

## Shabbat Shalom With a Side of Torah – Vayekhi

Professor Plum in the study with a wrench." Or was it, "Miss Scarlet in the kitchen with a knife?" Perhaps it was both. The movie "Clue" was innovative. It had multiple alternate endings. Depending on where you saw it and on which day you saw it, the ending was different; it mirrored the game's potential for variety.

I am addicted to a game on my phone: Bubble Breaker. Actually, it is Rabbi Stan Mile's fault. He beamed it to my phone a couple of years ago; he was my "pusher." It is so bad, that when I bought my recent phone, one of the features I sought first was whether the game was pre-loaded or not. It is a strategy game, and what makes it challenging is that you can only undo one move. You can't go backwards to an earlier point for a real "do over." You have to get it right, and if the move that loses the game is one that you want to take back ... too late. That one is gone forever.

"Do overs" and alternate endings are the tools of children in the play yard that keep friends friends and keep play time fun. The real world does not have many "do overs," but we are not immune from the alternative ending piece, at least not in my religious tradition. In fact, Ben Bag Bag (a sage in the Mishnah) teaches that any given piece of text has to be turned over and over again, for each time our new experiences will yield greater insight.

Such is the way in which I came to understand a text from this week's portion. Jacob is dying and calls his children to his side. He is about to tell them about their fate for the future, but in mid-sentence interrupts himself, "V'shimu el Yisrael avikhem – listen to your father Israel." Then, with his very last breaths, he went on to tell each his blessing or curse. (Gen 49:2) In a Midrashic work, Devarim Rabbah, I found a wonderful "alternate ending" to this conversation. The text tells us that the immediate response to Jacob's death bed statement and ultimate death is Joseph's mournful wailing and the return of the brother's fears. The Midrash, however looks at the phrase from Deuteronomy 6:4, the declaration of faith, "Shemah Yisrael, Adonai, Elohaenu, Adonai Ekhad – Listen Israel, YHVH is the only God," as a response to Jacob. Jacob and Israel are synonymous names, and the Midrash hearkens back to the phrase from our text where Jacob Says, "Listen to your father Israel." The sons then respond, "Listen Dad (Shemah Yisrael), we know that we have but one God." In other words, "We understand your concerns, so don't worry." With that, Jacob "goes to rest with his fathers."

Even in the moments where the literal text may create difficulties, such as Jacob blessing some children while cursing others, just before he dies, the rabbinic tradition goes out of its way to create a n'khemtah, a healing resolution. Even where Jacob's last thoughts were painful, the Midrash tells us that they accepted the rebuke with love and committed to healing their world. Even with the mandate our text gives us to see the world with new eyes and rethink text every time we look to it, there is – even with this mandate for variety -- an underpinning that commands us to seek healing and peaceful resolution. Repeatedly we are taught that as to any reading of text, the command reads, "U'v'kharta b'khayim – therefore choose life," and as one who teaches in a variety of religious settings, I am convinced that this is a teaching not unique to Judaism. Herein is the difficulty we face: each one of us believes that religious tradition is intended to enhance the world around us, giving us new insights towards a deeper faith in the goodness of the divine creative energy. And, yet, in so many news stories

we read each day, we find God and religion used as the battering ram inflicting blunt force trauma on victims in its path, or as the excuse/justification for the way in which we ignore the needs/rights of those who are or believe differently than do we.

I wonder what God thinks about our chauvinistic ownership of divinity? For those Christians who condemn those of other faiths to hell, Jews who argue that we have “chosen status above all others, Muslims, who claim that Allah speaks only through them, and the host of other statements made by people who claim to be faithful in their traditions, I have to ask, “How can we affirm that there is only one God, one God of love and justice who created all of us, who created one world for all of us to share, then ignore all but only one of us? And even were that possible, how is it that each one of us who claims to be “the one” chosen, can at best, only stand in line next to each of the others who make the exact same claim for themselves? For this, there can be no “do over” or alternate ending. As the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. alluded, so much of what we call faith and religion is nothing more than arrogance and superstition. In our liturgy, we pray for the day when God will be one and God’s name will be one. There are 32 different flavors of ice cream at Baskin Robbins – all labeled Baskin Robbins. There can likewise be hundreds of different faith traditions all bearing the same label of “Godly.” In my own home, we have two different genders, four different hair colors, and 6 different height and weight variations – and yet we are all Klins – and, we love each other. How difficult a concept is this really? Shabbat Shalom.