

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

(Portion of Vayigash)

From Rav Binny Freedman

There is an oft repeated quote, attributed to **Albert Einstein**:

“The definition of insanity is to perform the same experiment over and over again, expecting different results”

In order to achieve different results, one has to at least change a significant component in the experiment. And if we have not yet achieved the results we seek, it means there is still work to be done.

David Allen in his book *Getting things done* defines work as:

“Anything that you want or need to be different than it currently is”

To change our current reality then, we need a different system; we need to change the experiment or the process.

It is interesting to note therefore, that **Maimonides**, in his *Hilchot Teshuva* (Laws of Repentance 2:1) suggests that the accomplishment of real change can only be assured when the circumstances are exactly the same! The **Rambam** (Maimonides) suggests that one can only be certain he or she has succeeded in letting go of past mistakes and negative behavior patterns, when a person is in the exact same situation (read experiment) but sees different results.

Only if a person is in the exact same situation, with the same desires and yet this time succeeds in resisting those desires, can we be sure real change has occurred. So which is it? Do we change the experiment or repeat it?

This week’s portion, *Vayigash*, presents us with Judaism’s take on how we change who we are, and become who we always wanted to be.

Following the story of Joseph and his brothers as they are re-united after so many years, one cannot help but wonder what is really going on.

Joseph, now the Viceroy of Egypt, and one of the most powerful men on his earth, recognizes his brothers who have journeyed to Egypt in search of food during a regionally devastating famine. They, however, twenty-two years after having thrown him in a pit and allowing him to be sold as a slave, do not recognize him as an adult in a completely different role. So Joseph begins a series of calculated manipulations designed to ... what?

Accused as spies, forced to depart Egypt without one of their lot (Shimon) who is kept behind in prison as a hostage, and subsequently forced to return with their youngest brother Binyamin who is then ‘played’ and accused of theft, one can only imagine the angst and stress this must cause the brothers.

Why is Joseph doing all this? What is the outcome he desires?

Some have suggested he is in it for revenge. But given the emotions this process invokes in Joseph, causing him to weep again and again (Genesis 42:24;43:30) this explanation hardly seems plausible; a vengeful person would not weep; he would exult.

Perhaps Joseph recognizes he has an opportunity to help create a different future, where the brothers will learn to live together in peace and harmony, where Yaakov will be blessed to once again be surrounded by all of his sons living and working together towards a better future.

But in order for this to occur, two things have to happen: Joseph has to forgive the brothers and the brothers have to repent. In short, everyone has to let go.

It is clear from the story (45: 5-7) that Joseph is ready to let go. He clearly views all that has transpired as Divine providence and is in a better position to understand the dreams he had as a lad, which led him to his position of power today.

But are the brothers equally ready to let go of their adolescent hatred for the favorite son of Yaakov?

What is repentance? Judaism actually calls this process **Teshuva** from the root *shuv*: to return. In the end Teshuva is about wanting to go back, to return to become the person I always thought I could be. Teshuva is an attempt in effect, to be reborn as the person who could never have made all those mistakes in the first place. If a thief truly wishes to repent or ‘do Teshuva’; he must become the person who could never have stolen in the first place, and certainly a person who will never steal again. That is true Teshuva. So how does one accomplish this? The Rambam suggests three stages:

1. **Hakarat haChet**: recognizing one’s mistake. We cannot change unless we know what we are doing is wrong and realize it is a mistake which prevents us from accomplishing our goals.
2. **Charata**: regret: Sometimes we know something is a mistake, but we don’t regret it enough to change our behavior, like a smoker who knows it’s a mistake but does not really regret it enough to let go.
3. **Kabbalah le’Atid**: A conscious decision to change the future coupled with the sure knowledge that, given the same situation, this time one’s behavior will be different. And here the Rambam suggests the only way one can be sure he or she has really accomplished this, is to be in the same situation and see a different outcome. And why can we expect a different outcome this time around? Because although the story or experiment remains the same, the **person** (or subject of the experiment) has changed! We are no longer the same person; we are better; so we can expect a better outcome.

The brothers clearly know they made a terrible mistake when they threw Joseph into a pit, and they obviously experience intense remorse for their past mistake. (42:21: “... *but we are guilty for our brother when we saw his pain and distress and did not hear his cries...*”)

What remains is to see whether they have really changed; will the future be different?

So Joseph orchestrates a scenario which is strikingly similar to the scenario the brothers cannot help but recognize from the past.

Binyamin, beloved (favorite?) son of Yaakov is about to be thrown into slavery. The brothers are told by Joseph (whom they still do not recognize) they can all go home scot free (44:17), all charges dropped, leaving Binyamin behind. Once again, they can rid themselves of the “favorite” son and move on. Twenty-two years later, history seems to have come full circle. But this time, it will be different.

No less than Yehuda (Judah); the same Yehuda who proposed selling Joseph as a slave all those many years ago, steps forward as if to say ‘enough’! He offers himself as a slave instead of Binyamin and changes the course of Jewish history. Facing as close to the same situation as one can ever imagine, this time he puts his brother first. As a result, the family of Yaakov will become the Nation of Israel and the dream of a model society that can be a light unto the nations of how brothers can learn to live together in harmony, is reborn.

Four thousand years later, we have to ask ourselves: are we ready not just to *learn*, but to *live* this lesson? On an individual level, are we ready to assess the mistakes we make in our lives? Do we regret them? Are we ready to change ourselves and thus change the future? Will we revel in the opportunity, given the same situation to dare to choose a different, better path?

And on a national level, are we equally ready to make this effort as a people? Can we recognize, and are our leaders and teachers ready to recognize our mistakes, and find a way to change things, in order to allow for a better future?

And one more point to consider: it is not enough simply for Joseph to forgive the brothers; the brothers must also be ready to change. Real change often demands partnership. Hence the challenge in today’s Middle East: We yearn for peace with our Arab cousins: but will the most critical part of the experiment change? Do they recognize their mistakes as we do ours? Do they regret them? Are they willing and ready to change? Without that critical part of the process, it would seem there is nothing to talk about.

May Hashem bless us all with the wisdom to build a better future beginning with the journey towards becoming our better selves....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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