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December 21, 2012
Parashat Va-yiggash

It's all God: The Joseph Saga Continues

If the Joseph story was actually a Soap Opera, this week would have been on everyone's dvr machines. It reminds me of the "Who Shot J.R.?" episode of Dallas in 1980. Remember that one? Even if you weren't a fan of that show, you watched that episode. I was just a few years old and I remember my older sister and grandmother talking about it. It is still one of the highest rated shows of all time.

Va-yiggash is the equivalent to "Who Shot J.R.?" This is where it all goes down. We've been waiting for this episode for weeks now.

The goblet that Joseph stashed in Benjamin's bag is found and the brothers are dumbfounded. Believing that Benjamin is headed towards a life of slavery in Egypt, Joseph's brothers realize that this means the death of their father Jacob too. So Judah pleads with Joseph by first recounting all that has transpired. Then he pulls at Joseph's heartstrings by saying how their father will surely die since he is so attached to his youngest son and has already lost another son. Finally, Judah offers himself in place of Benjamin.

And this is where it gets extremely dramatic. Joseph can no longer contain himself, so he orders all his attendants to leave him and his brothers alone. Joseph then wails so loudly that all of Egypt can sense something big has just happened. Joseph speaks, "I am Joseph, Is my father still well?" The brothers are speechless. They are in a state of shock. Joseph continues, "Come closer, it's me, your brother Joseph, who you sold into Egypt. But don't worry. I'm not out for revenge because you sold me. What I realize now is that it was God who sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival. It wasn't you who sent me here, but God. Now hurry and bring dad back here and then we can all be near each other." Cue the music. All the brothers embrace and cry tears of joy.

What is fascinating about this exchange is how Joseph presents himself to his brothers. He first identifies himself as the brother they *sold* to Egypt, a fact which can't be denied. He's kind of opening up an old wound. Has Joseph changed or is he still that bratty tattletale kid his brothers despised? But he immediately proceeds to appease his brothers saying in essence, "You might be experiencing remorse at the thought that you sold me to a caravan of traders, but that is only according to how you see it. In reality, this was not the case." Perhaps Joseph has matured. He understands that in fact, there was no sale at all, but

rather an act of Divine Providence. On the surface, it appears to be a sale, an awful thing for his brothers to do. But on a deeper level, Joseph acknowledges that he was sent on a Divine mission.

Finally, he says to his brothers, “it wasn’t you who sent me here, but God.” Note that he doesn’t say “sell.” What had originally appeared as a criminal deed of kidnapping now stands revealed in its true perspective, as part of God’s plan for saving life. Everyone was just playing out their part, from Jacob sending Joseph to check up on his brothers, to the man he encounters in the field directing him into harm’s way, to his boss’s wife claiming he took advantage of her and thus being sent to prison where he met the cupbearer who eventually saved his life. All of these people and events had the hand of God behind them the whole time. And Joseph realizes this.

The fact that Joseph felt God’s presence might be the most interesting part of this story. Unlike his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, Joseph never had an encounter with God. He never spoke with God, wrestled with God, broke bread with God, or even received a blessing from God. He became a powerful man in Egypt, had an Egyptian wife and yet he never gave up on his faith in God. Maybe this is one reason why Joseph is considered one of the most righteous of all biblical characters in our tradition. He didn’t need God popping up in his life. He felt God’s presence even without a personal encounter. His faith may have been challenged many times, but it never faltered.

I know I’ve told some of my adult ed students this, but one of my rabbis and teachers once said that the younger you are the more you think you have control over your life. You control your destiny. But the older you get, you begin to realize that perhaps something else is going on. Maybe I’m not in charge of it all. Some of it perhaps, but not all. This, I believe was Joseph’s revelation.

Joseph, although a bratty teenager and maybe even a conceded adult, teaches us something none of his ancestors ever did: The possibility that we are part of something larger than ourselves. Whether it’s true or not, we’ll never know. My prayer on this Shabbat, however, is that we allow ourselves to be amazed at even the smallest of coincidences, and that we open ourselves up to the possibility that we are partners with God in living our lives.