

Good Shabbos.

I began thinking about this d'var sometime in October or so. As I tend to do, I read a little bit and let ideas float around my mind, literally as I would swim in the morning. I thought of different approaches and lined them up with me doing a bat mitzvah at this time of my life. Then October came and went and November came. While sorrowfully not entirely surprised with the election so-called results, I still felt shocked, overwhelmed and fearful of the new institutional power of extremists and what that meant for people from every targeted and marginalized community in the U.S. and elsewhere, for people from all communities, and for the very earth itself. To say I felt a certain paradigm shift, would be almost cliché.

I considered cancelling my bat mitzvah, but was counseled by my wise sweetheart, as well as others, that we needed reasons to gather in community and to celebrate too. But my previous ideas of what to talk about went out the window -- what could I say now in this climate. But while these were and are decidedly not normal times, our history and holiness, our heros and heras, our archetypes and ancestors – they have not changed. I thought about, as I often do, a quote I have by my desk about how it is not only the black fire of the words of the torah, the stories themselves, that we must attend to, but also the white fire that surrounds the letters. We are the keepers of that fire that can shape the black fire so that it can serve us and guide us, to create a living torah, even when what we learn is that we have to do things differently. And, I believe right now, in these not normal times, in order to move forward we need to both know the black fire of our ancestors and we need ourselves be the surrounding fire.

So, I went back to this week's parsha called Vayigash, which means to approach. It is another of the continuing stories that revolve greatly around Joseph. You may not be familiar with all the story of Joseph, but many are at least familiar with the Broadway musical Joseph and his coat of many colors – not to worry, I will not be singing any of the musical hits today. And while Joseph surely is a critical and powerful figure in history, I will only talk about him here peripherally. Instead, I want to focus on Judah, who we Jews are named after, and Serach, a less known figure.

By this time in Genesis, Joseph is second only to Pharaoh in power. He is engaged here with his brothers who he has not seen in many years and who are unaware of who he has become, as many years prior these brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Joseph recognizes them, but his brothers do not recognize him yet. In the previous parsha, Joseph attempts to “test” his brothers by hiding a silver cup in the sack of grain of the youngest brother Benjamin and then accuses Benjamin of stealing the cup. Joseph declares that Benjamin must stay in Egypt and become a slave, but the rest of the brothers are free to go. Judah, one of the brothers, knows that his father Jacob would be utterly devastated to lose Benjamin, who is now their father's favorite son. Many years prior when the brothers secretly sold Joseph into slavery, they told their father Jacob that Joseph was killed in the desert. At the time, their father was devastated to learn his then favorite son Joseph was dead and on some level Jacob never recovered. In this week's parsha, Judah decides he cannot let his father go through the pain now of losing Benjamin so he approaches Joseph to beg him to let Benjamin go free. He tells Joseph, “take me, Judah, as a slave instead of Benjamin.” The importance of Judah *approaching* Joseph, is what gives the parsha its name.

It is written “Vayigash ay-lave Yehuda “ וַיִּגַּשׁ אֶל־יְהוָה” Judah approached him.

While *vayigash* is not an unusual verb used in the Torah, there are only few times where it immediately comes before some sort of formal request and each time it is when a someone risks approaching a powerful authority, sometimes even G-d, for however you interpret that, in order to save others.

There is much commentary and midrash about what exactly is the type of approach Judah makes to Joseph. This too is a part of our tradition -- there are many ways we can approach authority to try to be effective and once we do, many people may have, let’s just say interpretations or discussions about what we have or have not done – surely a Jewish characteristic of the ages.

Some interpretations say that Judah not only approached Joseph physically, but he was able to approach Joseph emotionally too and it is this emotional connection that moves Joseph to finally reveal that he is their brother and for the family to be reunited. Here, we learn the importance of speaking from the heart. The great commentator Rashi, however, says this “approach” was not a compliant beseeching, but cites midrash where Judah is so confrontational with Joseph that he not only calls him a liar, but is even willing to physically battle with him and kill him. Midrash Genesis Rabbah 93:6-9 say that the approach is an epic and violent confrontation in which Judah threatens to paint Egypt red with blood. While I don’t condone the violence, perhaps we learn here the importance of knowing we must fight with strength, fierceness and conviction when approaching those in power.

Still others say that implicit in the language itself is that Judah is not only approaching Joseph, but indeed is approaching himself. That it is because of

Judah's own history that at this moment he is able to successfully approach Joseph. And Judah's history is a history of many mistakes. It is what he does with these mistakes throughout his life that allow him to come to this place of strength and ethics.

Early in his life, Judah and his brothers are so jealous of Joseph that they want to get rid of him completely. After various plans, Judah convinces his brothers that they should sell Joseph into slavery. The irony in this parsha is that instead of Judah trying to convince his brothers to sell the favored son Joseph into slavery, he now tries to convince that very same Joseph to save another favored son, Benjamin, by offering his own self into slavery.

Later in Judah's life, he loses his eldest two sons and is filled with grief. Both of his sons were married to Tamar, who becomes a childless widow. Judah does not allow his third son to marry Tamar, in those days the only possibility for decent survival by a childless widow. Judah is motivated by his pain and fear that perhaps his next son too may die if he marries Tamar. To make a long story short, Tamar understanding her limited options, disguises herself as a prostitute, Judah sleeps with her and she gets pregnant. Judah, not realizing he is the father of the child, calls Tamar a whore. When she proves to him that he is the father of the child and does so discretely so as not to fully discredit Judah, he recognizes his mistake and his hypocrisy. He not only feels remorseful, but he says that Tamar is more righteous than he is; he learns righteousness from her. Some say this is the first time in the Torah that guilt for wrongdoing is admitted clearly.

