

“The Uses of Sorrow”
Someone I loved once gave me
A box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand
That this too, was a gift.
- Mary Oliver

Like Joseph’s family, I’m a shepherd. The running joke in my life is that I can relate any Torah verse to sheep. That’s also part of my professional work. Ironically, sheep are mentioned in this parsha, and the main symbol on my dress is ram’s horns; there’s a greater overall design on this fabric (as there is in our lives) that means “See how God works in tandem”. God is a mixed media artist – light can’t be appreciated without darkness, strength means nothing without humility, joy is tasteless without sorrow. Duality. Joseph and his box of darkness versus Judah and his light.

Joseph excelled at dwelling in darkness. His gift was dream interpretation; most of us dream at night. He lost his freedom, family, his sense of place, his social identity, and his childhood for simply being himself. If that seems remote for you, consider the children in our country right now suffering a very similar experience. Joseph spent twelve years in prison (a place not known for its scenic views) for a crime committed against him, a Me Too experience from which he fled. Another Torah lesson – BELIEVE THE VICTIM. No one believed Joseph, so he just put his head down and did as he was told. Those painful, shameful experiences temporarily strip us of our We react to trauma by shutting down. We build walls as fast and high and thick as possible so that no one will hurt us again. From Jacob’s errand boy, to managing Potifer’s household, to running the white-collar royal prison, to viceroy of Egypt, Joseph’s ability to compartmentalize made him a natural administrator and a strong survivor. In freedom, this defense mechanism was rewarded and reinforced. Second in Egypt only to Pharaoh. A wife (selected for him) from the family of his accuser. People bowed to him in the streets. All meaningless. We survive in the darkness but we thrive in the light. And poor Joseph, the savior of Egypt, the buddy of Pharaoh, was merely surviving. He named his first son Manasseh which means “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” This was not true. In fact, not only had his loved ones handed him a box of darkness, he chose to go ahead and build his heart a little box fort to live in.

We have inherited Joseph’s survival traits. The Jewish people are masters of memory. Every week we sing about it – *shamor v’zachor* – keep and remember. Remember what happened when you were a slave in Egypt. Remember the covenant God made with us. Remember the mitzvot, our keys to survival. Remember that wherever we go it is eternally

Mitzrayim, the narrow straits, a world of pain. L'dor va dor, each generation has been a shamash to the next. Here's how you kvetch, here's the recipe for matzah ball soup, and oh yeah – always be ready to flee. Trauma is a part of our history and we cope communally. Joseph had to cope alone. In your lonely hours, how do you avoid bitterness? Do you hide who you are out of fear that others will recognize your pain? Do you hide behind your success, or the façade of how very adult you've become? Viceroy, prophet, loving husband, father of two....

Joseph did well for himself preparing all Egypt for the years of famine. But he wasn't prepared for the fulfillment of the dream that had landed him in a physical and emotional pit. The ten brothers who had sinned against him appeared prostrate in his throne room, begging for their lives as he had begged for mercy. It was as he foresaw; he should know what comes next, how to act, how to feel, right? Hurt people hurt people, and Joseph is no exception. That's one use of sorrow, but it's not a good one.

Rabbi Rachel Adler wrote: "Sin, in the context of relationship, is...an injury toward an Other rendered vulnerable by his/her trust. T'shuvah is turning again to face the Other, not to annul what has occurred, but to sew up the wounds and determine how to go on."

Joseph seemed only interested in retribution, felt justified in levying the same pain on his family that they caused him. He lobbed unfounded accusations, imprisoned them, played games, hid silver as a ruse to enslave his full brother, and passive-aggressively tried to recreate The Incident with at least three of his half-brothers as victims. Nowhere does the Torah say that Joseph visited, acknowledged, or revealed himself to Simeon while the family went back to get Benjamin. He left his brother to rot in prison, the same as they had done to him. Is this the action of a *tsaddik*? On the contrary. Joseph chose self-imposed emotional bondage, the continued darkness of "winning".

Trauma places markers in the brain. Part of us stays perpetually the age at which the trauma occurred. Joseph's inner 17 year old wants his family to recognize him and apologize, to undo what they've done and make it all okay. Yet despite his clues and cruelty, they are unwilling...or unable. One of trauma's more painful lessons is forgiveness without *teshuvah*, forgiving the perpetrator that has neither made apology nor asked for forgiveness for our sake, not for theirs. Most of the time we don't get the apology we feel we deserve, and sometimes the apology we get is as painful as what we endured. The wounds we suffer compound, bleeding at unexpected and inconvenient times. We rarely get answers for why we suffer. How do you repair what will always be broken? Joseph cannot be unsold. He cannot reclaim the years he spent in slavery, prison, and familial isolation. His brothers stand before him in a painful show of solidarity and fraternal compassion that he was never afforded. While therapists today might tell a survivor "it's okay to not be okay", Joseph has never had that luxury.

