

Parshat Vayigash

Redeeming a Holy Spark: Coming out of the darkness

by Rabbi Rachel Gurevitz on Friday December 25, 2009

8 Tevet 5770

Genesis 44:18 – 47:27

We reach the climax of the Joseph story in this *parsha*. Joseph has schemed for his goblet to be found in Benjamin's sack, and the brothers have been brought back to Joseph's house to answer for the crime. When Joseph makes known his intention to hold back only the guilty one as his slave (i.e. Benjamin), Judah intercedes with a long, emotional plea to Joseph. He explains the whole story of Jacob's unwillingness to let Benjamin go and Judah cannot bear to see the pain on Jacob's face if he comes back without Benjamin – it will surely kill him. Perhaps Judah remembers Jacob's pain when they declared Joseph killed by wild beasts, and he knows that he cannot cause such enormous pain again. So Judah pleads to be taken in Benjamin's place.

It is interesting that many of the interpretations in *Midrash Rabbah* (an early collection of rabbinic expositions on the Torah) suggest that this was not a gentle exchange; they add details to the exchange that suggest that both Judah and Joseph express anger, aggression, pain and only eventually do they emerge from those emotions to reach a resolution. Such is the force and emotion of Judah's words that Joseph breaks down and reveals himself to his brothers.

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, the Rebbe of Ger, in his commentary on the Torah, *Sefat Emet*, provides a wonderful reading of this exchange. Judah begins his plea to Joseph with the words, *Bi Adoni*, usually translated as 'Please, my Lord'. But the Gerer Rebbe re-reads the letter *bet* of *Bi* to offer another valid meaning: "within me." And so he reveals an alternative message; 'My Lord [Adonai] is in me'. Judah, facing his inner shadows, chooses this time to act differently; to speak from a place of courage – he will not return without Benjamin. In doing so, Judah redeems a Divine Spark and, with it, redeems the story. The Gerer Rebbe is teaching here that, when we have the courage to enter the dark places within – the places of shame, the places of secrecy – and, from those places, find our truest, holiest essence, we can redeem the story; the story of our lives, and the story of our relationships.

The Gerer Rebbe goes on to teach, 'By means of faith that God oversees all, a person can set himself right even in times of hiding. Then you should have faith that you have within yourself the soul of the living God, as every Jew says: *Elohai n'shama shenatata bi t'hora hi* – 'the soul You placed within me is pure.'

For Queer Jews, the more obvious ‘coming out’ story in this *parsha* is Joseph’s – when he reveals himself to his brothers. But this Chassidic teaching offers a deeper understanding of coming out, placed in the story of Judah. The courage to come out, to speak our truth, to live in alignment with our inner essence, is strengthened by the knowledge that this is our God-given inner spark of divinity. This is how we were made in God’s likeness. And, in this coming out, revealing a Divine Spark, there is the potential to transform relations with others, notwithstanding hurt, pain and anger that sometimes find expression before the healing and the growth (as the *midrash* on this *parsha* illustrates). When Judah stood before Joseph, revealing the fullness of his self – his darkness and his light – Joseph ‘was no longer able to hold back’; he now too ‘reveals himself to his brothers.’ This is their story... and ours.



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