

This week's parashah, Vayechi, the end of the book of Genesis, is in many ways the bridge between the story of a family of Abraham and Sarah, their personal challenges and their immediate descendants, and the story of a people that will pick up with the beginning of Sefer Shmot, the book of Exodus, next week. This week, b'nei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, are literally that, Yaakov's 12 sons. But in Exodus, that same phrase will mean a whole people, the descendants of Israel.

That switch comes with the powerful moment at the death of Yaakov, which I described in my parashah video earlier this week. Unlike his father, who only apparently had one blessing to give, and who was so dismayed when he realized he had given it to "the wrong son," Yaakov blesses all of his children at his deathbed.

So B'nei Yisrael are destined to be one community, but that does not mean that everything is easy in this family.

On the contrary, immediately after Yaakov's death and burial, the brothers panic. As Genesis 50, verses 15-21 relate, "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!"

So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction: So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father's [house]." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him. His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, "We are prepared to be your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your dependents." Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

In Bereshit Rabbah 100:8, there are two opinions given about why the brothers got nervous. One rabbi says that after Yaakov's death, Yosef stops inviting them to eat with him. That rabbi explains that Yosef didn't mean to be distant, but was puzzled about how they should be seated: Yaakov had always set him at the head of the table, but now that he was dead, Yosef felt uncomfortable seating himself above the actual firstborn. At the same time, presumably, it would have been awkward to seat himself below, since he was now a prince of Egypt, with all of them dependent on him. So he avoided the question by letting the dinner invitations slide. Another Rabbi suggests that when they went to Canaan to bury Yaakov, Yosef detoured to look at the pit – the one into which they had thrown him – and contemplated it for a while, and that is what made the brothers nervous.

Whichever explanation you find convincing, they have a certain awkward silence in common. Yosef and his brothers are feeling things that they are not communicating to each other, and so there remains a distance that is not bridged, and within that distance, the brothers' fear grows.

In fact, the brother's may be so uncomfortable with Yosef's silence that they crave an angry confrontation. When they say to each other, "What if Yosef is still angry?" the Hebrew text doesn't use the words that would usually mean "what if?" such as *פן*, "lest" or *אוּלַי*, "maybe." Instead it uses *לוּ*, which usually is wistful, "If only. . .!"

One commentator Chaim Ibn Attar notices this and comments, "It seems that the Torah has the brothers express a subconscious desire for Joseph to pay them back for all they had done to him. If Joseph were to do that now and the brothers would experience a similar agony to that which they had subjected him to, they would no longer have to worry about paying for their sin against him at the end of the exile."

It makes a great deal of sense that the brothers would crave confrontation, even nasty confrontation. After all, when Yosef behaves as the bratty favorite back in the beginning of Parashat Vayeshev, Torah tells us that they were so angry that they couldn't speak to him. What if Yosef is similarly seething at them?

And yet, they do not get that confrontation they desire. Because Yosef, whom they traumatized and brutalized, has already processed his trauma as best he can. He has attributed it to God, and found meaning that has allowed him to move forward, and has done it without them. He does not want to rehash this with his brothers, after all these years. He cries when they bring it up, but he is also firm in saying, "I'm not going here. Don't worry, I won't hurt you, I'll even take care of you. But I have my own story about how to make sense of this, and it does not involve a messy confrontation with you."

In her recent book, *Repentance and Repair*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg describes how one of the hardest aspects of true *teshuvah* can be respecting the boundaries of the person we've wronged when they don't want to talk about. Sometimes we want to bare our souls, get the closure of a big confrontation where we apologize profusely and feel forgiven. But that desire is selfish, not true *teshuvah*, if the person we've wronged is not interested in that conversation, or if it would hurt them. If we've violated a boundary, true *teshuvah* cannot involve violating another boundary.

And the brothers, to their credit, accept this. They don't push back on Yosef. They learn to live with the silence between them. They have communicated that the door is open if Yosef wants to talk about what they put him through, but they do not demand that he go there.

As Rabba Claudia Marbach writes, “Sometimes we need full forgiveness but get only reconciliation. Sometimes we need to be satisfied with abatement of anger. What I will take from Vayechi, this year, is that there are times to put aside the old angers and hurts, and to trust in God and do the right thing, even if others have not done so.”

Shortly after this, the book of Bereshit ends, and I think it is the brothers’ navigation of this moment: their inclination to seek conflict and closure, and their graceful willingness to accept that it is not going to happen, not fully, not the way they wanted; that creates the possibility of moving forward as an expanding people. Because to be a people, and not just one family that constantly expels and estranges members, we need to be able to invite the conflict, and we need to accept when to live with the silences.

Shabbat shalom.