Here comes Judah, Joseph's betrayer, the hand that passed him to slavers, the brother most directly responsible for his sorrow – but Judah is as unrecognizable to Joseph as Joseph is to the brothers! Judah's an interesting guy. After The Incident he moves away from his family, has a whole life, raises a bunch of sheep, survives his wife and two of his three sons. He impregnates Tamar, calls a *beit din* and they condemn her - pregnant with twins - to burn to death. She shows no fear; she looks him dead in the eye and calls him to task. That is the inciting moment of *teshuvah* for Judah.

When confronted with his role in causing darkness, he chooses to transform his power to harm into power to heal. In moments of suffering, ask yourself two questions: what is my role in the darkness, and what is my capacity to bring light? A man of power, like Joseph, uses confrontation as a tool to keep others at bay. A powerful man, like Judah, confronts himself and allows what he finds to change him for the better. That's why we aren't Josephites, we're Jews.

Judah the Lion deals with the world if not through anger, certainly through loud and righteous indignation. Face to face with his brother, his sin, he faces a choice. He can deal with this the way he always has, "*Ganug shoyn*, I am responsible and I will not allow my family to suffer! Stop this *mishegas!*", or he can try something different. Judah chooses *Vayigash*, he chooses to draw near. He says, "Let not your anger flare up." This speech is as much for him as it is directed at Joseph. "If it's not too much trouble, could I have a word?" In this moment Judah embodies the words of Bachya ibn Pakuda: "Humility is the root and beginning of repentance."

Judaism defines sin as missing the mark. Joseph missed when he rejected his brothers, then set them up to fail. He was trying to share his box of darkness. For atonement to take place, someone has to choose to show others the way forward. Think of the headlights on your car, the way we hold flashlights in front of us, or the way we flip a switch before entering a room – light always enters darkness. Judah became the light. Judah, who had done *teshuvah*, who was willing to be vulnerable to make his family whole. Judah's actions answer Cain's question: "am I my brother's keeper?" in the affirmative. And God rewards Judah with a greater wholeness than he thought possible. When Judah approaches Joseph from a place of truth, willing to extend trust, Joseph responds in kind. Weeping, he steps into the light. "*Ani Joseph.*" It's me; I'm your brother. Of course they couldn't know him before! All those walls built from pain, all that effort to stay in darkness, how could anyone see the wounded Joseph inside? How could Joseph see the gift in the bottom of the box?

As Joseph transitions from victim to survivor, he's able to recognize that his experiences are a gift. (Gen. Ch. 45 v. 5), "...be not distressed, nor reproach yourselves for having sold me here, for it was to be a provider that God sent me ahead of you." He repeats in v. 7: "God has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a momentous

deliverance." V. 8: "It was not you who sent me here, but God." I posit that he repeated this assurance three times as he spoke to the three brothers he had previously punished. This is the moment of *teshuvah*. The brothers have asked, and Joseph is able to forgive. This is the first fraternal reconciliation in the Torah, the first time a family is able to permanently repair their relationship and live together in peace. Still, no one in Jacob's family follows the adage "forgive and forget". When Jacob dies the brothers openly fear that Joseph will enact retribution. He reminds them that God turned their evil intentions to blessing.

Death is the one trauma that none of us escape. Grief is in everyone's box, in equal measure to the love we share throughout our lives. We acknowledge it weekly, annually, communally; as one of our own lights is extinguished we are surrounded by no less than ten. Kaddish is a fixed point of light refracted by our tears. And like Joseph and his brothers, in our moment of greatest vulnerability we audibly bless the Creator of the Universe. Using sorrow for blessing flips the light on in our hearts.

At the top of this *d'var torah* is a poem by Mary Oliver. She said it came to her in a dream, and she wrote it down as soon as she woke. People Joseph loved once gave him a box of darkness. It took him twenty two years to realize that this too, was a gift.

When your heart is open and the light is on, you can see clearly: 2020 vision, if you will. In this new year, may we have the faith to find the gifts in boxes of darkness, the uses of our sorrow. May we be blessed with lights to guide us, and may we lend strength to others by lighting their way. May this be our blessing. Amen.