AND…
Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC
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November 26, 2021

This week's Parasha, Vayeshev has always been one of my favourite in the entire Torah. If you've paid any attention to my sermons throughout the years, I say that often about many different Torah portions but this one, the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers and ultimately ending up in Egypt where he finds himself in a position to save his family and the Jewish people is truly my favourite.

I appreciate it for two reasons. The first is the story, which I have shared before about the role of the nameless man, the Ish that meets Joseph when he is lost in the field looking for his brothers and directs him toward them. Had it not been for this man, who doesn't even merit a name in the Torah, its quite possible that whole arc of the story of the Jewish people would have been different. How many times has my own life, any of our lives been changed by people whose name we never learn

or whose transformative influence we didn't appreciate till long after the events unfolded in our life?

The second reason I love this parasha is for the way that it is written and the great lessons that offers us as we write the story of our own lives.

The Rabbis notice that every pasuk (verse) of Parshat VaYeishev with the exception of 8 verses, begins with the Hebrew letter Vav. The letter "Vav" is a prefix which, at the beginning of a word, means "And". Consequently, the story which is about to unfold is to be seen as one, cogent piece over several parshiot.

I love this teaching because in the context of the story of Joseph, the story of the Jewish people, even the story of our own lives "and" is as powerful and transformative as that nameless man, the Eish that changes the course of Jewish history.

In Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, a “dialectic” refers to the idea of two truths being true simultaneously, even if they seem to oppose one another. It’s a practice in removing ourselves from black-or-white, either-or thinking, which is one of the greatest limiting factors in our collective ability to grow. We’re so used to seeing things as one-or-the-other and never as both-at-once that we unconsciously choose a side and live there.

Our Torah portion models this powerful dialectic in the very first verses of the story. Listen to it first as it is written in the text with the word AND beginning each verse:

At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah.

And *Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.*

3 And *Israel [his father] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colours.*

4 And *when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.*

5 And *Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more.*

6 And *He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed:*

Now hear the same six sentences as we might have read them without the Torah reminding us of the power of and. If every and was instead a but, as we often communicate with each other, as we often rationalize with ourselves; hear how different the text would be, hear the judgement and the conditional nature of the narrative.

At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah.

***BUT** Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.*

***3 BUT** Israel [his father] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a coat of many colours.*

***4 BUT** when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak a friendly word to him.*

***5 BUT** Once Joseph had a dream which he told to his brothers; and they hated him even more.*

***6 BUT** He said to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed:*

If every time we are about to say "but," we replace it with "and," we allow two things, perhaps conflicting emotions, and truths to coexist as they must coexist. When we replace "but"

with “and”, black AND white we create the grey area that we know so much of our life, if not all of our life and certainly the life of Joseph and our people lives in day after day, moment by moment.

Living in the grey which is at the core of the Joseph story, a story which is the origin of the Jewish people as a family is hard, its messy, like families themselves, it complicated – never black OR white. To replace “but” with “and” means we have to dig deeper to figure out how we feel about things, what our actual motivations are. The gray area removes the ease of simply choosing a side and leaving it at that.

- Joseph was good, but his brothers were bad
- Joseph was a boaster BUT his brother’s rightfully resentful.
- Jacob favoured one of his sons, BUT Jacob failed to see the enmity he created between them.

If you have ever been in a conversation and had your truth followed not with “and” but with “but” you know that your

truth, your opinion once confronted with a “but” has been dismissed, supplanted and replaced by theirs. “But” ends dialogue. It says, “your truth is not nearly as important as my truth.” AND creates space for the other, turning, “I love you, BUT we need to talk,” into, “I love you, AND we need to talk,” opens a door for exploration, “and” values the first truth just as much as the second.

If we view our lives as Torah views the life of Joseph and his family as shades of grey as complicated relationships, because they involve other human beings and human being are by nature complicated then we can appreciate the grey, the constructive, conjunctive power of “and” instead of destructive, depleting power of “but”.

Our Torah this week is simple, but so hard to do; hold multiple truths in your hands, in your mind, in your heart at the same time. The life of Joseph, the story of the Jewish people; the choices we make as parents, individuals, and leaders; they are

not binary choices, because people by nature are not binary, all good, all bad, all left brain or right brain. To use an overused idiom, “it’s complicated” because we are complicated. Embrace the complexity, just as Judaism and our Torah has for pages and pages, thousands of years. Add an ‘and’ to your understanding of other people, to your understanding of yourself; we will all be better for it, make no buts about that!