



Scrooge and Joseph: A Jewish Perspective **Torah Reflection on Parshat Vayigash**

December 11, 2010

4 Tevet 5771

Jews in America can't avoid Christmas. As much as we tell ourselves it doesn't matter, in our heart of hearts many of us feel a little left out by the giant nation-wide party we were probably not invited to. This season can be a lonely time for Jews, and this isolation is compounded when we are sick or caring for someone who is ill. This week's Torah portion and one of the most famous Christmas stories, tell surprisingly similar tales about isolation and suffering in this season.

So what *do* Scrooge and Joseph have in common? All Americans know the story of Scrooge. More than 20 movies have been made of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" including a 1901 adaptation, one of the earliest surviving films, and a recent 2009 3-D version. Scrooge has been played by Daffy Duck and by Barbie the doll. The story is enduring because it is a universal one of loss and redemption. Scrooge's heart has been broken. Not all at once, but in small fits of mean-spiritedness in his day-to-day living. His sister dies, his father is mean to him, his fiancé breaks up with him and Scrooge looks for a way to shield himself against the fear of loss. He begins to "edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance."¹

Scrooge begins to grow farther and farther away from other people. He refuses to recognize the relationships that still exist in his life; his persistent and good-hearted nephew, his loyal employees and collegial friends. Instead he focuses on what and who he can control from an isolated distance. However in a dramatic night of revelation from ghosts of the past, he relives the happier moments of his youth and he begins to recall what it feels like to be close to others.

Scrooge remembers moments of stinginess with regret and slowly realizes that giving to others is the best way to draw near to them and by withholding himself he has become alone. He makes a series of changes, sharing his resources, and finally, he shares his most important gift, himself. Just as his fear had slowly led to isolation and resentment, these acts of generosity build on themselves and draw him closer and closer to others. Generations have found the story compelling because whether ill or well, young or old, content or not, we all have a deep longing to share ourselves with others and a fear of loss that can lead us to pull away.

The Torah tells an ancient version of this timeless tale. This week's Torah portion, *Vayigash*, is also about the capacity to draw near to others even in the face of suffering and loss. As a young man Joseph was isolated from his brothers by their jealousy of him because he was his father's favorite, eventually this leads them to sell him into

¹ "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens; Stave One, "Marley's Ghost", Paragraph 9.

slavery and convince their father that he is dead. These are terrible wrongs and Joseph would be justified in never wanting to be close to his family ever again and distrust any intimacy with them.

And yet in this week's Torah portion Joseph is reunited with his brothers and instead of holding himself apart in resentment, he chooses to draw near. When Joseph sees his family for the first time in decades few words are exchanged, they mostly just hold each other near and weep. The Torah is teaching us that healing does not require a rational explanation of loss and suffering, but rather simply the intention to draw closer to others. Joseph could have chosen to be like Scrooge before the ghosts appeared and harbor his bitterness. He would have been justified in being stingy with his brothers in the face of their wrongs to him, but instead of isolation he chooses a path of generosity and intimacy as he gives of his resources and gives of himself to them.

The name of this week's *parshah* offers a whole approach to Jewish healing – *Vayigash*, means to draw near. It would make sense for Scrooge and Joseph to stay isolated – after all they were wounded by being close to people why should they risk intimacy again? Why should they risk giving of themselves again? And yet both Jewish and Christian tales remind us to take a leap of faith and with a generosity of spirit draw near to one another.

Suffering has the capacity to pull us away from each other and lead us to become isolated in our pain. However it is drawing closer to others, even with the danger of more loss that brings healing. This December may we not ignore the small moments that allow us to give of ourselves to others and in this giving come one step closer to each other and to healing.

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Gail Kolthoff



This Torah Reflection was co-written (from a Jewish and non-Jewish author) by Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Gail Kolthoff of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco. The Torah Reflections series is published 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. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.

