



Shabbat Sermon - Shabbat *Vayechi* Jan 2023

Seeing is not always believing!

As many of you will remember, I have a terrible struggle to remember names. I sometimes even forget names of people I know quite well. I also have problem with faces; if I blank you in an unfamiliar place, I'm not being rude. I just can't figure out who you are.

I don't think that all of Joseph's brothers struggle with face blindness. This was Graces' (our bat mitzvah's) question: when they see Joseph, their brother again, after so many years, 'why don't his ten brothers know him'?

Is it they don't know who he is? When I am not sure if I know who someone is, I usually know his or her voice.

Joseph's brothers are deceived. They think that this stranger is powerful man. They see what they already think. They see what they already know. None of them was listening to those dreams because they would have spotted him if they did!

But *he* sees them. Right away, Joseph is all about seeing. He sees them and he quickly knows that Benjamin, the full brother whom he loves, has not come. He sees their desperation. The naïve lad is now a thoughtful man, someone who can hold himself back. You learn by suffering. The boy with the big mouth and the bigger mind has been thrown in a pit. Sold as a slave. Exploited by a powerful woman. Thrown in a prison. And now, in a place of power and responsibility, his bully brothers are back. How come they now see him, and how come he forgives them?

Seeing plays a vital part in this long story. *Va-yiru*, they saw, *va'yar*, he saw, these words appear tens of times. Jacob sees and blesses each of his sons. He dies, they bury him.

Now, the brothers see for the very first time. (Gen 50:15) *Va-yiru achei-Yosef ki met Avihem*, "when Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead," they said, "what happens if he bears grudge against us! And pays us back for the things we did to him!"

That's an interesting sort of seeing, and an unusual use of the verb. This special sort of seeing means, thinking, knowing. Joining the dots, seeing a connection. It comes months after his death. Now they see. Now they know.

And this is when they lie to him. As Grace so skilfully suggests, they lie out of fear. "Our father commanded us to ask for your forgiveness". No apology as such. Joseph, as Grace says. He sees right through them, and strangely, he accepts. Why doesn't he make the most of this opportunity? To hurt them as they hurt him?

I want to suggest that Joseph has learned a lot of lessons. Lessons felt in pain. I think Joseph knows that in this life, there are times when real repentance and real forgiveness just won't come.

Sometimes, and just sometimes, when there is no apology and no real opportunity to forgive, there is another Jewish possibility. Joseph is *ma'avir middato*. In other words, this is no longer a brash young man who opens his mouth, not knowing what will come out. He is choosing NOT to take what is owing to him. *Ma'avir middato*, to pass up on the choice for anger, revenge repentance. To turn aside from pushing back. To know that you are right, but you will not demand your just desserts. That's not easy when you are young. Real wisdom can sometimes be when you don't say, "I told you so", or "it's time for payback". *Ma'avir middato*: not the easy choice. And not a weak choice either. You see it in people who are gentle and wise. And you see it in those who are watching the bigger picture. *Ha-tachat Elohim, anochi?* Am I standing in the place of God? I don't think he is. He is standing in the place of hard-won wisdom. He is the brother who sees. This goes beyond physical seeing.

Being *ma'avir middato*, one who can pass up the desire for payback or retribution, might be lucky trait; maybe some people are natural saints. But in my experience, it usually happens when you have faced a lot of grief and pain. There is acceptance in suffering. Joseph has to come to terms with knowing you can't turn back the clock. You can't make people be what they are not. You can't make someone sorry for something they don't regret. And with that pain, there is sometimes acceptance. And with acceptance, there can be freedom.

At the end of the story, there is a different sort of seeing. As Grace so beautifully says, Joseph lives to see the fourth generation, and that seems a very fair reward. These are the people that he lives to see, (50:3) *Va' ar Yosef l'Ephraim b'nei shleishim*. Three generation from both of his children. *Va' yar*, he sees them. So, this man, who has a gift for seeing, and for understanding what he sees; sees the thing that means the most to him.

The world can seem unjust. Relations between our brothers and our sisters can be full of pain. Seeing is the most subjective thing. Sometimes we only see what we expect. But for Joseph, there as a final justice to his seeing. So may it also be for us.

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