

Parshat Vayigash is one of my favorite parshayot for a number of reasons. My first real laying experience was at Temple Beth Am where I learned the very basic elements of trope and used this new knowledge to chant 6 or 7 lines from the second aliya which is part of what I layned today. The story of Joseph, Egypt, his brothers, his parents, his power, his amazing sense of leadership and more, impressed me then and most years since I have been repeating the laying of three or four aliyot from this parsha. Some year, when Joel is on vacation and the rules are eased a bit I'd like to layn the entire parsha. This year I have been examining a particular aspect of the story and relating it to some study that has been going on at the JCC with executives and staff from a number of Jewish agencies.

George Gellman, one of our more astute and generous benefactors, teamed up with Ron Benderson and arranged to finance a series of lectures, study sessions and learning experience centered around Mussar, a re-emerging system of self-examination, self-improvement and self-awareness. With roots in ancient texts and Torah, Mussar offers itself in a modern version of work that started in the mid -19th century in Lithuania. With a system of Middot, or measures, many aspects of personality, goodness, character traits and similar human facets are studied and systems of regulation and change are taught in a variety of fashions. One of the middot that are studied is "gratitude". George and Ron are two of the most grateful people I know. Herein lays the connection to the story of Joseph, his brothers and other challenges placed before Joseph.

Had Joseph lived in our times he might have used the expression "gam zu l'tovah" or "this too is for the good". This Talmudic teaching is given to us with examples of things that appear as curses but ultimately become blessings in disguise. We are commanded to also offer thanks to G-d for things that appear as a curse, but with faith and trust, turn out to be blessings. We don't wait for the revelation; rather acknowledge with thanks the things which we don't understand. Joseph tells his brothers not to fear or grieve for their reprehensible behavior, it resulted in Joseph being able to prosper and offer salvation to his family as he shields them years of famine. Bordering on being a Pollyanna, Joseph finds the good in his imprisonment after being thrown into a hole in the ground by his resentful

brothers, sold four times into servitude, falsely being accused of attempted rape and other potentially life-threatening episodes. Joseph expresses gratitude to G-d for determining a course of events that leads to life-saving powers; which required misfortune and faith to result in salvation. Joseph teaches us much about gratitude.

Joseph is a lucky man. Moslem tradition holds him as one of the greatest of prophets. His immense beauty is described as being half of all the beauty G-d gave to mankind with the other half shared by the rest of us. His power of dreams, given by G-d and his ability to interpret these dreams served to save him when he was imprisoned and aided him as vizir of all of Egypt. At first glance Joseph's skill at the interpretation of dreams added to the resentment felt by his siblings. Ultimately they led to his reunification with his brothers and his father. In the end, a tearful reunion between the now adult brothers replaced fear and distrust. Gratitude for a plan that Joseph recognized as G-d's plan allowed a family to be reunited and saved from years of famine. Joseph and his wife Asenath had two sons. The first Joseph named Manasseh, meaning, "God has made me forget (*nashani*) completely my hardship and my parental home" ([Genesis 41:51](#)). He named the second son Ephraim, meaning, "God has made me fertile (*hiprani*) in the land of my affliction". A little gratitude and faith went a long way.

We face the same challenges when faced with seemingly unfair and unjustifiable curses which make us question G-d's plan for the world and the logic of his motivation. Why did G-d allow so many children to be murdered last week by a crazed gunman? Why are thousands of children allowed to die violent deaths by maniacs armed with automatic weapons and assault weapon throughout the world every year? Is there some good that is supposed to result at a future date for which we should be grateful now?

Each of us has a history that includes confusing curses and misfortunes. Early deaths, financial distress, illnesses, suffering, terrible family stories and more make us question G-d, community and family. Is the lesson we learn from Joseph about the power of the *midda*- gratitude a tool given to us by G-d to help us

through such travails? Not all of these questions are answerable yet. I do have some understanding, however, that gratitude helps. While we are not all as strong, handsome and wise as Joseph we only need to strive to emulate a small amount his example of gratitude. In the spirit of Mussar and from the example we might try saying thank you to many more people than usual, telling them, like Joseph did, why we are grateful. Watch faces light up and tears of joy and relief well up as they did in the eyes of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph-like gratitude can help to make jealousy, fear, resentment and many other manifestations of the evil inclination transform into reconciliation, warmth and healthy attitudes. For me this is a huge and difficult task, but necessary behavioral modification for a communal professional. It isn't always necessary to understand all the events which haven't yet happened to understand that even those things which seem impossible to comprehend have an ultimate purpose. Unlike the Mussar masters, I'm more inclined to wait for the good news before being grateful for the bad news. I wish I were different, more like Joseph and more worthy of G-d's help. If we believe that G-d is good and what G-d intends for us is good, we can develop a personal plan to work with G-d towards a better world, beginning with ourselves. I'll make a secular New Year pledge to be more grateful and express more gratitude. It can only lead to good.

Shabbat shalom.