

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 12/28/2018

Va Yehi 2018

This Shabbat we concluded our reading of the Book of Genesis. The Book of Genesis can, most certainly, be read as its own, independent literary unit and not merely as one-fifth of the Torah. It has a literary style all its own and it is extremely well written in terms of plot, language, metaphor, imagery, pretty much everything that makes for great, and timeless literature. One fascinating note of literary structure is the fact that the book begins and ends at the same place, namely exile. Adam and Eve are exiled from their own Promised Land, the Garden of Eden, and by the end of the book, the descendants of Abraham are living outside of their Promised Land as well. The big difference, however, is that Adam and Eve did something to deserve their Exile, while the descendants of Abraham did not. In fact, the Torah makes it very clear that this exile of Abraham's family was part of Gd's plan. In our portion today, as well as in last week's, Joseph makes it very clear to his brothers and his father that Gd made them leave Canaan for a reason. And that reason itself was already revealed to Abraham long before Joseph was ever born. Abraham is told by Gd that his descendants will endure the terrible hardship of slavery in Egypt, but ultimately return to the Land of Israel after the passage of hundreds of years.

So the story essentially ends where it begins, in Exile. But, you know, Adam and Eve's exile I can understand. They blew it. They were disobedient. They lied. They acted shamefully. But the Torah never says that the "Abrahamskys" (After all, it is just 4 generations of the same family - so I call them the 'Abrahmaskys') messed up and lost their Garden of Eden, later to be called Israel. So this makes me wonder, "Why was this exile necessary? What did Gd intend to accomplish by subjecting the Jewish People in its earliest stages to centuries of suffering? Why should they have to endure the brutality of bondage?"

I guess one answer could be so that Gd could show His power by taking them out of slavery. That way the Jewish People would always be in Gd's debt. But truthfully, I never really liked it when my Dad said, "I'm punishing you - but it's for your own good." That was (and is) usually followed by, "Now go to your room and think about what you did!" But the Jewish People did nothing to deserve this kind of cruel and inhuman punishment. Slavery? The near murder of the first born males? There was no sin for which THAT punishment could be deemed appropriate.

Of course you can always say, "Well, that was Gd's will and who are we to question that?" But one of the things I love most about Judaism is that you CAN ask questions about anything, even Gd. You could fill libraries far larger than ours here with volumes dedicated to asking these tough questions and find a myriad of different answers. And THIS one, "Why our People had to go through slavery in the first place," is a GOOD one.

And "why" is indeed a good question. But to me, a BETTER question is, "What lesson is to be learned from the suffering our People endured?" And for that one, I'd like to propose the following answer: If we Jews were selected to bring a new system of justice, fairness, kindness and equality to the world, we needed to know, in our kishkes, in our psyche, in our collective souls, what it felt like to live without it. To be a model of what is just and right we must have exposure to what is wrong with the world. That's why the Torah spends so much time talking about defending the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the oppressed. It's precisely because WE knew what that felt like. And understanding the Torah this way, that the suffering has a purpose, is a profoundly Jewish way of looking at the world.

Look folks, stuff happens. We can't always control the world around us. And hardship and suffering find us. The world is not always the way we'd like it to be. So then what? Well, it seems like we have two choices: We can walk around sullen and angry and hurt. And if you want to do that for a while, fine. You are entitled. But what the Torah seems to me to be teaching, is that life will make a whole lot more sense, and be far less of a burden, when we can find positive life perspective from the suffering we ourselves have endured.

And, so I ask you, as we close the Book of Genesis, and close out a calendar year, what are the positive life lessons that can come out of the negative experiences you have had in the year gone by? How can the things that bothered you the most inspire you to lead a better life, and to help others to do so as well in the year ahead?

The beautiful Book of Genesis ends with the death of Jacob, at which point the brothers worry that Joseph will take revenge on them. Joseph responds by explaining to them precisely the point that I am making, that his slavery made him into the person he is, brought him that much closer to Gd, and drew him that much closer to his own brothers. This then is the challenge: to understand and process all that we see, and all that happens to us as positive lessons for living; lessons that will draw out the best in us, draw us closer to Gd, and closer to those who share our world. May our deeper understanding of the year gone by lead to a meaningful and fulfilling year ahead.