Judah is perhaps a model of the Jewish concept of teshuvah, that we do each year during the high holidays, where we look at our mistakes and try to

make amends and make *actual change* to get to our higher selves. As we see in this parsha, Judah has changed. His failings and pain inspires his resolve and provides him the wisdom to approach a powerful person in the defense of someone other than himself; to put himself on the line for his family and community. He is able to stand up to this powerful person not because he himself is perfect, or has always been ethical or righteous, has natural responsibility or leadership from being the eldest or is even designated as the “favored son,” -- indeed far from any of these things. But Judah has inside him the understanding that his previous actions borne out of jealousy of Joseph hurt his father throughout his father’s life and still did not make Judah the favored son. He has inside him the understanding that out of the grief and fear of losing another son, he oppresses Tamar, a woman without as much power as he and he put her in an untenable situation to protect the privilege of his son. And it is Judah who we Jews are named after, not someone powerful like Joseph, or even Elijah the prophet or Moses, but someone who matures from mistakes, changes their ideas AND their behavior, who understands the uselessness and damage of protecting their privilege and oppressing others, and the need to speak truth to power.

But it is not just Judah who is an unusual powerful figure that shows up in this parsha. At one point there is a listing of all the descendents. I often have to make myself read though all these names and begets because I feel it important that we name our ancestors, but it’s also, honestly, a bit boring, so I tend to skim it, especially as it’s also angering as it’s almost exclusively a line of males discussed. But here, in this portion, one granddaughter is listed, Serach. As many have pointed out, it is pretty unlikely that Jacob’s 12 SONS had 53 SONS and just one daughter. Yet there seems to be no clear textual

reason why she is mentioned here and briefly in two other places in the Torah. AH, Let the midrash begin!

Through midrash we hear that after Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, there is concern about what this shocking news about Joseph might do to Jacob, their father, who thought Joseph was dead. Serach is asked to present the information to Jacob in a palatable way, so that he can accept it. Serach soothes Jacob with music and tells him of Joseph's existence. There is also a theory that because Serach lives a very very long life, she is able to help the Israelites fulfill the oath they made to Joseph before he died. The Jews become slaves in Egypt and Joseph asks that when the Jews are *finally* freed from Egypt, that they take the bones from his grave so he can be buried in the promised land. Joseph's bones are seen as a symbol of eternity and faith even when one is enslaved, impoverished, oppressed and in exile. And Serach lives so long that she is there when Joseph died and also when Moses and the Jewish people were trying to leave Egypt quickly to escape slavery. She is able to tell Moses where Joseph's grave is so that the Jews can fulfill their promise to their ancestor Joseph and also leave quickly to begin their journey towards freedom. In Seifer Ha Yashar, it is said that Serach is rewarded for her importance by being the **only** person, aside from the prophet, Elijah, who never actually dies but is able to enter paradise alive.

Nu, given all this, one would think we would know and hear more about her, but surely and sadly it is not unusual in the Torah or throughout history or today, for women, and woman of color in particular, as Serach is, to often be *minimally* relegated to the background, to perhaps be the soothers, but rarely considered the powerful ones. But despite male tradition of the 12 sons and their 53 sons, Serech finds a way to say, like the Jews before her and the

Jews today, henaini, I am here. Serech will not be made to be invisible amongst the many who seem to try to tell us what is “normal,” like listing mainly male descendents. Like Tamar, Serach teaches us to find our place, even when there seems there is no place for us. She teaches us to name our power in song and to understand how to talk about difficult things. She teaches us to remember our ancestors so we can make them alive in our hearts, as she literally does for Jacob, bringing Joseph back to life for him. She teaches us we can live with faith and hope even throughout the longest and most difficult and oppressive situations and the importance of needing to have our ancestors literally in our hands in order to begin the long journey to freedom, as she does when she shows Moses where Joseph’s grave is. And she shows us that it is possible for our spirit and our work not to die; it can live beyond whatever time we have here, just as it is said Serach’s spirit lives on in eternity.

Serech and Judah were the white fire of their time, burning into the black words of the stories of their families, communities and ancestors. They spoke up against power, learned from pain and mistakes, and said I am here, Hinani, no matter what the circumstances. We may think that we are not the most likely candidates to be the fire of our time, but as Judah and Serach teach us we must use whatever privilege we do have in the service of those who experience oppression and discrimination, and acknowledge we have much to learn about righteousness from those who are oppressed. And we must take what we have learned from our own oppression and pain and mistakes and use that too to become the fire. Throughout ancient and contemporary history many of our families and communities were this fire in the most challenging of times. The black fire of the holy words of our

ancestors, their stories and lessons, demand of us to become the fire and surely the time to be that fire is now.

I suppose that is obvious that I did not cancel my bat mitzvah. I didn't because I want to believe in and remember to have hope and community. I want to be part of the fire that burns with rage, compassion and love for righteousness and justice. I want to learn from the morality and the mistakes, the courage and the pain, the perceptiveness and the legacy that Judah and Serach bestow upon us. I want to do that in myself as I take on this bat mitzvah not as a 13 year old, but as I approach being 60 years old in a few weeks. I want to do that in community as I stand here in front of you who I know in so many different ways. I am hoping that the pain and grief, as well as the actions, compassion, hopes and aspirations of our collective past will help us with the challenges of today and the days after. I hope it helps each of us to commit to *approach* those in power and those oppressed, with our hearts, our fierceness and our true selves, so *vayigash* becomes today the active verb that we see it be in the Torah in all its manifestations and interpretations. May we all have the strength, tenacity, caring and wisdom of Judah and Serach to embrace the fires of our past and be the fires of today always taking with us our ancestors and always moving towards the freedom each of us and our children and our children's children deserve. Shabbat Shalom.