

Vayigash

Be Careful of Assumptions

The underlying theme of the *Torah* portion *Vayigash* is, be careful of assumptions. We should always probe what is real and what is just an assumption. Assumptions can cause a great deal of confusion and can give us the wrong picture of the way things are.

In this *Torah* portion, Judah thinks he is talking to an Egyptian, the Viceroy of Egypt, when, actually, he is talking to his brother, Joseph. Jacob assumes his son, Joseph, is dead and will not believe his other sons that Joseph is alive. Jacob does not believe that G-d will let him go down to Egypt, when this is not the case. Joseph assumes that what is good for Pharaoh will be good for all Egypt. All these assumptions prove to be false.

Why is it that companies like to hire college graduates? In most instances, their college degrees have nothing to do with the job they are performing. The reason is because college graduates think the same and talk the same. They make the same assumptions. This makes communication easier but, sometimes, it can lead to disaster because all the problems are thought of the same way and, when a new product is invented or a new way of doing things is thought of, it does not fit the pattern of their thinking, it is disregarded, even though it may be a better way. The Japanese have taught us this.

The brothers made assumptions that if Joseph were out of the way, their father, Jacob, would love them more, but it turned out that he loved them less. He was so involved in mourning he did not have any love left to share with his children.

It is very important we know what we are doing. The brothers made five different assumptions about Joseph, and they were all wrong. They assumed that he wanted to rule over them. They assumed that, if they would sell him as a slave, he would die. They assumed that their father would love them more if he were out of the way. They assumed that the Viceroy of Egypt could not be Joseph. They assumed that Joseph would treat them badly. All of these assumptions proved to be false.

Perhaps this is why Joseph gave Benjamin five suits and his brothers only one suit of clothes to highlight the fact that the brothers had failed to

distinguish between assumptions and reality. The word for "suit" in Hebrew, "*Chaleefa*," means "to pass, to change." The brothers confused permanence with passing fancy.

This is what, many times, we all do. In fact, Joseph did it himself when he thought that by helping Pharaoh concentrate all power in his hands, he would do good for himself and Egypt. It turned out that he planted the seeds of hatred among the nobility and peasants toward the Jews. They had no sympathy for Joseph or his descendants after they were enslaved, because Joseph had undermined their power and position. We must be very careful to determine what is an assumption and what is reality. We must never fool ourselves; otherwise, we will end up causing much grief.

I am reminded of the story they tell about an actor who always bragged and bragged and bragged about how good he was and how much money people paid to see him. One day another actor, after listening to him for several minutes, said, "You know, you must be right, because there is a man I know in Philadelphia who would pay \$1,000,000 to see you act." The braggart said, "Is that right?" The other actor answered, "Yes, he is blind. He would pay \$1,000,000 to see anybody act." We must be careful about reality and assumption.

Survival, Spirituality, Responsibility and Repentance

In the *Torah* portion *Vayigash* we learn about the four things that Jews must do if the Jewish people are to survive in exile. The first one is that they must be mutually responsible for one another. They must be willing to help each other at all times. The second one is they must maintain their Jewish visions. When Jacob went down to Egypt, he said that now he was happy because he would be able to put his eyes on Joseph. Joseph had the same vision of the world as his father had. The third one is that we should make sure that we contribute to the societies in which we live, as Joseph did so stunningly. Finally, we must invest great efforts in Jewish education, as Jacob did when he sent Judah ahead "*L'Horos*," which means not just "to show" but to set up schools which will teach Judaism even in the Land of Goshan. We need these four things. We need to be mutually responsible for each, as Judah proved when he stepped forward

to help his brother Benjamin against whom he thought was an alien vice-roy. We also must maintain our Jewish vision. We must contribute to the society in which we live, and we must be totally committed to Jewish education.

