



Reconciliation and Forgiveness at the End of Life

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This Shabbat we read about our patriarch Jacob calling each of his sons to his bedside and offering them instructions before his death. “Bring me to my people,” he tells them. “Bury me with my fathers. In the land of Canaan. In the family plot that my grandfather Abraham bought from Ephron the Hittite. Promise me.”

Jacob’s sons agree, and Joseph leads the brothers back to Canaan to perform this sacred task. Upon completion, they return to Egypt. This could be the end of the story, but, anyone with siblings who has experienced the death of a parent knows it’s rarely that simple.

When Joseph’s brothers returned to Egypt, they panic. This time, it’s not about inheritance or favoritism. It’s about protection. Without their father’s living presence, they imagine Joseph’s rage and resentment will resurface. “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us for selling him into slavery? What if now is the moment when he pays us back for all the wrong we did to him?!”

Driven by existential crisis, they send a message to Joseph, offering information that we, the readers, do not see in the Torah. “Before Jacob’s death,” say the brothers to Joseph, “our father left this instruction: Tell Joseph to forgive his brothers. Forgive their offense from years ago. Forgive the harsh treatment. Forgive the lost time and opportunity. Forgive them, Joseph, for they are also my children.” And in response, Joseph bursts into tears. (Based on Genesis 50:14-17)

The death of a loved one *often* leads to life-changing decisions. We promise to eat healthier. Hug our children. Get our affairs in order. We swear we’ll live differently from this moment on. We promise to forgive and forget.

Sometimes, it sticks. *Sometimes*, we change.

In the air tonight wafts the seasonal scent of New Year’s aspirations tinged with premature regret. We know it well: This is the season of promising change and falling short of our goals. We

are creatures of habit and it is hard to disrupt our routines. Even death, with its clarion call, soon dissolves into the daily chatter of appointments, errands, and text message alerts.

Yet it cannot be denied: The death of a loved one gives us a unique opportunity to do *teshuvah* - a change in direction, a new behavior – to experience a moment of forgiveness that was previously thought to be prohibited, unheard of, or unimaginable. But, death changes the rules.

Many of you know that Yom Kippur is meant to simulate an encounter with death so that, if given another shot at life, we feel compelled to immediately re-calibrate and stick to our resolutions. Unfortunately, that life-changing message is often lost in the waves of hunger pains and the busy work of counting down pages in the machzor.

In the wake of a loved one's death, towering billboards appear in our mind's eye: "Pay Attention!" and "Seize the Day!" and "Who Cares What's Happened in the Past...How Do You Want to Live from This Point Forward?" And still, estate lawyers and therapists know all too well that the content of post-mortem family conversations *rarely* include themes of mindfulness, forgiveness and generosity. It's as if the most important lessons death comes to teach us are tagged overnight by graffiti-ed bubble letters now declaring: "Pay Attention: Scarcity!" and "Seize Everything: Inequality!"

The death of a loved one reminds people of their childhood traumas, still buried deep inside, healed over but never expunged. And this is where we find Joseph's brothers: returning to their childhood, to the mistakes they made and the wounds that never healed...certain that Joseph will unleash the force of his sadness and rage now that their father is no longer there to protect them.

But, Joseph makes a different choice. A surprising choice. "Don't be afraid," he tells them. "Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about this very moment. Look around at the blessings that surround us even in the wake of death and grief. I see abundance. I see opportunity. This moment does not deplete me. I can and will sustain, support and nourish you all." (Based on Genesis 50:19-21)

Rabbi Roly Matalon, one of my mentors at B'nai Jeshurun, wrote in an e-mail this week, "I noticed that while the Book of Genesis is replete with sibling rivalry and family conflict, death opens the door to the possibility of reconciliation. Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father Abraham after long years of estrangement. Jacob and Esau also come together to bury their father Isaac. *[And, here tonight, the next generation is ready to take their place on stage, acting out a now familiar familial story of heartbreak and repair.]*

Following Jacob's death...the brothers plead with Joseph for forgiveness. Joseph reassures and comforts them and speaks to their hearts. He tells them that the story couldn't have unfolded otherwise, that they were all part of a divine plan; and he releases *himself* from resentment and *them* from remorse and the fear of revenge."

And, with this, Joseph's story ends. Not with anger, estrangement or regret but with an embrace of opportunity, blessing and abundance.

Tonight, may we be blessed with Joseph's vision. His grandfather Isaac's eyes grew dim at the end of life while Josephs' seem to sharpen over time.

May we be blessed with Joseph's heart. His mother Rachel cried bitterly with every child born to her sister Leah while Joseph's empathy expanded with each experience of loss.

May we be blessed not only with a good ending to our story, but a good ending for our children and our children's children. Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers...each set of siblings strove for power and position until death disrupted their routine. If we must wait for death, then let our death create space for forgiveness and reconciliation.

And, if we may, God, ask for one more blessing: **Help us to find holy moments of disruption before death arrives**, be it through this secular New Year and its fickle resolutions, a daily practice of gratitude, or this weekly routine of Shabbat. May we learn to see and embrace all the opportunity, blessing and abundance that surrounds us.

Shabbat Shalom.