



Shabbat Vayigash
4 Tevet 5778 / December 22, 2017

Dear Shir Tikvah:

On the darkest Shabbat (the longest night of the year), in what has been for many a very dark year, I have been thinking a lot about how we can bring light to one another.

Practicing kindness certainly helps, as does practicing gratitude. Being good and seeing the good, even when we don't feel like it.

I also keep thinking of another one of the qualities (middot) that our tradition teaches: giving the benefit of the doubt, or in Hebrew: dan l'chaf zechut - to weigh on the scale toward merit. It's so easy to feel hurt or slighted when someone was simply going about their own business. And conversely, it's easy to cause distress where none is intended, and we may not even be aware of our impact.

Here's how the Ba'al Shem Tov taught it: "From the Biblical commandment to love your fellow person as yourself (v'ahavta l'rayacha kamocho), we learn the Talmudic virtue to judge your fellow person on the scale of merit (dan l'chaf zechut). Since you always find excuses for your own misdeeds, make excuses also for your fellow person."

This week's story shows Joseph in a stunning act of dan l'chaf zechut, giving the benefit of the doubt with his brothers:

"I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me [into slavery]; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no yield from tilling. But God 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 God." (Gen. 45: 4-8)

Joseph could see the big picture, how many lives were saved because of his circumstances. We don't know how he came to terms with intentional cruelty - it was certainly not the inadvertent wrong I described above. But I am struck by the power of Joseph's ability to let the hardship go, or even find blessing in it.

I am left with the question, How do we feel when we hold a grudge or perpetuate stories of hurt? What if... just for Shabbat... we could simply let it go?

May we continue to support one another with kindness, gratitude, and benefit of the doubt for Shabbat and in the longer days ahead.

Shabbat shalom,

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