

**Parashat Vayechi
Shabbat 1/9/04**

**Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadahim, LA**

"If only God would give me a sign," someone said to me this week, stricken with uncertainty and worry about a decision that had to be made. "If God did give you sign, would you recognize it as such?" I asked, only adding, alas, to my poor friend's anxiety. And then - what got into me? - I said, "Or suppose God did give you a sign, but you interpreted it incorrectly and did the wrong thing?" Really I wasn't meaning to increase anxiety or add more worry. It's common though -- people do look for signs from God, which can be problematic.

My favorite story about that is one I've told before. I think it's no. 47 or thereabouts on the Jewish joke list:

You know - the one about the guy who stays behind at his house when the town is being evacuated? The police go door to door telling everybody to leave, offering to give them rides, and this fellow says, "no, I'm staying in my home, God will provide." Then they come by in a boat down the flooded street offering to take him out of there, and he says, "no thank you, I'm staying, God will provide." The flood waters continue to rise until he's forced to climb up on the roof. A helicopter comes by and drops down a ladder, "Thanks anyway," he shouts over the roar of the copter blades, "I'm staying put, God will provide." So the guy drowns.

And he's knocking at the gates of heaven, saying, "God, what happened? Why didn't you save me?"

And God replies, "Look pal, I sent a car, a boat and helicopter - what more could I do?"

We can wait a long time for a sign from God, and miss a lot of opportunities in the mean time. My anxious, uncertain friend made me think too of the stories of Joseph and his brothers that we've been reading these last few weeks, and which we finish this week, as we complete the book of Genesis. Joseph's life was a roller coaster how many of us fall so low as Joseph did -- literally into pits and dungeons and slavery, or rise so high -- second in power only to Pharaoh? And yet, no matter how low, no matter how high, Joseph took it in stride, took it in stride because he felt that God was with him.

When, in last week's portion, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and they realize that the boy they'd sold into slavery so many years before now held all the power, and could do whatever he wanted to them, they tremble in fear and guilt, but Joseph has no need for revenge, saying instead, "Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me into slavery; it was to save life that God sent me here ahead of you.

God has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. . . . it was not you who sent me here, but God." [Gen. 45: 5-8]

How many of us feel like Joseph through the lows and highs of our life? How many of us feel that God is with us, no matter what is happening? Some of us, I'm sure, but I suspect even more of us are more like Joseph's brothers, who even years after Joseph's reassurance find themselves still guilt stricken over their actions and fearful that Joseph will retaliate.

In this week's portion their father Jacob dies, and even though it has been seventeen years since Joseph first welcomed them, and all has gone well since then, Joseph's brothers are immediately fearful when their father dies, saying, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!" [50:15] They come up with new ways to try to prevent this. First they tell Joseph that on his deathbed their father supposedly asked that a message be sent to Joseph saying: "Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly" [50:17]. When this ploy is greeted only by tears on Joseph's part, they immediately offer to become his slaves (that sounds like some kids' game, doesn't it, "if you lose you have to be my slave for a week!"). But Joseph needs none of their tricks or their guilt, and he again calms their fears. So are you more like Joseph's brothers or are you more like Joseph? are you more fearful and regretful of past actions than certain that God is watching over us, or are you confident that whatever happens in life --even the bad stuff-- can lead to good, as Joseph seems to be?

How many of us can let go of grudges and resentments and desires for revenge? Or of the fear that others will seek revenge upon us, or blame us for things gone wrong? Maybe the terms "revenge" and "grudge" are a little harsh for most of us. Maybe the more appropriate terms are "regret" or "mistake" or "wrong decision" or "bad luck." Those are terms I often hear in conversation with people - but how tormented we can be by choices we made or accidents that happened: "If only I'd moved to a different town 20 years ago," "if only I'd chosen x instead of y," "broken up with her then," "not broken up with him," "gone to graduate school," "not borrowed money," "not had unsafe sex that one time," "talked to my mother before she died," "stopped drinking before the accident. . ." the lists go on and the voices are poignant with regret or anger at the injustices and arbitrariness of life.

Happily for me I get to hear the other sides of chance and happenstance (if that's what it is) as well: "just think, if I hadn't taken that boring job I never would have met him;" "if I hadn't come out my family never would have learned to talk to one another;" "if I hadn't done x, y wouldn't have happened;" "if I hadn't turned right at the corner by mistake I would have been in that accident."

The near hits and near misses of life. Sometimes the absence of control, the randomness of things drives us nearly mad and sometimes it brings us the greatest joy. And sometimes we need to grab hold of the present and let go of the past. This Joseph could do easily, no matter the situation, while his brothers never could.

Even Joseph, despite all his abilities as an agent of God, predictor of the future, and effective CEO, found that his life was not predictable, nor was it within his control. At several crucial times he was caught without "further instructions on where to go and what to do." After all, despite his sense that God had put him where God wanted him, that he

was there to save lives, God never does speak directly to Joseph in this story, and Joseph often has options, decisions to make; he's often caught off guard, having to deal with something beyond his control, and having to adapt his life to each change, each curve that came along.

But alas, no matter what Joseph says to his brothers, they never find the peace of mind he finds. Despite his many efforts, his brothers stay fearful and upset about their past behavior and the possible future consequences of it for many years. It isn't until just a few verses before the end of Genesis, seventeen years after their reconciliation, that Joseph finally seems to put an end to his brothers' guilt about their past actions and their fears of the future. He puts to rest their regret about the past by telling them even though they had made bad choices, had actually "intended me harm," good came of it, God had turned it around. And he puts to rest their fear of what's to come by saying, "Fear not. I will sustain you and your children." The narrator describes what Joseph did here by saying: "Thus he [Joseph] comforted them and spoke to their hearts." [50:20-21] va-yenakhem otam va-yedaber al libam

And maybe that's all any of us ever really needs -- not the right answer, and not even a sign from God, but just the comfort of having others speak to us from their hearts, the comfort of having others speak to our hearts, to our concerns. Maybe all of us just need the reassurance that none of us knows for sure, that maybe what Joseph and his brothers discovered is true -- that there is more than one way to get from here to there, that it is possible to do what God wants you to do even without a tangible sign from God. Maybe just wanting a sign, just wanting to do what God wants of you is enough. Or maybe just comforting one another, speaking heart to heart, is all God really wants from us.

Shabbat Shalom.