

Shalom!

I once saw the play Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat when it was out in Los Angeles a number of years ago. It is a musical comedy, sung-through all the way with lyrics by Tim Rice and music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, and based on Joseph, in the Book of Genesis. It's a great story!

It has drama! Sibling rivalry, jealousy, near fratricide, enslavement, a Pharaoh with dreams, widespread famine, the struggle to survive, hidden identity, and subterfuge.

Okay, so a little "prequel": Our patriarch Jacob marries Leah and then Rachel. He really wanted to just marry Rachel, but his uncle wanted his older daughter Leah to marry first. So Jacob married both, and their handmaids became wives to him too. But, Rachel was his favorite, and she struggled terribly, to have children, and finally gives birth to Joseph, and later, to Benjamin, with whom she dies in childbirth. Meanwhile, Leah and Jacob's other two wives Bilhah and Zilpah give birth to his 10 other sons, and one daughter, Dinah.

So Joseph was one of twelve brothers, and he was *the favorite*! Making his favoritism obvious to all, Jacob gave Joseph a coat of many colors. Joseph's brothers were jealous of the coat, of their father's favoritism, and of the dreams that Joseph shared with them about how they would all one day bow down to him. Out in the fields one day, the brothers throw Joseph into a pit, and debate killing him when a band of slave traders came by, and they sold him into slavery. Returning home, they dipped Joseph's torn and mangled coat in animal blood and told their father that Joseph had died.

Now a slave in Egypt, Joseph worked at Potiphar's home. Though honest, hard-working, and successful, Joseph was thrown into prison after he refused the advances that Potiphar's wife made toward him, as then she accused him of attacking her.

While in prison, Joseph was able to correctly interpret the dreams of two men, one who returned to work for Pharaoh. A couple of years later when Pharaoh needed someone to interpret his dream, Joseph was brought to him. Joseph

explained that the dreams Pharaoh had meant that Egypt would have seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh made Joseph his advisor, second only to Pharaoh, with authority to save food for the coming years of famine. When famine came, Joseph's own family was starving as the famine had reached them as well. Hearing that there was food in Egypt, Jacob sent all his sons except Benjamin to buy food. In his role as second to Pharaoh, Joseph recognized them, while they did not recognize him. They bowed down before him.

Can you imagine what you would do? Here are your brothers, who threw you into a pit – and then sold you. Now you recognize them, but they don't recognize you. You wonder, why has my father never come to look for me? Is my father alive? Is my brother Benjamin alive?

So Joseph asks, prying them for information, yet still not revealing who he is.

He finds that his father is alive, his brother Benjamin is with him, and his father remains grief-stricken, believing he, Joseph, has died. Joseph can hardly contain himself. He collects himself, because he wants to know more.

It's been many years. He wants to see his brother Benjamin. He needs to know if he can trust his other brothers. Have they changed? Joseph orchestrates a back and forth set of demands to test the character and behavior of his older brothers.

The Hebrew in this story uses a defective, less complete spelling of the word "shalom," which means peace. This form of the word occurs early in the story, in the line: "And when his brothers saw that their father loved him (Joseph) more than any of his brothers, they hated him so, that they could not speak a friendly word to him." (Gen 37:4) The Hebrew translates awkwardly as "they were not able to speak to him with shalom." The story begins with peace that is shattered.

As you can see, the Torah – the Five books of Moses, contains stories of imperfect people – rather than perfect examples of how to live our lives, we have imperfect patriarchs, matriarchs, and families. We talk about them, learn from them, and learn from their mistakes. We are not perfect, but being Jewish is to have hope, to have belief that change is possible. We can learn and we can change.

This first usage of shalom in the Joseph story shows us a broken peace. Favoritism has shattered peace in this family, much damage is done, much grief experienced, but redemption and forgiveness is still possible.

