



**Reconciliation and Healing:
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Vayechi*
Genesis 47:28-50:26
13 Tevet 5768 December 22, 2007**

Many Jews are surprised to learn that a sickbed prayer, known as the *Vidui*, is a part of Jewish tradition. This prayer asks God for healing, yet acknowledges the possibility that death may be near. The prayer also asks forgiveness for any previous transgressions or wrongdoings.

This prayer is not seen as a bad omen. Indeed, we are taught “Most of those who said the *Vidui* did not die, and many who did not say it died. Many who are walking the streets recited the *Vidui*...”

Thus a prayer for healing and forgiveness, accompanied by the realization that one's fate is ultimately in God's hands, is something that need not be reserved for life's final moments. Rather, forgiveness and reconciliation should be a part of our lives every day.

However, as this week's Torah portion shows us, old hurts and fears may lie under the surface for decades.

We read that after the patriarch Jacob dies, his sons become afraid of their brother Joseph. Years ago the brothers had traveled to Egypt to get food during a time of famine. They appealed to the second-highest ruler in Egypt. They did not realize that illustrious person was their brother Joseph whom they had sold into slavery twenty-two years before. Eventually, when Joseph makes his identity known to them, they are stunned, then frightened. Surely Joseph would now pay them back for the terrible treatment he had from them!

But Joseph has only comforting words for them, reassuring them that he holds no grudges. He realizes that ultimately it was God, not the brothers, who sent him to Egypt. He urges his brothers to bring their father and all their households to Egypt, to live peacefully with him there.

But now, after living together for seventeen years, their father Jacob has died. The sons fearfully wonder if Joseph has truly forgiven them for their harsh treatment of him decades before. Perhaps now that their father has died, Joseph will finally demand his revenge.

When Joseph learns of their fear, he weeps. His tears are those of compassion as he realizes the pain and uncertainty his brothers must have harbored for all those years.

We too feel compassion for the brothers. What a shame that for so long they never spoke to Joseph of their fear. What a shame they lived with their fear, rather than dealing with the situation directly. Fortunately, Joseph was finally able to reassure them and they were at last fully reconciled. They lived their remaining days at peace with one another.

When we are ill, thoughts of our mortality are often with us. The Vidui is a prayer of hope and reconciliation, reminding us to make amends with those we have hurt, to forgive and ask forgiveness.

Illness can often be a time of introspection and review of the past. Are there people with whom it is time to make amends? Are there situations that can be forgiven, so that reconciliation can take place in this lifetime?

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Helen Cohn of Congregation Chaverim in Tucson, Arizona. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging.

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