

D'var Torah
December 6 Kabbalat Shabbat
Parshat Vayigash

One of the TV shows I watch regularly, a drama about the groundbreaking study of human sexuality by William Masters and Virginia Johnson, the episode a few weeks ago was about performance assessment. Many people working in the hospital are concerned with his or her job performance assessment, but others take it less seriously. One doctor even just tells his secretary to write her own. Everything revolves around this document. A performance assessment allows the employees to see how others think they are doing—if they are doing their job to the best of their abilities, or if there is room for improvement. We are all probably familiar with a similar exercise. When I participate in evaluations for school or work, I find myself in a common situation. Often, how I rate my performance is lower than what my supervisor indicates in their assessment. I am much more critical and open to seeing room for improvement, and they just want to tell me I am doing well. Has this ever happened to you? Do

you see yourself a little less kindly, a little more harshly, than others do? I think we can see that same, very human quality in our patriarch Jacob.

In this week's Torah portion, Vayigash, the story of Joseph and his brothers comes to a dramatic climax. After many trials and tests, Joseph rips off his royal garments of an Egyptian and reveals himself to his brothers. He says that he is their long brother, and that he forgives them for all that they did to him when he was a boy. All he wants is to see his father again. When the brothers go to bring their father Jacob to Egypt, Joseph brings his beloved father to be presented to the Pharaoh. When he appears, the Pharaoh asks him about his life. Jacob, the patriarch of a great nation and father of the second-greatest man in Egypt, responds in the following way:

"And Jacob said to Pharaoh: 'The days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojournings.'"

Jacob is old and tired. He has seen countless moments of strife and unhappiness, as well experiences huge moments of blessing and prosperity. After all of that, this is how he chooses to describe his lengthy existence.

My question is WHY? How are we to make sense of the two versions of Jacob we see in the Book of Genesis: the complicated, clever, successful father of a nation and a tired man who has had enough of the world, who feels like his many days have basically amounted to nothing but evil. Jacob describes himself as a soujourner, a person who lives as a stranger in a strangle land, never really belonging to a place. They have been bad. At the very least, we can understand why he feels that way. He stole his brother's blessing, fled his childhood home, lived almost like a servant to his father-in-law, and lived thinking his favorite son died a violent death. His relationship with his other sons was full of resentment and they disregarded his feelings time and again. He describes the number of his years to Pharaoh, but he also describes how he feels about the quality of these years, "few and bad."

This certainly cannot be the point of Jacob's story. Why would the Torah want us to see him this way? What would Jacob had said if saw himself as Rachel, the love of his life who he worked 14 years to marry, saw him? What about through the eyes of Joseph, who he made feel special, loved, and perfect for the first 17 years of his life? Or what about the leaders around him, who revered him as a man of Adonai and great wealth? He is chosen over his brother to be the patriarch of the Israelite nation. It is through Jacob that the twelve tribes are born. God saw him to be worthy enough. God made Jacob his partner in the eternal covenant, protected him, and spoke directly to him in fantastic visions. He may not have his own land, but he receives an inheritance far greater for his children and their descendants. Surely his days were not only "few and evil." They were also blessed, with moments of love, personal growth, and direct encounters with the Divine. He even gets to see all of his sons together and alive after decades of grief. We, as the inheritors of the tradition of Jacob, can look

back and see the full complexity of the character of Jacob in a way he could not.

So what about us? It's pretty clear to most of us that life isn't always easy or perfect. Moments of joy and success are wonderful, but the moments of negative feelings can leave a much deeper, more lasting scar. They can overwhelm us, make us doubt ourselves, and expose our insecurities. Nobody likes feeling this way, but it's a fact of life that most of us have at one point or another. In the moment, it's often difficult to picture how to move forward from these challenging emotions. I'd like to suggest one idea that I learned recently, from all places, a commercial.

Like a lot of you, I rely on the Internet for most of my news. Sometimes, or even most of the time, I find that I am not a reading so much hard news. I keep up on current events, but I love websites with cultural news and pop culture as well. In the last month, a video has been circulating around on Facebook that I found very moving and interesting. As a part of the Dove campaign to promote "real beauty," they created a fascinating experiment. The people

at Dove hired a professional criminal sketch artist who is one of the best in the business. His job is to draw perfect portraits of people from a verbal description. For each woman subject in the video, he drew two portraits: one based on her own description of herself, and one based on the description a stranger creates of the same woman. The results were pretty amazing—in each personal description, the facial features ended up exaggerated, with the participants pointing out every flaw, everything they didn't like about how they looked. In the second portrait, you see a very different woman. The strangers were often able to better capture how each woman really looked to others, helping to create portraits that were beautiful and shocking to the subject. Could they possibly look that way? How did they not see their real beauty? If you haven't seen the video I really recommend watching it to see it for yourselves.

It reminded me of an important message: sometimes other people can see us more as we truly are than we can. They see our value, our beauty, and our strengths in a way that we cannot because we are too stuck inside our own

heads. This is true on the other end of the spectrum too. Like the spoiled Joseph of youth and Jacob in his trickster days as a young man, sometimes we need a reminder not to think too much of ourselves. The Torah gives us many examples of people with complex character and deep emotion beyond Jacob. Moses, the greatest prophet of his time, also lives an extraordinary life plagued by self-doubt and frustration at his failures. In the end, the Torah's final line is dedicated to reminding us that never again will there be again a prophet as special, wise, and Moses in the history of the Jewish people. His role as the leader of his people amounts to much more than the challenges he faces.

Jewish tradition offers us practice to temper the effects, both positive and negative, of how we see ourselves. It is told of a certain Hasidic rabbi that every day, in one pocket he held a piece of paper that said "For my sake the world was created." In his other pocket, a scrap of paper read "I am but dust and ashes." Each day, when he needed these reminders, he used them as a performance assessment. Depending on which reminder he needed, he would touch his

hand to the piece of paper to boost his self-esteem or humble himself. I actually know a rabbi who does this, keeping the two pieces of paper in his wallet, always in the pocket as a reminder to assess how he sees himself. I'd like to add another statement that I think we could use to for our own check-ins: Try to see yourself as others see you. What would your friends, family, colleagues, teachers, and other people who know you pretty well say? Perhaps a mistake will seem less fatal—what's the big deal if you make one mistake on a project or say one wrong thing. We can hear their voices in our heads too and work on finding a little perspective. As we just learned, Judaism gives us many examples of the profound effect of our self-image on how we act. Maybe if we try this exercise, we could be a little better, a little more honest in our own performance assessments.