Overcoming the Disease of Hatred: Thoughts for Parashat Vayeshev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayeshev

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Joseph's brothers were deeply jealous of him: "they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him" (Bereishith 37:4). They resented that their father showed favoritism to Joseph. They were infuriated by Joseph's dreams of lordship over them. They were so filled with enmity, that they were ready to murder Joseph. They showed no remorse once Joseph had been sold into slavery and was out of their way.

Yet, as the story unfolds, the brothers' worst fears about Joseph actually came true. Joseph did rise to lordship over them, and indeed had extraordinary power over all of Egypt. When the family was reunited in Egypt, Jacob continued to show favoritism to Joseph. While Joseph's brothers each represented one tribe of Israel, Jacob designated two tribes for Joseph—Menashe and Ephraim.

Given the profound jealousy and hatred the brothers' harbored toward Joseph during his youth, one would expect them to have even more jealousy and hatred once Joseph's pre-eminence over them was confirmed by the passage of time. Yet, the Torah gives no indication of their ongoing malice toward Joseph. We no longer hear that they hate him or that they cannot speak peaceably to him. We see no jealousy when Jacob demonstrates favoritism to Joseph. We hear no expression of anger when Joseph receives a double inheritance.

What happened to their jealousy and hatred?

When they were younger, the brothers viewed life as a zero sum game where there can only be one winner. If Joseph wins, we lose. If Joseph is destined to have power over us, then we must destroy him or we ourselves will end up losing the game. Hatred and jealousy eat away at the brothers. They think that any gain by

Joseph will necessarily entail a loss for them.

With the passage of time, they saw that Joseph indeed had great power, wealth, and wisdom, and that he was still favored by his father. But the brothers now had a new insight: it doesn't matter! We can live our own lives happily and successfully even if Joseph has all these advantages over us. We are not in competition with him after all. Life is not a zero sum game where only one side wins. Life can be lived fully and happily in a cooperative framework rather than in a competitive rat race for power. Joseph's great success does not in any way diminish from the self-worth of the brothers.

When the brothers came to understand that jealousy and hatred were self-destructive, they could rise to a happier philosophy of life dominated by love, family loyalty, and cooperation.

Much of the hatred in our world stems from an undeveloped sense of selfhood. People feel jealousy and hatred toward others who they fear are smarter, stronger, or more successful. They think that only one side can win; if the others are succeeding, then we must be losing.

Demagogues thrive on the rhetoric of hatred, stirring up the basest fears of a frightened humanity. They sow feelings of malevolence and mistrust into society. They stereotype the "enemy" and rob them of their human dignity. The rhetoric of violence and hatred leads to violent and hateful acts.

Those who inflict the suffering thereby show themselves to be humanly inferior to their intended victims.

Erich Fromm has written of the "syndrome of decay," that "prompts men to destroy for the sake of destruction, and to hate for the sake of hate." Because of frustrations, feelings of inferiority and malignant narcissism, many people direct their lives onto the road of hatred and death. People who suffer the syndrome of hatred are at root unhappy people, who begrudge happiness and success to others.

Until people can rise above the "syndrome of decay," they fritter away their lives in destructive patterns. They focus on hatred…and the hatred eats away their souls and poisons their lives.

Sad to say, some of the most vicious demagogues spew forth their hatred in the name of God and religion. They invoke God's name in fanning hatred and violence against those whom they perceive as their enemies. This gross betrayal of the

religious message of love and peace does vast dishonor to humanity and to God. This demagoguery saps life of happiness and creativity, turning it into a maelstrom of hatred, violence and destruction.

Those who hate become victims of their own hatred. They lock themselves into an ugly and endless strife, depriving themselves of a healthy, loving life.

Joseph’s brothers learned to overcome jealousy and hatred. They learned to escape the “syndrome of decay” that eats away at the fiber of life. They learned that life is not a zero sum game; that their winning did not depend on someone else losing; that all humans could live so much more happily and meaningfully if they adopted a syndrome of love and cooperation.

Angel for Shabbat