

THE TRUE VALUE OF FREEDOM AND RECONCILIATION

A commentary on *Parashat Vayigash*
By Rabbi Alexandra Wright

Parashat Vayigash brings the story of the estrangement of Joseph and his brothers to a moving climax. Second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, Joseph is responsible for managing the distribution of grain during the seven years of famine in the land. It is the famine that brings his brothers to Pharaoh's court, to purchase food. Joseph, unrecognised by his brothers, although he knows them, insists that their youngest brother, Benjamin, accompany them on their next visit. Simeon is taken hostage until their return.

The brothers make their second visit with Benjamin and appear before Joseph. As they make their way home, Joseph's

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goblet is found in Benjamin's sack and Joseph announces his plan to keep Benjamin as a hostage and release the rest of the brothers to their father.

Judah approaches the man to plead with him: *"By your leave, my lord," says Judah, "please give your servant a hearing, and do not let your anger flare up at your servant – for you are like Pharaoh."*

This verse, and the emotional reconciliation of the brothers, always reminds me of the moment that Nelson Mandela was released from his twenty-seven year-long imprisonment on 11 February 1990; how during that long period of privation, he had preserved the mask of restraint, keeping his emotions under strict control: "I have been fairly successful in putting on a mask behind which I have pined for the family alone".

Mandela survived against all odds into ripe old age; he implacably fought against apartheid in South Africa, hungered for freedom - not simply his own freedom, but for oppressed and oppressor to be liberated from prejudice and narrow-mindedness - and lived to see his dream of the dismantling of institutional apartheid fulfilled.

Many have written about the accrual of his moral capital, his dogged determination to see through the dream of reconciliation – this in spite of his political shortcomings. Others describe him as 'a patriarchal personality conscious of his messianic stature,' unable to share moral authority easily.

On the eve of the judgement that would determine his release from prison, and not knowing whether he would be set free or hanged, he wrote these words:

"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Mandela was undoubtedly a moral phenomenon, a symbol of the oppressed and all those deprived of freedom. But he was also a figurehead of freedom and equality, of the aspiration for reconciliation in a broken and deeply damaged society. He must have felt deeply angry at the injustices embedded in South African society, and no doubt there were times when he allowed his anger to *"flare up"*. But his stature – *"for you are like Pharaoh"* – as one who had suffered for so long, yet who remained unbending in his quest for that which was right and good – remains, long after his death, as a symbol of profound hope in broken societies.

As Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, there is stupefaction and bewilderment, but then a tearful reconciliation. The injustices of the past are set aside and there is reassurance and generous hospitality as he offers to house his father, brothers and their families in the land of Goshen.

In this story, we glimpse the terrible suffering that famine can bring on whole populations, the possibilities when governments manage disasters effectively (even when it involves people having to buy back their own produce!), the fearfulness and terrible uncertainty of detention and the true value of freedom.

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