

Shabbat Shalom.

It has been a difficult week for our country, a very difficult week. What happened in Newtown CT last Friday has deeply shaken all of us.

In times of deep sadness, we turn to that which we know, in order to find comfort, to begin to get us through the dark times. Some of us seek out more news, more coverage, more information for comfort. Others turn their attention towards politics and to making changes to the systems that failed last week. For me, it is our faith and tradition that bring me the most comfort.

We all look to find understanding and to make sense of the tragedies - and there isn't much to say. There is no theology that makes this right; no understanding of God's will that explains this to me; and no words to say to fix or change anything. But it is precisely that silence that I find some amount of comfort in.

Our tradition treats the absence of words in two ways. First, we often see the absence of speech as acquiescence. We learn that when a woman makes a vow, her father can either speak up against it, OR, if he says nothing, it signals his approval. We find this same use of speech (or lack thereof) in the traditional wedding ceremony, where the man speaks and the woman's silence is a sign of her acceptance.

But that's not the silence that comforts me. Silence here does not mean that we've accepted the tragedy, nor that we've come to terms with it.

The silence that I'm finding comfort in is the silence of being together in the depths of despair. When Aaron, Moses's brother, hears that his two sons have died, his reaction is one of complete silence. It is not that the Torah doesn't record what he said, but rather that the Torah tells us "VaYidom Aharon" - Aaron was silent. Aaron was silent because there were no words for the death of children.

Words are supposed to heal, to make a situation better, to begin a process of reconciliation - and for the people of Newtown, CT, and for a country in mourning, there are no words that can adequately do that right now.

Knowing that there is no explanation to be found, we as Jews can at least look to the Torah for some sense of normalcy and continuity.

Every year we revisit the same Torah portions and we find new meaning as we read our ancient stories. Whatever is happening in our world currently provides a lens through which we see the Torah anew.

When I turned to this week's Torah portion, *Vayigash*, it broke my heart. I had never noticed before just how painful and distressing this week's Torah portion can be.

Normally, *Vayigash* is explored as a compelling story of forgiveness and reconciliation. Joseph has been in Egypt - his brothers sold him into slavery long ago in a fit of boyhood jealousy, and no longer know that he is alive. Joseph on the other hand, has achieved wealth and power in Egypt and his brothers come to him to procure food due to a famine that has taken hold of the entire region.

In this week's *parsha*, we get the climax of the story - Joseph finally reveals his identity to his brothers. They hadn't recognized him, and he had been toying with them and testing them to see if they have changed since their childhood, and if they are now repentant for their previous behavior. Rambam cites this story as the classic example of perfect *tshuva*. The brothers have matured enough that when given the chance to commit virtually the same crime again, they make a different choice. It is such a powerful story that I find myself coming back to this *parsha* every High Holy Day season when I am exploring the topic of *tshuva*.

On top of being a story of repentance, this week's *sedra* also demonstrates the incredible power of forgiveness. Joseph forgives his brothers for the great cruelty they committed against him; and he sees that they have grown up over the years. In a fit of heart-wrenching emotion, he reveals that he is their brother, and in the same breathe, he asks after the welfare of his father Jacob.

Learning that Jacob is still alive and struggling to live through the famine is an ordeal for Joseph - and he invites his entire family to come down to Egypt to live in security and prosperity while the famine continues elsewhere.

This can be a really nice story and generally is one of my favorite *parshiot*. Joseph and his brothers can often be a source of inspiration for our own lives, and I love looking at the complex family dynamics that this story brings to light.

But none of that is where my attention went this week. My attention instead went to the experience of Jacob, Joseph's father and to the very different experience of Benjamin, Joseph's youngest brother.

Many years ago Jacob lost a child - for decades, he believed that his beloved Joseph was dead. His heart broke, and he never recovered. Throughout his life, he remained fragile and broken, never able to move on from that loss.

In this week's *parsha*, Jacob's experience is a dream, a fantasy, the most fervent wish of any parent who has lost a child - and right now it feels like a terribly cruel slap in the face.

Jacob gets Joseph back - his dead son essentially comes back to life.

And not only does he get his son back - he also 'lives happily ever after' in every sense of the word. He learns that not only has his son survived, but he has prospered and has fulfilled his God-given mission to serve his brothers and his people. And with his good fortune, Joseph is able to rescue his entire family from famine and to secure their future.

