

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Affirm forgiveness as the human family seeks purpose and peace

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In a time of conflict, it is easy to become discouraged and feel all is lost. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote an essay a couple of years ago about "Surviving Failure." He

recounts the story of Joseph from the Hebrew Scriptures. This well-known story is not only familiar to Jews and Christians, but also appears as Sura (chapter) 12 in the Qur'an.

Joseph, after being sold into slavery in Egypt, becomes the official in charge of preparing for the coming famine. When his brothers come to buy food, they are confronted by Joseph, whom they do not recognize as they see him only as the Egyptian viceroy named Zophenat Paneakh.

When his identity is revealed, they are understandably frightened, but Joseph responds with reassurance: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now, do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two

years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Genesis 45:3-8)

Following the death of Jacob, their father, the brothers are again fearful that Joseph now will take his revenge. Instead, Joseph reaffirms his forgiveness with the words: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."

"In this way, he reassured them, speaking kindly to them." (Genesis 50:19-20)

Sacks reflects, "This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have done. But, it also establishes another important principle: the idea of divine providence. History ... has a purpose, a point, a plot."

His essay continues by recounting other examples of apparent failures that were later resolved.

For example, J.K. Rowling's original Harry Potter manuscript was rejected by 12 publishers before finally being accepted. William Golding, who eventually received the Nobel Prize for literature, had his novel "Lord of the Flies," rejected 21 times. Even the Beatles, at their first recording audition, were told that guitar bands were on their way out and they would "have no future in show business."

Could it be in spite of confusion and conflict that there is more to the story? This is certainly a time of increased fear and threats to Muslim, Jewish and other faith communities. As described in last week's column, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism is on the rise. And as we have seen in other times of prejudice and hate, violence spills over to other minority groups as well. Yet, dark as it may seem, one can find hope. A Muslim friend recently told me he believes that God is at work, since he has experienced so many people and groups express support and solidarity in this time of threat.

The Christian story also has, at its very center, the event that appears to be a total failure, when Jesus on the cross cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) Yet out of this apparent

failure comes the basis for the Christian belief of forgiveness and the promise of hope.

Rabbi Sacks calls Joseph's act of forgiveness a "reframing" of his situation. He no longer sees himself as a victim wronged by his brothers. He sees himself on a mission to save lives. He sees purpose rather than an opportunity for revenge.

Sacks continues, "This single act of reframing allowed Joseph to live without a burning sense of anger and injustice. It enabled him to forgive his brothers and be reconciled with them. It transformed the negative energies of feelings about the past into focused attention to the future. ... He showed the power of reframing. We cannot change the past. But, by changing the way we think about the past, we can change the future."

This is not only a challenge for families, as was the case with Joseph. Sacks also calls for the religious communities to reframe their histories and put aside the sibling rivalries that have divided them and often led to conflict and violence. It is time to affirm those basic values of forgiveness and love in the cause of peace.

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