

## Shabbat Parashat VaYigash The Transformation/Maturation of Joseph

For the past two Shabbatot, we have been reading of the trials and tribulations of the descendants of Jacob. The story of the rivalry between Joseph and his brothers is riveting and well-known, so much so that it was dramatized and turned into both a musical and an animated film for public entertainment. It is very easy to get caught up in the action of this story, whether one is reading it from a “book” or observing it on stage or screen. However, when we get right down to it, this narrative is still a sacred teaching and must be examined for its educational and religious values. Therefore, if one takes a step back to discover the underlying messages of this four-*parasha*-long story, one will see that one of the main subplots is the growth and development of the character of Joseph from impertinent youth to mature and humble man.

When we first meet Joseph, he is an adolescent, the favorite son of his father. Joseph is blessed with the gifts not only of being a dream interpreter, but also a prognosticator or “fortune teller” of sorts through his own and others’ dreams. He is boastful and immodest. He is self-centered. He is unaware of the potential consequences of his behavior and choices. After having been sold into slavery and then thrown into prison for a crime he did not commit, given his freedom, high station and significant responsibilities by Pharaoh, and finally reunited with his brothers, we meet a new Joseph in this week’s *parasha*. Joseph has gained what some call “perspective.” It is a major turn around from the adolescent that his brothers and we readers came to know back in Canaan. Joseph is not looking to repay his brothers for the cruelties they inflicted upon him. In fact, Joseph shares with them the “big picture” that he is now able to see: God had sent him down to Egypt in order to save them from the famine. His journey away from his family and home were part of a larger plan. He did not attain his position in Egypt as a result of his own accomplishments or talents, but by virtue of God’s will.

This subplot in the *parasha* provides tremendous insight for us all as we negotiate the rough waters of parenting. Where Jacob struggled in the raising of Joseph, we have the opportunity to succeed. Jacob did not help Joseph to gain “perspective” and see that the world did not “revolve around him.” Jacob did not help his son to find humility or to work on methods of communication with others that would endear him to them instead of repelling them. Jacob does not seem to provide appropriate limits for Joseph so that he can see where the authority and boundaries are in his life. All of that aside, Joseph’s adolescence is presented to us in ways that are very real because they are very similar to the ways that we experience and observe it today. From a developmental standpoint, Joseph is behaving exactly as we could logically expect him to behave. However, this does not make it right. We should all wish for some of the new characteristics we see in Joseph in this week’s *parasha* to have been there earlier. In our work as parents, we have the opportunity to turn these desires that we have for Joseph’s character in the Torah into reality with our own children. A child who is reared with a greater understanding of the world beyond the self will be much better able not only to become a mature and compassionate adult, but also a parent that will do the same for his or her own children. Here are some suggestions of practices that will help our children to avoid the pitfalls of the young Joseph and become well-adjusted and understanding adolescents and young adults:

- Participate in community Hesed programs that benefit the less fortunate as a family unit.
- Model and teach non-judgmental attitudes of others.
- Play an active role in your child(ren)’s social lives: have strict rules about social exclusion (also known as social bullying) by insisting upon inclusive events and activities, be aware of how and to whom they communicate by phone, email, instant and text messaging.
- Discuss “growing up” issues with your child(ren) regularly so they are aware that they are important to you.
- Create and enforce reasonable limits on your child(ren)’s autonomy so that they feel empowered, but not entirely powerful.

May we all be witness to a maturation process for our children into good people in the model of Joseph this week’s *parasha*, only without the same suffering that ultimately lead to its coming into being.  
Shabbat Shalom!