

Vayigash 5784
 Learning To Be Our Siblings' Keepers
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We have reached the penultimate parashah of the book of B'reishit, and with it, an answer to the fundamental question the very first parashah of Torah raises:

הֲשִׁמְרָ אָחִי אֶנְכִּי? (בראשית ד, ט)

Am I my brother's—or, in today's language—Am I my *sibling's* keeper? (Gen. 4:9)

It's so tempting to say we got the point as soon as Kayin asked the question, after killing his brother, that it was rhetorical: of *course* we are our siblings' keeper! As Jews, our starting point always has been that all people are created in the Divine image and we are responsible for one another.

But it's not by accident that it takes until the end of the Book of B'reishit to bring the lesson home. Eleven parashot! It's a long learning curve to internalize that imperative. And so much family strife occurs in the gap—the bitter rivalry between Yaacov and Esav, Yoseph's brothers' jealous and cruel treatment of him, and his cruel and manipulative treatment of *them*, especially when he gains the upper hand, and much more. Let's take a closer look at what happens with Yoseph and brothers, for they are the ones through whom the lesson comes home to us.

One of the most painful moments in the Joseph story occurs when his brothers enjoy a picnic at the edge of the pit. Down in that pit, Yoseph wails for help, and up above, his brothers refuse to hear his cries. They see his terror and look away. *We* see them as evil but surprisingly our commentators do not.

I find this fascinating. Our commentators make these brothers relatable to us, seeing them as people like us, not evil, but generally decent, maybe even righteous people, who believe they are doing nothing wrong. Yoseph, the favored son of the favored wife, lords it over them, after all. He doesn't take their cues to stay away from them. According to the commentator S'forno, the brothers believe that Yoseph may hurt them—even kill the—in service of his dreams of ruling over them. They actually fear him, so they remove him from their midst as an act of self preservation. Only later, when they face the wrath of their estranged, unrecognizable brother-turned-Egyptian viceroy, do they reflect: "This [trouble, now] is because we saw [our brother] Yoseph's distress but we did not hear him pleading with us."

They have learned, and if the reader feels unsure, the Torah provides more evidence. When Yoseph demands that his brothers bring Benjamin to Egypt, Judah—Yehudah—says to his father Yaacov: 'Send the lad with me...I will keep him safe... If I do not bring

him back and set him before you, I will bear the blame (Gen 43:8).” And when the viceroy of Egypt wants to imprison Binyamin for the false crime of stealing the viceroy’s goblet, Judah says to him: If I return to my father without Binyamin, my father will die, as his soul is bound up with the boy. I am responsible for Binyamin. Therefore, imprison me instead and let the boy go home (Gen. 44:27-34). Yehudah, after whom we are all named, shows that he has internalized the lesson.

Now, in our parashah, Yosef reveals himself to his brothers. Years of estrangement and lost hope melt away as the family comes together—not in a place where they feel at home, but in a foreign land where they have finally found the capacity to see one another and to act as brothers who are responsible for one another.

Most of us readers never really liked those brothers because of what they did to Yosef. We are not easily impressed that they have learned what we thought was obvious. But Yosef also models it for us. After the reveal, Yosef’s brothers fear that he will use his Pharaoh-given authority to hurt them but instead he *forgives* them. He sees the hand of God in all that has transpired. He chooses not to act like a Pharaoh who wields power as if he is a god. Instead, Yosef acts like a person who understands that his capacities are Divine gifts meant to be used in service of God’s dream for humanity—not a dream of *superiority*, it turns out, but a dream of *care*. “God sent me here so that I could feed you. I will use my power to care for you and our entire extended family. That was *always* God’s will.”

Even that might not move us to understand how *hard* it is to take on the foundational idea that we are responsible for one another. But something else happens that invites our empathy: Yosef cries. Hard. In private, and in public.

Most of us have experienced a cry like that at least once in our lives. It’s a cry that says we are overcome by a reality larger than we can hold, that we lack words to express how much the rightness of that reality matters to us, and how much it hurts to be estranged from it. It’s a cry that says we cannot stand to be exiled from our deepest hopes any longer, that we yearn to be whole and aligned. It’s a cry that doesn’t break us but breaks down what has separated us from our deepest selves, a primal, pre-verbal expression of our desire for wholeness.

And that makes us ready to rediscover our capacity to be people who care for one another because we understand that we are intimately connected.

“We are not our brother’s keeper,” writes Maya Angelou, “we are our brother and we are our sister. We must look past complexion and see community.”

That truth is why, after Kayin asks his question, הַשִּׁמְרָ אָחִי אָנֹכִי, the Torah turns to a genealogy of the generations from Adam to Noah. The sage Ben Azai saw that listing as the most important part of the entire Torah, because the Torah retells the story of human history over again. In this recounting, the murderer Kayin is missing. Instead, future generations come from Adam and Eve's new son, Seth. From Adam to Seth all the way down to Noah, each of us traces our mythological ancestry back to the same point, through a chain of relationship in which brother does not murder brother, but rather, one soul gives *life* to another. This chain of relationship links us in responsibility to one another.

In the eyes of Torah, every member of the human family is our sibling. Kayin's question becomes our question, but unlike Kayin, we have learned the answer. Our task is to live out the answer again and again.

We have cherished this message for millenia. We take pride in understanding that we are not at liberty to allow what divides us from other human beings to obscure our responsibility to those who suffer, even though we are often mistreated:

וְגַר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יָדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הֵיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

Do not oppress a stranger. You know the heart of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. No people in the world understands this responsibility more than we, who have been strangers and cast out over and over again.

We live out this imperative when we come together to explore how to make our shul and our community more safe and welcoming for Jews of color, LGBTQ+ people, and other marginalized groups, when our newly mobilized Chesed Team prepares to visit our more isolated members; when we bring meals to those in need and ensure that bereaved families' needs are met. We live it out when we travel together to the border to welcome asylum seekers and when we teach our local community about how to help, when we support an EXPO event for our formerly incarcerated friends or an Iftar dinner for our Muslim neighbors. We know it when we take the time to learn how to care for our neighbors and when we donate to organizations that help us extend our care more broadly. We know it when our Board and committee members and volunteers labor for the betterment of this sacred kahal, and when our daily prayers remind us, over and over again, that we are meant to care about what happens to the people in our world. And, we know it when this list starts to make us a little uncomfortable because we don't do these things for our own aggrandizement, but in service of what is right and good.

We all share in this responsibility and each of us plays the part they are called to play, be it to offer a smile to a store clerk or a sandwich to a hungry person on the street, to ask someone how they are doing, to help make a minyan, to deliver a small gift that

makes someone's day, or to stand up for one another. We can all take a cue from Steve and Bobbie Jellinek and from Bill and Leslie Schwab (*who just came up to the Torah in celebration of their special anniversary and birthday*), who are shining examples of people who lend a hand, an ear, an encouraging word, and wise advice to so many of us.

When our world feels colder to the Jewish People than it has in nearly a century, leaning in to what makes us unique and what makes our ways beautiful helps. הַשִּׁמְרָ אֶחָי אֶנְכִי.
We are our siblings' keepers, each of us. Let us do all that we can, even when it's difficult, even when we're still learning how.

May it be our blessing to *be* that blessing.