

## Shabbat Parashat Vayigash 5768

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In February of 2003, then Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nation's security council and gave what can only be described as a very effective speech, burgeoning the claims that far from disarming, Iraq had maintained and sought to increase its stock of weapons of mass destruction. He concluded that speech with these words: "We must not shrink from whatever is ahead of us. We must not fail in our duty and our responsibility to the citizens of the countries that are represented by this body." Why was it such an effective speech? Because six weeks later the countries were at war, with most of the western world agreeing that there were enough terrible weapons in Iraq to warrant grave concern. Disagreement existed on whether invasion was the proper course of action (surely you remember Freedom Fries), and yes, later on Powell himself referred to the speech as a regrettable blot on his record, but the reputable American general and statesman's rhetoric was, at the time, quite convincing.

Some 41 years ago, another convincing speech at the U.N. was delivered – I wasn't around for it. Then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, gave a speech that sought to flush out the Soviet Union's activities in Cuba – events that I imagine were looked at with even greater trepidation here in south Florida. Addressing his Soviet counterpart, Stevenson began by saying I want to say to you, Mr. Zorin, that I do not have your talent for obfuscation, for distortion, for confusing language, and for doubletalk. And I must confess to you that I am glad that I do not! And just a bit later on, Stevenson famously declared: All right, sir, let me ask you one simple question: Do you, Ambassador Zorin, deny that the U.S.S.R. has placed and is placing medium- and intermediate-range missiles and sites in Cuba? Yes or no—don't wait for the translation—yes or no?

And when the the Soviet representative refused to answer he continued, "You can answer yes or no. You have denied they exist. I want to know if I understood you correctly. I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over, if that's your decision. And I am also prepared to present the evidence in this room." This was also an effective use of rather hot rhetoric because three very tense days later, a deal was struck by which the Soviet missiles would be removed from Cuba.

Colin Powell wasn't responsible for going to war in Iraq but his speech played its part. And Adlai Stevenson wasn't responsible for defusing the Cuban Missile Crisis but he played his part as well. The speech is rarely the deciding factor in how things turn out – but at times – some well placed, timed, and articulated words can invigorate, convince, and even result in strong action.

The themes of tone, translation, and result-producing speech-making relate well to the turning point in our parashah. You'll recall that before Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he tells everyone else to leave the room. The atmosphere for the brothers must have turned extremely tense, I imagine it like the extreme stillness that comes as weather fronts collide. If you've ever lived in tornado-prone areas you know what I'm talking

about – it’s a scary and anticipatory kind of stillness, and is almost certainly the origin of the phrase ‘quiet before the storm’.

So why was this a particularly tense moment in an already tense part of the narrative? Because up to this point it seems clear that Joseph had been hiding his identity in part by speaking the language of the Egyptian court, communicating to his Hebrew speaking brothers through a translator. Now this prince of Egypt has dismissed everyone, including the translators – the brothers may have feared for their very lives, if they were able to think at all logically. But then the door closes, and in perfectly inflected Hebrew, Joseph cries out, ‘I am your brother!’.

If this Hebrew declaration is the zenith of the story, the immediate precursor to it – what seems to push Joseph over the edge – is a great speech. It is a long speech by the standards of the book of Genesis – in fact it is the longest uninterrupted monologue in all of B’reisheet. At sixteen verses it is not long by modern standards – not nearly as long as Powell or Stevenson or even this sermon. But in sixteen verses Judah, the same brother who suggested that Joseph be thrown into a pit some twenty years prior, causes an this enigmatic Egyptian viceroy, who couldn’t seem to make up his mind about whether he was going to help this family obtain the food they had traveled from Canaan to procure, reveal himself as one of their own.

Was it Judah’s speech or was it the sum total of the enormous pressure of the events leading up to it which led Joseph to choose the moment Judah finishes to disclose his identity? We can’t know for sure – but we can look at the buttons that Judah pushes to estimate its impact on Joseph.

First, there is the tone of the speech. Nachum Sarna describes it as deferential yet dignified, spirited but not provocative, full of pathos and passion, yet restrained and transparently sincere. Last Shabbat, especially Friday night, I had almost no voice – a tragic event for a rabbi, a happy one for a congregation. Later I claimed that I lost my voice on purpose – I had to talk more quietly so people would listen more closely. Joseph, who hadn’t seen Judah in two decades, clearly recognized a change in his brother, and apparently it started with his tone. When we hear a normally quiet and reserved person speak with a sense of urgency, or when we hear a normally bombastic person appear reticent, we tend to pay closer attention. In a modern parallel, it will take a whole lot more than a new National Intelligence Estimate to convince me that the president of Iran is up to anything but no good. Any turnaround there must include not only positive expressions toward the world generally and Israel specifically, but a change in tone that would make such a conciliatory statement at all believable. Previously unwilling to stand up for his brother Joseph’s safety, Judah’s tone indicates that he has grown into someone willing to take one for team, that he really believes what he is saying, and not just trying to procure some food to save himself.

