

## Vayiggash 5780

### “The Rope Has Followed The Pail”

With Judah’s appeal to Joseph we encounter the longest monologue in the Torah to date. Judah’s plea for Benjamin’s life is also an outstanding example of skilled advocacy. He begins with expressions designed to attract Joseph’s attention; he sets out the facts of the situation briefly but with maximum pathos; and he even chooses his vocabulary so as to stress two main factors [what are they plz? - 13 x servant, 14 x father].

And the result is immediate. Joseph is overcome - he quite literally cannot keep himself together any more and sends everyone but his brothers scurrying from the room so he can reveal his identity to his brothers alone. Rarely - if ever - does an advocate elicit such a prompt and comprehensive response.

But if we explore what our Rabbis made of this exchange, we find that at least some of them understood it differently. There are a number of Midrashim that quite literally write between the lines of Judah’s speech to turn it into a fierce argument between Judah and Joseph. Joseph rejects Judah’s right to speak - “why are you the spokesman when you have older brothers?” - tells him that harsh treatment is all that he deserves and accuses him of being a hypocrite by standing surety for Benjamin when he did not do it for “the other brother who is dead.”

The climax of that collection of Midrashim comes when Judah asks Joseph, “What shall we say to our father?” And Joseph responds, “Tell him the rope has followed the pail.” [*halakh ha-hevel ahar ha-d’li*].

In all the versions of the Midrash that I have seen, this metaphor has the effect of stopping Judah’s advocacy mid-flow. It makes him cry out in pain; it makes him beg and plead for Benjamin to be released and it leads into the final words of his monologue: “How can I go up to my father when the lad is not with me?!”

There is a dreadful finality to the image. Once a rope - here meaning Benjamin, languishing in a dungeon - has followed a pail - meaning Joseph, who languished in pits and dungeons in his turn - then a well becomes useless. Not only does the metaphor recall for us the way that all through the story Joseph has been dropped in some hole or another; it takes away any hope of rescue or resolution. Once we let go of the rope that drops the pail into the well, we have lost our source of water, and with that, our source of life. When the rope follows the pail, it's all over.

But Nechama Liebowitz, in her commentary on this part of the Torah, points out that this is not what the plain text of the Torah says! There is no argument at all in the scroll: there is only Judah's speech and Joseph's immediate capitulation. She writes:

*Joseph of course could not have said these words. Who then is the "Joseph" in the Midrash, who plays the role of the accuser? Our Sages wished to personify Judah's conscience, the inner voice of remorse which plagued him at the turning of the tables.*

I think this is a wonderful explanation: and I believe we can take it even further and apply it to ourselves as well as Judah.

We all of us have inner voices. If talking to ourselves is indeed a sign of genius, then just about every human being ever created is an Einstein. And very often, just as in this Midrash, our inner voices are not externally vocalized. Many times we do not even notice them as we sit at the traffic lights playing out what is going to happen when we get home, or rehearsing what we are going to say in tomorrow's presentation at work, or rehashing the conversation we just had but making ourselves much more eloquent...the list goes on and on and it can feel more real to us than the actual reality we encounter.

A lot of the time those inner voices are our friends. By the time we get home, or get to the office, the rehearsal we put ourselves through can be beneficial, enabling us to choose our words and direct our behavior. But the inner conversations in which we re-hash the past, running the scene over and over again in our minds, can be truly destructive - just as in the Midrash. We can imagine Judah's inner voice telling him he's being *chutzpadik*, telling him he deserves to be punished, accusing him of being a hypocrite by standing surety for one brother having abandoned the other.

And when Judah's voice tells him that *the rope has followed the pail*, it breaks him completely. He is confronted with his worst possible fear - the effect that losing Benjamin will have on Jacob, the way he himself expects to be blamed for his failed attempt at advocacy. At that moment he loses his grip both literally and metaphorically and everything comes crashing down, just like the rope and the pail themselves.

But all this is only going on in Judah's mind.

There's a term for this in psychology - it's called *catastrophizing*.

We do it all the time. We imagine consequences of conversations that never took place and never will; we flip from page to page in the newspaper or on the internet building up pictures of a future that is not guaranteed to take place. And then we begin to react as if what we have created is real.

But we need to remember that the inner voices are just that. They only exist inside us.

This is a lesson that can be applied to almost any area of our lives. The feeling that we will never understand a family member's behavior, the recent argument with a colleague, current state of the country or the planet - it is all too easy to tell ourselves that the rope has followed the bucket. Particularly if we are fearful, as we may feel after the recent spate of attacks, the well yawns before us, drawing us down into its darkness.

This isn't to say that objective dangers don't exist and we should close our eyes to them. The possibility of Joseph not releasing Benjamin is a real possibility, and then the rope would indeed follow the bucket. But just as for Judah, our own futures are unknown, subject to change, and most importantly, subject to the way that we perceive them.

So we have a choice when it comes to those inner voices that tell us it's all over.

We can observe them.

We can listen but not be drawn in.

And if we can, we realize that we have choices. After Shabbat I'll post Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' latest piece about US antisemitism; it's an example of a considered, insightful reaction, expressing hope while still being realistic. Even if our direst predictions come to pass, we can claim the power to choose how we react to them.

And - just as for Judah - the actual reality may still be capable of surprising us.