

I love the 'cliffhangers' in our Torah portions, and we have a good one this week!

In *Parshat Mikketz*, there is a great deal of movement. Brought out of prison, Joseph interprets Pharaoh's two dreams and predicts seven years of plenty and seven years of famine. Pharaoh appoints Joseph to manage food collection and distribution. Joseph marries Asenath and they have two sons, Manasseh, and Ephraim. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt seeking food and encounter Joseph. While Joseph recognizes them, they only see an Egyptian official from whom they want to purchase food. Joseph accuses them of spying and Reuben speaks up to his brothers, "Did I not tell you, 'Do no wrong to the boy'? But you paid no heed. Now comes the reckoning for his blood." Hearing this, Joseph turns away and weeps. He chooses Simeon, and holds him hostage while the rest of the brothers return to Canaan. In time, as their provisions are depleted, they return to Egypt and bring back their youngest brother Benjamin to Joseph. Still unrecognized, Joseph continues testing his brothers. This time he falsely accuses Benjamin of stealing and declares that Benjamin is to stay with him as his slave. Judah pleads with Joseph, asking Joseph to see them all equally guilty, but Joseph replies, "Only he in whose possession the goblet was found shall be my slave; the rest of you go back in peace to your father."^[1]

And with this verse, Parashah Mikketz ends: Joseph dismisses them . . . "the rest of you go back *in peace* to your father." But what can this possibly mean? How are they to go *l'shalom*, in peace?!!

The use of the word *shalom* is often used regarding welfare, but I cannot help but ask, what is Joseph's intention here? Is this a straightforward dismissal, or is this to test his brothers further? Is there a deeper inquiry that Joseph is laying out for his brothers?

Joseph knows that his brothers succumbed years earlier to their hatred and jealousy, cast Joseph into the pit, and sold him. But what of them since then? What of their character now? Under stress, who are they now? Can they walk away from their enslaved brother Benjamin, and return to their father 'in peace'? Is Joseph torturing them or testing them with his words?

In *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, Rabbi Mendel of Satanov speaks on the *middah menuchat ha-nefesh/equanimity*, saying it is this trait 'which protects us from many evils and stands by us at our time of need.' Equanimity is fairly easy when our mind is settled, but he writes, when 'agitated, a fearful darkness falls upon him and his counsel and strength are taken from him. . .or a perverse animal spirit grabs hold of him, dragging him over thorns and briars, sometimes casting them both into a deep dark pit.'

Perhaps Joseph is shaking up any equanimity his brothers may have, casting *them* into a deep dark pit!

Or perhaps Joseph is not seeking retribution at all.

Rav Dessler suggests that Joseph's motive in doing this was to foreshadow the impending exile in Egypt:

'Here was a high Egyptian official ill-treating the representatives of the future tribes of Israel. But this was only outwardly. In truth, behind the Egyptian disguise was Yosef Ha-taddik, who loved them with all his heart and was moved to tears by their distress. (This symbolizes the nature of every exile; behind the outward form of the oppressor stands the loving presence of Hashem.)' [2]

Rav Dessler explains that Joseph is not trying to hurt his brothers. He sees his brother Reuben's exclamation of intense regret, but not so of the remaining brothers. Joseph's words come from love and compassion, sending the message, "Could you, your deepest self, really be at peace with this, allowing your father's favorite son Benjamin, be enslaved?"

Joseph is opening a path for his brothers to no longer be in exile *from themselves*. In calling for them to return *l'shalom*, in peace, he is calling for them to return to God, and to the Divine spark within themselves, as we recognize *shalom* as one of the names of God.

In our *mussar* study and practice, we strive to become more and more aware of our strengths and weaknesses, as these become areas for potential growth. I discovered in conversation with one of our wonderful TMI facilitators Nancy Weiss, the *middah* of holy boldness, *atzut d'kedushah*. Joseph's intriguing dismissal of his brothers (see what happens next week!) is a courageous, bold statement to make. He sees the potential good in his brothers, and the leaders that they are to become, and is asking them to strengthen their character and fulfill their potential. The brothers have been thinking only of themselves, and the destruction in their wake has affected their family, and especially their father Jacob.

Rav Dessler, in *Strive for Truth* teaches:

It should be noted that all the promptings of the evil inclination are couched in terms of "particularity." "This will be good for you; never mind about anyone else." Even when the evil prompting comes in the guise of the public good, careful introspection will reveal its selfish origin. If we can learn to lose ourselves in the good of the community we are well on the way to that blissful state of inner compulsion. We are compelled to act according to the true welfare of the community; our individual selfish will is no more.[3]

Rav Dessler takes this teaching, to distinguish our thinking from the "I" or "me" to the "we." [4] He continues, speaking on the nature of a *yeshiva*:

There is something very important we can learn from this in our own small sphere. When we are in a *yeshiva* we tend to think of ourselves as a number of individuals who happen to have been brought together in one place like potatoes in a sack. Each one of us still thinks of himself as in a world of his own, free to act as he wishes.

This attitude blocks the way to success and to all spiritual progress. ...One must lose himself completely in the good of the community and he is at all times responsible for that good. ...Each of us should love our *yeshiva* with all our hearts and should try with all our might to contribute to its progress and success: through our behavior, through our learning in *halacha* and *mussar*, through the deep devotion of our prayers.[5]

I invite us to consider this teaching and, expand out from *yeshiva* to larger and larger communities to which we belong, even to our country, and to our world. Joseph knew that his brothers had to become leaders, but only if they could lose themselves completely in the good of their family and be at all times responsible for their family.

In this verse which concludes *Parshat Mikketz*, we can see the interrelated *middot* of compassion, equanimity, and holy boldness.

In the challenges we face, do we see the issues before us and respond with compassion? Do we consider our equanimity as we are confronted with challenges that swirl around us? As we consider equanimity, we may notice the need to simply recognize that we are 'off kilter', or perhaps increase in patience with others as well as ourselves. Do we face the challenges and

opportunities in our lives and our encounters with others with holy boldness, or do we shy away? When is it time to step forward and try with all our hearts and might to contribute to the progress and success of all of us together, our communities, our country, and our world? What is the gift that you have that this world is yearning for?