If Judah’s tone played a role in convincing Joseph to effectively forgive his brothers, the content didn’t hurt either. Fourteen times in seventeen verses Judah mentions their father – and as Sarna points out this is a “shrewd yet simple appeal to Joseph’s sense of fairness

and mercy” – Judah must have sensed that there was some reserve of humanity in this Egyptian viceroy who up to this time had presented himself as mercurial and even eccentric. He has sent them on wild goose chases, he has insisted – out of the blue – that the youngest brother remain with him as a prisoner, yet Judah seems to think that is he has any chance here at all he could appeal this prince’s sense of dedication to his own father, or at least to the kernel of sympathy and kindness which one view of human nature insists is deep down in everyone. Judah – who was one of the brothers who refused to see any goodness in their dreamy kid brother – now leads the way in appealing to the sense of goodness in this stern Egyptian royal. Amazing.

So the appeal to fairness, mercy, to the parental instinct turned the tide, but here is what pulls the boat into the harbor: Judah offers to trade places with Benjamin. It is the perfect example of Judah’s teshuva. Judah, who just two decades prior was willing to sacrifice Joseph to God knows what fate while he stood idly by, unwilling to do anything constructive short of suggesting that instead of killing him quickly in a pit they would kill him slowly as a slave. Judah is now putting his own life in danger so that their father’s heart, all but broken when news of Joseph’s demise reached him, wouldn’t be shattered beyond repair with news that Benjamin was being held captive.

Another modern parallel: Recently I taught a class and the subject was live organ donation. Live organ donation might have been practically impossible of the rabbis of the Talmud – of any pre-modern rabbis – to conceive of, but they understood the concept. Am I ever allowed to put my life in danger to save someone else? The brief answer: while there are almost always exceptions to the rule, the rule is that we don’t put ourselves in danger, and we certainly don’t do that unnecessarily. So don’t invite me bungee jumping or skydiving – I’m not interested.

It is now possible to give someone a kidney with little danger to the donor. It is now possible to transplant the lobe of a liver with little to no loss of liver function in the donor, and the possibility of a return to normal life for the recipient. When these operations were just beginning there was more risk involved – the cost-benefit equation had to be weighed carefully. Now that there is great success in these operations, the ethical questions turn more toward whether we are creating a market for these organs, whether we are literally placing a price on them. While that remains a great concern, from the perspective of the majority of Jewish sources, if something poses a little bit of danger but the potential benefits are extremely great, it is a legitimate option to participate in an act even whose safety is not a hundred percent guaranteed.

Judah was willing to give much more than a metaphorical kidney to Benjamin in order to save their father’s life. Judah was willing to give his heart, his life, in order to save both Benjamin and Jacob. In one of the most famous ethical dilemmas of the Talmud, two people are walking in the desert and one person is holding a container of water that has enough for one of them to probably survive the journey. What should he do? Though an answer is offered that they should share it, along comes the great Rabbi Akiva who says – do you remember? – that the person in possession of the water should keep and drink the water, saving himself. Now Judah lived well before Rabbi Akiva, but surely he knew

that he was potentially sacrificing himself in order to save the others, and seeing Judah hold himself to this ultimate standard – more than what was expected of him, more than Joseph probably ever thought Judah was capable of – led to the declaration – I am your brother Joseph.

Our amazing religion presents us with many opportunities and challenges. One of them is to play out scenarios – like the Talmud was doing in the hypothetical example of the water in the desert – to be better prepared to act and to act nobly and well in whatever everyday or unexpected interaction we have. Want to be more patient? Think more about what it means to be patient, think of what makes you impatient, prepare yourself to not be as impatient. This is what the musar tradition, the system of highly developed and disciplined Jewish ethics that some of us have been studying together this year, has to say about developing patience. We may wish to be many things: wise, patient, humble, joyful, spiritual, fulfilled – whatever it might be, if we conceptualize that trait first in the recesses of our mind we will have a better chance of acting on those traits when the time comes to act on them.

Study of our ancient texts can propel us toward a more vivid spiritual imagination. Place yourself in Jacob's shoes, in Judah's, in Joseph's. Would Judah's speech have moved you, the way modern orators moved or at least propelled events at critical junctures in the history of our world? As Jacob, what would you have said to Joseph when you saw him for the first time? As Joseph, is there forgiveness in your heart for your brothers who tried to do away with you, or only a practical need to move on from those events by offering them protection in the land you now control?

In Joseph's declaration to his brothers as he reveals himself to them he says now I understand, God sent me here so that I would be in a position to save you when you were on the brink of starvation. Had Joseph imagined the day when he would confront his brothers, or did he realize it just as Judah was offering his heartfelt words? Could Joseph have imagined events would go down the way it did? If you suspended your knowledge of how the story ends, could you imagine it would have turned out this way? I know that I couldn't.

Perhaps Joseph had thought about the day he would see his brothers again, and maybe he thought about taking his revenge – a bit of which he does by sending them on their wild goose chase. But maybe he had also thought about letting go of past grudges, had considered what it would mean to move together into whatever the future held for all of them. He may have thought about this in connection to the perspective he had gained on his own life, his own journey his past mistakes and successes, and of God's own expectations for him. And if he had envisioned all of that, he is now given the opportunity to see if he could live up to the standard he had imagined himself living up to many times. Would the reality live up to the fantasy? When Judah's sincerity and self-sacrifice appeared literally at Joseph's doorstep, he began to realize that he was truly ready to accept all of them and to deal kindly with them. Both the tone and the content of Judah's words to Joseph helped him to move forward into the next chapter of his family's life, and the next chapter in the life of our people.

Shabbat shalom.