Overcoming Jealousy: Thoughts for Parashat Vayiggash

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayiggash

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Now therefore when I come to your servant my father and the lad is not with us…but his soul is bound up with the lad’s soul” (Bereishith 34: 30).

Judah made an impassioned plea for the release of Benjamin. Joseph was so moved that he revealed his true identity to his brothers: he was an Egyptian official but also their brother.

The surface reading of the text implies that Joseph was particularly touched by the sorrow that his father would suffer if Benjamin did not return home. But perhaps Joseph had another thought. The reason Joseph had originally been betrayed by his brothers stemmed from their jealousy. They resented that he was overtly favored by their father. However, Judah’s plea made a remarkable admission: Jacob obviously showed favoritism to Benjamin, their souls were bound together. Jacob would not have been equally distressed if any of the other brothers remained as prisoners.

Joseph would have noticed: the brothers know of Jacob’s favoritism to Benjamin but don’t seem to resent it. On the contrary, they are ready to stand up on Benjamin’s behalf. Joseph wondered: were the brothers cured of the malady of jealousy? It seemed so, but how could he be sure?

On sending them back to Canaan, Joseph gave each of his brothers a gift of clothing: but to Benjamin he gave five gifts of clothing! “So he sent his brothers away and they departed; and he said to them, do not quarrel on the way home” (Bereishith 45:24). Joseph wanted to determine if the brothers would squawk about the favoritism shown to Benjamin. Apparently they did not. There is no mention in the Torah of any animus against Benjamin due to his favored status.

Joseph then knew for sure: the brothers had overcome the trait of jealousy. The family now truly could be re-united in a spirit of harmony.

How did the brothers overcome their feelings of jealousy? We can speculate that they came to realize that jealousy was a destructive trait; it caused them grief; it dragged down their lives with guilt and feelings of discontent. They finally understood that they needed to live their own lives as best as possible without concern whether others had more than they did. They realized that life doesn’t have to be lived as a competition.

When the brothers overcame jealousy in relation to Benjamin, they also overcame it in relation to Joseph. It no longer mattered to them if Joseph was more powerful or more beloved. What mattered

was doing their best to live up to their own potentials.

When people overcome jealousy, they can be rid of a life-sapping burden. They can be free.