

Kind to be Cruel

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This week we conclude the book of Bereishit with the death of Ya'akov. Midrashic tradition teaches that Ya'akov prayed to become ill before he died so that he would know that his end was approaching and could put his affairs in order.¹ And indeed, as Ya'akov sees that the time has come, he summons his grandchildren and his sons to bless them and guide them before it is too late. Yet, the *berakhot* (blessings) that Ya'akov bestows on his three eldest sons are not particularly encouraging or uplifting. Instead of praising them and promising them bright futures, he uses this opportunity to rebuke them. He excoriates Reuven for his hot-headedness and sexual improprieties.² He condemns Shimon and Levi for their violent natures and says that he does not want to be associated with them in the afterlife.³ Why does Ya'akov spend his final moments in this way? Why does he beg heaven for the opportunity to bless them and then appear to do just the opposite?

In order to understand why Ya'akov chooses this path of straightforwardness almost to the point of cruelty, it's helpful to look at Yosef, who chooses to do the opposite. When Yosef first reveals himself to his brothers, he does not acknowledge that they have done anything wrong to him,

בראשית מה:ד-ה, ז-ח

**וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אֶחָיו גִּשׁוּ נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֶחְיֶיכֶם אֲשֶׁר מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִם:⁴
וַיֵּתֶנּה אֵל תַּעֲצָבו וְאֵל יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הַנֶּה כִּי לְמַחְזָה שָׁלַחֲנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם...⁵**

¹See Bava Metzia 87a.

² Bereishit 49:3-4.

³ Bereishit 49:5-7.

וַיִּשְׁלַחנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם לְשׁוּם לָכֶם שְׂאֵרִית בְּאֶרֶץ וְלִהְיוֹת לָכֶם לְפָלִיטָה גְדֹלָה: וְעַתָּה לֹא אִתְּם
שְׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה פִי הָאֱלֹהִים וַיְשִׁימֵנִי לְאָב לְפָרְעָה וְלְאֶדוֹן לְכָל בַּיִתוֹ וּמִשָּׁל בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Bereishit 45:4-5, 7-8

⁴Then Yosef said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Yosef, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life... ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.⁴

All of Yosef’s kindness to his brothers, which should indicate that he holds no animosity toward them, does not comfort the brothers at all. They don’t trust this generosity and they don’t believe that Yosef is reconciled to them. In fact, they fear that he has only been kind to them for the sake of their father, and that as soon as their father dies, Yosef will retaliate against them.

בראשית נ:טו

וַיִּרְאוּ אֶחָי יוֹסֵף כִּי מֵת אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ יִשְׁטַמְנוּ⁵ יוֹסֵף וְהָשִׁיב לָנוּ אֵת כָּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר גָּמְלָנוּ
אֹתוֹ:

Bereishit 50:15

Yosef’s brothers saw that their father died and they said, “Perhaps Yosef will bear animosity toward us (*lu yistemeinu Yosef*) and return to us all of the evil that we did to him.”

⁴ NRSV translation.

⁵ The root for bearing a grudge or animosity מ,ט,ש is only used three times in the Torah. It appears both here, when the brothers are afraid of Yosef’s hating them and when Ya’akov obliquely refers to Yosef’s brothers hating him in his blessing, וַיִּשְׁטַמְהוּ בְּעֵלֵי הַצִּיּוֹם (Bereishit 49:23). The only other place it appears is when Esav says that he will take his revenge on his brother, Ya’akov, once his father Yitzhak dies, וַיִּשְׁטַם עֵשָׂו אֶת יַעֲקֹב עַל הַבְּרִכָּה אֲשֶׁר בָּרַכּוֹ אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר עֵשָׂו בְּלִבּוֹ יִקְרְבוּ יָמֵי אָבִי וְאֶהְרַגְתִּי אֶת יַעֲקֹב אֶחָי (Bereishit 27:14).

The turn of phrase that the brothers employ, **לו ישטמנו יוסף**, *Perhaps Yosef will bear animosity toward us*, is unusual. *Lu*, usually translates as, “if only”, and precedes something that the speaker *wants* to happen. Yet in this verse, the brothers use the term *lu* to preface something negative, that they do not want to happen to them i.e. that Yosef will pay them back with what they deserve! The Malbim,⁶ however, notices this unusual terminology and reads it in its plain sense. The Malbim suggests that the brothers do, in fact, want Yosef to deal unkindly with them!

