

## D'var Va'yechi 1 Jan 2021 – Matt Banks

- I biked home just at the beginning of the snow storm and it was just what I needed. Food for the soul, as it were. I'm guessing I have an aberrant connection in my brain somewhere, but I come alive when I put myself out in unsavory conditions and not only survive, but thrive.
- On my bike rides home from work sometimes I go up State Street and there is a quote on the side of the Overture Center from Sojourner Truth, "the truth is all powerful and will prevail ". The full quote is actually "I feel safe in the midst of my enemies, for the truth is all powerful and will prevail."
- This week's parasha is called Va'y'chi and begins with the word Ya'y'chi, which means 'he lived', referring to Yakov's sojourn in Egypt. So it launches from a place of life, and yet the entire parasha is about dying. First it describes the last days and the death of Yakov, then as if it's a novel that's had a chapter torn out, we turn the page and the narrative picks up during the last days of Yosef's life and his death.
- Life is all about transitions. There is no steady state. Change or cease to exist. Ultimately we transition into something entirely different, what we call death but the Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn has a different perspective.
  - He starts from the perspective that it is impossible to define the beginning and end of life, just as it is impossible to define the beginning or end of a cloud – they are made of water vapor, but when rain falls and the cloud becomes something else we wouldn't say it dies. Its water gets absorbed into flowers and swells rivers and fills the ocean. Our molecule before we are born are part of some other living thing, and will be long after we draw our last breath. Our origins are those of the universe, and our end is as well. It is a process he calls interbeing. We inter-are.
  - "We are not limited to our physical body even while we are alive. We inter-are with our ancestors, our descendants, and the whole cosmos. We don't have a separate self, we are never really born, and we never really die. We are interconnected with all life, and we are always in transformation."
- When I read Thich Nhat Hanh, there is something so obviously true about what he's saying, and yet it also makes no sense. It's like the truth is there, and yet I can't accept it.
- In a very real sense, we could say that 2020 was a long, painful funeral for truth. Truth died this year, and God help us in the year to come.
- Gladwell's book Talking to Strangers: we are spectacularly bad at deciding whether people are telling us the truth. We are convinced that we can read people, can discern their motives and intentions. CIA handlers in Cuba and East Germany; Chamberlain and Hitler; judges in NY deciding on pre-trial releases at arraignments.

- Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory. We assume that people are telling us the truth. We're good at identifying the people who tell the truth, but we're terrible at identifying the people who lie. We lead by believing. Belief is not the absence of doubt; it is the absence of sufficient doubt.
- You'd think that humans would have evolved to be able to detect lies. It's really useful to know if someone is trying to deceive us. But we're really bad at it.
- We want to believe in each other! It's super sweet, and it gets us into so much trouble. Opens us up to all manner of ridiculous conspiracy theories that cause real harm.
- And it's particularly apropos, because Yakov dies in this week's parasha, and according to the Rabbis, Yakov represents the quality of truth.
- In fact, the Sefat Emet discusses a teaching he learned from his grandfather, that the reason the parasha begins with Va'y'chi, and not Va'y'hi ("he was") was to teach that with the quality of truth you can live anywhere, even in Egypt.
  - By the quality of truth, of course, he means the awareness that everything is a manifestation of the Divine, and that even in a world of depravity, heartlessness, and violence, holiness and the Divine manifest, but are hidden from view.
  - What does it mean that Yakov represents the quality of truth?
  - Sefirot ('numbers' or stages) of the Kabbalah are an attempt to characterize both the inner psyche of God, and also the path between the God of ein sof, of absolute reality, of perfect unity, and the God that is manifest in this world of relative reality and multiplicity.
  - It's also a map of our inward spiritual journey to connect to God.
  - So it's at once a map of God's psyche, and a map of our own, which makes sense since we are created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God, and even more importantly, there is nothing but God (i.e. all of this reality in which we exist is a manifestation of God).
  - So the 10 sefirot are like 10 rungs on a ladder. The top three, the upper sefirot, are pretty complicated and heady, and best left for another day. But lower 7 are more relevant to the question at hand.
  - The first of these is chesed, translated variously as loving kindness, covenantal love, or sometimes grace. It's closely associated with the idea of sheaf, or Divine flow of blessing and life. It represents the God of love, the unbounded flow of blessing that is always there, a gift of love that is beyond measure. It is the first emergence of God in this lower realm, and is associated with God's first adherent, Avraham, a man so smitten with his love for God he chucks everything and follows this voice off into the unknown like an epic romantic movie.
  - The next is gevurah, structure or power, sometimes also called din, judgement, the yin to chesed's yang. It is the boundless power of God. It's a competing force in God's psyche, just as it is in ours. It's associated with Avraham's son Yitzchak,

