



Parshat Vayigash D'var Torah – Dec. 23,2023

By Barry Bergman

If you guessed that Vayigash was my bar mitzvah portion, you are correct. I recently realized that I conflated forgiveness and reconciliation when I gave a drash on Vayigash seven years ago in the main sanctuary on the 50th anniversary of my bar mitzvah. The commentary at the bottom of page 275 in the Eitz Chaim chumash is under the heading “The Reconciliation”. Is this correct? Is there a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation? Was the moment Joseph revealed himself to his brothers a reconciliation, forgiveness, both or neither?

I searched the internet for greater insight and found the following quote, which I believe applies here: “Forgiveness is not something we do for other people. It’s something we do for ourselves to move on”. Psychology Today says that “reconciliation is an interpersonal process where you dialogue with the offender about what happened, exchange stories, express the hurt, listen for the remorse, and begin to reestablish trust.”

I have been thinking a lot about this reconciliation since October 7 after watching videos of the young people at the Nova Music Festival screaming as they were taken into captivity by Hamas. You can only imagine how traumatized they were. Now imagine how traumatized Joseph was, being sold into captivity by his own brothers at age 17. The brothers heard those same screams of being sent into captivity. In parsha Miketz, the brothers acknowledge the anguish they caused Joseph when they are confined to the guardhouse. Invoking the theory of what goes around comes around they say to each other “Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us.” Joseph was deeply traumatized by his brothers. How do

you overcome trauma when the perpetrators appear right in front of you? How do you control your emotions?

This is the situation facing Joseph as he decides if he should release Benjamin to his brothers. Are his brothers still despicable people who wouldn't have a second thought about leaving Benjamin in an Egyptian prison if it met their needs? Joseph gets his answer. They like Benjamin. Judah gives Joseph an impassioned speech pleading for the release of Benjamin. After hearing the speech that mentions the word "father" 14 times in 17 sentences Joseph breaks down and says to his brothers "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you." A few verses later the parsha says "Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. He then kissed all his brothers and wept upon them." Is this reconciliation? Both Haamek Davar and Or HaChaim suggest that Joseph wept because he was reminded of the tribulations that he had suffered at their hands.

It is clear from Joseph's words that Jacob is his first concern; not his brothers. We know this because the brothers are still looking for forgiveness after Jacob dies in the next parsha. Joseph doesn't say don't worry I forgive you. He says that God sent him to ensure their survival. It is the validation of his dreams. Joseph has achieved the role as the leader as was foreshadowed in those very same dreams. Has Joseph changed? Do the brothers feel different about Joseph after all this time? Has their relationship changed?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks seems to think so. He says that at this point there is closure to the Joseph story. The estrangement is over. Joseph comforts his brothers and forgives them. Rabbi Sacks says the end of the Joseph story is about Teshuva on the part of the brothers. He points out that teshuva according to Maimonides has three elements:

1. Confession and acknowledgement of wrongdoing
2. A commitment not to repeat the offense

3. The offender is able to refrain from committing the offense when an opportunity presents itself to repeat the same offense

According to Rabbi Sacks, the brothers confess and acknowledge their wrongdoing when they are originally held in the guardhouse for three days by Joseph in parsha Miketz. They blame themselves for not listening to Joseph's pleas. The problem with Sack's logic is that the brothers are unaware that Joseph understood their words and they never directly express remorse to Joseph for their behavior.

According to Sacks the second element of a commitment not to repeat the offense occurs when Judah guarantees Benjamin's safety when he convinces Jacob to allow Benjamin to be brought to Egypt. The problem with this interpretation is that outside of Jacob's love for both sons, there is no similarity between how the brothers have treated Benjamin versus Joseph. As stated in parsha Vayeishev in regards to Joseph, "they hated him and they could not speak to him peaceably". Would they ever have considered harming Benjamin?

For the third element Rabbi Sacks says that Joseph tries to set up conditions that will cause the brothers to have the same jealousy of Benjamin that they had for Joseph. This is supposedly accomplished at the initial meal that Joseph arranges by seating the brothers in order by age from the youngest to the oldest and also giving Benjamin a portion five times larger than his brothers. I disagree with Rabbi Sacks. Maybe Joseph likes Benjamin and is not too fond of the brothers who wanted to kill him. Later on, after Joseph reveals himself, he sends Benjamin back to Canaan with five changes of clothing and 300 pieces of silver, but doesn't do the same for the other brothers.

Reconciliation is about reestablishing trust. This is clearly not established as we can see in the section from chapter 46 verse 33 through chapter 47 verse 3. Joseph instructs his brothers to tell Pharaoh they are cattlemen to show that they have wealth and to play down their roles as shepherds who are despised in Egypt. The brothers tell Pharaoh they are shepherds. Why? Malbim says that the brothers said they were shepherds because shepherds are free to travel with their herds anywhere. In other words, the brothers thought they had a good reason

for ignoring Joseph's instructions. Is it because the brothers still resent Joseph and weren't going to take his advice? Regardless of the reason, it is clear that the brothers still don't trust Joseph. The parsha spells out Joseph's instructions and what the brothers end up saying. Why does the Torah do this? I believe that these verses are specifically in the Torah to highlight the distrust between Joseph and his brothers.

Does Joseph forgive his brothers? Joseph says to his brothers that God sent him ahead in order to save lives. According to the Eitz Chaim commentary Abravanel doesn't let the brothers off the hook. He feels that although God used the sale of Joseph to further the divine plan, the brothers are still accountable. Becoming second in command in Egypt may have been God's plan as foretold in Joseph's dreams, but was sending him to Egypt as a slave also part of that plan? Maybe not.

The brothers clearly know that they were not forgiven by Joseph in Vayigash. We know this because in next week's parsha the brothers are still looking for forgiveness. In parsha Vayechi, the brothers instruct that Joseph should be told through an intermediary that Jacob had asked before his death that Joseph forgive the brothers. So rather than apologize directly to Joseph they make up a story and send someone to relay it to Joseph. Then the brothers go to Joseph to say they would be his slaves. The brothers are clearly afraid of Joseph but they don't offer an apology. According to Rabbi Bachya "We find it nowhere specifically mentioned that Joseph formally forgave them. They remained unforgiven until their dying day."

The Joseph story ends with him revealing himself to his brothers, weeping, kissing and hugging them. Does he forgive them for the trauma they caused him? Most rabbis say he did. As viceroy of Egypt Joseph could afford to forgive his brothers. Why not? He could do it to put the trauma behind him and **move on with his life** as a government official living in luxury with his wife and kids. Does a reconciliation take place where the wrongs are rectified and trust is reestablished with everyone? I don't think so.