

Every Grain of Sand

Shabbat Vayigash 5782

If you haven't been following the recent serial drama known as the weekly Torah portion, a recap is in order:

Joseph, the boy dreamer, has risen to an improbable position of power and prestige in Egypt. There, as Pharaoh's vice-regent, he oversees food distribution in a time of severe famine.

Joseph's long-estranged brothers, who had sold him into slavery years before, now arrive as supplicants, begging for food. They do not recognize the imposing figure with the long beard and royal garments and fluent command of Egyptian who now sits enthroned before them, but Joseph certainly recognizes them.

Taking advantage of this twist of fate, Joseph devises a test of character for the brothers who had once so brutally mistreated him. He demands that they go back to Canaan to fetch their youngest brother, Benjamin, the only source of comfort in their father's life after losing Joseph. What the mighty vizier intends to

do with Benjamin at that point is anyone's guess, but the risk of him coming to harm is significant.

Their father, Jacob, naturally, is horrified. He fears the worst: that history will repeat itself.

But the brothers are starving so back to Egypt they go, Benjamin in tow. After much palace intrigue, including a trumped-up charge of theft, Joseph arrests young Benjamin, announcing that he will be sentenced to slavery.

With that as last week's cliff-hanger, we now arrive at this week's portion, *Vayigash*. An older brother, Judah, steps forward to intervene on Benjamin's behalf: Take me instead, he pleads. "I myself will be the boy's guarantee." This is Judah's defining moment, putting himself in harm's way for the sake of Benjamin. And it is this turn of events that moves Joseph to reveal his true identity: אָנֹכִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי הֵן -- Weeping, he exclaims, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" (Gen. 45:3)

Commenting on the Joseph story just two weeks ago, I highlighted the role that random chance--or, as Bob Dylan called

it, “a simple twist of fate”--plays in this saga. Indeed, like few other narratives in the Hebrew Bible, God seems to operate at a remove from the action.

For Joseph’s ancestors--Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel and Leah--God commands, God speaks, God appears in dreams and visions. Like a marionettist, God pulls the strings. God announces that Sarah will give birth in old age, sends Abraham up the mountain to sacrifice his son, appears to Jacob at a ladder and as a messenger who wrestles in the night.

But up until this point in the Joseph story, God is, curiously, kept at arm’s length, moving the plot forward explicitly a total of three times: once, when Joseph advances as chief steward in the house of the Egyptian army captain Potiphar, and the text reports, “Adonai was with Joseph, and he became a successful man” (Gen. 39:2) and again, after Joseph is arrested on a trumped-up rape accusation by Potiphar’s wife, and the text reports, twice in a row, that “God was with Joseph” (Gen. 39:21), enabling him to find favor with the chief jailer, earning his trust in order to supervise the other inmates.

Then God disappears again, returning only when it comes time for Jacob to be reunited with his long-lost son. God appears in a nighttime vision, directing the aging patriarch to journey down to Egypt.

But as for Joseph, it bears mention that God does not speak to him directly, not once, keeping silent throughout the entire story, save for those brief third-person references to divine assistance in Potiphar's house and in the jailhouse.

Except, God is actually *all over* the Joseph story, but only as seen through the eyes of Joseph.

Everything that Joseph experiences--every "simple twist of fate"--Joseph *himself* describes *not* as random chance, but rather as the hand of God.

Joseph's uncanny ability to understand dreams? "Surely God will interpret," says the seer (Gen. 40:8). When Pharaoh credits Joseph's talent, he demurs: "Not I! It is *God* who looks after

Pharaoh's wellbeing" (Gen. 41:16). Even Pharaoh agrees: "Since *God* has made all this known to you, there is none so wise and discerning as you" (Gen. 41:39).

From Joseph's perspective, "a simple twist of fate" has nothing to do with *his* fate; everything has come about by God's design.

By the time we reach this week's *parasha*, nearly every line spoken by Joseph gives attribution to God. When Joseph reveals his true identity, and the brothers tremble that he will now exact his revenge, Joseph assures them:

"Now, do not be distressed. Don't blame yourselves for selling me here; it was in order to save life that *God* sent me ahead of you.... *God* has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. You see, it was not in fact you who sent me here, but *God*, who has made me like a father-figure to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, ruler over the whole land of Egypt. So hurry back to my father and say to him: 'Thus says your son Joseph, "*God* has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me without delay"' (Gen. 45:5, 7-8).

In a near-Godless story, the hero is saturated in the awareness of God.

