

Parashat Vayechi
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The dusty dirt clumped against his sandals.
He gathered that old but fine woolen coat¹
in his gold clad hands and sat down,
dangling his tanned legs over the side of the pit,
bored² deep, deep into the ground.
It was dark and dry...³
while inside it snakes slithered
and scorpions silently subdued their enemies.⁴

Just sitting by that pit,
was to sit with the pain.
He eagerly went to find his brothers
that long-ago day,
at his father's bidding.⁵
Though he knew they hated him.
He knew -
His dreams, they despised.
And his coat, they coveted.
After his father's love, they lusted.
And for all of that, into the pit they threw him.

All of that was in the past now.
As one of the most powerful men
in Pharaoh's court,
Joseph lived a lavish life of comfort.
Reunited with his father
and reconciled with his brothers,
we can imagine Joseph and the entire family
living prosperously together in Egypt
for the duration of Jacob's life,
a life that concludes in this week's portion.

Returning to Egypt
after burying Jacob in *Machpelah*,
Midrash Tanchuma tells us:

¹ Genesis 37:3

² English play on the Hebrew word for pit, Bor.

³ Genesis 37:13

⁴ Shab. 22a, Chag. 3a

⁵ Rashi: "Here I am.": An expression of modesty and eagerness. He went with alacrity to fulfill his father's command although he knew that his brothers hated him. [From Mechilta Beshallah, second treatise, introduction]

Joseph stopped to look in the pit.
 What pit?
 That same pit into which his brothers cast him,
 left him for dead, so many years before.
 Having risen,
 NO - **soared** to great heights,
 what purpose did it serve Joseph
 to return to the pit that day?

The Joseph narrative,
 for all its dreamlike grandeur,
 cast of characters
 and action-packed family drama,
 is also the story of one mere pit.
JUST ONE PIT
 That each man experienced differently,
 but that nonetheless managed to engulf them all.

We learn from the brothers, their father Jacob,
 and from the one who rose above it all, Joseph -
 its what you do with the story of your time in the darkness –
 That can change your life.

*

Our infamous brothers know life's trenches.
 As Joseph approached them that day,
 in the fields of Dothan,
tired of his unbelievable and unbridled dreams,
 they plotted:

“Here comes that dreamer!
 Let us kill him
 and throw him into one of those pits....
 we can say, 'A savage beast devoured him.'
 [then] we shall see what comes of his dreams!”⁶

The brothers return home
 to break the news to Jacob.
 They witness their father's anguish,
 agonizing at the loss of his most beloved son.
 To explain Joseph's death,
 they begin to spin a story,
 digging themselves deeper and deeper
 into the same hole into which they threw Joseph.

⁶ Genesis 37:19-20

They carry this story with them,
 wherever they go.
 When, during the famine,
 they travel to Egypt to procure food,
 when they face the Vizier of the land,
 a man whom they should surely recognize –
 the story is with them.
 When they tell him “We are twelve brothers...
Ve’ha’echad eynenu – and one brother is gone,”
 as they stare into the face
 of ‘that one brother who is gone,’
 the story is with them.
 One cannot come face to face with fratricide,
 and not be affected, altered, traumatized.

On the return from burying Jacob,
 Joseph is not the only son of Israel
 to revisit that dark pit of the past.
 The brothers see Joseph.
 Sitting there.
 Staring into the pit.
 Gazing into the emptiness.
 They tremble.
 They remember what they did.
 And surely, they worry, he remembers, too.
 Tanchuma reflects their fear.
 “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!”⁷
 They ask each other.
 “Now that our father is dead,
 he will make his hatred of us felt.”⁸

Even after reuniting and reconciling
 with their brother Joseph,
 ultimately,
 the brothers carry that pit, that story,
 with them wherever they go.

What is the effect
 of keeping our story with us always?
 And what happens when our story of darkness

⁷ Tanchuma, Va-y’chi 17 “When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!” What did they see that made them afraid? As they were returning from burying their father, they saw that Joseph turned off the road and went to look at the pit into which his brothers had cast him. Upon seeing this, they said, “He still bears a grudge in his heart. Now that our father is dead, he will make his hatred of us felt.” But in fact, Joseph’s motive was a pious one: He wanted to utter a blessing for the miracle wrought for him in that place. (Tanchuma, Va-y’chi 17)

⁸ Tanchuma, Va-y’chi 17

brings us down too low,
When our brokenness feels beyond repair?

So it was with Jacob.
Upon hearing that Joseph has died,
the Targum tells us that Jacob wails,
“I will ascend to my grave.”⁹
His grief is deep.
His heartache profound.
His horror story unfathomable.
The only place he can imagine being
is in the depths of the ground.

And even years later,
reunited with his beloved son,
which one might think would be the
joyful end of his story,
Jacob lets the darkness overcome him.
Though it was **his sons**
who threw Joseph into that pit,
it was **his own** favoritism,
in raising one son above the others,
that ultimately created the breach.