מלבים על בראשית פרק נ פסוק טו

ויאמרו לו ישטמנו יוסף... מ"ש החכם אם רעב שונאך האכילהו לחם, שהנקמה היותר גדולה מאויבו הוא אם תחת איבתו והרעה שעשה לו ישימהו מאוכלי שלחנו ויעשה עמו אך טוב וחסד, שאז יזכור תמיד מה שהוא הרע לעשות, וז"ש כי גחלים אתה חותה על ראשו. ואחי יוסף הרגישו זאת, וטובת יוסף היה בעיניהם כי חותה גחלים על ראשם, ואמרו הלואי אחר שיוסף ישטמנו בודאי, וא"כ לו ישיב לנו את כל הרעה אשר גמלנו אתו, שיעשה עמנו רע בפועל לא טוב שהוא לנו כמדקרות חרב:

Malbim on Bereishit 50:15

They said, “Perhaps Yosef will bear animosity towards us... Regarding that which the wise one said (King Shlomo in Mishlei 25:21),⁷ **If your enemy is hungry, feed him bread**, that the greatest revenge one can take upon his enemy is to repay his hatred by placing him among those who sit at [the aggrieved]’s table and to do only goodness and kindness to him. For then he will constantly remember what he had done wrong, and that is [why the next verse, 25:22] says, **for you are stoking coals on his head**. And Yosef’s brothers sensed this and the goodness of Yosef was like he was stoking coals on their heads. So they said, “If only Yosef would clearly bear animosity towards us! And if so, he will return to us all of the evil that we have done to him. Let him be actively bad to us, and not kind, which is like being stabbed with a sword.”

⁶ R. Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhel Wisser, Russia 1809-1879. The Malbim’s commentary is renowned for his close attention to language and his efforts to anchor classical Rabbinic interpretations as the plain meaning of the text.

⁷ King Shlomo is the traditional author of Mishlei and Kohelet.

According to the Malbim, nothing made the brothers suffer more than Yosef's unwillingness to make them suffer. Just as before, they hated his holier than thou attitude. Nothing was harder for them than his insistence on being somehow more than human, by refusing to yell at them for what they did to him, or make them pay. They wanted to be Yosef's slaves since they sold him into slavery⁸ and it was complete torture for them to be guests at his table and to benefit from his largesse. The psychological torment that they suffered was too hard for them. They would have been happy to attempt to pay back the debt in any way, what was unbearable to them was the feeling that they couldn't even be punished.

Reb Tzadok HaKohen⁹ unflinchingly articulates the psychological torment of this kind of regret,

צדקת הצדיק נו

העגמת נפש שיש לאדם על עבירות שעשה הם ממש יסורי גיהנום על אותה עבירה, ולכן אמרו בסוף פרק קמא דברכות (י"ב ע"ב) דהמתבייש בה מוחלין לו כי כבר סבל עונש גיהנום. ומי שזוכה מן השמים מזכירים לו בכל עת עבירות שעשה ומתמרמר עליהם עד שסובל שיעור גיהנום המגיע לו על זה בעולם הזה, וזהו הפרעון מן העבירות שנפרעים מן הצדיקים בעולם הזה...

Tzidkat Ha-Tzadik 57

The distress that a person feels over the sins which he has done are actually the pangs of hell for that sin. Therefore they said in the Talmud (Berakhot 12b) that one who is ashamed of it is forgiven—for he already suffered the punishment of hell. And one who is meritorious is constantly reminded of the sins he did and ruminates about them until he suffers in this world the portion of hell that was due to him. And this is the payment extracted from the *Tzadikim* in this world...

Hell is where you go when there is no option for redemption, when there is nothing that you can do to right the wrong. Regret and self-recrimination is strongest when there is nothing

⁸ Bereishit 37:27-18.

⁹ 1823 - 1900, Poland.

constructive that left to be done, therefore, according to Reb Tzadok, regret *is* hell. While Yosef may have thought that he was doing right by his brothers with his unflappable positivity and his lack of acknowledgment of how they wronged him, he was leaving them to the psychological torture of thoughts of guilt without reprieve. Yosef doesn't say that he is angry. Yosef doesn't say that the brothers owe him for his years of suffering. Yosef is completely impassive and completely blank, and this has a negative and almost maddening effect on his brothers.

This may explain why Ya'akov chose to be harsh—but honest—with his children before he departed from this world. Ya'akov models the alternative approach, to be lovingly straightforward. Ya'akov doesn't pull any punches, he tells it like it is. And by airing his grievances he allows his children to confront what they've done, learn from what they've done, and move beyond a secret and unrelenting sense of guilt.

