

Vayiggash 5781 **Selfish to Selfless**

It's that time of year again. So obviously I've been thinking about Ebenezer Scrooge.

Scrooge is the leading character in Charles Dickens' novella, *A Christmas Carol*. He's been portrayed in movies many times, from the 1901 silent version with an unidentified actor to Michael Caine in the Muppet version. In between we've also enjoyed Albert Finney, Kelsey Grammer, Jim Carrey, Yosemite Sam and Donald Duck.

Let me just briefly retell the story. Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserable, avaricious man whose business partner, Jacob Marley, died some seven years before the story begins. It is Christmas Eve. Scrooge is visited by two charity representatives who he turns away empty-handed with some choice words, and goes home having demanded that his long-suffering clerk, Bob Cratchit, work the next day. But on his return home, Scrooge's door knocker suddenly transforms itself into the face of his dead partner, and from then on Scrooge spends the night being visited by four spirits - first the ghost of Marley, dragging behind it the heavy chains it forged during its life and then the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. He is transformed by the experience and awakens on Christmas morning a new man.

A Christmas Carol is a classic story of redemption. The change in Scrooge's character is the whole point. It drives the plot from start to finish.

But what exactly is that change?

The cold-hearted miser who began the story by paying as little as possible towards his friend's funeral, squeezing his debtors and underpaying his faithful clerk becomes a generous benefactor we see at the end of it - giving an enormous charity donation that includes 'many back payments,' providing for the Cratchits, reconciling with his own family, vowing never to be miserly again. As Dickens writes:

He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old City knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world.

The man who only cared for himself at the start of the story becomes the one who cares primarily for others. Let's notice how with that final sentence, Dickens gradually expands the focus from the individual into relationships - friend, master - and out into the city and finally into the world. Scrooge moves from self to other, from being selfish to selfless.

And we see exactly the same pattern in this week's parashah. It's the one that opens with Judah pleading with Joseph for Benjamin's life. This is the same Judah who at the beginning of the story was ready to throw Joseph into a pit and then sell him on to some traveling merchants. But Judah - like Scrooge - changes.

On our community Havdalah Zoom last week, Rabbi Pernick pointed out that at the end of last week's Torah portion, Judah uses very specific language when he asks Jacob to send Benjamin back to Egypt with him. *Ani e'ervenu* says Judah - I will pledge myself for him, mortgage myself for him. It's the same move from selfish to selfless that powers Scrooge's transformation. It's as if Judah is saying that he is ready to step away from being Judah at all if it will only keep Benjamin safe. That theme continues all the way through Judah's address to Joseph this week, the longest monologue in the Torah to date and an outstandingly persuasive piece of advocacy. Its climax reads:

Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!'

The focus is on Joseph, on Benjamin, on the brothers, on Jacob and his feelings - anywhere but on Judah.

¹ Bereishit 44:33-34

In 2017 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gave a TED talk called 'Facing The Future Without Fear' which sounds almost prophetic now. (I strongly recommend that we listen - the link will be in the website form of this sermon.²) During the talk he urges us to ask: what do people worship? Future anthropologists will conclude that we worship the self. But it is critical - for all sorts of reasons - that a shift happen from 'us' to 'we.' He tells us that he loves the phrase, "We, the people," because it says that we all share collective responsibility for our collective future. Since then, in his last book, *Morality*, he wrote again about the same idea:

Since the beginning of civilisation, morality has been humanity's internal satellite navigation system as we have journeyed toward the undiscovered country called the future. It has taken different forms, but it is always about caring for the good of others, not just ourselves; about decency, honesty, faithfulness, and self-restraint; about treating others as we would wish to be treated. It's the world of "we" not "I."

And right now more than ever we are being called upon to build that world. More than ever now we are being called to prioritize others' interests over our own. Scrooge; Judah; contemporary morality. All three are linked by the same pattern. As has been the case throughout the pandemic, Torah is speaking directly to our lives.

How should we prioritize others? A week or so ago Governor John Bel Edwards invited all the rabbis of Louisiana to join him on an update call. He explained to us his concern over the collision of the spike in COVID with the rise in cases because of all the Thanksgiving travel and pleaded with us to pass on to our communities that we need to embrace all necessary measures during the winter holiday season. That means more masking, more distancing and preferring outside over inside whenever possible, even though it's cold. He concluded by asking for our prayers for him as well.

2

https://www.ted.com/talks/rabbi_lord_jonathan_sacks_how_we_can_face_the_future_without_fear_together/transcript?language=en

So as the secular year turns and we begin to think about leaving 2020 behind us, we must continue to look after each other. Every time we mask, every time we stay home when we'd rather be out, every time we prioritize the community's interests over our own, we are making that move from selfish to selfless. Will we emerge transformed by our experience, as Scrooge was by his?

It depends on us.

God bless us, every one. And Shabbat shalom.