



This week's Torah portion, *Vayigash* is the climax of the Joseph story – The [Joseph story](#) is the longest narrative in the whole Torah...

- Joseph, Jacob's favorite son
- Coat of many colors...
- Dreamer
- Tattle tale...
- Fratricide – almost
- Joseph's rise to power
- Potiphar's wife
- Prison
- The baker and the cup bearer
- Pharaoh's dreams
- Seven years of plenty, seven years of famine
- His brothers come down to Egypt....
- Revenge of a sort...
- Judah's amazing speech

Joseph can't take it anymore. This is how the Torah describes what happened next:

Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace.

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come forward to me." And when they came forward, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.

This is a great moment in Torah and there is much we could focus on. Tonight, we only have time to look at two things - Joseph's emotional response, and how he understands what happened to him.

The Torah says that "Joseph could no longer control himself...and he cried out..."

Why? What happened? Was he angry, frustrated, indignant? I don't think so... No, he could not hold back his tears. In fact, the Torah says all of Egypt heard his sobs. He was overcome with sadness and he cried.

That to me describes the national outcry we've experienced since the shooting last Friday. Sure, people are angry, upset and calling for all kinds of changes, some of which make sense, but underneath it all we are in pain, intolerably sad about what has happened. We might also be afraid, but it is the sadness that feels the most palpable and also the least acceptable – we have to do something, anything, but feel this...

Feeling sad means feeling vulnerable and feeling vulnerable takes guts! We also need a safe place to be vulnerable. Notice Joseph does not want the Egyptians to see him so upset, so vulnerable – he orders his attendants to leave him alone with his brothers. He tells his brothers who he is but they don't believe him. He then asks them to come close to him – why? [Rashi](#) says so he could show them that he was circumcised!

Perhaps not what one would expect but, I think there is something very important we can learn here; part of what it takes to feel safe and thus to be free to feel the range of emotions a truly vulnerable person feels, is community, and circumcision is a sign of communal identity.

Raw emotion is not appropriately expressed everywhere, but amongst your tribe, say after a loss; you ought to be able to sob uncontrollably. If we are doing our job reasonably well, the synagogue should be a place where it is ok to feel horribly sad and not feel totally alone or exposed.

Let's take a moment now to look at how Joseph understands what happened to him – ...do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.... God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on

earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God...

Joseph has extraordinary faith in “The God of History.” As far as he is concerned, everything that happens is part of “God’s plan.” In Joseph’s case, this makes sense since, at least according to the story God is the main albeit behind the scenes, character in the story... So, while it could not have been easy to be Joseph, we can readily understand where his faith flows from. Not so true for us.

Anytime a tragedy like Newtown occurs – and there have sadly been more than a few – the foundational assumptions of our lives are severely shaken. The truth is, we don’t need a national tragedy to be emotionally and spiritually knocked asunder; lose anyone you love, anyone you really care about and that can easily be enough to start an emotional/spiritual earthquake.

The eikar, crux issue is “meaning.” Why get out of bed in the morning, why care about anything if it can all be taken from you in the blink of an eye. “Tell me there is a reason to my suffering; tell me there is a reason why.... And I’ll be ok. Tell me dammit!”

Of course, I can’t. There are no good answers for why good people suffer horribly. There is no acceptable answer to the question, “why Newtown?” None!

We can’t answer the question “why?” and it is really not the Jewish focus; we’ve never cared that much about theology. Our questions, the only ones we can answer are “what?” and “how?” What can we do to help those who are suffering? What can we do going forward to prevent this kind of thing from happening again (if that is possible). How can we comfort the bereaved and each other during this time of need?

And, how can we find the collective courage to believe in the goodness of humanity, in each other, in the promise of the future even and especially in the face of terrible suffering?

How to sing as Leonard Cohen does, “even when it all goes wrong, I’ll tip my hat to the Lord of song with nothing but Hallelujah on my tongue.”