

D'Var Torah Va-Yiggash Chapel Minyan Temple Emanuel 1-7-06

Shabbat Shalom.

As a psychologist, I hear painful stories of jealousy –jealousy of colleagues who get better assignments or bigger salaries, spouses who show too much attention to others, and especially, jealousies of siblings who receive better treatment from one's parents. Sometimes these jealousies go on for decades and ruin lives and destroy family businesses, built over several generations.

Thus, the Joseph saga, and the climactic episode in our Parasha today, Va-Yiggash, holds particular interest for me. A few weeks ago, the story seems to be a lesson about the perils of bragging, or revealing one's grandiose dreams of self-importance, and flaunting one's privileges and parental indulgences. Today, however the story reaches beyond "kin, kine, and corn" and adds a visceral lesson about kina—jealousy.

Last week's parasha, Mikketz, ends like the best season finale one could imagine. ("Desperate shepherds?") Joseph plants the royal chalice in Benjamin's bag where, of course, it is discovered. The brothers are horrified as Joseph dismisses them from Egypt and says that he will keep the "thief" as his slave.

Torah stories about jealousy and violence should not seem surprising to us. To the contrary, one way to look at the entire book of Genesis, of which the 4 parshiot of the Joseph saga provide the longest and closing narrative, is as a meditation on jealousy in the family.

No sooner is the world created than we have our first encounter with extreme jealousy—Cain murders Able when his sacrifice to God is not deemed worthy as is his brother's.

Later, Sarah prevails on Abraham to send out Hagar and Ishmael to die in the wild, because she did not want him to "share in the inheritance" of Isaac.

The theme is replicated in the next generation. Jacob is terrified—with just cause –when he learns that Esau is amassing troops apparently to revenge the trickery perpetrated by Rebecca and Jacob in order to steal what might have been Esau's—his birth-right.

Today, in Va-Yiggash, the stage also is set for a massive retaliation. Joseph has total power to destroy, by a simple verbal decree, the brothers who are guilty of attempting to murder him.

But the Torah has a different message for us that gets to our very core as human beings. In the longest speech in the Torah, Judah pleads for the life and freedom of Benjamin, and offers himself in his stead. He dramatically pictures how the loss of another beloved

son will kill Jacob with grief. It's as if Judah's ability to empathize with his father awakens this same empathic response in Joseph.

In our own lives, we often have the opportunity to recall our slights and get back at others for them. Sometimes, we actually get the chance to retaliate through some act or even passively, remaining detached and unmoved by the chance to reconcile. How often do we use our memories to recall how bad we had it. For example, in the hospital, senior physicians have been presented with pleas from young residents for a less frequent on-call schedule—one that will ease their already stressed lives and has been shown to generate fewer medical errors. Some of the physicians have rejected such ideas with “I remember being on call every third night and I got through it.”

Joseph now reaches deep. Instead of the narcissistic grandiosity which characterized his younger years, he uses the ability to empathize with his father and his brothers. Joseph understands from his own experience of loss and loneliness. But instead of exacting revenge, of making his brothers “pay” for what they did, he is overcome with emotion and ends the sadistic game with his revelation to them that he is their brother.

The Torah provides evidence of the victory of empathy over jealousy in several places. Joseph states (45:5) “Al Tay-atzvu v' al yeechar b'ay-nay-chem, kee machartem oh-tee hay-na –Do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me here,” anticipating their guilty feelings.

In v. 8, Joseph softens their crime by saying “shalchtem otee hayna” you sent me instead of “you sold me.”

In v. 24, as he sends the brothers back to get Jacob, he reminds them “Al teer-gazu ba-derech” essentially, don't fight with each other on the way home over who did what in your plot to get rid of me.

God too models empathy. In 46:3 God tells Jacob in a dream not to fear going to Egypt where he will be made into a great nation. Etz Chaim underscores the power of empathy in its interpretation of this verse: “The same reassurance was given to Abraham and Isaac. It is never preceded by a statement revealing human disquiet. The idea is that a person's unexpressed inner anxieties and fears are known to God.”

Thus the Torah offers us a model of how to deal with our tendency towards jealousy: we can give in to this and feel alienated or diminish our lives and those of others. Or we can dig deeper and, B'tzelem Elokeem, we can use our own experiences, especially when they have been hurtful and even traumatic, to help us empathize and forgive.

One final note on jealousy. In addition, to showing us the power of empathy, our texts offer us two other means to deal with jealousy. The 10th commandment—uncharacteristic in that it is the only “thought crime”—warns us not to covet what is not ours.

And Pirkei Avot gives us the way to do that, in its elegant simplicity:

Ay zeh hu Ahshir? Hasomeach b'chelko.

Who is rich? Those who are content with what they have.