

Torah Table Talk – Sacred Words

Vayitnaker: ‘He Played the Stranger:’

Alienation, Identity, and Forgiveness

Parshat Miketz, Genesis 41:1 – 44:17

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

As the *parshah* unfolds, Joseph finds himself torn between anger, uncertainty and sorrow. As Joseph sees his brothers for the first time in twenty years, he remembered his childhood dreams of megalomania and domination. But the years had changed Joseph; though he was now among the most powerful people in Egypt, he still carried the childhood wounds of having been sold into slavery by his brothers. Had they changed? Could he forgive them for their actions? More important, could he trust them? An elaborate game of cat and mouse emerges as Joseph tests his brothers and himself. On the one hand, Joseph is reluctant to reveal himself to his brothers; he, “makes himself a stranger” to them. On the other hand, he repeatedly cries as he watches them struggle with their guilt over his treatment years before. *Parshat Miketz* is read during *Chanukah*. While the connection between this biblical passage and the winter festival is not overt, there are some intriguing connections. The *Etz Hayim* Commentary states: “Although that is only a coincidence of the calendar, we can find connections. Just as Chanukah celebrates the victory of the weak over the powerful, the parshah begins with Pharaoh’s dream of the lean cows conquering the well-fed ones.” A more profound connection might be seen in the issue of identity which plays such an important role both in the parshah and in this holiday. Joseph, “makes himself a stranger” to his brothers. On the simplest level, this means that he becomes unrecognizable to them because he adopts Egyptian practices. Chanukah is all about the conflict between assimilation and identity in the Hellenistic world. We, too, struggle with questions of identity and alienation with family and community.

Genesis 39:8-9 - And Joseph saw his brothers, and recognized them (*vayakireim*), and played the stranger (*vayitnaker*) to them and spoke harshly to them and said to them, “Where do you come from?” And they said, “From the land of Canaan to buy food.” And Joseph recognized (*vayaker*) his brothers, but they did not recognize him (*hikiruhu*).

Sources

Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses

And recognized them, and...played the stranger to them. The verb, “recognize” and the verb for “played the stranger” are derived from the same root (the latter being a reflexive form of the root.) Both uses pick up the thematically prominent repetition of the same root earlier in the story: Jacob was asked to “recognize” Joseph’s blood stained tunic and Tamar invited Judah to “recognize” the tokens he had left with her as security for payment of sexual services...Given the importance of the recognition theme and verb to which it is linked, it is fitting that the fact of Joseph’s recognizing his brothers should be repeated, along with their failure to recognize him (in other words the success of his playing the stranger.)

Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, Genesis: The Beginning of Desire

“When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them.” (42:7) Joseph sets himself to act a role of total alienation Rashi reads *va-yitnaker*: “Joseph acted to them like a non-Jew, in his way of speaking – his language was harsh.” He tests his actual alienation, his lost-ness, by taking it almost to the point of caricature, conscious of the perils of assimilation, of forgetting his native culture, he acts – more, he speaks – in a style and tone barbaric to a Jewish ear. His purpose is hinted in the fact that the root of *va-yitnaker* is the same as that of *va-yakireim* (“He recognized them”). The root - *nakar* – means “to perceive by making strange” – that is, to know by breaking up the smooth continuities of things and focusing on the singularity of the object. In order finally to be known by his brothers in a way that will heal the rifts of the past Joseph makes himself strange to the point of un-canniness...He is an enigmatic sovereign presence, his true face unseen, set at a distance from them by the presence of an interpreter. In this way he can, for the first time, hear them, as they remember their deafness to Joseph’s cries from the pit.

Rashi’s Commentary

Another explanation: “Joseph recognized his brothers.” Now that they were in his power, he recognized them as his brothers and had pity on them, “but they did not recognize him,” that is, when he fell into their

power (years before), “they did not recognize him,” as their brother by acting toward him in a brotherly manner.

Bereshit Rabbah 91:6

“He made himself appear as a non-Jew (*vayitnaker*) to them.” He acted like a non-Jew, in that [seemingly resorting to divination] he took his goblet, tapped it, and said to them, “I see in the goblet that you are spies.” They replied, “We are upright men” (Gen. 42:11). He said, “If you are upright men, why did you not enter through the same gate?” They: “Our father commanded us, ‘Do not enter through the same gate.’” He: “Then what business had you being all together in the street of the harlots? Were you not afraid of the evil eye?” They: “We had lost something and were searching for it there.” He: “What was it that you lost? [You are lying!] I see in my goblet that two of you have destroyed the great city of Shechem [which I believe is what you intend to do here].” They: “Who were the two?” He again tapped the goblet and said, “Simeon and Levi.” Seized with trembling, the brothers blurted out, “We, thy servants, are twelve brethren” (Gen. 42:13). He: “Where are the other two?” They: “One, the youngest, is this day with our father, and the other is we know not where” (ibid.). He: “Bring your youngest brother unto me, so that your words may be verified” (Gen. 42:20). He then seized Simeon, bound him before their eyes, and said, “This one will stay in prison until you bring me the youngest.” Why did he bind Simeon? Because it was Simeon who had pushed him into the pit; and also because Joseph wished to separate him from Levi, lest the two devise a plot against him. Simeon then said to his brothers, “What you did to Joseph, are you now about to do to me?” They: “What can we do? Shall the people of our household die of famine?” He: “Do what you will. As for me, let me see who can throw me into prison!”

Commentary

The language in the story of Joseph is seriously playful. Nearly the same words are used for alienation and identity. *Vayakirem* and *vayitnaker* have opposite meanings but are closely related as the commentaries above point out. Joseph is not sure if he wishes to deny his connection to the past or to identify with it. He not only recognizes his brothers but, for the first time, he begins to understand them. And yet, he can not deny his anger at the way they treated him. But why should he forgive them? Joseph has made a good life for himself in Egypt. He does not need his family? His half-Egyptian son celebrates his alienation from his ancestral home. The name, Manasseh, means “God made me forget completely the hardships of my father’s home.” (Genesis 41:51) And yet, there are his brothers standing before him and reminding him of his painful experiences. We can deny our past but we cannot avoid it. As hard as Joseph tries, he cannot turn away from his family. He makes himself a stranger but he is overwhelmed by emotion, crying more than any other character in the Bible. Sometimes when we play the stranger with the family and friends, we do so to protect ourselves from the painful truths that confront us. Why does Joseph act in this seemingly strange fashion? The Spanish Torah commentator, Don Isaac Abravanel, asks: “Why did Joseph denounce his brothers? Surely it was criminal of him to take vengeance and bear a grudge like a viper. Though they had meant evil, God had turned it to good. What justification, then, had he for taking vengeance after twenty years?” Joseph’s response to his brothers is not so different from the animosity and ambivalence we all feel at times towards family – and maybe toward our religion as well. We can alienate ourselves but we cannot escape who we are!

Questions to Ponder

1. Which translation best captures the meaning of the word *vayitnaker* as you understand it: “he played the stranger;” “he acted like a stranger toward them;” or “he hid his identity from them?” Do you think Joseph’s actions were motivated by fear, anger, or simply curiosity about how his past dreams would play out?
2. Have you ever felt the need to “play the stranger” in your dealings with others or with your heritage? If so when?
3. The Maccabees are often depicted as zealous defenders of the faith. Later history would depict them differently. Later the Maccabees would become assimilated and lose much of their identity. In fact they were responsible for allowing the Romans to take control of Jerusalem. To what extent does power often lead people away from their identity? Do you think Joseph faced these challenges?

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