

Revealing Brotherhood
(Genesis 44:24-45:5; Jeremiah 31:7-14)

There was a mug filled with water on the floor next to my bed. My daughter and I walked in the room and chanced to see our cat saunter over and sip out of it. We saw the same thing, but we interpreted it differently. I tried to think like a cat—“Here’s a water bowl on the floor, although it’s taller and narrower than the vessel I usually drink out of. Surely this vessel is for me!” But, seeing the same scene, my daughter said “Look Mom, She thinks she’s a person!” For her, mugs, whether on the floor or on the table are for people.

How often our perspective goes unchallenged by that of another. A mug is a mug or a water bowl is a water bowl. But sometimes an experience reveals a new way of seeing, and we incorporate it into the rest of our lives.

Virginia Foster Durr was a major figure in the civil rights struggle, fighting for racial justice and voting rights for blacks. She grew up in a genteel and racist Southern family before coming North to attend Wellesley College. The first night of her Sophomore year, newly living on campus, Virginia approached her assigned dining table, only to discover that a black girl was seated there. She immediately went to the head of the house and insisted that she couldn’t possibly eat at a table with a Negro girl. Her Alabama father would have a fit. The head of the house calmly informed her that it was her choice—she could abide by the rules and eat at her table until she rotated next month, or she could withdraw from the College. When Virginia went to her room to consider her options, her roommate challenged her—at home, you hug and kiss your black cook. Virginia responded, “Well I love her, but I don’t eat with her.”

This ultimatum was the first time her values had been contested. She made a decision to stay. She ate at that table and discovered that her tablemate was a perfectly nice, cultured, well mannered and intelligent young woman. What was revealed to her about their common humanity had a profound impact. Virginia realized it was not her classmate she was frightened of—it was her father’s reaction. She was breaking the taboos she had been raised with. In her autobiography, Virginia Foster Durr, wrote, “The incident...was the origin of a doubt. It hurt my faith, my solid conviction of what I had been raised to believe.”¹ This first experience of questioning her perspective, of responding to a community that held different values, set the stage for a life of activism against racism and injustice. From then on, Virginia insisted upon a place at the table for all blacks. Brotherhood was revealed for Virginia in a college dining hall.

In another place, and at another time, Nechama, a 13 year old Jewish girl with two long braids dressed in a bathrobe knocked on a stranger’s door. The Vavriseviches, (vav-ri-se-vitch-es), a Greek Orthodox family opened the door to her and opened their home. They hid Nechama and her widowed mother from the Gestapo for 15 months. Mikhail and Nikolai, the 16 and 18 year old sons in the family, left their carefree teen years behind. They were always on guard. If chimney smoke appeared more often than usual, the neighbors might wonder who else their mother was baking bread for. If they drew

more water than usual from the well, the neighbors might speculate about how many people were bathing inside the house. Mikhail and Nikolai helped Nechama and her mother to celebrate the Sabbath on Friday nights by creating makeshift candles, with an oil dipped piece of thread in a scooped out potato. They surreptitiously picked extra potatoes during Passover, so Nechama and her mother could keep the holiday. In the most dangerous of circumstances, these three teens from different backgrounds shared a home and a destiny. In doing so, they became close friends. Six decades later, Nechama still overflows with admiration and appreciation. “They treated us with respect. You don’t know what it is like to be treated with respect when [out in the street] you are cannon fodder.” And Mikhail and Nikolai reply, “Under the worst circumstances, you know who are your friends. What united us was the evil of the Nazis. We don’t want anybody in the world to go through what we went through.”ⁱⁱ For Mikhail and Nikolai, brotherhood was revealed through potatoes and protection.

In today’s biblical text, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. Like Mikhail and Nikolai Vavrisevich, someone in need has knocked on his door for food and safety. Like Virginia Forest Durr, he is faced with a choice.

Joseph in Egypt is filled with power and charisma. He goes by an Egyptian name. He embraces his adopted country and the success he has found there. He is happy to forget his origins. At first, he toys with his unwitting brothers. He could have continued to dispense food and keep his distance. He could have chosen to remain in character as a powerful Egyptian prince, sending his brothers away satiated and oblivious, privately gloating at their powerlessness before him.

But in one moment, his perspective changes. The meaning of his youthful dreams becomes clear.

