Objects in Mirror May Be Larger Than They Appear - Parashat Vayechi 5780
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My car is a philosopher; yours is too.

I am certain I am not the first to look into my passenger side view mirror and ponder the existential meaning of the message inscribed at the bottom of the frame, "Objects in mirror may be closer than they appear."

In this week's torah portion Joseph does essentially the same thing.

Midrash Tanhuma imagines the moment: *"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they grew frightened, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!" (Genesis 50:15)*
What did they see that made them afraid? As they were returning from burying their father, they saw that Joseph turned off the road and went to look at the pit into which his brothers had cast him."[1]

His brothers thought that Joseph was dwelling on the terrible deed they had done to him years before.

What *was* Joseph thinking as he peered into that fateful hole? In what way did he remember that bleak moment? The midrash answers: "Joseph stood up and prayed, 'Blessed is God who performed a miracle for me in this place!"[2]

There, gazing into a barren crater, the place of his greatest danger and fear, Joseph sees his life reflected in that pit (if this was a movie special effects artist would have filled it with water to provide and actual reflective surface). Joseph stares into the abyss and sees indeed that harrowing moment is much closer than time and circumstance would suggest. It looms large over everything that has happened in his life, the life of his family and his people. But where we would excuse him for thinking it case a dark shadow, he sees the rays of light that herald a new dawn.

In retrospect, he is able to piece together the harrowing events of his life into a story that reveals God's intent. "Although you intended me harm," he says, "Elohim Chashavah l'tovah/ God intended it for good, to bring about the present result— L'hachayot Am Rov/ to keep alive many people" (Genesis 50:20).

How many of us have lived through desperate and confusing moments in our lifetime (maybe just this past week?) only to look back years or days later and see within them blessing, or the seeds of who we've become; a step in a journey we could not have predicted?

None of us likes to fall, none of us likes to find ourselves at the bottom of a pit. Victor Frankl wrote, "The meaning of our existence is not invented by ourselves, but rather detected…What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general, but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment."[3]

[1] Midrash Tanchuma, Va-yehi 17; Genesis Rabbah 100:8
[2] ibid
[3] Man's Search for Meaning, Viktor Frankl 1963 p. 157

We stand on the cusp of not only a New Year, also a new decade; we look back in the mirror; memories are close and poignant. We greet those that brought obvious blessing with appreciation, but what about those whose lessons are more painful, the blessing if it is to be found at all hidden or delayed. We can't help remembering those too – and we are fools if we force ourselves to forget.

Mark Twain is credited (perhaps erroneously[4]) with the maxim "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." Similarly, writer and philosopher George Santayana wrote, "those who do not study history are bound to repeat it."[5] Both maxims instruct that we would be wise to pay heed to, lest we repeat the failures of the past.

The objects in our mirror of memory are closest when we allow them to teach us how to see what is right before our eyes; or maybe looming over the horizon. That is Frankl's point and Joseph's great example; Joseph didn't allow the bleak memories of the past to be destructive or corrosive but rather he found blessing and insight in them, for Joseph the past was prologue. He looked into the pit and remembering his past, he appreciated the present and dreamed of a future.

With the insight of our own history as daughters and sons of Joseph, we have to ask, 'What is our meaning in this moment? What are we here to do? As Mordechai said to Esther as he spurred her to action at the brink of disaster, "*Mi Yodea im la'et kazot higa'at la'malchut?* /Who knows if it was just for this moment that you arrived at majesty?"[6]

The Jewish people, like every human being is a product of a collection of experiences some desired and many foisted upon us. The strength of our people and of resilient human beings is to look in the rearview mirror and learn from the past but not to be consumed by it. If Joseph's imaginary car (with its rearview mirror) has a bumper sticker on it, perhaps this quote from early cartoonist Bill Kean would be displayed proudly on its fender, "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it is called the ***present***.[7]"

In this New Year, this new decade look back with curiosity and the wisdom that comes only from experience, but drive forward with purpose, "*Mi Yodea im la'et kazot higa'at la'malchut?* /Who knows if it was just for this moment that you arrived at majesty?".

[4] https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/01/12/history-rhymes/
[5] The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress, George Santayana 1905
[6] Esther 4:13-14
[7] The Family Circus newspaper cartoon from 8/31/1994, http://yesterdaytomorrowtodaypresent.blogspot.com/2015/08/yesterday-tomorrow-and-today-phrase.html