Recognizing his imminent death,
he begs of Joseph -
“Promise me you will bury me
B’kivri asher ka’riti,
in my grave,
which **I dug** for myself”¹⁰
Ka’riti, Jacob said, I dug it.
I made my resting place.
My grave.
My pit.
Jacob’s deathbed wish is to return to the pit,
to the story of darkness,
that he created,
into which the whole family fell,
that his sons sought to leave behind.,
and from which Joseph rose.

What do we do with a story

⁹ Gen 35: 13 - I will ascend to my grave: as a mourner to the grave: Heb. Sheol. According to its simple meaning, it is a term denoting the grave. In my mourning I will be buried, and I will not be consoled all my days. (Targum Jonathan ben Uzziel as noted by Rashi)

¹⁰ Genesis 50:5

that follows us everywhere?
 When the darkness eclipses our vision,
 And we can't ever really move forward?
 How do we recast the dark pits of our past
 into transformative productive parts
 of our current identity?
 And how do we pull ourselves out of the deep?
 What if, like Jacob, we can't?

[Cantors sing *Mi'ma'amakim*]

Mi'ma'amakim, the psalmist calls,
 lift me from "out of the depths."
 We know from the biblical narrative,
 if not the Broadway musical,
 that Joseph did, in fact,
 rise from the depths of that pit to begin anew.
 He could dream his way in or out of any story,
 creating his own reality,
 especially when a particular reality was painful.
 With the pain he felt
 betrayed by his brothers,
 and abandoned by a father
 who never came to find him,
 dreaming then
 was both a profession and a survival mechanism.

And for Joseph,
 it seems that forgetting
 was also a way to move on.
 Joseph names his first child *Menassheh*,
Ki nashani elohim et kol amali
 Because "God has made me forget
 completely my hardship
v'et kol beit avi - and even my father's home."¹¹
 To depart from the depths,
 Joseph rewrites his story,
 attempting to forget the earlier chapters
 as he dreams up a new life for himself.
 Except, every time he says his son's name,
Menassheh – I have forgotten,
 he is reminded of the story.
 He has not forgotten.
 We know, as Joseph knows,
 the memories we try hardest to erase

¹¹ Genesis 41:51

Never really leave us.

Why then,
 after going to great lengths
 to move on from the depths of his youth,
 did Joseph revisit the pit that day?
 Was it, as his brothers feared,
 in anger and potential vengeance?

No, Joseph stopped by the pit
 on the day of his father's burial,
 not to curse his brothers.
 Rather, *Tanchuma* concludes,
 his "motive was a pious one:
 He wanted to utter a blessing
 for the miracle wrought for him in that place."¹²

Nechama Leibowitz suggests that
 "The prosperous and comfortable
 have always to be on their guard
 against the dangers
 of complacency and ingratitude."¹³
 Joseph was already out of the depths.
 He was successful, comfortable, powerful.
 But instead of being content with his prosperity,
 he agitates himself.
 He shakes himself out of complacency.
 He stops by the pit
 to remind himself from whence he came.

We all have moments in our lives
 where it seems we have been thrown into a pit.
 Where darkness and emptiness
 suffuse our every move.
 While the stories
 that lead us to find ourselves
 in the abyss may differ,
 we all have a story
 of personal catastrophe:
 feelings of failure
 when we were sure we'd succeed;
 grief over the loss of a loved one;
 distrust from an experience
 of betrayal or deception;

¹² *Tanchuma*, Va-y'chi 17

¹³ Leibowitz, 599.

fear of separation or abandonment;
 episodes of depression and anxiety;
 frustration over losing sight of our goals;
 distress when our commitments
 no longer evoke passion;
 these and so many other low points,
 we all know well.
 In these moments, in these depths,
 in spite of hierarchies of suffering,
 and severity of judgments,
 no matter the cause
 we experienced darkness.
 And if we can,
 we reach upward in order to get out.
 Why, then, would we want to revisit such pain?

It feels counterintuitive
 to put ourselves in deep, deep darkness,
 when we so naturally aspire to rise.
 But it is important to revisit the pits,
 the depths,
 the deepest darkest moments,
 those painful stories of our lives
 to see what needs to be learned from them.

Nietzsche charges us:
 Name your pain and give it a use.
 The stories we tell
 and the stories we don't tell
 can have great power over us.
 Or we can choose to have great power over them.

These stories don't have to torment us.
 We are not the brothers.
 Our pain, our stories
 do not have to skulk behind us wherever we go.
 And we are not Jacob.
 Even with the pain of our stories,
 we can rise from the deep.

If only Jacob could have taken heed
 of his final blessing to Joseph:
Yivarechecha Birchot Shamayim,
 May you be blessed in the heavens,
Me'al birchot t'hom rovetzet tachat.
 And even in the depths below.

When we revisit the pit
and remember the pain,
when we voice the story,
and transform it,
and use it -
then we can move on
to the next chapter of our story -
having faced what was terrible,
acknowledged with gratitude
that we were spared
that we survived
and were given the chance for new life.

Then we, too, can find blessings,
Even in the darkness.

[Cantors sing *Mi'ma'amakim*]