

VaYeeGash

Good morning. It is an honor to be able to talk to you this morning in this great synagogue. I thank Rabbi Pearce for extending the invitation for me to address you this morning. I also thank rabbi Cohen and Cantor Barak for helping to lead the service.

In this week's Torah portion, VaYeeGash, Joseph is Vizier of Egypt. As the Vizer he controls food distribution. His brothers have all come down to Egypt for food because there is a worldwide famine and Egypt is the only place with provisions. When the brothers arrive, they do not recognize Joseph, and he pretends not to know them. Joseph sets up an elaborate plot, in order to keep his brother Benjamin in Egypt. When Joseph demands that Benjamin remain in Egypt, Judah explains that Benjamin and his father are so close that if the other brothers return without Benjamin, their father, Jacob will die. Judah explains that the father and son's souls are bound up together. Upon hearing this description of inseparability of souls, Joseph, the dreamer of dreams and schemer of schemes, begins to sob uncontrollably and reveals his identity. What causes such a tactician as Joseph to suddenly abandon his elaborate designs is, I think, his realization that his soul is entwined with the souls of his father and brothers. He realizes that to let his brothers and father

starve would, in some way, kill him. He arrives at the same consciousness John Donne, the great 16th Century Metaphysical poet and priest, came to when he preached: “No man is an Island, entire of it self; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”¹

Whether we realize it or not, we are all bound up in each other's souls. The great tragedy of human existence is that we usually become so ensnared in our own self that we believe that we could exist independently.

Martin Luther King Jr. said: “We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”²

At some level we know King's words are true, yet we are frequently given messages that there is an us and a them, a here and a there, in other words that there are many garments of destiny rather than a single tapestry. This is not true. This dawned on me forcefully when I purchased a bottle of 100% pure

¹ Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII

apple juice in a gas station in Natchez, Mississippi. The label said:

"CONTAINS CONCENTRATE FROM GERMANY, AUSTRIA, ITALY, HUNGARY, ARGENTINA, CHILE, CHINA TURKEY, BRAZIL, AND THE UNITED STATES." In other words, even something as ordinary as a bottle of apple juice comes from 10 different countries these days. If you tried to pinpoint where each molecule of apple juice came from you would have an almost impossible task. The paradigm that splits space into here and there breaks down when we talk about where the apple trees were, that produced the apple juice. When we start to talk about the origins of things, we begin to see that nothing is isolated after-all. The poet Tich Nhat explains interdependence thus:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in your apple juice. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the apple trees cannot grow; and without apple trees, we cannot make apple juice. The cloud is essential for the apple juice to exist. If the cloud is not here, the apple juice cannot be here either... If we look into the apple juice even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the apple trees cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this apple juice. And if

² Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, on 31 March 1968. Congressional Record, 9 April 1968.

we continue to look, we can see the farmer who picked the fruit and brought it to the press to be transformed into juice. And we see the wheat. We know that the farmer cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in the apple juice. And the farmer's father and mother are in it too. You cannot point out one thing that is not in the apple juice: time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists in a single glass of apple juice.³ In fact, one could say that it took almost all of creation to produce a single glass of apple juice or a single human being. If any whole category, such as humans, is removed from the cycle, the entire cycle is truncated and we have no apple juice.

In terms of creation it is relatively easy to see that every element is part of a grand cycle. What is more difficult to see is that there is a cycle of deeds that begins at a local level and ends up affecting everyone.

Joseph realizes that he is involved in mankind and that he is part of the single garment of destiny. The following parable will illustrate this point: Many years ago a disciple said to a rabbi: The Torah says Love your fellow as yourself.⁴ How can I do this rabbi? The rabbi answered, your neighbor is a part of yourself; you would not stab your own hand with your other hand.

³ From The Heart of Being, by Tich Nhat Hahn. This has been modified, a little, by me to fit into this

The disciple replied: of course not. Joseph realizes that to let his brothers starve would be to stab one of his hands with the other.

Although we are part of the single garment of destiny, in our society, when someone starves, we are not formally punished for murder. When someone dies from the cold during a New York winter and that person is sleeping in front of an empty heated church or synagogue, we are not formally punished. No one comes and takes millions of people who live in heated homes to the courthouse and says: “hey, you murdered this person by neglect.” We tend to think of it as someone else’s problem. Maybe it’s the government’s problem or the family’s problem or the homeless individual’s problem. It’s anyone’s problem except my problem or your problem.

This is the type of thinking that has created a society in which 38 people could watch a woman named Kitty Genovese being murdered, in Queens NY, and do nothing to help her. When the 38 witnesses were asked they all said they thought it was someone else’s problem and that someone else was taking care of it.

When people assume it’s someone else’s problem, our lives become unsafe. When we think, this won’t happen to me because I live in a nice neighborhood, we are wrong, Kitty Genovese was in a “nice” neighborhood.

When we ignore people's cries for help we make the world more dangerous for everyone. This was well expressed in Dachau, in 1941 when Pastor Martin Niemoller wrote: "In Germany the Nazis first came for the Communists and I didn't object because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't object because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't object because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't object because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me and there was no one left to object." When Kitty Genovese died no one raised a hand to help her. When the Nazis burned synagogues and rounded up Jews like cattle, very few raised a hand to help. The allies said the same thing that the people watching Kitty Genovese die said, it is not our problem. When a homeless person dies on our streets here, we say the same thing. In fact, in some tacit sense we quote Cain when another dies by our negligence, we say, "am I my brother's keeper?" We are Kitty Genovese's keepers. We are homeless people's keepers, we are all each other's keepers and if we believe that it will all happen somewhere else, we are wrong, because there is nowhere else. Everywhere is part of the same tapestry.

⁴ Leviticus 19:18

Our Reform Liturgy addresses this problem in a prayer that says, “we have enough if only we would use it wisely.” In other words, do not say it is up to someone else, because I lack the resources to deal with this problem, rather find the resources. We are, after all, the richest nation on the planet and we are living during the wealthiest era in the history of civilization. Yet people go hungry every day in this country. We blame and we blame and our blame serves to blind us from our responsibility to others just as Joseph’s anger could have blinded him to his interdependence with his brothers. If Joseph would not have had the vision to see that his soul was bound up in his brother’s souls, 11 of the twelve tribes of the Israelites would have starved to death. How many more of *us* need to starve before we learn that we are all interconnected.

The good news is that it is not difficult to do good in the Grand Cycle. Small deeds will help. Like, giving a hungry person a sandwich. Giving money to a charity. Swapping places in a line for someone with a cane. Giving up a seat on a bus or train for someone who is less able to stand than you. And if we are numb to the needs of those around us, it may help to think that all that is between the housed and the homeless is an earthquake and that we are all only one missed meal away from hunger.

Shabbat Shalom by Ethan Annis