

## Vayigash-44:18-47:27

### A journey from deceit and insensitivity to forgiveness and teshuva.

*A Grammar School Teacher recounts the following story about an unusual example of show and tell in her 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom:<sup>1</sup>*

“Usually, show-and-tell is pretty tame,” the teacher said. “Kids bring in pet turtles, model airplanes, pictures of fish they catch, stuff like that. And I never place ... limitations on them. If they want to lug it to school and talk about it, they’re welcome.

“One day, for “show and tell”, a bright, outgoing girl named Erica waddles up to the front of the class with a pillow stuffed under her sweater. She holds up a snapshot of an infant. ‘This is Luke, my baby brother, and I’m going to tell you about his birthday. First, Mommy and Daddy made him as a symbol of their love, and then Daddy put a seed in my mother’s stomach, and Luke grew in there. He ate for 9 months through an umbrella cord.’ “Erica stands there with her hands on the pillow, and I’m trying not to laugh and wishing I had a video camera rolling”, the teacher recalls.

““Then, about two Saturdays ago, my mother starts going, “Oh, oh, oh!”“ Erica puts a hand behind her back and groans. ‘She walks around the class doing this hysterical duck-walk, holding her back and groaning. ‘My father called the middle wife. She delivers babies, but she doesn’t have a sign on the car like the Domino’s man. They got my mother to lay down in bed like this.’ Erica lies down with her back against the wall. ‘And then, pop! My mother had this bag of water she kept in there in case he got thirsty, and it just blew up and spilled all over the bed, like psshheew!’

“Erica has her legs spread and with her little hands is miming water flowing away.

““Then the middle wife starts going push, push, and breathe, breathe. They start counting,

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<sup>1</sup> Shareworthy, Nov. 28, 2018

but they never even got past 10. Then, all of a sudden, out comes my brother. He was covered in yucky stuff they said was from the play-center, so there must be a lot of stuff inside there.’ “Then Erica stood up, took a big theatrical bow and returned to her seat.

This story made me laugh aloud. That is reason enough to share it with you. But it also made me realize that, if we are open to learning through life experience, as we mature, we can learn to use language more effectively and with more sensitivity. That can have a huge impact on our ability to positively affect the people around us.

Just before Shabbos I got word that my high school English teacher had died at the age of 97. I remember her teaching us that an effective writer (or speaker) would *show* her reader a story, not merely *tell* it; would not impulsively write or speak but would develop her story, always being mindful of its impact on the reader. When we follow Joseph’s use of language from the time of his youth to revealing his true identity to his brothers, there is clear evidence of his having learned to communicate with more thought and compassion, as his conversations with his brothers are used to reveal complex feelings and passions.

There are curious similarities between the way 7 year old, Erica, and the young Joseph, disclose what they know. Erica had a story to tell which she did with great drama and excitement. While her words were not totally accurate by adult standards, she shared in her own way, and taught unselfconsciously. She had the full attention of her peers who watched and listened with amazement. No harm was done

When the young Joseph shared his dreams there was *every* possibility of hurt and resentment. He dreamt and *immediately* shared his dreams with his brothers and then his father. He was unaware of the effect his sharing had on his family. “Pray hear this dream that I have dreamt: we were binding sheaf-bundles out in the field and my sheaf arose, it

was standing upright ...and your sheaves were circling around and bowing down to my sheaf.” (37:6-7) He told his dreams impulsively and without thought. We know the results. When in prison in Egypt, Joseph interpreted the dreams of the cupbearer and the chief baker. He had matured somewhat. He noticed that his comrades were sad. They told him they had dreams but no interpreter of them. He volunteered his dream-interpretation services. However, his thoughtfulness was short-lived. Joseph told the baker he had three days to live before he would be impaled and his body eaten by birds. He used the same initial language he used to interpret the cupbearer's dream: "In three days, Pharaoh will lift your head..." The cupbearer's head would be lifted and restored to its old position while the baker's head would be lifted and separated from his body! He revealed what he knew with no regard for the feelings of the baker.

By the end of the parsha, young Joseph has matured, conquered his emotions, reframed his understanding of events and his use of language. The brothers, all of Jacob's sons, are together, immigrants in Egypt. Worldwide famine provides the background for the family drama to unfold. And somehow, over the years, *everybody has changed*. Joseph has emerged as a powerful governor not only for Egypt but also for his family's destiny. When we reach the climax of Joseph's testing of his brothers, the reader is a virtual participant in the story. The depth of emotion shared among the brothers, and Joseph's reconciliation with himself, is masterfully depicted. We not only witness Joseph in what Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks calls: *the first recorded moment in history in which one human being forgives another*<sup>2</sup>, but also, we see Judah engage in the ultimate act of teshuva.

