



Truth and Peace

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We find ourselves at the closing moments of the Book of Genesis—moments of transition as a family becomes a nation. We stand on the threshold between Yosef’s personal trauma and the national trauma soon to come, the slavery in Egypt. What mindset does Parashat VaYehi seek to give us as a tool for facing the suffering of Egypt?

“Yosef’s brothers saw that their father had died” (Genesis 50:15). This verse describes the moment of change: Ya’akov is gone, and the brothers stand together—yet without their father. Into this empty space, two paths of response emerge: the path of the brothers, and the path of Yosef. The first is marked by fear and lack of honesty; the second, by a courageous willingness to look also at the hurt, and a focus on emerging from it—perhaps even toward the good.

Not every path is suitable for every situation, and, in the Torah’s characteristic way, our *parashah* broadens the range of human possibilities and invites reflection on the consequences of each choice.



“Yosef’s brothers saw”—fear that leads to dishonesty

The verses reveals the brothers’ inner state: “They said, ‘What if Yosef bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the evil we did to him?’” (Genesis 50:15). They read reality through the lens of guilt: deeply aware of “all the evil we did to him,” they are convinced that Yosef intends to take revenge.¹ Yet the narrative offers no hint that Yosef planned to harm them. Their fear seems to say more about them than about him.

Driven by the fear that Yosef will maintain the grudge, the brothers approach him:

בראשית נ:טז-יז

¹⁶וַיִּצְחָא אֶל יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר אֲבִיךָ צִוָּה לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ לֵאמֹר: ¹⁷כֹּה תֹאמְרוּ לְיוֹסֵף אֲנָא שָׂא נָא פְּשַׁע אֲחֵיךָ וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי רָעָה גָּמְלוּךָ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפָשַׁע עַבְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ וַיְבִיךָ יוֹסֵף בְּדִבְרָם אֱלֹהֵי:

Genesis 50:16-17

¹⁶So they sent this message to Yosef, “Before his death your father left this instruction:

¹⁷So shall you say to Yosef, ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father.” And Yosef was in tears as they spoke to him.

The Midrash Tanhuma comments on this appeal:

מדרש תנחומא ויחי יז

חֲפָשְׁנוּ וְלֹא מְצֵאנוּ שְׂצִוָּה יַעֲקֹב דְּבַר זֶה. אֲלֵא בּוֹא וְרֵאָה כִּמָּה גְּדוֹל כַּח הַשְּׁלוֹם, שֶׁכָּתֵב הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּתוֹרָתוֹ עַל כַּח הַשְּׁלוֹם אֵלֵינוּ הַדְּבָרִים.

¹ The brothers’ words echo the description of Esav, also a brother wronged by his sibling, who is described in Genesis (27:41) as holding a grudge and bearing resentment: “And Esav harbored a grudge against Ya’akov because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, ‘Let the days of mourning for my father draw near, that I may kill Ya’akov my brother.’” The use of the same unique verb, to bear a grudge (*lishtom*), links the brothers’ fears that Yosef will harm them after their father’s death to the plans of their uncle. However, the context also subtly hints at Esav’s eventual relinquishing of his intentions.



Midrash Tanhuma VaYehi 17

We searched and did not find that Ya'akov commanded this. But come and see how great is the power of peace—that the Holy Blessed One wrote in the Torah these words for the sake of peace.

The brothers invent a “deathbed command” that never existed—“Your father left this instruction... say to Yosef: please forgive.” They choose a path of dishonesty. According to the *midrash*, the motive is the pursuit of peace, and even the permission to lie stems from “the power of peace.”

The Babylonian Talmud (Yevamot 65b) makes their act a general principle: “R. Ilai said in the name of R. Elazar bar R. Shimon: A person is permitted to deviate from the truth for the sake of peace” (Yevamot 65b). But alongside this permission, it is hard not to feel sorrow: at the very moment when the relationship enters a new stage—after their father’s death—the brothers cannot bring themselves to say plainly: “Yosef, we are afraid. We feel guilty. We ask your forgiveness.” Instead of truth, instead of direct speech, instead of exposing their inner selves, they resort to manipulation in the name of peace.

On a human level, the brothers choose to cope with their fear by creating a relationship based on dishonesty rather than trust. As soon as their father dies, they position themselves before Yosef as guilty parties plotting a way to escape punishment—rather than standing with him to build something new.

Their words—“Your father commanded”—may produce momentary calm, but they also create a pattern. There is no real conversation. There is no open taking of responsibility. There is only hiding behind the figure of their father. Moreover, invoking their father’s last will and testament binds Yosef in a web of duties and obligations, instead of leaving him—as a person,



and as someone who was wronged—with genuine freedom: the freedom to choose how to respond. All that remains for him is obedience to an imaginary will.

The “peace” the brothers seek to establish between themselves and Yosef is a peace that protects. But does it heal?

“They saw that Yosef went to the pit”—seeing that leads to action

The Tanhuma paints a contrasting picture of Yosef, showing him choosing a very different path.

בַּעֲתֵּי שְׁחֲזָרוּ מִקְבֹּרֵת אָבִיהֶם רָאוּ שֶׁהֵלֵךְ יוֹסֵף לְבָרֵךְ עַל אוֹתוֹ הַבּוֹר שֶׁהִשְׁלִיכוּהוּ אָחָיו בְּתוֹכוֹ.

