

Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Vayaeshev

I spent a couple of hours walking through history last week. While visiting my mother, I had coffee with a new friend who was an old time ... well, anything but a friend. You may recall that I previously spoke of the re-union planning over last summer. I had come back into contact with Mark McGhie. We had never been friends, nor close to friends, in fact the only kind words we ever shared were ... well, there were no kind words that we shared. Over the course of the last several months, we have created a new friendship rooted in our mutual maturation and changes of heart. Last weekend, we met for coffee. It was two of the nicest most unexpected hours I have spent in a while. There was so much about each other that we had never known or thought to ask, and in hearing each other, lots of puzzle pieces began to fall into place. There was a whole lot more about who Mark was, and perhaps who I was, that I first learned that day. It was a gift and a blessing that too few of us get to share in. Most of us are forced to live with the consequences of our past, never having the opportunity to retrace our steps with someone who can help us gain perspective. In failing to gain this perspective, we condemn ourselves to continue to recreate the same problems in future relationships. We are responsible for the choices we make and when we make them with only partial truths, we are destined to have made problematic choices. Certainly the choices that Mark and I made as to how we related to each other and the world around us was ours to make. It is only with a little perspective that we can see the blessings and curse of those choices.

This is Patriarch Jacob's story, as well. This week's portion begins with an incredibly troubling statement. "And Jacob was settled in the land." The operative word is "Vayaeshev," a word that translates as dwelled or settled. The verbs for lived, existed, set up camp, etc are not found in this text. He pursued a place of rest from his life which had been full of torment. His dispute and tenuous reunification with his brother, his dishonest relationship with his father-in-law, his squabbling four wives, his sons who murdered an entire town, and his struggle with God were all only chapters in a tumultuous life. But now it was time to put the past aside and dwell in the land. Despite his intentions and desires, his life continued to provide only torment. The Joseph story reminds us that Jacob did love Rachel more than Leah, he chose Joseph over his other children, denying them his love and attention. Jacob even lords Joseph over his brothers in the field. When they get rid of Joseph and tell their father that he was dead, Jacob asks God, "Why me?" The land in which he hoped to dwell became the land of his living grave. Jacob had no perspective – no best friend to sit him down at any time along the way, to figure out that most of his trauma came from choices he had made. It was not until he was an old man reunited with his son who he thought dead, that he found rest, and then it was in someone else's land. Jacob's life may have ended reconciled, but at no place along the way did he ever make the real opportunity to find healing, resolution, and refocus.

All this may be true, and yet, when we speak of the patriarchs of our tradition, Jacob is certainly listed right up there with Abraham and Isaac. As I thought about my weekend visit with Mark and then thought about Jacob, I found myself troubled. In fact, as to Jacob I have always been troubled. Despite his many epiphanic moments, he never seems to get it. God had saved him from himself many times, and yet, he never learned. How is this life story supposed to become

a positive influence for us? I do not know that it is enough to say that he has status for literally being the father of the tribes of Israel. In light of his life story, I am not sure that the wrestling match or the dream of the ladder really made any difference, either. At the risk of being callous, I cannot even justify his elevation simply because he survived it all. Perhaps the editors / authors of the bible never intended for us to see the patriarchs as paradigms of virtue and faith. The volumes of commentary of apologetics, creating Midrash telling the stories of the virtue of these men, the actual book "forgot to include." As we look at their life stories, they were fraught with ethical and moral lapses. Their work and lives are spent focused on themselves, and even when they make the bold step forward as did Abraham over Sodom, ultimately, they cave, as did he, and protected himself and his own. Perhaps the genesis stories even if rooted in myth, are our stories. The people of genesis are us, we look in the mirror. We hold them up not for their virtue but for their realism and relevance. We will then spend the next four books teaching the process of decision making to help us live better, less traumatic, more fruitful lives. Maybe it is specifically because of our study of the Patriarchs that made Mark and I realize that we needed to seek resolution in this and so many other places in our lives. First we have to take ownership of our baggage and our choices, but then we also need to surround ourselves with people who will help us make sense of those decisions and help empower us to make better ones as we move forward. Life is too short to suffer, especially when our suffering is due in large part to our own lack of vision. The patriarchs shunned community and none of them had good relationships with even their spouses. If this is a paradigm for us, it is one not to follow. This Shabbat, retrace your steps in time. Renew even a difficult relationship and explore what went wrong. Revisit a friend with whom you lost touch. Close the chapter on the pain we have brought forward from yesterday, and write on the new pages the book by which you want to be remembered. Shabbat Shalom.