After Ya'akov's death, his children put words into his mouth, and beg Yosef to have compassion on them in their father's name,

בראשית נ:טז-יז

וַיִּצְווּ אֶל יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר אָבִיךָ צִוָּה לְפָנָי מוֹתוֹ לֵאמֹר: ¹⁷כֹּה תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנָא שָׂא נָא פְּשַׁע אֲחֵיךָ וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי רָעָה גָּמְלוּךָ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפָשַׁע עַבְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ וַיִּבְךְּ יוֹסֵף בְּדַבְרָם אֵלָיו: ¹⁸וַיִּלְכוּ גַם אֲחָיו וַיִּפְּלוּ לְפָנָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִנְנּוּ לְךָ לַעֲבָדִים:

Bereishit 50:16-18

¹⁶So they enjoined Yosef saying, “Your father commanded before his death saying, ¹⁷‘So you shall say to Yosef. Please forgive the crime of your brothers and their sins. For they have done wrong to you.’ And now forgive the sin of the servants of the God of your father.” And Yosef wept as they spoke to him. ¹⁸And also¹⁰ his brothers went and fell before him. And they said, “We are here to be your slaves.”

¹⁰ That is, in addition to the Egyptians who had already offered themselves as slaves to Yosef. See Bereishit 47:19.

When Yosef hears his brothers beg for forgiveness in such an abject way, he realizes that even if his own wounds have healed, his brothers have not yet been able to move on themselves. He understands that they don't trust his kindness, and he follows in his father's footsteps by including some acknowledgement of the hurt they caused him,

בראשית נ:יט-כא

19 וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף אֵל תִּירָאוּ כִּי הִתַּחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנִי: 20 וְאַתֶּם הִשְׁבַּתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹהִים הִשְׁבַּתָּה לְטוֹבָה לְמַעַן עֲשֶׂה כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַחִיית עִם רַב: 21 וְעַתָּה אֵל תִּירָאוּ אֲנֹכִי אֶכְלָכֶל אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת טַפְּכֶם וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם וַיְדַבֵּר עַל לִבָּם:

Bereishit 50:19-21

19 Yosef said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today. 21 Now, do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he comforted them and spoke to their hearts.

What comforts the brothers here is not only that Yosef tells them that they have no reason to fear and that he will provide for them—he had already promised them protection before. What makes this time different, what makes his statement believable, is that he finally acknowledges that they have done something wrong when he says, “*you intended to harm me.*” He betrays some hurt and that amount of truth lends more credence to his words.

The *midrash* in Bereishit Rabbah underscores this idea that the guilty need no accuser and the guilty mind can blow even the most innocent of gestures out of proportion:

בראשית רבה ק:ח

רבי לוי ורבי יצחק, [רבי לוי] אָמַר: שְׁלֵא זְמַנָּה לְסַעוּדָה... רַבִּי יִצְחָק אָמַר: הֲלֹךְ וְהִצִּיץ בְּאוֹתוֹ הַבּוֹר.

Bereishit Rabbah 100:8

[This is a dispute between] R. Levi and R. Yitzhak. [R. Levi said]: [The brothers thought that Yosef was still angry at them] because he didn't invite them to a meal. R. Yitzhak

says [that the brothers thought he was still angry at them because]: He (Yosef) went and he looked into that pit.

According to this *midrash*, the brothers were hypersensitive to indications that Yosef was angry. Because he never said that he was angry once and is angry no longer, the brothers justifiably assumed that he was still fuming. According to R. Levi they read into his neglecting to invite them to a meal.¹¹ According to R. Yitzhak when they went back to Canaan to bury their father, they passed the pit where Yosef had been cast and the brothers saw him looking at it. While R. Levi and R. Yitzhak disagree about what the trigger was, they both understand that Yosef's nonchalance and placid demeanor was unconvincing. Because there was a lack of overt communication, the brothers looked for subtle hints that Yosef was angry. And their fear spoke louder than Yosef's words.

It can be difficult to be honest. It can feel terrible to say to someone else, "You have wronged me." The lesson of this week's *parashah* is that these difficult conversations are often better than the alternative—silence. The silence is a breeding ground for overactive imaginations, for harmful assumptions and projections, and for even deeper hurt. If someone apologizes to you for a real wrong, avoid saying, "It was nothing." Instead say, "Yes. What you did was wrong and really hurt my feelings. But your apology is enough and I'm happy to move past this together."

Yosef's brothers demonstrate how hard it is to forget, but Yosef himself teaches that it is possible to forgive. The dynamic between them indicates that the key to reconciliation is this open communication. As Ya'akov showed, sometimes a harsh word is in fact a blessing.

Wishing you a Shabbat of clear communication.

¹¹ This could also be a reference to the story of Yosef's being cast into the pit, since the verse testifies that the brothers sat down to a meal immediately after throwing Yosef. See Bereishit 37:25.