When they returned from burying their father, they saw that Yosef had gone to bless the pit into which his brothers had thrown him.

This description opens a window into Yosef’s emotional state and explains the background of the brothers’ deep fear.

According to the *midrash*, after Ya’akov died, his sons traveled to the land of Canaan to bury him, as he had instructed. On their way back to Egypt, Yosef went to the pit into which his brothers had cast him. At that moment, a psychological split takes place between Yosef and his brothers: instead of communication, there is distance. As the Tanhuma explains, the brothers were afraid:

וְכִינּוּ שֶׁרָאוּ כֵּן, אָמְרוּ, עַכְשָׁיו מֵת אָבִינוּ, לֹא יִשְׁטַמְנוּ יוֹסֵף וְהַשֵּׁב יֵשִׁיב לָנוּ אֶת כָּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר גָּמְלָנוּ אוֹתוֹ.

When they saw this, they said, “Now that our father is dead, what if Yosef bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the evil we did to him?”

They assume that Yosef’s visit to the pit reveals his inner world: that he is dwelling on the harm and abuse he experienced, feeding a desire for revenge and punishment.

But the *midrash* actually places Yosef in a very different emotional space than the one imagined by his brothers. Instead of avoiding the place of his suffering, Yosef returns to it. Psychologically, this is almost impossible to understand. Yet Yosef’s return to the site of his hurt leads to a remarkable act:

הָלַךְ יוֹסֵף לְבִרְרָה עַל אוֹתוֹ הַבּוֹר שֶׁהִשְׁלִיכוּהוּ אָחָיו בְּתוֹכוֹ וּבִרְרָה עָלָיו, כְּמוֹ שֶׁחַיִּב אָדָם לְבִרְרָה עַל מְקוֹם
שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה לוֹ יֵס, בְּרוּרָה הַמְּקוֹם שֶׁנַּעֲשָׂה לִי יֵס בַּמְּקוֹם הַזֶּה.

Yosef went to **bless** the pit into which his brothers had thrown him, and he blessed it, just as a person is obligated to bless the place where a miracle was performed for him.

Yosef refuses to remain only a victim, focused solely on the wrong done to him. He does not sugarcoat the hurt done to him—he goes specifically to the pit “into which his brothers had thrown him.” He does not erase the pain; instead, he chooses to see another dimension—one he calls a miracle. It is unclear whether he refers to his personal rescue from the pit, or to the fact that through that dark moment began the chain of events that would save many lives, as the verse says: “Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people” (Genesis 50:20).

Standing at the edge of the pit, several things happen within Yosef. First, he manages to look at the pit while holding together three perspectives at once: the thoughts of his brothers (“You

intended evil”), the thoughts of God (“God intended it for good”), and his own experience (that he came out of the pit alive). Second, in this moment Yosef chooses to define what happened as a “miracle” and to bless it. Blessing a miracle acknowledges the need for salvation and the depth of the fall, yet comes from a place that says: today I stand in a different place. The blessing is a choice, an act of agency. Yosef chooses not to focus on his brothers’ cruelty in throwing him into the pit (and therefore not on revenge or punishment), but on his emergence from the pit. This shift allows him to focus on the Other—the ultimate Other—who was part of his rescue. In the language of the *midrash*: a salvation on the level of a miracle.

Between revenge and recognition

The responses of the brothers and of Yosef show us two different ways a person can stand in relation to a painful past, ways that join the broad array of human responses to being deeply hurt. They suggest that when we face wrongdoing—whether harm done to us or harm we have done to others—we have a choice.

On the one hand, we can let feelings of guilt or revenge rise up. The brothers are trapped in a story where it is obvious to them that someone who is hurt will take revenge and hurt back. This is a worldview where power and revenge set the tone. Even if Yosef doesn’t think this way, they project their own patterns of thought onto him. As a result, they live in constant anxiety—hiding, assuming that peace can only exist with a bit of dishonesty, and only under the pressure of duty and obligation.

On the other hand, we can look at the pit not as a place of returning to the injustice, the humiliation, or the abuse, but as the place Yosef left. We can name the entire process—something that also allows for a degree of responsibility. Yosef could have stood by



the pit and overflowed with anger: “Here is where my brothers humiliated me; this is where the nightmare began.” Instead, he offers a blessing. A blessing is an act of choice, freedom, and meaning-making: it recognizes the terrible, the helplessness, and also that “I am no longer there,” and it chooses to include in one’s story the idea of a “miracle.”

The *midrash* sets before us a deep choice. Sometimes we are like the brothers: knowing we hurt someone, feeling ashamed, afraid of how they will respond. In those moments, hiding behind “your father commanded” or “this is required” feels easier than speaking the truth, apologizing, acknowledging guilt, harm, consequences, and impact. Using “peace” to avoid truth may create outward quiet, but underneath it can leave guilt, suspicion, coercion, alienation, and hostility. And sometimes we are like Yosef: carrying a wound from the past—within family or community—where someone used unfair power against us, a hurt that still sparks anger today.

Parashat VaYehi invites us to the bravery of “blessing on the pit”: returning to the place of pain—inside ourselves, in memory, and sometimes in real life—and trying to see what also opened there—inner strength we discovered, new paths that emerged, a capacity for empathy that formed. This does not erase the responsibility of those who caused harm. Rather, it is a choice not to let anger and revenge define our entire story.