Joseph knows intellectually that the men before him are, by blood and kinship, his brothers. But it is only when Judah pleads for Benjamin, a plea filled with purity—pure in contrition, pure in filial respect, pure in sibling responsibility, pure in selflessness, that he feels the intensity of his brotherhood. “Then Joseph made himself known to his brothers.”—by making himself known to them, he understands his own life with new perspective. And his identity changes. No longer pretending to be Egyptian, no longer wrapping himself in privilege, no longer lording his power, no longer hiding behind convention, Joseph, the brother is revealed, “Ani Yosef, Ha od avi chai?” “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” Joseph reveals himself, and in that moment, everything changes. As writer Peter Pitzele comments “The one who was dead is alive again; the past is present; the beginning is the end; the hidden is revealed; the impossible is real. Joseph, who at various crucial moments in his life is stripped and cast down, here strips himself of his own pretensions and resumes his place among his brothers...As he reveals himself to his brothers, something is revealed to him...He has an epiphany.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Overcome with emotion, Joseph shares this revelation laced with forgiveness and overture with his frightened and astonished brothers. “I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be pained or incensed with yourselves that you sold me down here, because for sustenance God has sent me before you...God has sent me before you to make a remnant on earth and to preserve life...And so it is not you who sent me here but God and He has made me father to Pharaoh and lord to all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (Gen. 45:4-9)

The dream that young Joseph dreamed-- of his brothers bowing down to him-- has come to fruition. The brothers had assumed the dream foretold Joseph's power and their jealousy. But they came to know a new meaning, one none of them had imagined in their youth. The revelation that brought Joseph back to himself, back to his family, back to his purpose was borne not of hierarchy, but of identification. The revelation that brought Joseph back to himself, back to his family, back to his purpose grew out of the recognition of brotherhood. Power gives way to trust and reconciliation--reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers, reconciliation between Joseph and God.

Only when he reveals himself to his brothers does Joseph embody his own dreams. Only when he reveals himself to his brothers is the meaning of the dream revealed to him. The power and privilege that was his pales in the face of the power he now knows as an instrument of reconciliation, as a begetter of brotherhood. The power and privilege that was his pales in the face of the power of furthering God's dream--a dream of reaching across difference, a dream of reconciliation, a dream of our common humanity. Joseph comes to understand that the ultimate task of power is to live in peace with one's brothers—whether brothers of blood or culture, whether brothers of differing perspectives and history.

“Behold, I have dreamed a dream”, Joseph said to his brothers early in his life. When he revealed himself to his brothers, he lived his old dream in a new way. This dream was not only his own. By revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph inspires others to dream. In our time and history one of the best known dreams is the one proclaimed by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington in 1963. There his words, "I have a dream" rang forth like a clarion, calling us back to the brotherhood Joseph affirmed, to the brotherhood Mikhail and Nikolai practiced, to the brotherhood Virginia Durr lived out in her activism.

We all know that Dr. King's dream was a dream of brotherhood. But what is less well known is that those very words were inspired by reaching across difference. They were first the words of a white college student, speaking in a mass meeting in a small black church. Civil rights leader Dorothy Cotton remembers hearing this unsung woman praying with the phrase, “I have a dream” in that crowded church in Albany, Georgia. The woman went on to talk about her hope that one day her little boy could reach out and hold the hands of little black boys and girls and no one would see that as strange. Cotton was so impressed by this young woman's vision that she told Dr. King about it when she picked him up at the Albany airport the next day.^{iv}

Such a simple image. Such a profound impact. To hold hands across difference—black and white, Jew and Greek Orthodox, Southerner and Northerner, boy and girl, vizier and supplicant, Egyptian and Israelite, is to reveal the dream of brotherhood and sisterhood, To hold hands across difference is to reveal the dream of recognition and identification. To hold hands across difference is to touch the dream of creating a common humanity. May we dream such dreams. May our dreams invite us to a rendezvous with our deepest and best selves. As William Butler Yeats wrote, “In dreams begins responsibility.” Our dreams of a common humanity hint at our future—whether we treasure them and live them out, whether we spurn them and live with regret. Yeats teaches that our sense of responsibility grows from our dreams as we keep faith with their purpose for us.^v

When Virginia made her decision to break bread with her black classmate, she concealed it from her father. When Mikhail and Nikolai protected Nechama they had to keep their generosity hidden. Before Joseph revealed himself to his brothers he sent away his attendants. May we, in this new year, not only have the imagination to dream a dream of brotherhood, but may we have the courage to reveal our dreams in those dark places where holding hands across difference is still unknown and dangerous. May we, like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King be able to proclaim our dreams in the public square and embody them with our lives. Ken Yehi Razon, So may this be the desire of God. Ken yehi chalom. So may this be the dream of God.

ⁱ Virginia Forest Durr and Hollinger Barnard, Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Forest Durr, 56-59.

ⁱⁱ New York Times, November 28, 1997

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Pitzele, Our Father's Wells: A Personal Encounter with the Myths of Genesis, p. 220.

^{iv} Drew Hansen, The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Speech that Inspired a Nation, p. 114.

^v Pitzele, p. 209.