“*Vayigash aylav Yehudah*”... And Judah drew near to Joseph and said: “Please, my lord, pray let your servant speak a word in the ears of my lord, and do not let your anger flare up against your servant...” (44:18) Midrash tells us that with his words, “Judah penetrated

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by R.Lord Jonathan Sacks in “Forgiveness in Vayigash”; quoting American classicist David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: the origins of a moral idea* (2010)

Joseph's innermost depths. Buried in Joseph's heart was a plan to conceal his identity until the appropriate moment .... but Judah tied together an emotional narrative and a powerful appeal, until the news burst forth [from Joseph] that not only was he still alive but he was their brother, with all the love and devotion the word implies."<sup>3</sup> "I am Joseph" (45:3), he said. He sensed that they shrank from him in shame. He approached [them] lovingly and with complete forgiveness in his heart. "But now, do not be pained, and do not let upset be in your eyes that you sold me here! For it was to save life that *God* sent me ... before you." (44:5) His language is intentional *and* he has a plan to guide the brothers to teshuva, to repent and return to their better selves.

*The first step toward teshuva requires the brothers to admit that they had done wrong.* In Gen.42: 21 we read: "They said each man to his brother: *Truly, we are guilty-concerning our brother!* ... We saw his heart's distress when he implored us, and we did not listen. Therefore, this distress has come upon us!"

After a *second* meeting, Joseph had his silver cup planted in Benjamin's sack, saying it had been stolen. When it was found, the brothers were brought back. They learned that Benjamin must stay as a slave for Joseph. "What can we say to my lord?" Judah replied. "What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt." (Gen. 44: 16) They pleaded with Joseph explaining that if they returned to their father, Jacob, without Benjamin, their father would surely die of a broken heart. Joseph's test of the brother's love for family was working. He had brought them to the second stage of teshuva: *confession*. It is noteworthy that they *confessed collective responsibility*. Although it was only Judah who proposed the crime, (37: 26-27) they were all complicit in it- except for Reuben.

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<sup>3</sup> Stone Chumash; Vayigash note-pp. 250-251

Finally, at the climax of the story, Judah said to Joseph: “Now let *me* remain as your slave in place of the lad.” (42: 33). Judah, who sold Joseph as a slave, was willing to become a slave himself, so Benjamin could go free. This is what the sages and Maimonides define as *complete repentance*; namely: when circumstances repeat themselves and one has an opportunity to commit the same crime again but refrains from doing so because *one has changed*. Everything has come full circle and the long-standing and nearly irreparable rift in the family will be healed.

There is a story of two brothers who lived side by side on their own farms for many years. One day, a foolish argument caused a rift between them. Until that day, they worked their fields together, shared knowledge and produce, and lent a helping hand to one another in times of need.

The fight began over a small misunderstanding, which can sometimes happen, but the dispute dragged on. Angry words were exchanged; followed by weeks of silence.

One day, there was a knock on the older brother’s door. He opened it to find an elderly handyman, holding a toolbox. “I could sure use some work, sir,” said the stranger. “Do you need any repairs on your farm?” “Yes”, replied the brother. “I’ve got a job for you. Across the creek, is a farm that belongs to my brother. Until recently, the whole area between our homes was green, but he changed the creek’s path, making it into a border between us. We had a disagreement,” said the older brother. “You see those trees by the barn? I want you to turn them into a 10-foot tall fence. I never want to see his face again.”

The old handyman thought quietly to himself. “I see” he said.

The farmer helped the man carry his tools and the wood. Then drove off to do some errands. When the older brother returned that evening, the work was complete. He approached the creek. He was stunned--unable to utter a word.

Where a fence should have been, a bridge now stood. A quaint bridge, truly a work of art, with an intricately carved banister. At the same time, the younger brother arrived at the spot. He rushed over the bridge and embraced his older brother. “You’re something special” he said...” building a bridge, after all I’ve said and done!”

Do we have a vision of how we want our stories to end? Or those of our loved ones? Are there bridges we can build in our lives? and relationships we can fix? And, if we were to “show and tell” something about our everyday lives, now, could we, as 7 year old Erica did, take a big theatrical bow and proudly returned to our seat?