Communicating Without Words-- Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayiggash

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When Joseph said to Jacob's sons that he would keep Benjamin as his slave, Judah came forward to plea for his brother's safe return home. Judah's speech to Joseph is marked by keen logic, eloquence, and strength. It is one of the oratorical masterpieces of the Bible.

But how did Judah know that Joseph understood a word he was saying? After all, the brothers knew Joseph only as an Egyptian official, someone who would not likely understand Hebrew. Normally, a translator would be present…but in Judah's emotional plea to Joseph there is no evidence of a translator. Moreover, Judah's eloquence would not have been properly conveyed by a neutral translator.

The 19th century Italian Torah commentator, Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, suggests that the brothers somehow picked up clues that Joseph understood their private conversations. Thus, when Judah came forward with his plea, he had a suspicion that Joseph would understand his words.

Joseph was obviously moved to tears by Judah's plea so that he revealed his identity to his brothers and began a family reconciliation. But perhaps Joseph was so powerfully moved not merely by Judah's words—which Joseph in fact did understand—but by the non-verbal power of Judah's presentation.

We can imagine Judah's tone of voice, his facial expressions, and his body movements as he made his case to Joseph. The presentation began with a calm review of previous conversations between Joseph and the brothers. It became more emotional as Judah described how his father Jacob would suffer and die if Benjamin did not return home. It rose to a crescendo when Judah offered himself as slave in place of Benjamin. And at this point Joseph broke down.

It was not merely Judah's words that reached Joseph's heart; it was the manner of Judah's presentation. Joseph sensed Judah's intense emotion, his sincerity, his strength of character. If Judah's words had been sent to Joseph as a letter, they would not likely have made such a dramatic impression.

When people speak honestly and authentically, their non-verbal communication validates their words. When people speak deceptively and falsely, their non-verbal communication conveys their dishonesty.

Dr. Oliver Sacks reports on an incident in the aphasia ward of the institution in which he was working. (Aphasia is a condition that blocks patients from understanding words. They can pick up the sounds, but do not grasp the meaning of words they hear. But they are very attuned to non-verbal communication.) While watching a televised address by the President of the United States, the aphasiacs were laughing. They did not understand the words of the President…but they understood the tone of his voice and his facial and hand gestures. "It was the grimaces, the histrionisms, the false gestures, and above all, the false tones and cadences of the voice, which rang false for these wordless but immensely sensitive patients….That is why they laughed at the President's speech." (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, p. 87). They could distinguish between communication that was authentic or not authentic.

Although the President's speech may have convinced some in his television audience, he failed miserably among those in the aphasia ward. They paid close attention to his manner of presentation, to his gestures and facial expressions. They found his communication to be laughable, deceptive, and insincere.

When Judah communicated with Joseph, the communication was total, sincere, authentic...and Joseph knew it and responded accordingly. Verbal and non-verbal communication were at work.

When we deal with others, it is essential to understand their verbal and non-verbal communication. Likewise, we need to be sure that our own non-verbal communication is in sync with our words. The line between authenticity and hypocrisy is easily blurred.