

The Complexities of Reconciliation: Joseph & His Brothers

And Judah approached him, and said, "Please, my lord, may your servant speak a word in the ears of my lord, and do not be angry with your servant, for you are like Pharaoh." (Gen. 44:18)

1) It is written: *Like deep water is the counsel of a person's heart, but [and] a person of understanding will draw it out* (Proverbs 20:5). This may be compared to a deep well full of cold, lovely water, yet none could drink from it. Then came one who tied cord to cord, thread to thread, string to string, drew up from it and drank, and everyone began to draw up water from it and drink. Thus Judah did not cease from answering Joseph word for word until he stood upon his heart. (*Bereshit Rabbah* 93:4)

2) *And Judah approached him...*The word "him" appears to be extraneous. It's possible to say that "him" in fact means "himself." Judah repeated his words this second time before Joseph. For this time he said the words with great feeling, from the depths of his heart.

(Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, in *Itturei Torah*)

3) *I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you...*(Gen. 45:4-5) Joseph forgives. That is a first in history. There is even a hint in the Torah of the newness of this event. Many years later, after their father Jacob has died, the brothers come to Joseph fearing that he will now take revenge. They concoct a story: *They sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers for the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father."* When their message came to him, Joseph wept. [Gen. 50: 16-18] The brothers understand the word "forgive" – this is the first time it appears explicitly in the Torah – but they are still unsure about it. Did Joseph really mean it the first time? Does someone really forgive those who sold him into slavery? Joseph weeps that his brothers haven't really understood that he meant it when he said it. But he did, then and now.

(Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "The Day Forgiveness Was Born," 2011)

- **Texts #1 & #2 seem to describe two entirely different processes of reconciliation: in the first, reaching deeply into the other; in the second, reaching into oneself. How do you understand these two processes?**
- **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues that, seeing the full repentance of his brothers, Joseph fully forgives them, the first recorded instance of forgiveness in the Bible. But according to the Torah, his brothers remain unsure. Is complete forgiveness possible, in such a case as Joseph's? Has he truly forgiven?**

The Complexities of Reconciliation: Jacob & Joseph

And Joseph harnessed his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. And he appeared to him, and he fell upon his neck, and he wept upon his neck "od." (Gen. 46:29)

1) *And he appeared to him*—Joseph appeared before his father, *and wept upon his neck 'od'*—this means weeping copiously. Here he wept greatly and continuously—more than is usual. Jacob, however, did not fall upon Joseph's neck nor did he kiss him. Our Rabbis say: because he was reciting the Shema. (Rashi)

2) The correct interpretation [of this verse] appears to me to be that Israel's eyes were already slightly dim from age, and when Joseph arrived with a mitre on his head as was the custom of the Egyptian kinds, his father did not recognize him. His brothers also had not recognized him. Therefore Scripture mentions that when he appeared before his father, who stared at him and finally recognized him, his father fell on his neck and cried again over him, even as he had continually cried over him to this day when he had not seen him after his disappearance, and then Jacob said, *Now let me die, since I have seen your face* (Gen. 46:31). It is a known matter as to whose tears are more constant: that of an old father who finds his son alive after having despaired of him and having mourned for him, or that of a grown-up son who reigns. (Nachmanides)

3) Joseph wept but Jacob did not weep. Joseph could still weep. Jacob was finished weeping. He had wept enough in his life. Joseph was still weeping even after Jacob had already spoken with him . . . Since he had missed Joseph, Jacob had had a dull monotonous life. He had not ceased from weeping...In the meantime, Joseph had lived a life full of changes. He had no time to give himself up to the pain of separation. He was kept fully occupied with each of his different posts. Now when he fell around his father's neck again, he felt all the more what separation had really meant to him, and lived once again through the past twenty years. Jacob had already become Israel but Joseph still wept. (Samson Raphael Hirsch).

4) *And he appeared to him*—Joseph appeared before his father (Rashi): Do you wonder that we find in no other place the use of the word *va'yera* ("And he appeared") in regard to a human being, but only in connection to the Blessed Holy One or an angel? It seems that *va'yera* indicates a kind of revelation of the divine not in its full truth, but in a way that is limited or hidden. For the Blessed Holy One cannot be revealed to human beings in Its true nature, for *no person can see Me and live* (Exodus 33:20). And so also with an angel, which cannot be truly seen and needs to be clothed in some material form in order to become visible. Here, Joseph was the governor of Egypt and had taken upon himself the disguise of the ruler, and now he was being revealed as Joseph the Righteous the son of Jacob our father, and so it says of him, "*va'yera/he appeared.*" (Itturei Torah)

- **Rashi, Nachmanides, and Hirsh differ on who was weeping and who not. Does it matter? How do you imagine what this encounter meant for Jacob? For Joseph?**
- **Text #4 suggests that Joseph's appearance to Jacob was in some way similar to a revelation of the Divine. What does that insight add to this encounter?**