

PARASHAS VAYIGASH

Missing Persons

For twenty-two years, Jacob had grieved inconsolably over the loss of his beloved son Joseph. And now, his sons, returning from Egypt, had burst in on him with the most amazing news. Joseph was alive and well! Moreover, he had risen to the post of viceroy, becoming for all intents and purposes the undisputed ruler of the fabled Egyptian kingdom.

Surely, there can be no more dramatic instance of a dream come true. So what was Jacob's first response to these wonderful tidings? Incredibly, he was incredulous. As we read in this week's portion, he simply refused to believe them. Only after they repeated to him exactly what messages Joseph had sent to his father, and showed him the wagons he sent to transport the whole family back to Egypt, did Jacob finally accept their news. Only then was "his spirit revived."

The question immediately arises: Why indeed did Jacob refuse to believe them at first? Surely his sons, all great and upstanding men, would not have conspired to play a cruel practical joke on their old father. What could they possibly gain by dragging him down to Egypt only to discover that Joseph was not awaiting him? Why then was Jacob so incredulous?

The commentators explain that had spent the first seventeen years of Joseph's life molding him into a supremely spiritual man, a man steeped in the most profound Torah concepts and attuned to the deepest mysteries of the universe, a man of transcendent aspirations and goals, a man intensely alive in the full spiritual sense of the word. This was the living son he had lost so many years before, the spiritual successor for whom he had never ceased to grieve.

Now, after twenty-two years, his sons had returned from Egypt with the news that the selfsame Joseph who had studied Torah with his father was now the autocratic ruler of Egypt. Jacob did not believe it. He had no problem, of course, accepting the objective fact that the flesh and blood Joseph was still alive and breathing. But was he the same person who had grown up in his father's sanctified home? How could it be that he had risen so high in the Egyptian power structure without compromising his values and ideals? And if so, this man's identification with the lost Joseph was no more than a superficial, physical one, and his return could not compensate Jacob for his terrible loss.

But then the brothers relayed Joseph's word and showed him the wagons Joseph had sent. According to the Midrash, these symbolized a Torah discussion they were having shortly before they were separated. Clearly, Joseph was sending a message to his father that he had not succumbed to his new environment, that he was still the same Joseph with same abiding devotion to the Torah and everything for which it stands. Only then did Jacob understand that his lost son had survived not only physically but spiritually as well, and "his spirit was revived."

A young man studied for many years in the academy of a great sage. One day, he decided to go out and seek his fortune. He took his leave of his mentor who had taught him wisdom for such a long time and left.

Many years later, a middle-aged man came to visit the sage. He wore vulgar and flamboyant clothing, and gaudy jewelry adorned his fingers. He took out a thick wad of money and handed it to the sage.

"This is for your academy," he said. "You may not remember me, but I was your student years ago. I have made a large fortune in the circus, and I have decided to give something to my alma mater. Life is strange, isn't it? Would you ever have believed that a student of yours would one day manage a circus?"

The sage smiled sadly. "I would never have believed it, and I still don't believe it. My student has ceased to exist. The man who owns the circus is an altogether different person."

In our own lives, each of us developed a certain self-image during the formative years and still feels connected to that special person we once considered ourselves to be, even though the years may have coerced us into making certain compromises. But are we really? Only if our compromises did not involve sacrificing our basic values and ideals can we still be considered the same people we once were.