Strength and Tears: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayhi

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As Joseph rose to a position of power in Egypt, we imagine him to have been a clear-headed, pragmatic official. He had to develop a plan for gathering and storing seven years worth of produce. He then needed a plan for responsible distribution of food during the seven years of famine. He had to create a vast bureaucracy to implement fourteen years of complicated management of resources. As the years of famine continued, Joseph centralized government control so that Egypt's land became nationalized under Pharaoh.

This amazing work would have required a strong, efficient and single-minded leader, one who would not let emotion get in the way of pragmatism. Yet, Joseph is the character in the book of Bereishith who displays the most emotion!

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted that the Torah records seven acts of Joseph weeping. "They span the full spectrum of emotion, from painful memory to the joy of being reunited, first with his brother Benjamin, then with his father Jacob. There are the complex tears immediately before and after he discloses his identity to his brothers, and there are the tears of bereavement at Jacob's deathbed. But the most intriguing are the last, the tears he sheds when he hears that his brothers fear that he will take revenge on them now that their father is no longer alive."

Joseph was not only a strong-minded official; he was also a soft-hearted human being. By stressing Joseph's weeping, the Torah is reminding us that ideal leaders must not only be strong and pragmatic, they also need to be sensitive human beings.

Some people are efficient but hard-hearted. Some are compassionate but inept. Some are neither efficient nor compassionate. And some are in the Joseph model. They work hard; they are single-minded in getting things done; they are clear-headed and pragmatic; but they are also kind, empathetic and sensitive human beings.

Years ago, I met with a congregant who was chairman of a huge company. I imagined it would have been impossible to rise so high without being very tough and competitive. Yet, this congregant was very affable, kind, generous, thoughtful. I asked him: how did you become chairman of the company when you are such a nice man? He answered: to succeed, one needs good judgment and the ability to work effectively with others. One can be a strong leader and a nice person at the same time. This congregant followed the Joseph model!

We all can learn from the Joseph model. We can strive to be efficient and pragmatic while also being compassionate and considerate. It’s good to be strong…and emotionally healthy.