

Parshat Vayechi- Torah From The Holy Land

Torah: Embracing the Painful

In the Torah scroll, all parshiot either begin on a new line, or with a nine letter break between the last parasha and the new one, except for parshat Vayechi. This closed spacing prompts Rashi to comment below:

למה פרשה זו סתומה, לפי שכיון שנפטר יעקב אבינו נסתמו עיניהם ולבם של ישראל מצרת השעבוד שהתחילו לשעבדם.

“Why is this section closed? Because, as soon as our father Jacob passed away, the eyes and the heart of Israel were “closed” from of the pain of the servitude that they (the Egyptians) began to subjugate them to.”

This phenomenon of closing ourselves off to painful stimuli, or worse yet, refusing to see the reality in front of us by closing our eyes and hearts, is all too familiar to us as humans. This phenomena is twofold: it exists both on the outside, in the pain of others, and inside, in our own pain. Pain isn't a pleasant feeling, whether we experience it directly or see it on the faces of those around us, so we turn away from those who are hurting, or deny the fact we hurt at all, suppressing our feelings. According to Rashi, the children of Israel shut down after Jacob's passing and in the face of a privileged class seeking to enslave them. Paraphrasing a quote of Rav James Jacobson-Maisels, when we are closed to one emotion, we close ourselves to them all. To be open, we must open ourselves to both the pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Jacob's sons were not able to process their own pain at the loss of their beloved father, and this numbed them from sensing the pain of enslavement that was to engulf them until it was too late.

Today, in the discourse surrounding Israel, Judea, and Samaria, this phenomena seems to be all too prevalent. While the left needs to recognize Israel's historical right to this holy land, the right must also be willing to make compromises in the pursuit of peace. The belief that while peace is desirable, it's not possible right now, has led to a status quo that is untenable. The terror of the early 2000s and the failure of the pullout from Gaza has understandably numbed the hearts of many Israelis, and they have closed their hearts to their closest neighbors, who, like them, have valid claims to the land and in the end will be forced to make compromises as well. In order for any lasting peace to develop, both Israelis and Palestinians must commit to opening their eyes and hearts each other. They must learn to sit in their discomfort, and learn that, as my teacher Yiscah Smith says, “we are not commanded to like other people, or go out to coffee with them, but we are commanded to love each other.” That love is a deeper love, a recognition of each person as made b'tzelem elokim, in the image of God. It's a recognition that we all have something important that only we can bring to the world. And it's a recognition that we all have the right to have our basic needs fulfilled. In this space, the status quo begins to move towards a status in which there is a basic respect for the rights of others. And it's in the small steps that this recognition is demonstrated, through a real demonstrative effort to give the other basic respect that shows that we view them as a person.

Our life practice is to learn how to open ourselves in love to that which makes us uncomfortable or afraid. Not to push it away or bury it down deep, but to welcome it in and soften our resistance to those feelings. Avot de Rabbi Natan comments, “Who is a hero of heroes? One who conquers his evil inclination” but then goes on to say “and there are those who say: One who makes his enemy into his beloved” (23:10).

May we be blessed in the coming week with the breaking open of our heart, so that love may pour forth, and with the courage and vision that we may be able to transform our enemies, both internal and external, into our beloved, that they may spread more love into the world.

T'fillah: Yamin u'smol - Left and Right You Shall Spread Out

At the end of our parasha, Yisrael turns to Joseph's two sons to bless them in Joseph's place. At this point in the Torah, it should be no surprise that he puts his right hand on Ephraim, the younger, and his left on Menasseh, the older, saying the younger will become greater and more famous than his older brother.

The imagery of *yamin u'smol*, right and left, is also found in the 8th stanza of *Lecha Dodi*, which is said on Friday night in *Kabbalat Shabbat*. Below, I'd like to suggest a new interpretation of the stanza.

Yamin u'smol tifrotzi - Right and left you shall break out - When we live in a place of fear and despair, such as the desolate city described in previous stanzas, we close ourselves off to the world, and in turn, close ourselves off to ourselves as well. We deny reality and create a reality that is more pleasant and comfortable. It's when we burst out of our bubble, opening up to finally accept those surrounding us, that we can accept ourselves as well for who we really are.

V'et Adonai ta'aritz - And to the Lord you will be in awe - When we break out of our self-centered reality, we are able to recognize the Divinity present all around us, in everyone and everything. This recognition leads us to a feeling of the awesomeness of our creation.

Al yad ish ben partzi - Through the descendant of Peretz - Read *partzi* not as Peretz, but as "one who breaks out from the 'I'" (from the root *prtz*, break out, as seen above). In Rabbinic teaching, the redeemer will come from the lineage of Peretz. In this reading, the redeemer will come from one who has broken out of the self-centered mindset of "I", who has sown the seeds of love by revealing the Divinity present in the world. This person, which could be any of us, may not see the redemption themselves, but their descendants will merit it.

V'nism'cha v'nagila - We will rejoice and we will be glad - Only after all of this, after we open our hearts to the world around us and the seed has been sown, will we merit the joyfulness that will create a new world, a world of Shabbos, where we can sit back and say the world is *tov me'od*, very good.

On Friday nights, we bless our sons to be like Ephraim and Menasseh, the blessing of the right and the blessing of the left. And we recall Yisrael's blessing to them, that they "may proliferate abundantly like fish within the land" (Bereshit 48:16). May we be blessed through the holiness of Shabbos to break out of our servitude to the ego and embrace the world around us, and let love spread right and left, multiplying like fish within the land.

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