This *Torah* portion teaches not only about the survival of the Jewish people. It also teaches us how to survive as an individual, what an individual needs to do in order to cope in this world in order to become an upstanding human being. Science has recently learned that 99.6% of the DNA of a chimpanzee is identical to that of a human being, but we are not chimpanzees, although occasionally people like to act like monkeys. We know that we are different. We know that we have a different nature. A human being has a spiritual nature. A human being wants to change the world. No other animal wants to change the world. We want to make sure that we live, not just to live but to make a difference. We know that because of our spiritual nature we want to leave our mark on the world. We want to make this world a better place. We live in order to better ourselves and to better the future. Because we have a spiritual nature, we know that we are not complete. We know that we are not whole the way we are. We know that we must do certain things in order to make ourselves feel whole. Other religions give different prescriptions for what a person must do in order to be whole. Some religions say that you have to believe in certain things. Other religions say that you have to be a passive recipient of love. Judaism says that what we must do to become whole is to assume responsibility.

That is what the term "*bat mitzvah*" means. It means that we are now responsible for our deeds. It means that we must be responsible first of all for ourselves, then for our family, then for our people, and then for the world. We must make sure that this world is a better place because of us, that this world is a little bit better place because we have lived. The word responsibility means to respond, to respond to the challenges at hand. Only we can solve the problems of this generation. We cannot act selfishly because if we act selfishly, we will be filled with depression, and if we are filled with depression, then we will not be able to fulfill our spiritual nature. We will give way to drugs and to alcohol.

Life is filled with a great paradox. And what is that paradox? The

paradox is that the more we become self-actuated and self-indulgent and self-motivated, the more selfish we become and the more unhappy we become. Selfishness is not a unique thing and therefore, we can't fulfill our spiritual nature by being selfish. Anybody can be selfish, but to be special means that you assume the responsibilities and the tasks that only you can do best. Only you can be the best parents to your child. Only you can be the best child to your parents. Only you can solve the problems of this age. The problems of the past age were your parents' responsibility. The responsibility of the problems of this age are yours, so that there will be a future, so that your children will be able to solve the problems of their age.

That is also one of the main themes of this *Torah* portion. Throughout this *Torah* portion we have the term *Vayagash*, and he approached." Judah, when he approached the viceroy of Egypt, it says, "*Vayagash*, and he approached." He assumed responsibility for his family, something he had failed to do before when he was willing to sell Joseph to Egypt. He was now willing to attach himself to others because it is only by attaching ourselves to others that we actually find ourselves, that we actually fulfill our spiritual nature. The same expression is used when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. It says, "Approach, please, to me, and they approached, and Joseph said, 'I am your brother that you sold me to Egypt.'" Joseph did not whitewash what his brothers had done. The brothers had done a terrible thing, but he said, "You are still my brothers, and I want you to approach me." Then he said something very interesting. He said, "Don't be sad and don't be angry in your own eyes because you sold me here, because in order to preserve life G-d has sent me before you." Joseph tells them that there are going to be five more years of famine ahead and that G-d sent him ahead in order to cause the family to survive. Joseph continues, "And G-d sent me before you to put for you a remnant in the land to cause you to live, to cause you to be alive for a great redemption, for a great deliverance." The rabbis all ask, why does Joseph say, "And you shall not be sad and don't be angry"?

Most times when people do the wrong thing, tragedy occurs. But sometimes a person can do the wrong thing and it can actually turn out all right. Sometimes people intend to do bad but it turns out good. We know

that throughout history that that has happened. Czar Nicolas II was a terrible czar *vis a vis* the Jewish people because he started pogroms and caused the deaths of several hundred Jews. But, because of these pogroms, millions of Jews left Russia and went to the United States and other places, and their lives were saved when Hitler invaded those areas where these Jews had lived. All these Jews probably would have been killed if they wouldn't have left because of Nicolas' pogroms. Nicolas II didn't intend to do good and he was never sorry for what he did do so, therefore, he deserved to be punished. But the evil he did turned out to be good for the Jewish people. We see that, too, of another terrible anti-Semite, Stalin, who wanted to kill all the Jewish people to make a second holocaust, and he almost succeeded. He concocted what was called the doctor's plot in which all Jews would be accused of trying to overthrow the Communist government by killing its leaders. He died on Purim just a month before it was to be implemented. All the Jews of Russia were to be taken to Siberia and killed. But this was the same Stalin who saved Israel in 1948 after Israel declared its independence. Because he hated Britain so much, he sent all the captured German WWII arms that he had stored in Czechoslovakia to Israel so they could defeat the Arabs. Israel could never have defeated the Arabs without these arms. G-d sometimes takes the evil that we do and makes it good because no matter what we do, we cannot stop G-d's plans. G-d can take the evil we do, and He can make it good. There are many paths to get to the same place.

