

Parashat Vayigash

January 2, 2004

Rabbi Lisa Edwards

Beth Chayim Chadashim, LA

Anyone make any new year's resolutions? [Don't worry, I'm not going to call on you to tell.] The New Yorker cartoon I liked this week had an office worker saying to another: "Nope, no New Year's resolutions for me this year -- I'm still working on a backlog dating from '87."

Sigh. Me too, I fear.

But hey it's only the second day of the year, and I thought we could spend a little time making some resolutions. And I have some particular ones in mind.

You know, unlike our Jewish new year, the Torah portion for the secular new year varies from year to year, so it's often fun to read these various portions in the light of the change of year. And as usual each year we read the portion, something different jumps out at us. This year in reading this week's Torah portion, Vayigash, the dramatic portion in which Joseph finally - and gently - reveals himself to his 11 brothers, having strung them along for some time now, I was struck by his brother Judah's role in Joseph's revelation.

Can we summarize the story briefly?

1. Joseph was his father's favorite
2. Brothers jealous, sell him into slavery
3. becomes favorite of Potiphar, then imprisoned then
4. interprets dreams and becomes second in command to Pharaoh, saving the world from famine
5. his brothers come from Canaan seeking food for him
6. he recognizes them, they don't recognize him

And what is Judah famous for? 3 things:

- 1) he's the one who suggests selling Joseph into slavery instead of killing him
- 2) he's the one who unknowingly impregnates his daughter-in-law, and then takes responsibility for his actions, saying "she is more righteous than I" tzadka mimeni (38:26)
- 3) he offers to substitute as hostage instead of Benjamin (and in the beginning of vayigash is the one who tells the story in way that melts Joseph's heart [44:18-34])

In past years I haven't particularly noticed how much the traditional commentators take note that it isn't until Judah vayigash – steps forward – to tell their story to Joseph, that Joseph dissolves in tears and then tearfully tells them all who is (44:18-34).

I'll let you in on a secret of how I write d'vrei Torah – my little commentaries on the Torah portion. I often pick a passage I'm drawn to. Then I try to figure out why I'm drawn to it. I usually look up some traditional commentators on that section. Write some about it. And then, after I've written or thought about it for a while, I'll often look at what two of my colleagues are saying this week about this portion. The two colleagues are Rabbi Bradley Artson, whose weekly d'vrei Torah I receive on-line early in the week, and second, whichever local rabbi is writing in the Jewish Journal this week, which usually arrives at our house on Friday afternoon. Often I and Artson and the Jewish Journal rabbi differ on what passage and topic has drawn us in this year, and in that case I read them more from interest than immediate usefulness. But this week Artson, a Conservative rabbi, and Asher Brander, an Orthodox rabbi, and I (a Reform rabbi) all were drawn in by the same scene and similar thoughts. We were all taken by Judah's influence on Joseph...or rather, we were all taken by how our predecessors – "the rabbis" and commentators of previous generations – credited Judah with softening Joseph's actions and attitudes toward his brothers.

Of course that's bound to get me thinking about why bazman hazeh – why at

this time, in THIS year – we are all struck by the rabbis' beliefs that it wasn't until Judah bravely and gently vayigash – approached – Joseph, responding firmly but gently to Joseph's tough instructions – that Joseph stopped playing his threatening game and instead softened, cried, revealed himself, and granted his brothers, his father and their families sanctuary from famine by allowing them to come and live near him in the land of Goshen.

Rabbi Artson writes: Judah, made wise by his lifetime of living, made responsible by what had befallen him and his family, was able to speak to Joseph—patiently, slowly, and persistently. As layer upon layer was peeled back, Judah was able to gain sight of the hidden Joseph within, and was able to allow the true Joseph to come to the surface. And he concludes: [so] Each of us can provide attentive listening and persistent questioning for those around us. All of us have our wounds, our secrets, our shame, sorrow, and our rage. Often those scars feel so threatening that we wrap ourselves behind them and trap ourselves within, even as we distance our friends and our families.

Judah allowed Joseph to emerge into the sunlight by giving him the most precious gift of all, the gift of soul. Through a willingness to truly listen, to truly care, and to truly be present, we too can give such a gift. [Today's Torah - Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies - Parashat Va-Yiggash 5764

X-MDMailing-List: torah@uj.edu Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson] And Rabbi Brander picks up less on Judah's ability and desire to draw out the true Joseph, and more on the fact that Judah is in this role because he, of all the brothers, is the one who takes responsibility for his actions, takes responsibility for his part in the difficult situation they find themselves in. Rabbi Brander suggests that the parents among us, when we mediate sibling struggles, not allow our children to shirk responsibility for their part in creating those struggles, but instead encourage them to be more like Judah, and thus "invest them with a sense of accountability, however unpleasant or frightening that might be." And he ends his d'var Torah with a wonderful observation on this matter of taking responsibility, writing:

"For the past 2,000 years, our people have been called Yehudim – or Jews – a derivative of the word Judah. We are not [called] Yissachars, Dans, nor are we

even [called] Josephs. Perhaps it is because God demands of us to take responsibility for our flaws. Even as we do not control our circumstances, we surely control the way we respond to them. This essential understanding forms the basis of real spirituality. Once we acknowledge that we are accountable for ourselves and indeed for our fellow human beings, we become emboldened to unlock the grand potential stored within." [Jewish Journal 1/2/04, p.27]

I really appreciate both of my colleagues conclusions about Judah, but I'm drawn to Judah's gentle mediation with Joseph for yet a third reason. Like my colleagues, I do think what Judah has gone through has taught him much, and it seems to have given him sensitivity and empathy. Not only does he draw out Joseph's softer side, as Rabbi Artson notes, and not only does he take responsibility for his faults, as Rabbi Brander notes, I appreciate that Judah also manages not to become hardened, not to strike out at others. Unlike many of us who suffer loss, or who feel responsible for things gone awry, Judah doesn't build a wall of defense, doesn't blame others, doesn't try to make someone else feel as bad as he does. Instead, he uses his own experience to better understand others, and he uses his experience to show himself and others that change is possible – that one can grow from one's mistakes, that one can become a better person than one was before, that good can come from bad or difficult or unpleasant situations or behaviors. And I think that is why my colleagues and I were drawn to Judah this year, and to his willingness to vayigash – "to step up" in a difficult circumstance. For at the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004, we are surrounded on a daily basis by countries, by companies, by leaders and followers who have not done what Judah did – who have hardened their hearts rather than softened them, who have blamed others rather than take responsibility, who advocate confrontation and war instead of reconciliation and peace. We are surrounded – and perhaps we are ourselves are becoming – people who lash out when our feelings are hurt, who want nothing so much as to be right, who clench our jaws rather than say what hurts or ask another what would help this situation or ease this pain.

Vayigash – Judah stepped up to talk with Joseph. Vayigash – Abraham

stepped up to try to talk God out of destroying Sodom and Gomorrah [Genesis 18:23]. But while vayigash – stepping up – is always proactive, it is not always a positive. Vayigash – Jacob stepped up to the blind Isaac, in order to try to trick his father into believing he was his brother Esau. We always have choices to make: Consider for yourself, maybe even make a new year's resolution, if 2004 is a year for Vayigash, a year to step up, toward whom will you step up? what is it you will step up to do?

Shabbat shalom