The first chapter of Genesis says that we are made *b'tzelem Elohim*, we are made in the “image” of God. One of our great thinkers and Rabbis from the 12th century, Maimonides, teaches us that we are not to anthropomorphize God, so we don't know for sure what this “image” of God really means, but we do understand this as likely meaning something about our ability to think of the future, to think in metaphor, conceive of the intangible, and to speak. So if I say, “cucumbers and tomatoes for lunch,” you may imagine in your mind's eye, sliced cucumbers and tomatoes on a plate at lunchtime.

But this notion of being in the “image” of God has more to it – because if we are each part of God's creation, each of us has a spark of the Divine with us. Martin Buber taught that we find God in the moments of the I-Thou experience. God arises in our deep meaningful connection with others. Rabbi Harold Schulweis taught that God is a verb – it is about godliness, how we treat one another, and how we conduct ourselves. I take this to mean that when we speak with one another and recognize the spark of the Divine within each other, we begin to see that each of us have sacred gifts to share with the world – each of us, in our own unique way.

The word “shalom,” peace, occurs 8 times in the Joseph story. The first had a missing letter, indicating a broken peace. The middle six “shaloms” are about looking out for another's welfare – “how are you,” “how is your peace”?

The eighth “shalom” is when Joseph lays a trap to test his elder brothers, especially Judah.¹ Judah stands strong in the face of accusation, and stands firm to keep his youngest brother Benjamin safe. Even though and perhaps because this is stressful, difficult, and indeed *the* test in Judah's life, there is wholeness. “Shalom” is written in a complete form. Judah's peace is restored.

¹ Genesis 44:17

I can't help but think of Maverick, in the original Top Gun. Maverick is a highly skilled, brilliant pilot, who has messed up over and over, being a hothead and considers himself above everyone else. Not quite a loner, but not a team player either, he doesn't think twice about leaving his wingman. After he gets in trouble, great trouble, he is faced with the test again, but in real battle this time, not a training run. People can die. His life is at stake. He redeems himself as he says, "I'm not going to leave my wingman," and he does not repeat his previous mistake. Even as he risks his life, his soul here is no longer broken, he has peace with who he is.

And yes, *spoiler alert*: Maverick saves the day.

I love the image of "not leaving my wingman." Don't ignore or look through those who are right next to you, especially if you live or work together! The secret sauce to life here is that we are most fulfilled when are really seeing one another and recognizing the spark of the Divine in one another. When we do so, we can leave behind the habits of favoritism and jealousy, and feelings of being greater or less than, or seeing others as greater than or less than. We stop hurting one another, and we care for one another, our world becomes friendlier, and our souls are free to breathe, and thrive. We are happier. When we recognize the unique Divine gifts that each of us have, we truly honor the Divine and live lives of godliness.

Do you see the Divine gift or gifts that are within you? Within those around you? What do you admire about the different people in your life? Sometimes it can be a challenge, but if we really look, we can find one thing. Start with that.

We are social creatures, we need one another. We cannot survive without one another. God gave us the Torah to study it and figure out how to get along. We make mistakes. We can repair some of them. We can be forgiven. We can heal. We can learn from our mistakes and become better people. It is possible.

Who do we have in our lives right now, to whom we know we should say "I'm sorry. I know what I said or did hurt you. I regret that I did that. I will not do that again. Is there anything that I can do or say to repair what I have done? Please forgive me."

Upon revealing his identity, and reconciling with his brothers, Joseph forgave them with all his heart, and asked them not to be distressed for what they had done, explaining, “it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.”

I don't know for certain how Joseph forgave his brothers. I believe he had both a tremendous amount of time to reflect while he was in prison, and he had a great foundation of faith in the Divine. He knew from a young age that he had a purpose, and his brothers were instrumental in helping him fulfill it, though it did not look like it at the time, and certainly not to us as we hear the story!

Albert Einstein wrote, “Strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: That we are here for the sake of others...for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy. Many times a day, I realize how much my outer and inner life is built upon the labors of people, both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received.”

Shalom aleichem, May peace be upon you.

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