THE MEANING OF THE MOMENT
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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Parashat Vayechi

Rabbi Bat Joseph, who's very name is a sermon unto itself, connected as it is through the generations to our forefather Joseph, just read the following verse from Torah: "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they grew frightened, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us!'"

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.

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 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).

Oh the clarity of hindsight, if we only knew then was we know now – our trails and challenges would have purpose and our achievements would have context and perspective.

Mark Twain famously wrote, history does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. It echoes which similarities that we would be wise to pay heed to, lest we repeat the failures of the past.

I read a harrowing article this past week, one of many. It was written by American historian Timothy Snyder, part of a lengthy treatise he wrote following

Donald Trump's election victory in November. Snyder is the author of the book "Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin" and a highly regarded expert on the atrocities of the 20th century, where he advised Americans to learn from the experience of Europeans who watched as democracy was wiped out before their eyes.

In his article, he warns us not to be distracted when "the unthinkable arrives. When the terrorist attack comes, remember that all authoritarians at all times either await or plan such events in order to consolidate power."

As evidence of this he points to the Reichstag fire. The burning of the Reichstag, [the German parliament] building in Berlin, on the night of February 27, 1933. It was a key event in the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship and widely believed to have been contrived by the newly formed Nazi government itself to turn public opinion against its opponents and to assume emergency powers.

It was that sudden disaster that required the end of the balance of power, control of the press, the end of opposition parties, and so on. Snyder cautions us that it is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book, and not to fall for it."

The Germans or Italians of the 1920s and 1930s did not elect their leaders thinking they were voting away their freedoms and security. They were scared and they wanted a strong leader to protect them. Then that fear was exacerbated by a crisis (real or imagined), and as we have seen so many times throughout history a scapegoat was found, it has been us more times that we can count, the peoples' energies were directed toward that contrived cause of all their fears, and human beings were thrown literally and figuratively, like Joseph into the pit.

This week's torah portion ends the dramatic play of Joseph and his brothers on a redemptive and conciliatory note, but we must not overlook the rupture that led us to

this moment. His brothers convinced themselves that he was the enemy, that his behavior was more than annoying, and bothersome, it was a mortal danger and so the rules of family and siblings no longer applied – he was a cancer that had to excised.

I will tell you that I worry what will happen when the latest version of Joseph's brothers decide that they can no longer tolerate that annoying voice that keeps questioning their actions, or reminds them that if it was a popularity contest father would vote Joseph over them every time, 3 million times.

What will happen when they realize that they are 11 against one, that they have all the power and can do

what they want without fear of repercussions because with the Fake News of a bloody coat of many colors they can play on our already heightened fears, covering over their own heinous crimes with crocodile tears.

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."

If hindsight is 20/20, and if history rhymes, then this period looks and sounds a lot like the 1920s and 30s.

Thus given the insight of hindsight, and our own history as bat Joseph and b’nai Joseph, 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?”

Who knows if it was just for this moment that we arrived 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.

Hardly a week goes by without someone on Facebook or in the mainstream media posting Protestant

pastor Martin Niemöller’s haunting poem "FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE SOCIALISTS..."

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

The poem stems from Niemöller's lectures during the early postwar period. His point was that too many who should have known better were silent when their

voices was needed most. Particularly he points to people of faith who read a book, the bible, whose central narratives in both the Hebrew and the Christian versions are of peoples or individuals wrongly persecuted because of the silence of others in the face of totalitarian rulers or who place their own self-interest ahead of the greater good. A people distracted by fear and lead astray by leaders who promise them they will make them great again if they only blindly follow their lead. Think of Korach and the Golden Calf, Haman's appeal to Ahasverosh, or the generation of Jews in Egypt that thought the memory of Joseph would keep them safe

when a new pharaoh, who didn't know or owe anything to Joseph came to power.

When Joseph stared into that pit, he may indeed have concluded that what his brother's meant for bad, God intended for good – but I pray that he never forgot what they did to him. Even as he forgave them, I pray the lesson he learned from that moment and the lesson that we learn from our own moments of staring back in to the pits from whence our people have suffered and restored is that we should be warry of those that might throw us into the pit in the first place.

We have earned the right, if not the responsibility to be skeptical. The Mishna in fact commands us in Pirkei

Avot 2:3, “Be careful with the government, for they befriend a person only for their own needs. They appear to be friends when it is beneficial to them, but they do not stand by a person at the time of his distress.”

“Mi Yodea im la’et kazot higa’at la’malchut? /Who knows if it was just for this moment that you arrived at majesty?” The world needs the Jews now more than ever. It needs our tortured and harrowing experience, it needs our skepticism, it needs our voice to call out in the deafening silence – we remember the pit, we remember what 11 brothers did to another when they thought no one was watching.