



Parshat Vayigash
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After the Crash
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We knew it was coming, this report from an expert who had been spending a lot of time investigating, but when it landed, it really hurt.

I am talking of course about the recent report that concluded that French fries are bad for you. According to Eric Rimm, a professor of nutrition at Harvard, French fries are, in his cruel phrase, “starch bombs.” He argues that French fries—even though they are made out of potatoes, and even though potatoes are a vegetable, that grows from the ground, and even though vegetables that grow from the ground are usually good for you—in the specific case of French fries, they are not so good for you.

That was hard enough to hear. I love French fries. But when I first read the article, I thought to myself, this does not apply to me. They’re talking about other people, not me. And here is why. There is a vegetarian restaurant in Newton that cooks up *sweet potato* fries. They are orange. They have to be healthy, or so I thought.

Then I heard a segment on NPR interviewing Eric Rimm. The NPR reporter, Deborah Becker, asks the question I was waiting for. Are all French fries created equal? What about sweet potato fries? This is Dr. Rimm’s response:

There really aren’t differences. Sweet potato fries are orange so they have some carotenoids in them. But for the most part, the starch in potatoes is going to be starch, and that gets absorbed into your bloodstream faster than sugar...

Over the long term, that’s just not good for people, especially as people get older and put on weight.

This hit me hard. Do you know how many sweet potato fries I had eaten over the years, believing, wrongly it turns out, that they were the healthy option?

What do we do when something we always thought was true turns out not to be true? Now I know that whether sweet potato fries are a healthy choice is not the most urgent issue in the world. But in its own way, it does exemplify a larger problem that many of us, perhaps all of us, will experience at some point. A truth that we have been living with turns out not to be true.

A woman named Benay Lappe gave a TED talk on just this subject: What happens when a paradigm that you have been operating under crashes?

Benay Lappe points out that to be human is to ask big questions. Why am I here? Why am I alive? Who am I? Where do I belong? What is my purpose? We respond to these questions by locating ourselves in what she calls a Master Story. A Master Story is a larger narrative which grounds us and gives us meaning. If we are Jewish, our Master Story is the Torah. If we are Christian, our Master Story is Scripture. If we are American and not connected to a religious tradition, our Master Story is the American dream. While living our Master Story, we live out answers to these big questions.

But an inevitable part of life is that at some point, we experience what Benay Lappe calls a crash. A moment where the Master Story that we are living no longer takes in our reality.

We always thought we wanted to do a certain thing for a living, but it turns out, we don't like it so much, or it's not working for us.

We always thought we had a friendship that we could count on. Turns out, not so much.

We always thought we were going to be young and healthy forever. Not so.

We always thought when we retire, that is going to be amazing, long, rich days beckoning to us, and now we are wondering, how do we fill those days that are too long and not rich enough.

In our Torah reading this morning, both Jacob and Joseph have master stories, and both experience moments of crash when they reconnect after 22 years of separation. When they finally see each other, there are tears, though the text is deliberately ambiguous as to who cries. Genesis 46:29 tells us: “He presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while.” Who cried? The commentators disagree. Both son and father experienced a crash which could explain their tears.

Joseph had a master story, and it worked for him until he saw his father. Joseph’s master story was: I was betrayed by my brothers, sold into slavery, and through my grit and spunk, and with God’s help, I was able to rise to become number 2 in all of Egypt. It is a rags to riches Egypt story. Joseph’s master story was true. There was only one problem. When, 22 years later, Joseph finally sees Jacob, Jacob has become old, worn, tired. His skin is wrinkled. His hair has thinned. His posture is no longer erect. He no longer radiates energy and charisma. Jacob is an old man. Joseph’s master story of rags to riches had a casualty, his own father. That is why, according to Rashi, Joseph cries. *I caused my father’s aging. My success came at my father’s expense. Crash.*

Jacob also had had his own master story, and his own crash. Jacob’s master story was: I am a father who is an important part of my children’s lives. When they are hungry, I am hungry with them. When they are full, I am full with them. Yes, there was one precious son I loved and adored who was tragically killed. But all the living children are the most important part of my daily life. Jacob’s master story experienced a crash when he saw Joseph. Look what happened

to Joseph since I last saw him. Look what I have missed. He got married, he had children, he had this remarkable story, and it all happened without me and without my even knowing about it. That is 22 years I lost and can never get back. Crash. That is why, according to Nachmanides, Jacob wept, for the pain of years lost irretrievably.

What happens after their crash?

Jacob and Joseph role model two very different responses. Jacob says: I'm done. I am ready to pack it in. *Amutah hapa'am* Now I can die.

But Joseph's response is to adapt and create a new story. Joseph settles his father and brothers and their families in Goshen, in the best part of Egypt, and sustains them during a time of famine. Jacob will go on to enjoy a grace note chapter of 17 years—exactly as long as he had shared with Joseph before Joseph was sold into slavery. 17 years before the separation. 17 years after the separation. The Torah is strongly suggesting that new chapters, even after devastating loss, are possible.

Jacob and Joseph's responses to their crash moment anticipate what Benay Lappe did as her own story crashed. In her TED talk Benay Lappe shares that moment in 1974 when, growing up in a traditional Jewish home, before *Modern Family*, before the internet, she realized that she was gay. She would go to a women's book store, and there she would read books about being gay. In those forbidden volumes she could see herself. She would read quickly, furtively, hoping nobody would notice. Who she is, a gay woman, did not fit with her Master Story, the Jewish community in 1974. Crash. What to do?

There are three possible moves, and she has lived them all.

Option 1 is denial. Deny the crash. Deny the part of you that makes the Master Story not work for you. Cling desperately to the Master Story. Benay Lappe tried that. She related that

she once had a green leather jacket that she loved. One day she wore it and somebody said: you look like a gay woman—they used a pejorative term—wearing that jacket. She put the jacket in her basement and never wore it again. Option 1 had the upside that it preserved the people and traditions she was used to, but it had the downside that she could not be herself. She did that for a while. But at some point it no longer worked. So she moved on to Option 2.

Option 2 is to reject the Master Story. She became a Buddhist. She moved to Japan, which at the time she felt was as far from her hometown of Chicago as she could get. If I cannot be a gay Jew in Chicago, I will be a gay Buddhist in Japan. Option 2 had the upside that she could be herself, proudly gay, but it had the downside that she could not be herself with the people and traditions of her life. At one point doing Buddhist practice in Japan, she felt that she was not living *her* life.

Which led her to option 3, which was to adapt. Revise and deepen her story. She decided to reclaim her Jewish identity, as a gay person. She went to the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1990s. We were classmates. At the time the Seminary was not ordaining openly gay people, so she was in the closet. After she was ordained, she built something from the ground up--a yeshiva called Svara. Svara is a Talmudic term that means common sense wisdom. Something that is just obviously right, that you don't need a proof text for. It is obviously right that serious Talmudic study is the provenance of the whole Jewish people; that the queer community should be included in serious Jewish learning. Her signature move is the rigorous study of Talmud open to all, including a significant queer community. She built her yeshiva precisely in Chicago, the city she had once fled, but that she came home to. She deepened her hometown's story even as she deepened her own story. After her first story

crashed, she took her greatest pain and converted it into a new master story of ever greater inclusion, ever greater love, ever greater learning, ever greater beauty.

After their crash, Jacob and Joseph got 17 beautiful years together. After her crash, Rabbi Benay Lappe created Svara in Chicago. After your crash—to live is to experience a crash—what new and beautiful story can you create? Shabbat shalom.