There is a scientific theory called "chaos" which speaks about this. Winter comes every year, but the temperatures leading to winter are not always the same. Spring comes every year but not every day every year leading to spring is the same every year. There are different patterns that can bring us to the same result. There are different roads, different paths which can be used to arrive at the same result. So, too, G-d can even take the evil we do and fulfill His plans for us. We may suffer because of it, but He can still take the evil that people do and make it good.

When Joseph says, "Don't be sad," what he is referring to is "Don't be sad that you have done evil. You did do evil. You sold me, but it did not turn out badly, so don't be sad. It actually turned out to be good because G-d sent one before you to save you from the famine." Then Joseph says,

“Don’t be angry.” Don’t be angry at yourselves for doing something bad in the very beginning which turned out good. True, it caused a lot of suffering but, in the end, it will turn out good. Don’t be angry at yourselves at this time because it is going to result in a great deliverance. Eventually, you are going to leave Egypt and come out and be a great people.”

Yes, G-d could have brought us back down to Egypt in another way, and we wouldn’t have had to suffer so much, but in the end, it is going to be all right. But how can Joseph say, “Now don’t be sad, now don’t be angry”? Isn’t he absolving his brothers of all responsibility? He can do this because the brothers had done *teshuva*. The brothers had proven that they had repented for selling Joseph. Judah, instead of telling the Egyptian vice-roy, Joseph, “Take Benjamin. Let him be a slave. We are going back to our father,” he pleaded for his brother Benjamin. He proved that he was his brother’s keeper, that he was interested in helping his brother. Since the brothers had done *teshuva*, since they had repented, Joseph was justified in telling them that they should not be sad, that they should not be angry at themselves now. Yes, they had done a terrible thing, but G-d tells us all that no matter what we have done in the past, we can always assume responsibility for each other. We can once again do the right thing. We should feel that we can never change, that we are captives of our past. We always have the opportunity to assume responsibility for ourselves and for others, no matter what we have done in the past.

This we can always do but we have to understand what is the good thing to do in every situation and that is a very difficult thing to determine. That’s why learning is so important in Judaism because before we act, we must make sure that what we are going to do is going to better the situation and not worsen it. In order to be responsible, we must know all the options. We must know how we should act in any given situation. We must know what we have to do in order to make the situation better. Each of us has a responsibility to act, to act to make our lives better, to make our family’s lives better, to make the lives of all people better. We cannot just run away from our responsibilities like some religions and philosophies say we should. Some religions say that the purpose of life is to merge our individuality into the greater whole. Other religions say that the purpose of life is to guard our souls, is to lead the quiet life away from the rest of

the world. Our religion says that we fulfill ourselves. We obtain spiritual wholeness by assuming responsibility. This assumption of responsibility brings to us all a great sense of joy and happiness because it tells us all that we are worthwhile and that we are doing worthwhile things. We cannot shirk our responsibilities to ourself, to G-d, and to others. If we will assume our responsibilities, we will all be able to lead a happy and a good life.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a paratroop group which was going to be taken out to be dropped off about fifty miles from their base camp. They were told to check their parachutes and their safety parachutes, but one guy did not want to do it. He did not feel like doing it. They were told that they were going to be taken on the plane and that after they jumped, they should pull their parachute rip cord and that if this parachute did not work, they should pull the cord on their safety parachute. There would be trucks waiting for them below. This fellow got on the plane. The others jumped and he jumped, too. He pulled the cord on his main parachute and it broke. He pulled the cord on his safety parachute. It, too, broke. He looked up and he said, "Just my luck. I bet the trucks won't be there either." If we are to live decent and good lives, we have to be responsible people. We have to check the things we are supposed to check. We have to learn the things that we have to learn. We have to act in a way that is responsible so that truly we will be there when the trucks will be there, and we will be able to help and do our job the way it should be done. Let us all hope that we will assume responsibility for ourselves, for our family, for our people, and the world so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.