

## Sermon Parashat Va-yiggash 5766

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Now that the secular New Year has passed it gives us another chance to forge new New Year's resolutions and I have one that I will try my best to adhere to. In general I think it is a good rule of thumb to stay away from psychological jargon if you are not in the mental health profession. In fact, even if you are a social worker, psychologist or psychiatrist, you ought to steer clear of these terms unless you are speaking to another person of your same ilk. Complicated ideas of ego and self have been misappropriated and misapplied for far too long and I would suggest we all stop it. The truth is, no matter how perfectly we believe these words describe a specific circumstance or approach, the use of the terminology is infuriating. When my brother calls and tells me how upset he is with something my mother said, I say, "Jeremy you shouldn't *internalize*." Without hesitation he invariably calls me a name."

When my upset child awakes in the middle of the night and I ask her what is bothering her, or "What are you *suppressing*?" My seven-year old looks at me like I am crazy, and then asks, "What are you talking about?" When a congregant comes to me and says, why can't my husband be a little more like you, and I suggest that they may be experiencing a little "transference," it usually kills the conversation. But my favorite is when I am in the midst of an argument with someone and they accuse me of things I never said or did so I remark that I believe they are "projecting," Usually the next comment out of their mouth is "you're an idiot."

I realize the best thing to say is, "I hear what you are saying and you make a valid point but that is something I need to think some more about. Perhaps there is another way we might look at the situation?" The words, "I think you are projecting" just make more sense. If people could just see that it is their own internal and emotional *mishegas*, and their own crazy baggage and that their anger has nothing to do with me, but for some reason whenever I say the words, "I think you are projecting," they seem to go over the deep end. So I have decided no more psychological terminology. No longer will I tell anyone that they are "acting out" or that they are behaving in a "passive/aggressive" manner or that they are "projecting," even if it is true because it just gets them more irritated and I just don't need that negativity in my life. In fact,

now that I think about it I don't think I will even use the phrase "baggage" any more. Whenever I offer the opinion that "this is your baggage," people tend to get irked as well. From now on when I am packing my clothes for a trip, they are going in a valise.

Even though "baggage" is the perfect metaphor for things we collect and are forced to carry with us on our journey through life and even though "baggage" is exactly what inhibits us and is the place where we keep all of our psychological stuff that we are unwilling or unable to let go of, maybe we could just find other language to express this sentiment. We believe our baggage keeps us grounded but really it just keeps us from flying. It is so true. We walk around carrying so much and we are so weighed down that life can be exhausting. If we cannot find a mechanism for release then we will be crushed under its burden.

That is the story of Jacob. Abraham is the Torah figure who teaches us how we ought to interact within our own families. He shows us what *not* to do with your son and how *not* to treat our spouses. Joseph teaches us about how we are supposed to think of others. He shows us how to use our unique talents to help others. Jacob teaches us about self. And he is our most psychologically complex person. Through Jacob we see deception and internal struggle. In Jacob we are treated to the nightmares and the emotional wanderings. What we have in the end is a person torn apart by the unnatural death of a child.

Upon seeing the torn cloak Jacob yells out, "My son's tunic! A savage has devoured him! Joseph was torn apart by a beast!" The path is extraordinary. All of his sons and daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, saying, 'No, I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.'" (Genesis 37:33-35) Even after his father Isaac pleads with him not to let go of life and not engage in lifelong mourning. (Sforno on Genesis 37:35) The emotional turmoil and the psychological havoc are overwhelming. Jacob has other children to live for. But he is devastated and holds on to the misery as only Jacob can.

Jacob, after tricking his father into giving him the birthright and fleeing, Esau lives with the event for the next twenty years. Jacob has a long history of holding on to the past and allowing the past to haunt his future and cloud his perspective. Jacob knows about baggage; Jacob knows

about nightmares and holding on to grudges. When Lavan tricks him into serving another seven years for Rachel's hand in marriage, he feels he has it coming to him and offers no objection so he stays another seven years. He knows how to live with deception, after all he is the great deceiver. We are outraged by the criminal nature of the Rachel/Leah switch. We become enraged by Lavan's games and Jacob's passivity, but Jacob is not enraged because they are one in the same and they understand each other.

That is why Jacob steals Rachel away in the middle of the night. There is nothing above board and there is nothing honest about the way these two interact. They know each other too well and even worse, they know themselves. They don't trust each other because they don't trust themselves. That is what is so sad about Jacob. When Jacob's sons come clean about the apparent death of Joseph, Jacob doesn't believe them.

When they told him Joseph was still alive and had become ruler over all of Egypt, "His heart went numb, for he did not believe them." (Genesis 45:26) Although Avot D'rabi Natan would prefer to interpret this as a story about the sons and about Joseph's brothers, it is also a great comment about the father as well. Avot D'rabi Natan comments on the phrase "For he did not believe them..." This is the fate of a liar; even when they are telling the truth, a liar is not believed. (Avot D'rabi Natan 30) Avot D'rabi Natan says Jacob doesn't believe his sons because they never tell the truth.

What is really interesting about this sentence and the reading of Avot D'rabi Natan is that not only do lies beget lies, but liars apparently beget liars. Though the brothers don't seem to offer us other lies, they are still categorized as liars none-the-less and if we carefully read the earlier text, they don't ever really lie, they simply set up the circumstance and permit Jacob to draw his own conclusion. However, Avot D'rabi Natan seems to suggest a history of such behavior is a history of deception, be they actual lies or otherwise. He then takes it one step further by suggesting that Jacob knew they were liars. When I was growing up my parents always seemed to know when I wasn't being honest with them. They would say, "Jay, are you telling the truth?" as if they were giving me another opportunity to come clean.

I believe the previous story is not about *not* believing the boys, but about not trusting anyone. There is no record or blueprint for deception from the brothers because it was a one-time occurrence. Although it is possible that all of their lives they were conniving and illusory, I think the comment by the text about Jacob is just that, a comment about Jacob. It is Jacob that is the con artist. Jacob doesn't believe them because he has grown not to believe anyone. He just doesn't know what the truth is. This is not a story about Jacob giving birth to liars, it is a narrative about Jacob giving birth to lies.

It is not so much the second half of the verse that is important - this indicates Jacob did not believe his sons. The first half of the verse indicates that his heart went numb and that is far more significant. Even without understanding the phrase "and his heart went numb," you can sense the death that has already occurred within him. I am suggesting Jacob begins to die long before he ever thinks he has lost Joseph. *Jacob starts dieing when he starts lying.* And that is why Ramban comments that his heart was suspended and his breathing ceased, "for the movement of the heart ceased and he was dead." When we spend our lives telling half-truths and fabrications then we have wasted so much.

Though Avot D'rabi Natan would have us believe this is a story similar to the boy who cried wolf, it is not. This is a story about a cosmology based on how we behave. This is a story about how warped our perception of the world becomes when we have no sense of self. What we see in others is what we see in ourselves. We can never trust others until we learn to trust ourselves. We cannot love others until we learn to love ourselves.

One of the Baal Shem Tov's students Or Hachachma (Parashat VaYakhel) offers the following piece of advice. When we find ourselves in conflict; when we are agitated and frustrated with the people who surround us; when we feel as though the world is arrayed against us. When we feel as Psalms describes, *shiviti hashem l'negbi tamid* (16:8) that the whole world is crumbling around us. Or HaHochma says think of the following image. At that moment, our reflection comes to meet us.

So, too our hearts look towards others. When we think of ourselves great, then our fellow is also great. When we make ourselves smaller before our fellow so too, does our fellow become smaller... In this manner we become equal. If you want others to trust you, trust yourself. If you want others to love you, than love yourself. If you want respect then respect yourself.

So no more “projecting,” “sublimating,” “transferring,” “obsessing,” or any other term that describes behavior over which we seem to have no control. I pray we are never trapped either physically or emotionally in our own lives. In this secular New Year, like in our holy New Year of Rosh Hashanah, let our resolutions center on reflection and sincere evaluation of self. May we be given the strength to see these resolutions through to fruition.