Finally, in one last gut-wrenching moment, Jacob is told by God that Joseph will close his eyes - he is promised that his son will outlive him – and that the natural order of the generations will be restored.

Both in general and more specifically this week, this story reads like a fairy tale.

That is not to say that Jacob isn't grateful for the outcome. When Jacob hears that Joseph is alive, the Torah tells us ויפג לבו (v'yofag libo), his heart stopped - our translation says, his heart went numb. His heart literally stopped at the shock of the turn of events, of his dream coming true.

But this gift, this miracle that Jacob gets feels that much less possible this week.

What DOES feel real in this week's *parsha* is Benjamin's role. Despite being one of the key players in this story, Benjamin doesn't actually say a word.

This silence is a combination of the silence of acquiescence and the silence of despair. Acquiescence because he grew up in a broken family, lost his brother at a young age, never knew his father as a complete person, and to some extent, must have always known that something bad would happen to him.

And despair because he's about to be torn away from his family, he knows that he's been framed for a crime that he didn't commit, and he has no idea how his story will unfold.

Benjamin is the innocent victim. He's both a mere pawn and a crucial figure in the outcome of this story. His presence makes the events unfold as they do, but he had very little to do with creating them.

He was merely a child when his ten brothers sold Joseph and lied to their father about the event. He grew up in a household that was missing a child – his only full brother – without a mother and with a father who was never whole again. And now he is being treated like a prisoner in Egypt, being held as a negotiating tool.

Knowing all of that, his silence shouldn't come as a surprise – life happens *to* him, and he takes no actions nor speaks any words to change its course.

Who are the Benjamins in Newtown? Of course, the 26 people whose lives were pointlessly taken – most of them had not yet reached 8 years on this Earth, and like Benjamin were the objects in their own stories, to whom life happened. But without a reason to take action, we risk letting this become someone else's tale as well – so we must choose to speak, to learn, to do things to prevent this from happening to other Benjamins.

Who are these Benjamins? Who are the potential victims that need our attention to ensure that they are not ignored?

I see three categories of innocents that we, as a community and as a nation, need to address:

- Our children. They know something happened, even if we've tried to shield them from the details. They are too young to truly understand, but we must help them learn now that they have a voice – so that in the future they will be active participants in their own stories.
- Those suffering from mental illness. Already marginalized in many ways, they are often prevented from receiving the help that they truly need. If we want to prevent another Newtown, it's not just laws that need changing – it's how we work with, listen to, and help those who need it most.
- And finally **us**. We watched in horror as the events unfolded on TV; we hugged our children and students tighter; we talked to our friends about not letting this happen in our community. But as we reviewed security policies and signed petitions, did we truly find our voices so that the rest of our story does not happen *to us*?

Empowering these groups is the first step to preventing more of these tragedies; just as importantly, it is the first step to creating a community – a country – a world – in which there are no Benjamins.

I want to close with a story - a lesson that I learned last Friday evening.

Between Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat last week, Lisa Stella taught a session at KICKS on the topic of Miracles and Hanukkah. The lesson that stuck with me was the answer to the question of why we celebrate Hanukkah for 8 nights. When I asked our kids the same question the next morning - last Shabbat morning - in Jr. Congregation, they all blurted out the same answer that I'm sure we've all heard countless times: "We celebrate Hanukkah for 8 night because the oil lasted 8 nights".

[I was glad to hear that they have been listening to our teaching!]

But the lesson that Lisa was teaching was deeper than that.

It wasn't actually a miracle that the oil lasted 8 nights. It was only a miracle that the oil lasted 7 nights - everyone expected the oil to last that first night. So why don't we celebrate Hanukkah only for 7 nights?

Because, and this is the answer that has sustained me this past week, even faced with only enough oil to last for one night, the Jews cleaning up the Temple lit the menorah anyway. Perhaps unsure of what the future would bring, they had enough faith to take a step forward.

Were they expecting a miracle? No, probably not. Instead, they were seeking an element of comfort in light of what had become their new normal. They took a step forward and God met them there.

I pray that the people of Newtown find the strength to light the first light - to take the first step forward and to let God and their community meet them where they are. It will indeed be a miracle if their community, and ours, can come through this darkness stronger than we were before.

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