PARASHA VAYECHI
OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE LARGER THAN THEY APPEAR
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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Our family was in Los Angeles this past week for vacation. We had not been back to LA, all of us in about a year and it was wonderful to see friends and family. We dined at favorite restaurants, visited many old stomping grounds and worshiped at the congregation Sharon grew up at and where my in-laws belong and are very active members.

It was nice to be back in the old country as I would often remark to friends when they asked if I missed LA, and there are things I missed, old friends and family chief among them and really good Mexican food a strong third.

But I will tell you what I did not miss – I did not miss the traffic. Even over a holiday weekend, when much of Southern California is someplace else the roads were packed bumper to bumper and you just sit in your car

crawling along the freeways. I didn't miss freeways either.

Sitting in my car on one such middle of the day slog from the Westside of Los Angeles to the Valley I glanced at my passenger's side view mirror and noticed for the thousandth time those immortal words, 'objects in mirror are closer than they appear.'

One thing you have plenty of time to do in traffic is think. And of course that prophetic statement engraved in the side view mirror got me thinking.

First the statement was aptly true about our return back to our city and country of origin. Not much had changed in the year we had been away. Dear friends were still dear friends even if removed by time and distance – we still felt close to them, maybe even closer as time and distance helped us appreciate how much

they meant to us. What and who we left behind were indeed very close to us.

The statement in the mirror also evoked reflections (that pun was intended) on the year that was about to pass from 2014 to 2015. Its hard to remember all that is behind us in the year 2014, though the year in review shows and articles are both helpful and at times quite painful.

We look back in the rear view mirror of our year, individual and collective and what we see there may appear distant but is indeed very close and personal. And for this year, 2014, in particular much of it was brutal and painful and we might wish to forget it.

In January of 2014 ISIS emerged as a force in the Iraqi peninsula capturing the embattled city of Falluja and murdering hundreds of civilians. That was a year ago

and they are still on an evil rampage throughout the region. Closer than they appear.

In February the Olympic games took place in Sochi Russia. Vancouver enjoyed some degree of *Schadenfreude* as the Russians scrambled to get the facilities and venues open for business, or at least with running water. Putin followed the games with the invasion of the Crimea in the Ukraine. Russia may look haphazard about their approach to the Olympics but their military moves in the Ukraine had an all too familiar and practices ring to them.

In March Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, traveling from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, disappeared from radar in airspace over the Gulf of Thailand. The plane is still missing without a trace, for many it was a distant memory until this week when an Air Asia flight went down with a similar lack of distress calls or explanation.

The year marched on with horror and heartache. In April *Boko Harem* kidnapped hundreds of schoolgirls, in May, 294 people most of them high school students on a field trip died when a South Korean ferry capsized.

That same spring the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians formally collapsed, some things just grow more distant in the rearview mirror, peace talks seem so far away now.

In June and July while much of the world was engrossed with the World Cup in Brazil, Jews everywhere were consumed with worry, then outrage and vengeance over the kidnapping of Gil-Ad, Eyal, Naftali. War soon followed. We try over and over again to put that behind us but it keeps coming back to the front. So often between Israelis and Palestinians armed conflict, death and destruction, particularly of the most vulnerable is much closer than it appears – just below the surface.

August and September brought the graphic and barbaric executions of western journalists and aid workers kidnapped by ISIS which for many of us brought back memories of Daniel Pearl. ISIS itself reminds us of brutality and barbarianism not seen since medieval times. We thought our mirror of memory could not see back that far, and yet there they are on grainy YouTube, doing things to other human beings we thought went the way of the crusades. Some images you will never forget, try and try as you might.

There was Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Gardner in Brooklyn – which reminded me or Rodney King in LA. Corporal Nathan Cirillo on Parliament Hill, in Ottawa, which took place two days after a man used his car to run over two Canadian soldiers in Quebec, killing one. These reminded all of us that terror truly is closer than it may appear.

We lost beloved and admired entertainers, writers, scholars and leaders – all of which compelled me to look back at the moments in my life when they provided the soundtrack, the laugh track or the inspiration to go forward. Now we continue without them, but their memory and the gifts they left us are as close as Netflix, iTunes or the books in our library; as long as they keep printing books of course.

I'll leave out a trip down the memory lane of sports except to note that my San Francisco Giants won the World Series for the third time in five years. In that particular case the vision and experience of past successes helped shape current victories.

Still sitting in traffic I thought about this week's Torah portion and the final act in the story of Joseph, his brothers and their father Jacob who dies in Egypt.

In this week's parasha *Vayechi* we read *"When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they grew frightened, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!'"* What if he looks back in the mirror of memory and becomes enraged.

Midrash Tanhuma asks: *"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."* His brothers thought that Joseph was dwelling on the terrible deed they had done to him years before. "Objects in mirror may be closer than they appear."

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!'"

There, gazing into the mirror of a barren crater, the place of his greatest danger and fear, Joseph looks back and sees not damage, but blessing, meaning, purpose. 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 or in this past year only to look back years or days later and see within them blessing, or the seeds of who we've become, or 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, but each of us has something to give to this moment. 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."

We stand on the cusp of a New Year, we look back in the mirror; memories are close and poignant. We can't help remembering, reflecting – and we are fools is we forces ourselves to forget. The past is important, as the philosopher George Satayan taught, *"those who do not study history are bound to repeat it."*

But what we make of it for our present, what we allow it to teach us, that is Frankl's point and Joseph's great example. He didn't allow the bleak memories of the past to be destructive or corrosive but rather he found blessing 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.

What is our meaning in this moment?
What are we here to do?

In this New Year, we do not yet have the wisdom of hindsight, but perhaps there is a way for each of us to discern what this moment is for, what this year can be?

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?"*

Who knows if it was just for this moment, this year - that we arrive at majesty? Perhaps this is the moment to find and reveal our God-given majesty, to bring forth what we uniquely have to offer the world.

None of us likes to fall. None of us likes to be at the bottom of a pit. But *Mi Yodea*, who knows, may it be that years from now, when we look back on this past

year with its bloodshed, struggle, pain and violence, we will stand up and pray "Blessed is God, who performed a miracle for me at this place!" *"Elohim chashavah l'tova. God intended it for good."*

Sitting on the freeway stuck in traffic, the only way to keep your sanity is to look back at the cars behind you and thank God you are not back there anymore. Trust me, I know traffic, I'm originally from Los Angeles.

Chazak Chazak v'nitchazek.