

PARSHAT VAYIGASH
JANUARY 7, 2017
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The custom to complete the weekly public readings of the Torah every year on the holiday of Simchat Torah finds its roots in Babylonia of the Talmudic Era. The Torah was divided into 54 sections or Parshiyot to allow for the completion of the yearly cycle with the reading of one Parshah every week. This week's Torah portion, Vayigash, follows the story immediately told in last week's Miketz. But, the Rabbis seem to be enamored with the old-time serial movies or the modern-day soap operas by leaving us last week with a cliff-hanger of a story and asking us to wait a week to complete it.

Last week, towards the end of our Torah reading, the divining cup of the Viceroy of Egypt, Joseph, is found in the food sack of Benjamin. We know that it was a set-up by Joseph as he had instructed his servants to bring Benjamin back to Egypt and send the other brothers on their way to Canaan. The brothers refuse to leave the side of their young brother and are all brought back to stand before Joseph.

At that point, the Torah reading last week ends and we are left on the edge of our seats to find out what happened. If this was a mystery novel many of us would not put it down until we knew what had occurred or we would look at the end of the book to find out what happened.

Rabbi Zev Leff asks: "Why did the previous Parshah have to end with such a cliff-hanger? Why didn't the Torah simply extend Parshat Miketz a few more verses and include the resolution of this story? Why do we have to wait a whole week to find out what happens?"

Rabbi Yosef Mizrahi, a Sephardic Rabbi who is involved in Orthodox Jewish Outreach efforts, suggests that: "More than any other Biblical account, this story illustrates how 'everything turns out good in the end.' In order to drive home the lesson, the Torah makes us wait one week to find out the ending!"

I respectfully disagree with the response and would suggest that perhaps the Torah is trying to teach us the exact opposite, that life is never certain, that we don't know what will happen the next moment, the next day, the next week. We wish we could understand the big picture and know that it will turn out well in the end, however, when we are in the midst of life's challenges we never know the ending. We live much of our life in uncertainty, in ambiguity, in mystery, unable to foretell the future.

In March of 2016, *Time Magazine* published an article by Alexandra Sifferlin entitled *Knowing Something Bad is Coming Is More Bearable Than Uncertainty*. She writes: "People

like to know what is coming for them, even if it's bad." Following up on a study published in the journal *Nature Communications*, she suggests that people are more stressed out when there is the possibility they will experience discomfort as opposed to when they know for sure something bad is coming. In the study people were shown a bunch of rocks and were asked to guess whether a snake was underneath them. When a snake was under a rock, the men and women received an electric shock on the back of their hand. The researchers measured how stressed the individuals felt and looked at physical markers of stress like pupil dilation and sweat. They found that most of the men and women felt more stressed when they were uncertain, compared to when they knew definitely the shock was coming. In other words, she suggests, "If you're confident that something has gone well, or you're certain it's gone badly, you might not be as stressed as when you're completely uncertain about the outcome."

As we begin the year 2017, we live in uncertain times. In a little over a week, the United States will inaugurate a new President. I don't think anybody would have predicted that Donald J. Trump would be that President a few years ago. Even at the start of the election season, most people doubted it. Many people have concerns about the future and are uncertain about the days ahead. Last Monday, the *Forward* newspaper published an article by Jay Michaelson entitled *50 Things to Fear From the Trump Administration*. Some people fear the worst, others look toward better times, most of us are simply concerned, not sure what the future will bring for our world. In addition, we live in an age of terrorism where security issues all over the world concern us. Life itself is uncertain, and no one is given a free pass.

Today we have concerns with regard to the plight of the State of Israel as we begin the secular new year. What will the recent UN resolution mean in the world arena? Will it allow the BDS Movement to grow and gain traction or will there be reactions against the resolution and its accompanying speech by Secretary of State, John Kerry, as there has already been in some countries around the world?

What we have very often learned from history is that when there is uncertainty in society the Jewish people is singled out for difficult times. We have already seen that all over Europe, and even in some places in the United States. There has been a rise in anti-Semitism, sometimes in the guise of anti-Zionism, and sometimes just as pure anti-Semitism. Uncertainty frightens us, ambiguity concerns us, and a murky future bothers us.

