



Parashat Vayigash: Joseph's Secret

Dear Friends,

In Parashat Vayigash Yehuda approaches the great Egyptian master - we, the readers, know this is Joseph - and begs him not to throw Benjamin in prison for “stealing” the royal cup (which Benjamin did not do). “Take me instead,” he begs. Yehuda’s brilliant speech melts Joseph’s heart, who then bursts into tears, and reveals his true identity to his brothers. The brothers are terrified, and rightly so! They had undressed him and thrown him into a pit, and later sold him to a caravan of Yishmaelites who took him to the slave market in Egypt.

But Joseph calms them and tells them: **“Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.... To ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.** (Bereishit 45: 4-8)

After passing the test - which Joseph had set for them without their knowledge - he forgives them for the terrible act they performed. But it was not the test that appeases him. It is the clarity that, **it was not you who sent me here, but God...**

But what does it mean **“but God”**? Does God require such tragic and hateful stories in order to promote His future plans? Can the almighty God not bring Joseph to power without all of the suffering of the past few parashot? Couldn't He have prevented the drought from happening in the first place?

I wish to suggest an interpretation which may shed a different light on the phrase: **“Ki HaElohim”** (translated above as **“but God”**).

The interpretation has to do with another issue: Joseph’s strength to overcome the tragedy and loss all of those years, particularly in the first days following his exile from his and his father’s home, and then in his first years as a slave, and the many years when he was rotting in jail, although innocent?

What was Joseph’s secret for survival?

I think the secret had to do with loyalty. He was loyal to his father, then to Potiphar - his first employer in Egypt - then to the powers that be of the prison, then to the king of Egypt and his dreams. He was even loyal to his brothers and to the promises he made to them.

But more than anything, Joseph was loyal to something deep within himself, to his path, and to his dreams. And he was loyal to God.

Yoseph is different from all of the other significant characters in the Torah, except perhaps Yitzchak, his grandfather. Avraham tricks the kings of Egypt and of Gerar when he tells them that Sarah is his sister. Yaakov manipulates his brother into selling him his birthright and then steals his blessing too. He makes shady deals with Lavan, escapes with his family in the middle of the night, ingratiates himself to Eisav, refuses to face the people of Sh'chem, whose prince raped his daughter, and does not set limits for Joseph. Joseph's brothers trick their father with the blood-stained striped tunic. Shimon and Levi trick the men of Sh'chem and slaughter all of them. Reuven sleeps with one of his father's concubines' and Yehuda reneges on his promise to his daughter-in-law.

Joseph, on the other hand, is as straight as a ruler. He is the same inside and out. When his father sends him to his brothers in order to observe them and tattle, he does exactly as he is told. When he dreams dreams he relates them without hesitation, and when Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him he refuses because of his loyalty to his employer. When he is asked to interpret dreams for others he tells things as he understands them, without censorship, including the upcoming execution of one of the dreamers.

When Pharaoh is enthusiastic about the Yoseph's interpretation of his dream, Yoseph tells him and repeats again, it was not me, it's God: **"Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same: God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do... God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do.** (Bereishit 41: 25, 28) And now, as he confesses to his brothers, he calms their fears, reminding them that **" it was not you who sent me here, but God..."**

Indeed, **it was not you who sent me here, but God...**

Yoseph teaches us two enormous lessons. The first is familiar, and the second less so. We don't have to accept them, but it can change you life if you do!

The first, more familiar, lesson is that it is not the small, scared and petty individual who is truly in charge of his or her own life. There is a "mysterious" force (mysterious only because it can't be seen), intelligent and precise, knowing and wise, which conducts our life without a hitch and without coincidences. A person - or his ego - with all of its accompanying thoughts, artifice, fears, lies, and plotting - is certain that he steers his own life, but no - this is only an illusion, a comedy and a tragedy at the same time.

The second lesson - which is the point of this drasha - is a little bit less familiar, and I think it is the secret of Joseph's remarkable survival. Joseph experienced the worst in human treachery, and not only did he not break or become utterly depressed as happens to most of us - he overcame every pit and challenge, and rose to greatness.

A person's ego - his thoughts, plans, and maneuvering - is not his essence, but an external coat of many colors. It is disguised as our "inner truth", but it isn't. Never. This outer garment - the unceasing thoughts - hijack our essence time and again, mask our light, and trick us into thinking that it's the real thing. Our essence, which is nameless - some may call it "neshama" (soul or spirit) - is whole, not breakable, healthy (always), knowing, intelligent, and eternal.

Yoseph knew this essence, cleaved to it, and was loyal to it. Yoseph called it "God": **but God..**

He knew that Pharaoh, too, had "God" - the one who knew, the one who directed him, the one who appeared to him in his dream - **It is just as I have told Pharaoh: God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do...** (Bereshit 41, 28). Whereas Pharaoh and his magicians were unable to see past their thoughts, plots, and fears, and therefore could not see what was so evident and simple, Joseph could see the essence with great clarity.

Afterall, why did Pharaoh accept Joseph's interpretation of his dreams? It was not particularly brilliant, a mere speculation. But something within Pharaoh knew! When he heard Joseph's words he was moved deeply: **And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, "Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?"** (41:38) In other words, is there another person who speaks to the essence? Who sees the essence?

Every person, without exception, IS a clear, bright, knowing, healthy essence. Yet, there is no one who is not hijacked time and again by his or her thoughts, fears, and urges.

We all have moments of grace in which that essence is apparent to us, bubbling up to the surface, infiltrating the layer of illusive thoughts which engulf us. Ah, these moments of grace! So sweet, so clear, so wonderful. Yet, it is Pharaoh who reminds us of that essence, of that Divinity which exists within us at all times. It does not come and go. It is just covered by thick layers of thoughts. **The guardian of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.** (Psalms 121:4)

The secret of Joseph's survival lies in his deep knowing of that essence - the essence that does not sleep, that cannot be imprisoned, thrown into a pit, seduced, threatened, or elevated. **Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with(in) me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort me.** (Psalms 23:4)

The "guardian" of Psalms 121 and the "You" in Psalms 23 are not outside of us. **"In whom is the spirit of God"** says Pharaoh. **"...It is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond your reach. It is not in the heavens... Neither is it beyond the sea... No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart..."** (D'varim 30:11-14) Thus says Moshe Rabbeinu. It is within us. It is everything that makes us alive, everything that knows our path.

When a person is connected to this essence everything changes. Everything! The thoughts, annoyances, and fears do not disappear, but they retreat, calm down, and cannot overcome the great light of this essence.

Yoseph is called “Yoseph Hatzaddik” (Joseph the righteous) not because he was not tempted to sleep with his employer’s wife, and not just because he forgave his brothers. Joseph has an internal compass which shows him the way.

So do we. It’s called God. But are we aware of it?

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha