



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayigash

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 6, 2013
Vayigash

**How to Repair an
Irreparable Rift**



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

GENESIS > Vayigash > How to Repair an Irreparable Rift

December 6, 2013

ABSTRACT

Unfortunately, it happens -- sometimes, a person hurts the one he or she loves: a spouse betrays a spouse; a brother enslaves a brother; a sister deceives a sister; parents wound children; children dishonor parents; friends offend each other. Often these betrayals are seemingly unforgiveable, leaving deep wounds which irreparably fracture the relationship and trust.

The million dollar question is: Can we repair a deep rift between intimates? Can we overcome a treacherous breach? And if yes, how?

This week's Torah reading contains the dramatic and surprising culmination of one of the greatest betrayals ever perpetrated -- brothers selling their own flesh and blood into slavery. It describes the approach that Judah took to touch Joseph's heart -- the story of one brother vulnerably approaching the other, removing all ego and self-interest, whispering pleadingly into his brother's ear...

And it teaches us one of the most important -- and counterintuitive -- lessons that we will ever hear about repairing our own rifts and schisms.

HOW TO REPAIR AN IRREPARABLE RIFT

1. Silent Treatment (Joke)

A husband and wife got into a huge tizzy. I'm not even sure what they were fighting about but it culminated in that coldest of cold outcomes: The Silent Treatment!

After about three days of silence, the husband was faced with a great dilemma – the next day, he would need his wife to wake him at 5:00 AM for an early morning business flight. But how could he go about conveying this to his wife without breaking the silence and losing the war?

Well, wise as he was, he wrote on a piece of paper, "Please wake me tomorrow morning at 5:00 AM." He left the note where he knew she would find it.

The next morning the man woke up, only to discover it was 9:00 AM and he had missed his flight! Furious, he was about to go and see why his wife hadn't awakened him, when he noticed a piece of paper by the bed. The note said, "It is 5:00 AM. Wake up or you are going to miss your flight!"

2. Family Fights

This, of course, is a humorous take on a subject that is no laughing matter. Unfortunately, the world is full of arguments, hostility and animosity. But, perhaps the worst fights are not the wars fought between countries and enemies, but the fights fought between people that love each other, between families, spouses, siblings, and friends.

Of course, optimally, there never should be such a divide between close ones. But, what happens when such a rift does occur? Can we repair it – and if so, how?

Please God, may we all know only peace in our families, but for the moment let's consider a hypothetical example and ask ourselves: "What would I do if this, Heaven Forefend, happened to me?"

3. Hypothetical Example

Say you grew up in a very wealthy home. You were one of twelve brothers, second to the youngest. Your father loved you very much. You were his life. One fine day, your ten older jealous brothers decided to sell you into slavery. After being traded a few times like a penny stock, you ended up in prison. You were subsequently freed and rose to become a great leader with great influence over the global economy and the international markets.

On another fine day, many years later, your very same brethren that had sold you into slavery, were visited by hardship, and in their dire need traveled to your country. For they had heard about this great economist and leader who might provide help and resources. Not recognizing you as their brother, they came begging for your help.

What would you do?

They sold you into slavery, essentially turning the innocent cuddled boy that you were into a slave and prisoner. But then you transcended your circumstances and became a scion and visionary. Do you now help your brothers who are in desperate need of your help or do you punish them for their cruelty?

Pay-back time? Or time for forgiveness?

And what about the brothers who perpetrated the crime: Can they find any way to repair the damage they had done? Can they bridge the rift they created? Can they restore trust?

4. A Dramatic Ending

The above hypothetical case is taken verbatim from the Torah (of course), and it culminates in this week's reading, which describes the dramatic and surprising ending to one of the greatest betrayals ever perpetrated – brothers selling their own flesh and blood into slavery.

Two weeks ago (on Shabbat of *Parshat Vayeishev*) we began reading the story of Joseph. He was second to the youngest of twelve brothers, his father's favorite son. Then, his jealous brothers, after considering killing him, sold him into slavery. He ended up in Egyptian prison. From there, he rose up to become the viceroy of Egypt and the greatest economist on the globe.

When famine hit the region, only Egypt, with Joseph pulling the purse strings, had the resources to overcome this deep recession. This is what we read last week (on Shabbat of *Parshat Miketz*).

All the starving people of the region traveled to Egypt to acquire food and sustenance. Joseph's family, back in Israel (then called Canaan), whom he hasn't seen in 22 years, was also running out of food. Jacob, Joseph's very influential and wealthy father, instructed his sons to travel down to Egypt, meet with this CEO, and acquire provisions. Of course, not having the slightest clue that this is his very own son.

Ten of the boys took off, leaving the youngest, Benjamin, at home, as he was very dear to his father. When they arrived in Egypt – to make a long story very short – Joseph recognized them but they did not recognize him. In reply to their request for food, he said that he would only provide relief if they brought their youngest brother as well.

When they did as he asked, Joseph engineered a trumped-up charge in order to seize Benjamin as his captive and told the brothers to go back home.

Thus, he set up a dilemma for the brothers – another favorite son is removed from the family and taken into slavery – what will they do this time?

This is where this week's Torah reading (*Parshat Vayigash*) begins:

5. Judah's Moment

Then Judah approached him (Joseph) and said, "Please, my lord, let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears, and let not your wrath be kindled against your servant..."¹

Judah is the fourth son. Because of his actions here and now, he will become the leader of the family – the son from whom will eventually descend the mighty and holy kings of Israel (such as King David and King Solomon), from whom will also descend the Moshiach, the Anointed Redeemer who will lead the Jewish people and the world out of exile. (May it be before this sermon concludes – and it is a short sermon.)

Judah had personally guaranteed to his father Jacob that he would return Benjamin to him unharmed. And now Benjamin has been taken prisoner! Judah is totally distraught.

So he now approaches Joseph and asks to whisper something into his ear – *let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears*. Not knowing that he is speaking to his own brother whom he had sold into slavery, he humbly approaches Joseph and proceeds to bare his pained heart.

He tells him the story of his life, of how they were twelve brothers and one of them was lost... How their father's heart was broken over the loss of Joseph, and how he is horrified at the prospect of losing Benjamin as well.

He thus opens his heart to Joseph, and his utter vulnerability and self-sacrifice pierces Joseph's heart. Two verses capture this fateful moment:

So now, please let your servant stay instead of the boy as a slave to my lord, and may the boy go up with his brothers. For how will I go up to my father if the boy is not with me? Let me not see the misery that will befall my father!"²

¹ Genesis 28-30.

² Genesis 33-34.

Judah implores Joseph, asking to take the place of Benjamin, remaining in Egypt a slave while young Benjamin returns to his father.

You see what has just happened here – Judah has turned his life around one-hundred-and-eighty degrees! A few years back, Judah led his brothers in selling their sibling into slavery while they went on to lead free lives. But, now, over two decades later, Judah is doing the complete opposite – Judah is begging to enslave himself so that he can free his brother Benjamin.

This single act of total vulnerability – laying oneself completely on the line –changed the course of history.

6. Approaching a Crisis

This, my friends, is how you approach a crisis. Intuitively many people deal with a confrontation by either withdrawing or becoming more aggressive. Withdrawal, naturally, doesn't resolve anything. Aggression often leads to a vicious cycle, exacerbating the conflagration.

Judah teaches us that you approach a challenge with complete humility. You open your heart and you bare your soul.

Whenever you have an argument with someone you love, think of these words:

“Let me be wrong just so my loved ones can be right; if that's what takes, let me be a prisoner just so that my brothers may be free.”

7. Joseph's Reaction

This heart-wrenching and heart-baring encounter moved Joseph's heart. (Because words that come from the heart enter the heart.) Judah's remarkable act is paralleled only by Joseph's stunning reaction:³

³Genesis 45:1-3.

Now Joseph could not hold in his emotions. Since all his attendants were present, he called out, "Take everyone away from me!" So no one stood with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

And he wept out loud, so the Egyptians heard, and the house of Pharaoh heard.

And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" but his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence.

One can only imagine the tears that flowed from Joseph's eyes and from his shocked brother's eyes on that historic day...

An unforgiveable betrayal – separating the brothers for 22 years – was resolved with one act, an act of absolute self-sacrifice and vulnerability.

