



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Miketz 5770

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We usually think of prayer as a way of connecting to God. But this week's *parshah* suggests that prayer can also help us connect with other people and open the way toward *tikkun*—repairing brokenness in our world.

Parshat Miketz describes the slow, agonizing process of Joseph's reunification with his brothers, who have come down to Egypt to plead for food. The Torah tells us: "Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him."¹ The relationship between them, long broken since their bitter childhood, cannot be repaired so quickly. Joseph chooses not to reveal himself, taunting and testing his brothers and maintaining their estrangement.

Only when Benjamin, Joseph's youngest and only full sibling, arrives in Egypt, is Joseph confronted with a deeper recognition of brotherhood. Choking up, he utters a short prayer of blessing:

"May God be gracious to you, my boy." With that, Joseph hurried out, for his compassionate feelings grew hot toward his brother, and he needed to cry; he went into a room and he cried there (*vayevk*). Then he washed his face and returned; restraining himself, he gave the order [to his servants]: "Put out bread." They served him by himself, and them by themselves...²

The encounter with Benjamin stirs Joseph's compassion, but the short prayer cracks it open. Suddenly he feels the pain of disconnectedness from his family and is able to empathize with his brothers' hunger and powerlessness. And yet, Joseph hides his cries. Determined to maintain his distance and power, he stifles his own emotions and offers only a terse order to give bread. He cannot and will not sit and eat with his brothers. How familiar is this feeling to those of us who see suffering or poverty and yet hold our full selves back from such an encounter, content instead merely to give a bit of *zedakah*!

And yet: "*vayevk*—and he cried." This powerful word reappears at two crucial junctures in the next *parshah*. The first comes when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers. He allows his emotions to break free; he still tries to hide his cries, but the Egyptians outside the room hear him sobbing.³ The second comes when Joseph reunites with his father Jacob, apparently in full view of many others. At this moment of reconciliation, the process of recognition and reunification reaches its fulfillment.⁴

A 19th-century Hasidic text, *The Well of Living Waters*, illuminates how prayer can be a model for *tikkun olam*. Commenting on the verse in which Joseph begins to recognize his brothers, it cites a teaching by Rabbi Isaac Luria, one of the founders of 16th-century *kabbalah*. Luria explains why the central prayer of Judaism, the *amidah*, must first be said silently, before being repeated out loud:

¹ Genesis 42:8.

² Genesis 43:29-32.

³ Genesis 45:1-2, 14-16.

⁴ Genesis 46:29.

So it is in the way of holiness: it both disappears and is revealed. And in a place that requires full repair (*tikkun*) and unification (*yichud*), at first the unification needs to be in secret... But afterward, when the unification has been effected quietly, then one is able to raise one's voice and to effect the unification, revealed to the eyes of all.⁵

Luria, a mystic, believed that prayer (like other *mitzvot*) unlocks the Divine light in our broken world and reunites it with its Divine Source. The author of *The Well of Living Waters* argues that just as the *amidah* must begin silently and then become loud in order to achieve *tikkun*, so too Joseph's recognition of his brothers must unfold gradually, from hidden and stifled to public and open. As this recognition grows, so does its expression in Joseph's cries, until full *tikkun* and *yichud*—repair and reunification—are achieved.⁶

We can learn from the *tikkun* in Joseph's relationship with his family that sometimes the commitment to pursue justice also needs to unfold within us in stages. Justice is—or would be—the ultimate result of a full recognition of our common humanity with others, and thus, our responsibility for others. That recognition often begins quietly within our consciousness: stirred by an encounter with another person, it may then be unlocked or revealed to us through prayer. Unsettled, we may seek to stifle this growing knowledge because of its profound implications. Some time may pass before our changes in consciousness lead to changes in our outward behavior.

Yet we are obligated to emerge eventually from our silence; to cry out against injustice, and take action. Just as the public repetition of the *amidah* must follow its silent recitation, external advocacy and action are the necessary consequences of our internal awakening. Our actions can then lead to the repair of brokenness, to the release of hidden Divine light and to a closer unity between this world and its Divine ideal.⁷



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⁵ Thirer, Chayim. *Sefer Be'er Mayim Chayim*, comment on Genesis 42:8.

⁶ For the connection between prayer and weeping, see I Samuel 1:10, where Hannah prays for a child: "In her wretchedness, she prayed (*vaitpalleh*) to God, weeping all the while (*uvacho tivkeh*)."⁷ The Talmud presents Hannah as an essential model for how to pray (Brachot 30a-b).

⁷ A *midrash* suggests that this dynamic also has a collective, communal dimension: "As Joseph became reconciled to his brothers by means of weeping, so too will the Holy Blessed One redeem Israel from the midst of weeping" (Genesis Rabbah 93:12 on Genesis 45:14).

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