

Miketz, Genesis 41:1-44:17

Raise your hand if you dread winter - the cold, the dark, the snow, the heavy coats, the inconvenience, the dry skin, the bare trees. Maybe it's because I'm from Wisconsin and had to spend more time in these conditions than those of you from Baltimore do, but I love it, at least until February when I'm ready to move on. But I know I'm in the minority.

We know that our moods can be affected by shorter days and decreases in natural light. Many people suffer from SAD - Seasonal Affective Disorder; depression and anxiety resulting from changes in the season that is often treated with light therapy. Many ancient traditions, recognizing the anxiety associated with decreased sunlight, compensated by establishing holidays of light and hope at the very time when the winter solstice was approaching. Hence, the observance of Christmas, Chanukah and in modern times Kwanzaa, fills homes with the beautiful lights and the warmth of family celebrations.

This week's Torah portion finds us in the midst of a story that, on the face of it, does not seem to be a story that resonates with the spirit of Chanukah. It is the profoundly human tale of a family, the family of Jacob and his sons, who through their own failures and weaknesses suffered the consequences of division and alienation. This week we read how Joseph, who is now in a position of great power in Egypt, hides his identity from the brothers who betrayed him. As he negotiates with his unwitting siblings who are in search of food during a famine, he tests their loyalty to each other and their father, to see if they have changed and are worthy of his forgiveness.

Every time we come to this story, so full of pathos, I wonder at Joseph and his inner strength. At one point in the story, when his brothers return with their youngest brother, Benjamin: "[Joseph] looked up and saw his [full] brother Benjamin, his mother's son and he said, 'Is this your youngest brother you told me about?' And he added, 'God be gracious to you, my son!' Joseph hurried out for he was so deeply stirred with tender warmth toward his brother that he wanted to weep; he went into an [inner] chamber and there he wept" (Gen. 43:29-30).

How is it that after this incident Joseph continued his deception and framed his brothers by placing a silver goblet in Benjamin's travel bag? What was his motivation? We know that his brothers betrayed him and the years of slavery, imprisonment, and separation from his beloved father might well have been a source of deep animus. Yet time and again the Torah describes Joseph pulling away from his brothers as he weeps from a place of love and tenderness.

We can marvel at Joseph's resilient spirit, but we can also learn from it. Is it possible for us, like Joseph, to rise from places of pain, suffering and bitterness and find healing, forgiveness and wholeness? As a child, Joseph paid dearly for his arrogance, feeding on his father's preferential treatment and shoving it into the faces of his siblings. Yet throughout his resulting servitude in Egypt, Joseph developed a capacity to appreciate his gifts and use them to further his own well being, all the while developing inner humility and awareness of God's presence in his life.

In her book "The Gifts of Imperfection," Dr. Brené Brown describes the most common factors of resilient people. Among those are two that jump out at me as I consider Joseph in this story: Resilient people "are resourceful and have good problem-solving skills" and "hold the belief that they can do something that will help them to manage their feelings and cope." In other words, people that can bounce back from difficult situations look for ways to solve their problems. They don't give up. They believe that they have resources to resolve their situation, to manage their feelings and find wholeness.

Faith, hope, and an inner sense that you have the power to affect change in your life are keys to making it through the darkness and into the light. Joseph did not ultimately attribute his gifts and his power of prophesy to himself but to God, to some unknowable but somehow accessible source of energy or spirit. He believed that he could harness that spirit to find healing for himself, his brothers, and his father and to bring them together, finally, in peace and harmony.

In the Haftarah for Shabbat Chanukah, the prophet Zechariah exclaims "Not by might, not by power, but by My spirit - says the God of heaven's hosts." Joseph overcame life's travails because he had believed in that spirit and its power to guide him to right actions, good outcomes, and more importantly, to wholeness and peace. This is indeed a story of hope and light for us all. Happy Chanukah and Shabbat Shalom.

Shabbat Shalom,
Cantor Sacks

For more Torah learning, please join us for Torah Talk, Saturdays, 9 AM at BHC.