

Parashat Va-Yiggash

Bechol Lashon - "In every Tounge"

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In last week's Torah portion, we read about Joseph's brothers journeying into Egypt to buy food because of the famine. When they arrived in Egypt, they bowed low to Joseph and did not recognize him. Maybe because Joseph, fluent in the tongue of the Egyptians, was wearing Egyptians garb, had make-up on and a new hairdo; - at least according to the midrash! In fact, Joseph probably looked just like an Egyptian, no doubt look a little strange in his brothers' eyes.

Joseph, on the other hand, recognized his brothers when he saw them; but he did not acknowledge them. Instead, he pretended that he didn't know them and demanded his brothers' promise to return to Egypt with Benjamin by threatening them, retaining them in prison, hiding silver in their food bags and accusing them of being spies. In other words, toying with them.

In this week's portion Va-Yiggash, we learned that Joseph finally met Benjamin. After seeing Benjamin, Joseph couldn't stand it any longer and revealed himself to his brothers. Weeping, Joseph came out to his brothers. Verse 45:2 said, [He put forth his voice in weeping: the Egyptians heard, Pharaoh's household heard.] I can only imagine that his weeping, heard throughout Pharaoh's household must have been heart-wrenching. His tears must not have been tears only of joy but tears of years of frustration, and anger that his brothers, and his people have neglected him for such a long time; that his own brothers did not recognize him. Joseph, even though a powerful officer in Egypt must still have had feelings of isolation and loneliness being separated from his people.

Earlier this week, my eyes were opened to a whole new world. I was invited to participate in a Think Tank in San Francisco called "Be'chol Lashon", meaning "In Every Tongue" - it was the first ever gathering of about 40 multicultural Jews from all over the States and Overseas; some came from as far as Uganda and Ghana. We were a diverse group of Jews with different cultural backgrounds, multitude of ritual practices, liturgies and forms of worship. We were scholars, professors, entertainers, and researchers; we were rabbis, parents, scientists, teachers, filmmakers, journalists, and leaders of communities - secular and religious. We came together to find community, to reveal ourselves to each other, to discuss issues of having multiple identities. We also discussed all the ism - (you know) racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism. We brainstormed and strategize on what we can do NOT to feel alone and isolated from the larger Jewish community. I am very grateful to Gary and Diane Tobin, president and associate director of the Institute for Jewish Community Research - a grass-root nonprofit organization for organizing this event, I am also very grateful to Miri Haruach, some of you have met her

here, for linking me up with them.

The group of us - 40 or so Jews were quite a scene when we toured around the city and visited local synagogues. You can tell people were just not quite sure what we were about - except when we stopped at the Institute's third annual multicultural Hanukkah party celebrated by over 300 people. At the party, I was surrounded by a gay couple, and a lesbian couple who both have adopted children from China, they were so excited to meet me, the adult Chinese Jew. It was also at this party when I first met a member of this Think Tank, Patricia Lin, - Yes, there is another American Chinese lesbian Jew running around. She is a member of our sibling congregation in San Francisco.

Like Joseph having a yearning to meet Benjamin, his only brother by his mother, I too was hoping to meet other Chinese Jews - people of my own mother country. Unlike Joseph though, I did not weep when I met Patricia because I didn't have feelings of anger and isolation. I was one of the few blessed ones that my people, this community of BCC - all of you, have always so warmly embraced me, recognized me and accepted me as who I am.

At this conference, I've learned and heard stories of other multicultural Jews feeling being isolated and not recognized by fellow Jews.

Be'chol Lashon will continue to have other meetings and conferences in the future. We will keep our dialogue open; it was a big first step on those few days together that we were able to put aside our differences in order to work on a common cause. I have made many valuable connections and started a network of friends from this conference, I hope one day you will all get to meet them. Perhaps here at BCC. That idea reminded me of the prayer hanging by our front door. Will you read it with me - In the middle of page 1 of your Siddur.

May the doors of this synagogue open wide enough to receive all who hunger for love, all who long for friendship.

May the doors of this synagogue welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the doors of this synagogue be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and arrogance, envy and enmity.

May this threshold be no stumbling block to young or straying feet.

May this threshold be too high to admit complacency selfishness, or harshness.

May this synagogue be, for all who enter, the doorway to a richer and meaningful life.

[adapted for the BCC Siddur (prayer book)]

Shabbat Shalom