

The Talking Cure

Vayigash

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The Jewish Center

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In 1887, a Jewish ophthalmologist named LL Zamenhof created the language of Esperanto. Having grown up in Bialystok, he was moved by the enmity he saw between and among the various ethnic groups in the city: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews. As he once wrote, “the diversity of languages is the first, or at least the most influential, basis for the separation of the human family into groups of enemies.” And so he channeled his idealism into the creation of a universal language.

It’s the issue of language that I want to take up with you this morning.

There’s not a lot of dialogue at the opening of our parsha. Vayigash actually begins with two independent monologues. The first is Yehudah’s. He makes a passionate and compelling plea for his brother. “Take me,” he says. “And let Binyamin return to his grieving father.”

And then Yosef proceeds to make his own speech. He reveals himself and then goes on to assuage his brothers’ fears, telling them their great crime all those years back was really part of a much larger divine plan, the force of which was only perceptible now. Despite the guilt they feel, they should consider themselves blameless.

He kisses each of his brothers. He cries.

ואחרי כן דברו אחיו אתו

It’s such a tease. The Torah tells us that finally – after 22 years of separation – they spoke. The brothers talked to each other. Well, if there was a conversation, what did they say?

The Torah doesn’t tell us. So if it’s not in the text, surely the Midrash must have a theory. There must be at least a guess as to what the conversation was about.

But the Midrsah is silent too.

Maybe the Talmud or one of the Rishonim?

Nothing. Not a clue.

So we’re at an impasse. If they said something important, let’s hear what it was. And if it wasn’t important, why include the fact that they spoke in the text at all?

To understand what’s happening here, I want to return to the beginning of the story – where the narrative went off the rails in the first place.

The Torah is quite explicit about the relationship between Yosef and his brothers. There was jealousy and animosity.

וישנאו אותו ולא יכלו דברו לשלום

They hated Yosef and were incapable of speaking peaceably to him.

And the question is why? Why couldn't they even talk? The Torah itself tells us the answer.

Remember his first dream about the sheaves. It tells us everything we need to know. Of course the metaphor was off-putting. Who wants to hear that their brother will reign over them? But it wasn't just the message; it was the medium.

ויוספו עוד שנא אתו, על-הלמתי וְעַל-דְּבָרָיו

They hated him not just for his dreams; but for his words – for how he communicated.

Why is Yosef talking about sheaves in a field? These are shepherds. In the Torah – and in the Ancient Near East – shepherds and farmers represent two opposing archetypes. They don't get along. And they don't share a vocabulary.

- The farmer is sedentary; the shepherd is nomadic.
- The farmer traffics in cycles of nature; the shepherd is always seeking greener pastures.
- The farmer embraces stability. The shepherd is after change.

Yosef dreams in a language that his brothers don't understand. It's not just that they didn't like him; they never even understood him.

Which brings us back to our original question. If the brothers spoke, what did they say?

In point of fact, this time the medium was the message.

Just the simple reality that they were speaking was so hugely significant because it had never happened before. For the first time in their relationship, they were able to talk to one another. The specifics of what they said are almost beside the point. The Torah is simply telling us that here is where their relationship began in earnest.

Emily Fox Gordon wrote a very provocative piece a few months back in *The American Scholar* called "How I Learned to Talk."

"We have reached a bad time for talking. It's not only that the culture has split into warring factions and that representatives of these blocs have very little to say to one another. That began to happen long ago. What's newer is that... talk has become so inhibited.... Judgment and discretion have ceded their function to the political censors who stand guard at the gates of the mind, and humor, unless it's entirely anodyne, is tightly regulated. As for the imagination, these days it's viewed with suspicion."

When it comes to talking, she writes, “The cultural and political tripwires that have been strung across the world unnerve us and discourage it.”

Throw in the internet and smart phones and you’ve got a recipe for insipid conversation at best or utter non-communication at worst.

As is the case with any language, disuse begets to disuse. Our communication muscles begin to atrophy and we lose our capacity to talk.

The antidote, as Dr. Zamenhof long ago prescribed, is the creation of a shared vocabulary.

I’m not here to advocate for renewed attention to Esperanto. I have a very different shared language in mind.

On Wednesday I attended the siyum hashas in Met Life stadium. To see 90,000 Jews come together in any context is extraordinary. But to see them come together in the context of a shared text is even more extraordinary.

We daven every day for the ingathering of exiles. We daven every day that a time will come when our people is united in the Land of Israel.

But even more than a national homeland, what’s bound us together as a people for 2000 years and what binds us together today is the Torah.

As the Midrash tells us:

איכה רבה (וילנא) פתיחתות
הלואי אותי עזבו ותורתי שמרו, מתוך שהיו מתעסקין בה המאור שבה היה מחזירן למוטב

God tells the Jewish people in the Diaspora: Don’t even worry about me; as long as you’re involved in the Torah, the Torah will keep you on the path.

It’s quite a simple formula. Jews who have prioritized Torah have created a Judaism that endures. And those who have experimented with a Judaism in which Torah is somewhere other than the center – have faded into obsolescence.

Tomorrow, the 7½ year cycle of daf yomi begins anew. There are so many reasons to join. I’m just adding one. To study Shas is to study the grammar and vocabulary of our *mamalashon*. Our idiom. The building blocks of our universal language as Jews.

To know the Talmud is to create a bond across time with Abaye and Rava; with Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam. To know the Talmud is to create a bond with every other member of the Jewish people.

That’s the force of the Rashi later in our parsha.

The brothers return and tell Yaakov what's happened. But the tale is too tall; he doesn't believe them.

Then he sees the wagons

וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הַעֲגָלוֹת, אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח יוֹסֵף לְשֵׂאת אֹתוֹ; וַתַּחֲזִי, רוּחַ יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיהֶם .

And his mind was put it at ease.

Rashi says it was a coded message. Yaakov and Yosef had been learning together the sugya of eglarufa – so he understood the sign.

The brothers and Yosef had no shared language – so even when they did speak – their words were of no value. Yaakov and Yosef shared a bond. And so they didn't even need words. Just a signal was enough.

And if you'll tell me that that ship has sailed; you never had the background; it's too late... I'll tell you on that we met a man in the Meadowlands who started learning at 88 and finished Shas on Wednesday at age 95.

Young or old; man or woman; there's no one can't participate.

These are difficult times for us Jews in the Diaspora. And maybe particularly for us Jews in New York City.

The greatest consolation is that we have each other. But we'll only have each other as long as we can talk to one another. I'm not saying we shouldn't fight. We should. There's nothing more elemental in the Talmud than מחלוקת. There's a raging debate – or seven – in every sugya. But the system only works when we're all the same page. The challenges facing our community aren't going away anytime soon. But if we expand the scope of our shared language, at least we can take solace in the knowledge that when we face those challenges, we won't have to do so alone.