Sliding Doors

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I have been compiling a list of old movies to watch with my children over Winter Break. I should mention that what I think of as an old movie may different by decades from your own point of reference, but its my opportunity to relive my childhood with my children, so if I used to rent it at Blockbuster it's a candidate to make the list.

Going through the list I remember a terrific film I saw in the late 1990s called "Sliding Doors" with Gwenyth Paltrow. Perhaps some of you saw it, if any of us can remember the 90s?

Reading this week's Torah portion I thought of that film. The film follows Gwenthyn's character Helen on a typical commute home from work via the London Underground. Helen takes the same route home everyday. Her schedule seldom varies, and it is a routine known also to her boyfriend who relies upon it as cover for an affair he is having. The purpose of the title becomes evident within the first few minutes of the film. Helen gets off work early and rushes to catch an earlier than usual train home. Just as she is about to board the train the doors slide closed, and she is forced to wait. Or is she? The screen, like the doors, splits in two, and the magic of

Hollywood editing takes over. In one screen the doors re-open and she gets on the train, in the other they stay closed and she must wait an hour for the next train.

The film proceeds to follow the two parallel stories. In the first she comes home, surprises her boyfriend and his other girlfriend and things unfold from there. In the later, she arrives home none the wiser and her life continues according to plan. Or does it? Which was the intended outcome, was she meant to make that train or not. At the end of the film, the viewer, with the 20/20 clarity of hindsight knows the answer, but only after everything has already unfolded.

This week's Torah portion Vayechi, the last in the Joseph Trilogy tells a similar tale about Joseph and his forced relocation to Egypt. For Joseph it is not sliding doors that he stands in front of silently dictating the outcome of his life and those of his people but rather it is his 12 angry brothers who have sold him into slavery and told his father that he is dead. Joseph ends up in Egypt and after a series of ups and downs he rises to become the second in command of all of Egypt. From that position he and he alone is able to save Egypt from the ravages of the seven-year drought and famine that fall upon the land. The famine forces his brothers to seek food in Egypt, where

they end up standing in front of Joseph – whom they don't recognize – and plead with him for their lives.

In one of the most powerful and poignant moments in the Torah, Joseph can't hold back the emotion welling up inside of him and he reveals his true identity to his brothers. They are shocked and in fear for their lives, but Joseph is just happy to see them, and belay their fears saying to them. "Their was a purpose to what happened to me, and none of us knew it at the time." He forgives his brothers, provides them food and shelter and is reunited with his father Jacob. Had he not been sold by his brothers into slavery, surely, they and all his people, perhaps all of the Egyptians would have died in the famine.

We have all stood there ourselves. Each of us can point to a time a moment in our lives when we stood before our own set of sliding doors, before a crowd of people we thought were our friends our family, only to be betrayed. They are the moments when the movie stops, the screen splits into two and if we are lucky, we can see the paths laid out before us, the choices to be made. But more often than not, the moment passes us by, and we don't see the split screen till the credits begin to roll. Then looking back in the clarified vision of hindsight we realize the moment, the choices we could have made, the connections that bind our lives to one another, the cause and

the effect of our actions. Perhaps truly examine the moment, if we freeze frame the images, we can even perceive the silky threads of a power beyond our understanding that seemed to guide us down the right path. It is in that moment of reflection when we connect the dots of our lives that we begin to recognize the blessings that we all enjoy, but so often fail to recognize. It is far more than saying that everything happens for a reason, it is instead finding reason in everything that happens.

More important than the outcome of Joseph and for that matter Helen's decisions, is the beautiful example of how they took the seemingly random events and challenges of life and made sense and meaning out of them. Joseph found in the clutter of his experiences, the let downs and the hold ups a sense of purpose, a vision of the world and his role in it far greater than the impact of any single event. He transcended the moment his family let him down and defined for himself what that experiences would later mean.

It is an example of the thing that human beings probably do best, finding meaning and purpose even in life's challenges, hardships and sorrows. It is part of our survival mechanism as human beings, and it is also part of our Jewish tradition.

Joseph is a beautiful model for each of us on this Shabbat as we reflect on the year that was and prepare to enter a year yet to be. Each of us has the chance, over and over in our lives to transcend difficult experiences of the past and to find a renewed sense of purpose and meaning in our relationships, struggles, triumphs and even tragedies. I hold that that is in fact the real lesson of this weeks parsha, that we are no trapped by the past; that we are not doomed to attach only one meaning to what happens to us and to the choices that we make, but rather as human beings, guided by our tradition we can find meaning and purpose even in those things that appear beyond our understanding.

We Jews are lucky (or cursed as I offered in my end of the year letter), we get two New Years every year. Rosh Hashanah and January 1st. Two opportunities for *hesbone hanefesh*, the examination of our soul that these moments naturally invoke. As we look back over the past year, as we discover those moments when we stood at sliding doors, not knowing then, what we know now about just how important that decision was, I hope we will each accept the challenge to find new meanings in the seemingly unconnected events that have dotted our lives this past year. Perhaps through the clarity of vision provided by this spiritual hindsight we can forgive those who caused us petty hurts and injuries. Perhaps we will

discover that in fact a thank you is truly in order for the one who made that decision for us, held that door or shoved it closed. In the end let us all be so fortunate to be as Joseph was standing before his brothers, realizing in that instant that no matter the difficulty of the road he traveled to get there, it was all so that he could be there in that moment, in that place, to do that thing that only he could do to help his family in their time of need.