

**Parshat Vayechi:  
On Reconciliation**  
**Rabba Claudia Marbach**  
*Class of 2018*

I always feel a bit melancholy at the end of Bereshit. For this year, we are leaving these heroes we have come to know so well. Their loves and their hates, their wars and their peace, their rivalries and reconciliations. Yes, we remember Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov in our daily prayers but what about the others?

Every time that we cycle through the parshiyot we focus on a different aspect of the stories or take a different message from them. How do we hold the lessons learned from this year's reading of Bereshit and take them into the rest of the year? What I want to take from Vayechi this year is the possibility for reconciliation. After all the years of conflict between Yosef and his brothers there was justifiable concern about the relations after Jacob's death. At their reunion Yosef assured his brothers that all was forgiven and he understood that they were but cogs in the Divine machine to get the family down to Egypt. If all was forgiven, then why the coda to the story in this week's parasha? After Yaakov's death the brothers send a message to Yosef:

*So they sent this message to Yosef, "Before his death your father left this instruction:* וַיֵּצְאוּ אֱלֵי־יוֹסֵף לְאֹמֶר אָבִיךָ צִוָּה לְפָנָי מוֹתוֹ לְאֹמֶר:

*So shall you say to Yosef, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Yosef was in tears as they spoke to him. (Bereishit 50: 16-17)* כֹּה־תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אָנָּה שָׂא נָא פְּשַׁע אָחִיךָ וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי־רָעָה גָּמְלוֹךְ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפָשַׁע עַבְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ וַיְבַרְךְ יוֹסֵף בְּדִבְרָם אֵלָיו: (בראשית נ: טז-טז)

If all was well, then why this message? Why didn't Yaakov tell Yosef directly when he was alive? Rashi says that they altered the truth for the sake of peace. In other words, the brothers were lying. Rashi was referring to a Gemara in Bavli Yevamot 65b which not only says that "It is permitted for a person to depart from the truth in a matter that will bring peace." But, "[i]t is a mitzvah to depart from the truth in order to preserve peace." What was the underlying truth which had to be papered over with a white lie?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that Yosef is the first person in the Torah to forgive another person. However, he leaves his brothers unsure of their situation because Yosef fails to use the word 'forgive'. Rabbi Sacks notes that forgiveness is different than appeasing anger, a more universal action, as Jacob attempted do do with his brother. Perhaps the brothers were concerned that only appeasement had occurred. In the Torah the word *salach* is only used in reference to God forgiving and *machal* is used for loans and not people.

And their fear could have been justified after the abuse and trauma which they had inflicted upon Yosef - the hatred, near fratricide, enslavement, his trials in Egypt which included two years in jail not to mention the years of estrangement from his father and from Benjamin! It is not clear that Yosef could or should forgive them. Yes, there is Yehuda's poignant confession and Yosef's response but what about everything else?

The midrash says that "Yosef's brothers saw that their father died — and what did they see now that they were so frightened? When they returned from the burial of their father they saw that Yosef went to the pit that they threw him into and Yosef made the blessing that one is required to make after he experiences a miracle: "Thank God for performing a miracle for me in this place." Midrash Tanchuma, Vayechi 17

[Rabbi Alex Israel notes](#) that the pit was in Dotan, near Shechem, which would have been a significant detour to the north from the direct route from Hevron back to Egypt. The last day that Yosef was at the pit “if Yosef didn't pass by the pit, he certainly stepped back in time to the fateful day of the attack by his brothers and his subsequent sale, and he could easily recall his last moments in Hevron, a 17 year old youth embarking on a trip that unexpectedly lead him in slavery to Egypt. The brothers might have been justified in their fears that the experience would have evoked certain vindictiveness in Yosef.”

What did he see when he looked in the pit? The Torah tells us “it was empty, with no water.” Maybe it was an existentially empty place -- what Rabbi Nachman of Breslov calls the *chalal hapanui* -- a place that was empty even of God? Did Yosef go back to a dark and hopeless place? Maybe now the pit was full, for Yosef - full of all that had happened in the thirty-nine years since he was the sole occupant. Was Yosef doing a life review at that moment and trying to figure out how to move forward with relationship with his brothers?

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ginsburg in *Yalkut Yehudah* says about the first reunion:  
*Only Yosef and Binyamin cried and not the brothers. This is because when the heart is filled with sadness and pain, one is beyond tears. The brothers were mired in tremendous suffering and pangs of guilt over what they had done to Yosef. Only Yosef and Binyamin, who were free of such pain, were free to cry.*  
 So perhaps at Yosef's pit-stop he decided to bury his pain in the pit. When his brother's come with their white lie about Yaakov's message Yosef can see through the brothers. As Ramban comments on Bereshit 45:27

"It seems to me, according to the text, that Yaakov was never informed that the brothers sold Yosef. He thought that Yosef had lost his way in the field, and that people seized him and sold him to Egypt. The brothers refrained from telling him the truth because they feared for their lives lest he get angry and curse them... – If Yaakov had known about it, they would have all pleaded with their father in his lifetime to deliver the instruction directly to Yosef – for Yosef would not defy his father's explicit command... and they would not then have to fabricate evidence."

Yosef sees through the subterfuge and sees that they are still in pain. He answers in the same language that his father answered his mother when she asked him to pray for her to have a child “הֲתַחַת אֱלֹקִים אָנִי” *am I a substitute for God?* I think Yosef is saying, I have dealt with what happened. I am reconciled with my fate. I have looked into my pit, now it is up to you and God. Our father is no longer. Don't put him in the middle of us -

<p>Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.</p>	<p>וְאַתֶּם חֲשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֲלֵקִים חֲשַׁבָה לְטוֹבָה לְמַעַן עֲשֶׂה כִּיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַחִיית עַם־רַב:</p>
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<p>And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.” Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.</p>	<p>וְעַתָּה אֵל־תִּירָאוּ אֲנִי אֶכְלָל אֶתְכֶם וְאַתֶּם־טוֹפְכֶם וַיִּנַּחֵם אוֹתָם וַיְדַבֵּר עִל־לִבָּם:</p>
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Sometimes we need full forgiveness but get only reconciliation. Sometimes we need to be satisfied with abatement of anger. What I will take from Vayechi, this year, is that there are times to put aside the old angers and hurts, and to trust in God and do the right thing, even if others have not done so.



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