Separation and Reconciliation: Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash

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By
Rabbi Marc Angel
Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayiggash

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The root of deepest human sadness is embodied in the word "separation." We feel this sadness especially at moments of transition: when we say goodbye to a child who is leaving for college or moving out of town; when we say goodbye to a loved one whom we won't be seeing for a long time.

There is the poignant separation of divorce, of breaking off close friendships and family relationships; and the ultimate separation of death. Saying goodbye to a dying parent, spouse, relative or friend must be counted among the saddest of human experiences.

It is at moments of separation that we feel our emotions surging in uncontrollable waves. We come to recognize that we are not in control of everything, that we cannot hold things still, freeze time, freeze relationships. We cannot prevent death.

"Reunion" and reconciliation are at the root of the deepest human joy and satisfaction. Seeing a loved one after years of separation, reuniting with family and friends--these experiences bring tears of happiness. We feel the completeness of our lives. Things are now right. The joys of reunion are implied by our belief in an afterlife where we will ultimately be reunited with loved ones who have passed on. Death, in other words, is not a final separation. It, too, will be followed eventually by reunion.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a powerful account of the interplay between separation and reunion. Joseph is sold away to Egypt; he is alienated from his family; he is separated from the people and the land of his youth. As the story unfolds, Joseph and brothers eventually become reconciled. Joseph realizes that although he is an Egyptian official…he still is, at root, an Israelite.

While the contour of the story relates to the separation and reunion of Joseph and his family, it also reflects on Joseph's alienation from, and reclaiming of, his own identity. In his book, *Pillar of Salt*, Albert Memmi warns: "Do not become a stranger to yourself, for you are lost from that day on; you will have no peace if there is not, somewhere within you, a corner of certainty, calm waters where you can take refuge in sleep."

In a sense, Joseph was becoming a stranger to himself. He was transforming himself into an Egyptian; but at last he realized that he could have no real peace unless he reclaimed his Israelite origins.

Somewhere within each of us is "a corner of certainty," a hard kernel of identity that we abandon at our own peril. Alienation from others is painful. Alienation from oneself is disastrous.

Angel for Shabbat