was criticism of Yosef for his failure to act entirely from a place of compassion. There is something beautiful in the depth of our own Jewish sense of what is right and good, values learned from the very Torah that becomes a mirror in which to look at our individual and collective selves. It is the way of Torah to teach moral discernment through narratives that at times appear pedagogically calculated to disturb. We also felt a challenge as we learned and shared more personally, a challenge that begins in Torah and plays out through Jewish history and in the lives of those who make it so.

It is the challenge of how to be and respond to the “Jew in the middle.” It is also, in part, a question for all of us, not only the highly visible Jew, but for the “invisible,” the ordinary one, as well. Reflecting the unique dynamics of a minority identity, it is the challenge of how to be a Jew in the world; of learning how to balance on the high wire strung among the images that form a collage of identities that make us who we are in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. As a matter of identity and values, it becomes in part the challenge that begins with whether to feel compassion for Yosef, as we might and should for ourselves when struggling with the human realities of moral choices. Yosef is not Pharaoh, his is not the last word. It is the age-old dilemma for one who achieves a place of authority and is then challenged by the tension between the limits of that authority and the voice of moral response. We want the state to respond in the most moral way possible and we expect Yosef, as a Jewish forebear, to exercise moral authority as the way of the state. We wonder if he should just quit. What would happen then, would someone truly ruthless take charge while Yosef’s hands remained clean? We wonder why Pharaoh chose an outsider to direct his austerity program. Was it simply that Yosef had so finely interpreted his dreams? Or, as first instance of the Jew caught between landowner and peasantry, did Pharaoh more cunningly realize that it would be easier later to blame and punish an outsider for the pain the people would suffer? The unenviable position of Yosef is reflected in historical accounts of Jewish life in the Middle Ages, of Jews barred from most occupations, thereby being forced into areas of finance, notably of money lending, thus becoming the Jew in the middle (Jewish Life in the Middle Ages, Israel Abrahams, p. 240-242; Salo Baron, vol. 11, p. 144).

The tensions that we felt around the learning table play out in Jewish texts that wrestle with the same questions and challenges that stare back from the mirror of Torah across time and space. In a *mussar* text that is sharp in its ethical challenge, the writer says that Yosef behaved in the years of famine *with great cruelty/b’ach’zar’ayut g’dolah* (Chochmat Ha’matz’pun, vol. 1, p. 597). A rabbinic midrash (Torah Sh’layma to Vayigash 47:14) fills in the moral gaps, imagining Yosef as wise exemplar, imbued with a spirit of prophecy by which he could discern the means of those who came before him, thereby charging the rich more and the poor less in their purchasing of food. It is all part of the same wrestling that we do, all part of determining what to make of and how to respond to the image of self that is reflected in the mirror of living Torah.

Part of the invidious impact and legacy of anti-Semitism is our inability to see the whole image when we look in the mirror of self. There are those who look and see only the negative, the less than noble reflections of our selves. In the extreme, some internalize the poison of the anti-Semitic other’s age-old canard, that we are venal and unscrupulous. Psychically scarred and scared by ancient hate, whether expressed today in explosive violence, or with highbrow or lowbrow humor and commentary, we often feel an urgency to disprove the stereotype. When a Jew with a public profile indeed behaves unscrupulously, we feel it personally. Equally incomplete as a response to anti-Semitism, rooted in the same scarring and fear, is the response of those Jews who see in the mirror only the good within ourselves, and, by extension, only the perfidy of the other,

thereby sharpening the divide between us and them. To see only a negative or only a positive reflection of self is to behold an incomplete image, whether in the mirror of ancient text or through the media of the modern context. The negative is part of the whole self, of every person and every people. The challenge is to see both, and to feel pride in a tradition that holds both before us, not to condemn, but to encourage us to wrestle with hard questions in our striving toward wholeness.

In the quest for wholeness, our critique of Yosef and our discomfort with a Jew in his role is rooted in the very values of the Torah in which the story of Yosef occurs. The highest values of justice and compassion are given to us as the essence of Torah and are then challenged in the narratives of Torah and of life. Engagement with Torah becomes a process of values clarification through which we come to hear repeatedly, what would you do? The values we are taught to pursue and live are presented side-by-side with harsh realities of the world around us, no less for us than for Yosef. Only in presenting values and then offering challenges to them is the Torah able to offer a mirror in which to see our selves, in which to consider the way of our own response when values are challenged. Without challenge, values remain as abstractions. In holding all of the tensions as felt around the learning table, the ultimate challenge becomes the bridging of ideal and real. For all of its painful associations, the image of “the Jew in the middle,” becomes our own challenge to remove the tension between what is and what can be, to create a time when the requirements of state and the expectations of society are one and the same with the Torah’s call for justice and compassion. As a fulcrum in the sacred middle, an image transformed, we can see our task as helping to tilt each toward the other, not defined by external perceptions, but in all of our fullness as we see ourselves in the mirror of Torah.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor