

# COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

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THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA FROM THE CHIEF RABBI



ויגש

Vayigash

ז' טבת תשס"ו

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## The force of forgiveness

Judah has passed the test so elaborately contrived by Joseph. Twenty-two years earlier, it was Judah who had proposed selling Joseph into slavery. Now Joseph – still unrecognized by his brothers – has put him through a carefully constructed ordeal to see whether he is still the same character, or has changed. Judah *had* changed. Now he is willing to become a slave himself so that his brother Benjamin could go free.

**It is sometimes said that Judaism lacks the concept of forgiveness. Occasionally the claim is more specific: in Judaism, G-d forgives; people do not. This is simply not so.**

That is all Joseph needed to know. Now, at last, he reveals his identity to his brothers in a moment of intense emotion. The most important feature of the scene, however, is Joseph's complete forgiveness for what the brothers had done to him all those years before.

"And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that G-d sent me ahead of you . . . G-d sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but G-d . . ."

Joseph makes no reference to the brothers' plot to kill him or to the fact that they had sold him into slavery. He makes no mention of the lost years he spent, first as Potiphar's slave, then as a prisoner in jail. Not only does he forgive them: he does everything possible to relieve them from a sense of guilt. He tells them that they were not really responsible; that it had been G-d's plan all along; that it had been for the best, so that he could save lives during the years of famine, and so that he could act as their protector in the years to come. It is a moment of supreme generosity of spirit.

Nor is this the only such moment. Five chapters later, at the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph repeats the act of forgiveness. Jacob has died, and the brothers now fear that Joseph will take revenge after all. They are afraid that his apparent friendliness was merely a way of biding his time until their father was no longer alive (recall that Esau said: "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob"). This is what Joseph said on that second occasion:

"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of G-d? You intended to harm me, but G-d intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

It is sometimes said that Judaism lacks the concept of forgiveness. Occasionally the claim is more specific: in Judaism, G-d forgives; people do not. This is simply not so. Here is how Maimonides puts it:

It is forbidden to be obdurate and not allow yourself to be appeased. On the contrary, one should be easily pacified and find it difficult to become angry. When asked by an offender for forgiveness, one should forgive with a sincere mind and a willing spirit . . . forgiveness is natural to the seed of Israel. (Mishneh Torah, *Teshuvah* 2: 10)

Nor is it necessary for the offender to apologise:

If one who has been wronged by another does not wish to rebuke or speak to the offender – because the offender is simple or confused – then if he sincerely forgives him, neither bearing him ill-will nor administering a reprimand, he acts according to the standard of the pious. (*Deot* 6: 9)

Why then is there so little reference to interpersonal forgiveness in the Bible? It is not that G-d forgives, while human beings do not. To the contrary, we believe that just as only G-d can forgive sins against G-d, so only human beings can forgive sins against human beings. That is why Yom Kippur atones for our sins against G-d, but not for our sins against other human beings.

## **The Bible is a book – a library of books – about the relationship between G-d and human beings. It is about heaven and earth, Divine command and human response.**

The reason lies elsewhere. The Bible is a book – a library of books – about the relationship between G-d and human beings. It is about heaven and earth, Divine command and human response. It is not primarily about interpersonal relationships at all. Once the Torah has established the principle of human forgiveness, which it does here in the Joseph narrative, it does not need to repeat it.

Note how profound the passage really is. Joseph does more than forgive. He wants to make sure that the brothers, especially Judah, have changed. They are no longer people capable of selling others into slavery. The “Truth and Reconciliation” process established in South Africa by

Nelson Mandela could only come about once apartheid had been ended. It would have been absurd for the victim to forgive while the crime was still being committed or while the criminal was still unrepentant.

Nor is it Judah alone who has to change. So does Joseph. He has to rethink the entire sequence of events. He no longer sees it in terms of a wrong done against him by his brothers. He sees it as part of a providential plan to bring him to where G-d needed him to be (“So then, it was not you who sent me here, but G-d”). He thinks not only of the moment twenty two years earlier when he was sold as a slave, but of its long-term consequences. It is as if Joseph has to come to terms with himself before he can do so with his brothers. That is why forgiveness lifts the one who forgives even more than the one who is forgiven.

But the real significance of this passage goes far beyond the story of Joseph and his brothers. It is the essential prelude to the book of Exodus and the birth of Israel as a nation. Genesis is, among other things, a set of variations on the theme of sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. The book begins with fratricide and ends with reconciliation. There is clear pattern to the final scene of each of the four narratives:

1	Cain/Abel	Murder
2	Isaac/Ishmael	The two stand together at Abraham’s funeral
3	Jacob/Esau	Meet, embrace, go their separate ways
4	Joseph/brothers	Forgiveness, reconciliation, coexistence

The Torah is making a statement of the most fundamental kind. Historically and psychologically, families precede society and the state. If brothers cannot live together in peace, then they cannot form a stable society or a cohesive nation. Maimonides explains that forgiveness and the associated command not to bear a grudge (Lev. 19:18) are essential to the survival of society: “For as long as one nurses a grievance and keeps it in mind, one may come to take vengeance. The Torah emphatically warns us not to bear a grudge, so that the impression of the wrong shall be quite obliterated and be no longer remembered. This is the right principle. It alone makes civilization and human relationships possible.” (Deot 7: 8).

## **When people lack the ability to forgive, they are unable to resolve conflict. The result is division, factionalism, and the fragmentation of a nation into competing groups and sects. That is why Joseph’s forgiveness is the bridge between Genesis and Exodus.**

Forgiveness is not merely *personal*, it is also *political*. It is essential to the life of a nation if it is to maintain its independence for long. There is no greater proof of this than Jewish history itself. Twice Israel suffered defeat and exile. The first – the conquest of the northern kingdom followed a century and a half later by the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile – was a direct consequence of the division of the kingdom into two after the death of Solomon. The second – defeat at the hands of the Romans and the destruction of the Second Temple – was the result of intense factionalism and internal strife, *sinat chinam*.

When people lack the ability to forgive, they are unable to resolve conflict. The result is division, factionalism, and the fragmentation of a nation into competing groups and sects. That is why Joseph’s forgiveness is the bridge between Genesis and Exodus. The first is about the children of Israel as a *family*, the second is about them as a *nation*. Central to both is the experience of slavery, first Joseph’s, then the entire people. The message could not be clearer. Those who seek freedom must learn to forgive.

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