Rabbi Berel Wein, a noted scholar and lecturer in Israel, has written that "even a cursory knowledge of general and Jewish history will illustrate that there is no real certainty in any facet of life – health, wealth, success, power, national stability. etc. – and that uncertainty is the norm in human existence – privately, nationally, and internationally."

He writes that uncertainty is such an uncomfortable state of being that humans prefer to deny its persistent existence. However, he continues, "Judaism always preached this doctrine of uncertainty." Since all human life is based upon the principle of uncertainty and there is no

people in the world that has existed as long and as dangerously in the milieu of uncertainty as has the people of Israel, one should never be pessimistic or depressed, but instead have faith in the fact that the certainty of Jewish survival will conquer the uncertainties of the circumstances of general human existence.

For Wein the anchor of that certainty in one's life is the Torah and Jewish traditions and the history and memories of the Jewish people. With that certainty one can survive even in uncertain times.

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once heard a D'var Torah delivered by his teacher, Rabbi Dr. Nachum Rabinovitch, based on Midrash Tanhuma on the story of Noah. After their long stay in the ark, Noah was instructed by G-d "come out of the ark." On this the Midrash says: "Noah said to himself, since I only entered the ark with permission from G-d, shall I leave it without permission?" The Holy One blessed be He said to him: "Are you looking for permission? In that case I give you permission, as it says, 'then G-d said to Noah, come out of the ark.'"

Noah was uncertain what would be his next step. He had entered the ark and sat there for a very long time knowing that nothing was going to be the same. What would be next for him? It was easier to stay in the ark than to venture outside and meet all the challenges that might be present.

The Midrash then adds: "Said Rabbi Judah bar Ilai. If I had been there I would have smashed down the doors of the ark and taken myself out of it." Sacks states that the moral that Rabbi Rabinovitch drew from this was that when it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission. G-d gives us permission. He expects us to go on ahead.

For Sacks, this was a life changing moment. It meant that a significant part of faith is the courage to go forward, to venture out into the unknown. Our people's success shows that, as Sacks states: "Faith is the courage to take a risk for the sake of G-d or the Jewish people; to begin a journey to a distant destination knowing that there will be hazards along the way."

Uncertainty can stagnant us. We become frightened to move forward. Ambiguity challenges us as we prefer, like the study showed, to know the end result, even if it is not in our best interests.

In 1989 Gilda Radner, the comedienne who became famous on Saturday Night Live, published a book as she was fighting cancer. It was a battle she did not win, even though she, along with her husband, the late Gene Wilder, gave it their all. Towards the end of her book *It's Always Something*, she writes: "I wanted a perfect ending, so I sat down to write the book with the ending in place before there even was an ending. Now I have learned the hard way, that

some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Like my life, this book has ambiguity. Like my life, this book is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what is going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.”

That is ultimately how we live our lives. The question is whether we can we embrace it, make the best of it, and proceed to conquer the uncertainty ahead of us with faith, courage, and hope.

February 22, 1999 was one of the saddest days in my pulpit career here at Beth El. I was asked to deliver the eulogy at the funeral of Gene Siskel. Gene was a very public film critic, but he was also a very private family man and a proud Jew. This was his Congregation and I was his Rabbi. I mentioned that when Gene would finish an interview he would very often ask this question: “What do you know for sure?” He would force his guests to expose the inner workings of their mind and in an unscripted and passionate response tell him and his listeners what made them tick.

Today, I am afraid, there is not much that I know for sure. We live in an age of uncertainty and it is challenging and even frightening. We live in a time of ambiguity and we are concerned for ourselves, our families, our country, our people, our state, and all humanity. What I can say is that we must proceed forward with faith and hope to conquer the uncertainty and to create a better world. As Jews we are always optimistic, we cannot afford not to be. As we begin the year of 2017, let us not plan for a cliff-hanger, but for a happy ending. Let us work towards making this year be one filled with happiness, prosperity, security, and well-being for us and all people on the face of this earth.