

## Putting the Pieces Back Together Parshat Vayigash

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We just finished another big holiday season. Hanukkah is a time for family togetherness. And many families spend New Years together, perhaps going on a winter break vacation, having a nice meal together, or even just relaxing. But many families find this time of year difficult. If there is there is discord in their family, then this time of year only brings those issues to the surface.

In the little experience that I've had with congregations, the most common topic that families will talk to me about is the strife that exists in their families. It might be one side of the family no longer talks to the other. Or two siblings can't be in the same room together. Or even a parent and a child who won't even talk on the phone. More often than not, these dysfunctional families eventually mend their differences. But it is often after a death in the family that this happens. Why wait until death motivates us to try to put the pieces back together and make peace? *If not now when*, as Hillel teaches.

This is the lesson in this morning's Torah portion. This morning's parsha is about family. It is about reconciliation. And putting these two themes together, we are faced with one of the greatest complexities of human existence. When there is disharmony in our family, how can we put the pieces back together? How can we bring shalom back into our home? Back into our family?

We are all familiar with the story of Joseph. In this crowd, if you haven't actually acted in the musical, you have undoubtedly, at least seen it. So, I won't repeat the story, but at this point in the drama, you should know that many years have passed and Joseph is still estranged from his brothers. He grows and matures, and through a series of divine interventions, he achieves great success in Egypt where he is now second in command to Pharaoh. The region is in the midst of a great famine and the brothers are sent to Egypt where Joseph had the foresight to stockpile food for the hard times.

When Joseph comes face to face with his brothers again in Egypt, he is confronted with that same complexity... how to put the pieces together. How to forgive? How to bring peace back into the family after all these many years. Joseph has to ascertain whether the brothers are contrite for their actions. Concealing his true identity, he puts them through a test. The whole time, he is communicating through an interpreter. He is dressed in full Egyptian attire. He is called by his new name Zaphenath Paneach. He has an Egyptian family. Joseph clearly has the upper hand. He knows with whom he speaks, but his brothers sit clueless.

After a series of mind games, Joseph can't take it anymore. The emotional magnitude of the situation overwhelms him. He is forced to come out and admit that it is he. He removes his courtiers from the room. But his brothers are not ready for such an announcement. He has to bring them in closer to him. Choking back tears, he cries out "I am your brother Joseph." And he justifies his life experience theologically, explaining Now God sent me before you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance.

Family discord did not end 120 generations ago with Joseph and his brothers. We know this all too well. So often today, when we speak of disharmony, we look at the larger picture. Our movement, our denomination, does not get along with that one. We can't speak to each other. We don't speak the same language. We also look at the even bigger picture of our discord. What do we have in common with that religion? Or that nation? Or that part of the world? Perhaps it is easier, less work, to look externally. But we need to focus on our family at home. Those who may be closest to us by blood, but now seem to be as distant as can be, if only metaphorically. And Joseph said to his brothers, come near me!

Joseph brings his brothers closer to him. This was the transformation. Joseph brought his brothers close to him for the very first time. He had to introduce himself to his own brothers, who never really knew him. And now they have grown into men. He presents himself to his brothers with the words *I am your brother Joseph*.

These five words in the Torah put an end to Joseph's ruse. They are only words, but they had the power to remove the cloak of hidden identity that Joseph wore. These five words meant that Joseph was ready to put the past in the past. For us, it meant the survival of the Jewish people.

In our society, we have made the word "estrangement" into an excuse. Instead of a negative term, it has come to explain an understanding. It often seems as though every family has a faction who is disassociated from another faction.

This was certainly the lesson I learned two years ago. You see, my father had not spoken to his sister for years. This estrangement of course had consequences for more people than merely my dad and my aunt. I'm sure there are cousins who live thousands of miles apart who were closer than I was to my cousin, just three months my junior and living just three miles away. We grew up at neighboring schools. We had mutual friends. I confess that there were times when I simply forgot I had this cousin, my own age, on my father's side. I could rationalize this at times, remembering how close I was with all my younger cousins on my mother's side. I had memories of my cousin from when we were toddlers. My younger brother had no such memories of this cousin.

When my father's mother passed away two years ago this month, the stage was set for reconciliation. It came as no surprise to me. At the funeral, just as Joseph choked back his tears a few millennia before, my father walked into the chapel and took one look at his estranged sister. As I stood there watching their embrace I understood that this was the reconciliation, the act of putting the pieces back together that happens after a death. And I thought of all the holiday meals missed. The lost discussions that cousins have. Yes, I optimistically looked to the bright future, but I could not help but ask why it had to take this long?

Bringing peace to our families is of utmost importance. Let us not delay in our actions. Is something of this importance really worth waiting for a something bad to happen? Yes, it may be easier to reconcile after a death, like in the movie Avalon. It may be convenient, as we see in the parsha, to reconcile in a time of urgency like a famine. Of course, it is more difficult to resolve the discord in the here and now, but it will be worth it.

From now on, let us make "estrangement" an uncomfortable term. Let us no longer use it as a comfortable justification to explain disharmony within our family. Sometimes we need to bring our relatives closer to us. We need to remind them who we are and that we have changed. That we are ready to put the past in the past and reconcile. Ready to say "I am your brother Joseph."

When we achieve harmony at home - *sh'lom bayit* - and end the divisiveness in our own families, we will then be empowered to go out and bring harmony to the world at large, ensuring Jewish survival for generations to come.

Shabbat Shalom.