8. The Midrash

In the Book of Proverbs we read:

*Counsel in man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.*⁴

The Midrash⁵ uses this verse to explain Judah winning over Joseph:

There was a deep well filled with coolness, its waters were fresh and pure. But no one could reach the pure waters – the well was just too deep! Came one wise man and tied a rope to a rope, a chord to a chord, a string to a string, and through that chain he drew water and drank. And all people followed suit and drank. Thus did Judah not cease to converse with Joseph, one thing after another, until he reached his heart.

⁴Proverbs 20:5.

⁵Bereishit Rabbah, Vayigash 93:3.

Often times, when we get into a disagreement with someone, especially when it is a justified disagreement, the first step is to talk about anything but the issue at hand. We go into denial due to our discomfort. We make excuses. We don't want to go to the heart of the matter. Why reach for the deep waters of the well when I can dance around this little puddle?

9. Inspirational Story (Optional)

A colleague of mine shared with me this sad but inspirational story:

A particular couple living in his community, despite them loving each other deeply and bringing up a beautiful family, faced a very challenging marriage. You see the wife, who was adopted at a young age, grew up in a home where her father, was essentially absent. He would go for long trips and barely spend time at home. As a result she developed serious abandonment issues, which impacted her in many ways, causing her to deeply mistrust those around her, especially her loved ones.

Her constant state of fear and insecurity would be especially aggravated when her husband would travel away from home. Her embedded scars and fears of abandonment left by her father's behavior in her impressionable years, would surface and she would become emotionally distraught, to the point of irrationally fearing that her husband would abandon her as well.

On one of these "ominous" trips, the husband receives a frantic phone call from his wife. She began hurling at him accusations of his betraying her and abandoning her and their children. With no cause or provocation she was simply abusing him for no reason at all. Unaware, she was reliving her childhood – at her husband's tragic expense. Her husband listened quietly to the abuse, barely able to control himself, until she finally hung up on him.

The husband immediately called his Rabbi, my colleague, and with tears told him: "I can no longer take this. It's been years. I have always been loyal, and with extra emphasis knowing the amount of hurt my wife carries. But how much abuse can I take? My mind understands that my wife is not herself and that her demons are controlling her. But my heart is devastated by her words. How can I even respect my wife as an equal if I continue to see her as a wounded child? I think the time has come for us to divorce..."

His Rabbi listened closely, and then calmly told him: "My suggestion to you will be difficult to hear, and even more difficult to do. It may even sound ludicrous to you. But I want to suggest it nevertheless.

"I suggest that you call your local florist and order the nicest bouquet of roses and send them to your wife, accompanied with a note that says, 'I love you unconditionally.'"

The husband was beside himself. "I hate my wife at this moment. I want to get as far away from her as I can. The last thing I want to do is send her roses expressing my love! What type of advice is this, Rabbi?!"

The Rabbi replied: "I told you that my advice will sound strange. But let me explain the logic: Your wife's very deep pain caused her to cry out in anger. What she is actually saying is that I am a terrified little child, frightened that you will leave me as my father did. She is calling out for help, but does not know of any other way to do so than to have an abusive tantrum. She expects that you will now get angry at her, and if you respond with anger and withdrawal you will be actually confirming and feeding her innermost fears.

"This is your opportunity to demonstrate to her the meaning of true love. And in the process shock her system, which is expecting reciprocal wrath, and instead you are showing her kindness and love. She may not acknowledge it, but she will never forget the gesture. And this will open her up."

To the husband's credit he listened to the advice. And though it did not solve the problem outright (obviously that would take time and therapy), it did open new channels of love between the couple.

10. Counterintuitive Advice

As counterintuitive as it sounds, the best response is not to fight fire with fire, but to humbly and sincerely show your unconditional love, even when you are not getting any immediate return.

Counsel in man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out – the deepest things in life, the deepest waters, take the most effort, the most care, the most work, tying a rope to a chord to a string until you can finally reach the depths of the heart and the heart of the matter.

And so is it with our personal relationships, especially those close to our hearts. If there is a schism in the heart, then the heart, and only the heart can repair that break. Nothing else will work, no platitudes, cute notes, not even roses. This Judah knew, and thus bared his heart, and this we must know, to bare our own heart when it is necessary.

And then, and only then, can we be forgiven by the people who love us for the wrongs and betrayals we may have committed against them.

11. The Zohar

The Zohar, the chief work of the Kabbalah, relates a story that demonstrates the power of forgiveness:

Rabbi Aba sat at the gate of the city Lod. He saw a man resting on a small hill. This man was weary from the road, so he lay down and slept. While he was sleeping, Rabbi Aba saw a venomous snake crawling toward the sleeping traveler. Suddenly, a segment of tree root fell and killed the snake. When the man woke, he saw the snake was dead. As soon as the man stood up and walked away from the small hill upon which he slept, the hill fell to the valley below. Thus, he was saved from being killed in this landslide.

Rabbi Aba came over to the traveler and said: “What have you done that God performed for you two miracles – for these events did not happen without reason.”

The man said: “In all my days, I forgave and made peace with any man who did evil to me. If I could not make peace with him, I did not sleep on my bed before forgiving him and all those who grieved me. Thus, I did not harbor hatred anymore for that harm he did me. Moreover, from that day on, I tried to do kindness for them so they wouldn’t think that I hate them.”

Rabbi Aba wept and said: “This man’s deeds exceed those of Joseph. As for Joseph, those that wronged him were his brothers. Assuredly, he should pity them when they fell into his hands. But what this one did is greater than Joseph’s deeds, for he pitied also strangers, so he is worthy to have God perform one miracle after another for him.”⁶

A miracle is when something unnatural occurs. And it can be brought about when we ourselves do something unnatural and abnormal – that is, abnormal by the standards of this finite earth.

When someone causes us grief, hurts us, even in terrible ways, the natural, normal approach would be to lock that person out and hold a heavy grudge.

To take the first step and forgive someone, especially if not prompted, is highly unnatural. It makes us vulnerable, leaving us open to rejection, so it is just more normal to do nothing and hold onto those angry feelings.

But, as the above story demonstrates, when we initiate and do something unnatural, the response from the other side – and definitely from the person who had hurt us – is also unnatural. It is the miraculous response that comes from God.

⁶ Zohar I, Miketz p. 201b

12. Holiday Season

In the world at large, this time of year is called the Holiday Season – spanning Thanksgiving ... Chanukah ... New Years.

During this time, we focus on the joys and blessings of family, unity, and warmth. But this, inevitably, also highlights when there is a deficiency, when a family doesn't get along well or when there is no family relations altogether. For many this is the sad reality of the holiday season – a time that reminds them of their family rifts.

It is now, as Chanukah concludes, that we must take this message to heart, to open our hearts and reach unconditionally to those that we love, to go beyond the letter of the law. As well as to allow others into our hearts.

13. Concluding Parable

I would like to conclude with a parable:

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift after 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch.

But then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a day's work" he said, "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother.

Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to it and now there is a deep ditch between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll do him one better. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence – an 8-foot fence – so I won't need to see his place anymore. That'll show my brother!"

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and the wood varnish, and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. Meanwhile the carpenter got to work, measuring, sawing, nailing.

About sunset when the carpenter had just finished his job, the older brother returned. His eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. Instead, there was a bridge – a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work handrails and all, and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched.

"You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder.

"No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.

"I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but I have many more bridges to build."

14. The Bridge

In life, we are handed a big pile of wood, cartons full of nails, and all the construction tools needed to put all the materials together and build something meaningful. The only question is:

What are we going to build with all that building material? Are we going to build walls, fences, barriers that divide? Or are we going to build bridges that unite?

Are we going to fence off our hearts and remain isolated from the ones we love? Or are we going to open up our hearts to the ones we love, reaching out, bridging any distance, any ditch that might divide us?

This week's Torah reading teaches a very powerful and personal lesson. From Judah we learn what it means to put yourself selflessly, vulnerably out there for the sake of someone you love. And from Joseph we learn that when our hearts are touched, it is possible to forgive and reconnect, even if a great injustice has been done.

So is it for each of us in our own lives. We can open our hearts and reach out to the ones we love. And, conversely, when the ones we love reach out to us in sincerity and humility, we can let them in, we can let them touch our hearts and forgive what has been done.

In the poetic words of Proverbs, *Counsel in man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out* –

Let us be understanding, drawing slowly but surely, and ultimately we shall drink of the deepest, coolest, most refreshing waters. Let us go the extra mile to those we love.

When we do something extraordinary, God makes sure that extraordinary things happen to us in return.

Shabbat Shalom!