and manifests in the human psyche as fear or awe, a knowledge of our mortality and limits in comparison to the infinity of the Divine. It measures and limits love, ideally to mete it out to those who need it. But of course it doesn't work that way: our judge-y side is the side of anger and dismissal, and when it gets the upper hand evil emerges in the world.

- And so the next sefirah is tiferet, splendor, sometimes also called emet, or truth, which is the force that balances chesed and g'vurah. And this is the sefirah that is associated with Yakov, not the Yakov who was the trickster and fraud as a young man, but the Yakov after he wrestled with the angel and was renamed Yisrael. Yakov represents the perfect balance between the forces of love and judgement, both in God and in ourselves.
- Yakov is truth. He is the balance between love and fear, Avraham and Yitzchak, he even, the Rabbis taught, sets right the sin of Eden, and so heals the schism between humanity and the Divine.
- Yet he is pretty crabby on his deathbed. There is a lot of bitterness in his so-called blessings to his children, as if he needs to tell the truth, and the truth is not pretty.
  - He says to his first born, Reuven, that he is as "unstable as water", that he'll "no longer be successful", that he brought disgrace on his household.
  - As first born, I'm guessing that Reuven already had it pretty hard, had a lot to live up to. What was the point of slapping him in the face like this?
  - Shimon and Levi get dissed similarly. But Yehuda comes out smelling like roses. And so it goes, some kids get the thumbs up, some thumbs down.
- When I read this I couldn't help thinking about the aftermath, and the fractures and resentment that this kind of thing can lead to.
- It seems to me that the balance that Yakov is said to represent is wholly lacking here. They are all aware of what they've done, and if Yosef, the one they sold into slavery, was willing to forgive them, why couldn't Yakov muster a little compassion on his way out?
- I imagine that as he approached this grand transition we call death he wanted to teach his children one last time, but it appears that Divine forces conspired against him.
- How do we know this?
- The parasha is sagur, closed, in the sense that it begins in the middle of a column of Torah without paragraph break. And the Rabbis, always curious about these sorts of things, asked why that would be?
- In the Midrash, it is said that Yakov could see the evil that was about to befall his people, and could see as well the redemption, and he wanted to tell them.
  - Look, it's going to be hard for a long time, but there is blessing even in this place of evil, you just have to look a little harder. Even in the narrowest of straits, in

the Mitzrayim of our daily lives, we can still thrive. Yakov says, I've had a hard life, I know what I'm talking about.

- Yakov knew the secret but the thing is, he wasn't allowed to tell, and that's why I think he was pretty crabby that day. You see, the Talmud says that Divine forces conspired to silence him.
  - Had he been able to convey that lesson, there would be no such thing as exile.
  - Seems super harsh. If there was ever a life-lesson we'd want passed on, it's that one.
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- The thing is, we can read this life lesson a hundred times and it won't sink in. We need to know about the possibility of it, we need to have faith that it's there, but to really take in the truth of it, we need to live it.
  - The ability to find that which is hidden from us, the ability to feel and express gratitude for small blessings that are all around us, is not something that comes naturally to us.
  - We have to train ourselves, to practice, to fail, and practice, and fail again.
  - We all of us have faith that we can do much better as individuals and as a community, but that faith is only the starting point. That is Yakov's blessing for all of us. The truth is there, never stop searching.
  - As we enter the first Shabbat of 2021, I wish all of us the love and strength to find the blessings and the truth in our lives, to find the truth of those blessings, and the blessings in that truth.