If you've studied American history, then the name Roger Williams may be familiar. Roger Williams was a minister and theologian who founded Providence Plantations, which became the Colony, and eventual State, of Rhode Island, where my parents reside and where fried calamari with hot peppers is the official State Appetizer. (My dad enthuses over Rhode Island arcana and will appreciate this reference.)

In any case, Roger Williams founded Providence Plantations after fleeing religious persecution from the Puritans in Massachusetts, and, in 1638, established the First Baptist Church in America, in Providence, a testament to his commitment to religious freedom. He named his new home in honor of "God's merciful Providence" which he believed was responsible for revealing such a haven. For Williams, his success was not his own; nor was it attributable to mere good fortune or fate. It was Divine Providence.

Two centuries later, an influential English Baptist preacher named Charles Spurgeon would clarify the difference: “Fate,” he said, “is blind; providence has eyes. Fate is ... just an arrow shot from a bow, that must fly onward, but hath no target. Not so, providence; providence is full of eyes. There is a design in everything, and an end to be answered; all things are working together, and working together for good.”¹

Often when people tell me that they “don’t believe in God,” my inclination is to respond, “Maybe God isn’t the issue. Maybe you’re just using the wrong verb.” God isn’t something you believe in or don’t believe in; God is a way of describing a perspective on your life and the meaning of events in our lives. God is a way of framing how we understand what life hands us, how we experience our time on earth.

Perhaps had an atheist founded Rhode Island, the capital city would have been called “Luck,” which happens to be a village in Wisconsin, population 1,227, and whose welcome sign declares, “You’re in Luck.” Or, maybe it’d be called “Fate,” which happens to be a town in Texas about the same population as Scarsdale.

¹ https://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/spurgeon/the_difference_between_fate_and_providence.htm

But, no, Roger Williams' perspective on the events of his life, like Joseph's, always ran through God.

As for me, in my role as rabbi, I have little interest in getting people to believe in God. I do, however, have a vested interest in helping people locate God in the experiences of their lives, helping people find, or, more aptly, *construct*, meaning, from whatever life hands us. The question is not, "do you believe in God?" but rather, "How might God be showing up in your life?"

Is this just a matter of semantics? Maybe, but also maybe not. Consider: have you ever had an experience that made you feel connected to something bigger than yourself? In synagogue? In a concert hall? In the mountains? In the ocean? Looking out an airplane window? In a hospital room? Under the chuppah? By a loved one's grave? Alone, in the dark? With the one person who loves you and understands you better, perhaps, than you understand yourself? I have. Some people feel comfortable talking about these experiences as "God moments."

Joseph did.

I do.

And, oh, of course, Bob Dylan does.

Like the Joseph saga, God is all over the words of Bob Dylan too, nowhere more than in the song “Every Grain of Sand,” which closes his 1981 Album *Shot of Love* and which I had the epic pleasure of hearing him sing, two nights in a row, the Tuesday and Wednesday before Thanksgiving, as the final song in his current tour’s setlist.

For a fan, hearing Dylan sing “Every Grain of Sand” is kind of like having heard Leonard Cohen sing “Hallelujah” -- it is more than a song; it’s a religious hymn. Its lines echo Biblical verses, both our Testament (“Like Cain, I now behold this chain of events that I must break”) and the Christian Testament (“Then onward in my journey I come to understand/That every hair is numbered like every grain of sand,” directly quoting from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 10:30).)

It also plays off of secular verse, albeit from other God-saturated writers, like William Blake whose poem “Auguries of Innocence” begins:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

Like the Biblical Joseph, Dylan surveys the events of his life, both the choices he has made (including the mistakes), and the things that have come to him through no choice of his own, and, looking back, all he sees is God:

*In the fury of the moment I can see the Master's hand
In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand.*

It is just as a Hasidic Master once said in the name of his teacher, the famous Maggid of Mezritch:

In everything that you perceive in the world, you will come to see only the Blessed One, whose powers animate everything, so much so, that you will eventually realize that even you are in fact nothing without the power of the Blessed One, who is giving you life even in this present moment, and that there is nothing else!²

In other words: *Everything is God*, ואין עוד (“*ein od*”), “and there is none else.”

Shabbat Shalom.

(Song “Every Grain of Sand”)

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² From *Derekh Hasidim, Emunah* #18. *Derekh Hasidim* is an anthology of teachings selected from among the major students of the Maggid of Mezritch, Rabbi Dov Baer. It was produced by Rabbi Nachman of Tcherin (1825-1894), from the lineage of Reb Nachman of Bratslav.

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