

Commentary on Vayigash

Rabbi Van Lanckton

Temple B'nai Shalom

Braintree, Massachusetts

Published in the Jewish Advocate December 18, 2015

The Torah portion for discussion today is *Vayigash* [Gen. 44:18-47:27].

In this parashah we reach the climax of the story of Joseph's encounter with his brothers.

They approach him in great fear, not knowing he is Joseph but knowing that he is the most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh himself.

The opening word, "Vayigash," means "He drew near." That is, Judah approached Joseph, acting as spokesman for the brothers.

Judah begs Joseph not to imprison the youngest brother, Benjamin. Judah offers himself in place of Benjamin and speaks with deep feeling about their father Jacob's love for Benjamin. If Benjamin does not return home with the brothers, that will kill Jacob.

It is too much for Joseph. He sends all the Egyptians out of the room and, in tears, reveals that he is the long-lost brother Joseph.

He utters two sentences that I find among the saddest in Torah. Joseph says to his brothers, "*Ani Yoseif. Ha'od avi chai?*" "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

Joseph is not really seeking information by this question. Judah has just made an extended speech about Jacob, still alive and waiting for the brothers to return to Canaan. Joseph knows that his father is alive.

So why this question?

I will answer with another question. Why has Joseph not communicated with Jacob during all the years when Joseph was in a position of high authority? Joseph could have reassured his father that he was alive and well. Yet he never did. Why not?

In the early period of Joseph's life in Egypt it is understandable that there was no contact. Joseph was in service to Potiphar and then in prison.

But when Pharaoh elevated him to the highest level of government, Joseph could surely have let his father know he was OK. But he never did.

Why did Joseph ask whether Jacob is alive? Perhaps because he needed further reassurance, beyond what Judah had already told him. Perhaps because he was feeling guilty for never having contacted Jacob, and now is desperate to know that there is still time for him to be in touch with his father.

And why didn't Joseph ever contact Jacob? Could it be that he blamed Jacob for his predicament, because it resulted from Jacob's favoritism toward him?

We will never know. But we do see here a pattern we have seen in other contexts today. It is all too common, I think, that children, even adult children, blame and punish their parents for something in their childhood and, in some cases, as Joseph does to Jacob, they do it by keeping themselves apart rather than having a conversation to resolve whatever the issue might be.

The book of Genesis is about family life. The families of Adam and Eve, of Noah, and of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, ending with an extended narrative about Joseph and his family.

Each of these family stories includes elements we would call dysfunctional.

Cain kills Abel.

Noah's son uncovers his father's nakedness while Noah is drunk.

Abraham pretends to both Pharaoh and then Abimelech that Sarah is his sister, not his wife, submitting to a foreign ruler's harem.

Rebecca conspires with Jacob to deceive Isaac, and Jacob steals his brother Esau's birthright and parental blessing.

Jacob favors Joseph over his brothers, who get their revenge by selling him into slavery.

Joseph estranges himself from his father, so that Jacob either wonders what happened or imagines Joseph died.

Here is one way to understand all this dysfunction. It all happens before the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

The entire book of Genesis takes place without the benefit of the Ten Commandments and all the other laws revealed in Exodus and the subsequent books of Torah.

One lesson of these dysfunctional families is that, left to our own devices, without the benefit of the moral rules of Judaism, we might not treat other family members any better than the characters in the stories in Genesis. In those stories, the ideal of close and loving family life does not conform very well to reality, at least in some families.

But the genius of Judaism includes giving us, and the world through us, moral instruction that can help us to overcome what otherwise might be our natural inclinations. Thus, we are told in the Fifth Commandment to honor our fathers and mothers. Failure to honor parents, as exemplified by Joseph failing to contact Joseph for more than a decade, was likely a common problem in the ancient world. We can infer this from the fact that there is a commandment to

honor parents. Laws are made when the behaviors they prohibit already exist and therefore require a corrective.

Like many of the other rules in the Ten Commandments, we are told to conform to this moral standard not because it is natural. On the contrary, our instinct might be to steal or lie or covet that which belongs to our neighbor. The Ten Commandments instruct us to refrain what may be instinctual because we should instead act according to a moral code. That may not be easy, but that is the way we should live.