

PARSHAT VAYIGASH  
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I never learned much Yiddish but one particular phrase I did learn. We are told *man tracht and God lacht* – man makes plans and God laughs. In other words, the best laid plans do not always come about. We may feel we are in control of our destiny and that we can plan for the future. Yet, we learn sometimes, only too abruptly, that things are not really in our control. Think of our Torah reading this morning. Only a short while ago in the Biblical story Joseph had been sold into slavery by his brothers. They were in control of the situation. Joseph may have found favor in Potiphar's eyes but soon he was thrown into prison and there languished for a long period of time. In this morning's Torah reading, there is a total reversal of fortune. Joseph is now the Vizier of Egypt, in control of food distribution for the Egyptian nation and has his brothers in a compromising situation.

This is what happened to Joseph throughout the course of his lifetime. As a young man he was impetuous and could even be called verbally abusive to the members of his family. He showed little remorse for creating situations which were very difficult for his brothers and his beloved father. He is not portrayed as a very sympathetic individual when he was a young man growing up in Jacob's home. We do feel for him when he is sold by his brothers and sent off to Egypt, eventually languishing in prison, however, sometimes we feel that he is getting his just desserts.

However, in this morning's reading Joseph truly comes of age. He has recognized that his brothers have changed, he wants to reach out to his father and make amends. He finally understands the pattern to his life. When Joseph tells his brothers that he is indeed their long, lost sibling he immediately follows those words up with words of consolation and comfort hoping that his brothers will understand that he does not intend to take vengeance upon them. He informs them: "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." Joseph now begins to recognize that there is a pattern to his life. All that has gone before him was a prelude to this moment. He was the one chosen to save his family and though he had gone through distress after distress inflicted upon him by others, when he was able to take matters into his own hands he realized that he could make a difference. He understood that this opportunity was granted him by God's role in the entire process.

Again two verses later Joseph reiterates that "God has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance." He then reassures them "So, it was not you who sent me here, but God." Three times he tells them that he finally understands the true significance of his life. He no longer wants to abuse his brothers, nor foretell dreams which will make them jealous, he has grown up and matured as a person and wants to make a difference in the life of his family.

How quickly fortunes change. The brothers were sure that Joseph would enact vengeance upon them. He was not interested in that but instead recognized his proper place in the drama of the unfolding story of the Israelite people.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written a new book entitled *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*.” He calls it in part a memoir and also his understanding how organized religion, in all of its branches and formulations, has changed over the course of his lifetime. Each of the chapters is devoted to his new understanding of religion, the wonderful presence of God in his life, theodicy – the problem of evil in the world – and the purpose of religion. His last chapter in the book is entitled *Give God the Benefit of the Doubt*.

Towards the end of the chapter he concentrates on one verse in the Book of Genesis, chapter 15, verse 6. God promises Abraham an unconditional covenant: his descendants will be as many as the stars in the sky, and the Land of Canaan is promised for him and his descendants. What did Abraham have to do to merit these promises? The text itself is rather difficult. Our Etz Hayim Humash translates the words in this way: “And because he put His trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.”

Kushner points out that the Hebrew word *vehe'emin* can also be understood as “trust” and “faithfulness.” There are different translations to this particular phrase. The King James Version reads it as “He believed in the Lord and He counted it to him for righteousness.” The Revised Standard Version offers: “He believed the Lord and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” The old JPS version, published in 1917 and updated in 1946, has “He believed in the Eternal and He counted it to him for righteousness.” The Jerusalem Bible, produced by Roman Catholic scholars, suggests: “Abraham put his faith in Yahweh, who counted this as making him justified.”

Kushner suggests: “What Abraham affirmed, and what God commended him for, was not his faith that God existed but his faith that God’s promises could be relied on.” He understands this as an important difference seen in the language: “To believe in God is a statement about God, that He exists and is not the product of wishful thinking. It is theology more than behavior, and theology is something that exists inside an individual’s heart and mind. To believe God is a statement about Abraham, that Abraham was prepared not just to affirm God’s reality but to trust God, to rely on God to do what He had promised to do. For that reason, he was prepared to act in obedience to God’s demands.”

Kushner suggests that what this means is that we must give God the benefit of the doubt. It involves having a vision of the world not only as it is but as it can be, and believing that one day it will be. In other words, believing that God follows through on promises allows us to create a world in which we become God’s partners as our vision of the world dovetails to that of God’s.

Kushner completes his work with these words: “This world is not the world God intended it to be. Some human beings have made it worse and continue to do so, while others have made and are making it better... The heirs of Abraham, whether they identify themselves as Jews, Christians or Muslims, honor Abraham’s memory by sharing his faith that the world we live in is not yet what God meant it to be, and by working to bring about the day when what should be, will be.”

It is not always easy to recognize what is our particular path and how we can make a difference. If we look back at the Joseph story we see that it took Joseph a great deal of time to validate his life, to recognize God's presence in it, and to understand that he had a specific role to play. Without his role the children of Jacob would have had to endure the great famine of Canaan and perhaps would have perished. His saving role in their lives created an opportunity for the people to live once more. Yet, at the very same time, Biblical history shows that things change rather quickly. As we begin the Book of Exodus we are told "There arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph." With that, the bondage of slavery of Egypt begins and the saga of the Jewish people changes from the tribal nature to a concept of peoplehood, a people who eventually will have to be liberated by God from the bondage of Egypt.

Sometimes we don't understand our God-given roles. Joseph's maturation allowed him to recognize that the world was not only about him, about his dreams, about his rise to grandeur, about his power in Egypt. Joseph learned that it was his task to save his family and to make a difference in the larger world. Once he learned that, Joseph could become a leader of his people. Kushner suggests that it is our task to be partners with God and to create a better world.

It seems to me that putting these two aspects together compels us to believe God's reliability and that we have a role to play in this world. As we recognize this, let us understand that the role entails to create a better place for ourselves and for those who follow us.