

# Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

## Parashat Vayigash

### A Moment of Truth

We like to tell lies; little lies. Often we are so convincing that we ourselves believe these lies. They become part of our personal narrative, part of our personal truth. The emotional comfort they bring is addictive, especially when the real historical truth is most difficult. We banish the uncomfortable truth, send it into exile in a distant parallel universe, one we try to forget if at all possible. Sometimes these “little” lies are not so little; we build a persona out of lies that we present to the world, but the true identity that lies behind the façade of lies is a pathetic version of the caricature we have created.

Yosef’s (half) brothers lived a lie - a pathetic lie, but a beautiful lie. The lie was of a united, loving family. The lie was the love they professed for their father. The lie was the charade of mutual responsibility. Under the veneer of that lie stood a stark truth: The brother whom they laconically described as “no longer (with us)”, quite ironically, actually was with them, listening attentively to their every word. He questioned, he probed, he tested them - and he knew they were

lying. Their answers were vague and mysterious; they simply said, “He is not with us,” implying that this brother was dead, or perhaps that he had left them to seek fame or fortune.

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What they neglected to mention was the circumstances behind their brother's mysterious disappearance. They failed to mention the ugly truth: Their brother had not simply vanished into thin air. Someone had plotted to kill him; someone had attacked him, jumped him, stripped him of his clothing and threw him, scared and trembling, into a cold, dark pit. They failed to mention that they themselves were that "someone". They failed to mention that a group of people sat to have a pleasant lunch within earshot of this brother's bloodcurdling screams coming from the nearby pit; again, they failed to mention that they themselves were the members of this callous group. They failed to mention that someone sold him as a slave; and once again that

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"someone" was they. They preferred the lie of "he is no longer (with us)". Simple, uncomplicated, far less emotional and messy: In Hebrew, their lie is even more elegant. It took only one word to bury the truth. *Einenu*.

and puts his goblet in the bag of his brother Binyamin. Would the others rally around even this brother, the second son of Rachel, Yosef's full brother? Or would they abandon him as they had abandoned Yosef all those years ago? Will they turn their backs on Binyamin when he cries out to them, when he is frightened and vulnerable?

Yosef listens to the lie, he hears the new narrative and he waits as they proceed to show off their beautiful family and their beautiful family values. They are united. Yosef sets a trap

Yehuda responds with righteous indignation. He pleads, he cajoles and he lectures the man he believes to be an unyielding Egyptian despot. And then he moves to guilt. He explains that separating their father from the son he loves would be cruel, possibly even fatal for their elderly father. In this new narrative, Yosef would be made to bear the guilt for breaking up this beautiful family. Yosef would be the one to break their father's heart, and possibly to kill the old man with grief.

At that moment Yosef reveals his true self; at the same time, he deals the brothers an impossible dose of truth. The man facing them is Yosef, the victim of their heinous acts. The narrative they have been selling him is fiction; he knows it and they know it. Their carefully constructed lie implodes; their narrative crashes and burns when their victim stands before them as their tormentor.

The rabbis use this moment of stark truth as an analogy for the moment that awaits each of us when our days on this earth are done. At the end of our lives, each of us will stand in front of God with our own carefully crafted narrative, only to have the inescapable truth contradict our lies. The further from the truth we have spun our narrative, the greater will be the shattering force of confronting the truth. If we are to withstand that confrontation, we best prepare for it by examining the truth of our lives, and guiding our narrative in anticipation of that great and awesome moment. Otherwise, we will stand stunned and paralyzed, just as Yosef's brothers stood before him - shocked into silence.

At the very moment he forces the brothers to face the truth and grapple with the full force of their actions, Yosef does the impossible: He slips into their narrative of unity and love. Yosef prefers their fiction over his own truth, a truth filled with so many physical and emotional scars. And when Yosef embraces their narrative of love, he turns the fiction into fact. Only through Yosef can this family's scars be healed. Only when Yosef comes back into their lives can they become the united family that existed in their fantasy narrative; only now can the lies be replaced with love.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/12/audio-and-essays-parashat-vayigash.html>