

Beards and Brothers
Rabbi Michael Fel

Shabbat Shalom,

I want to begin by once again welcoming our guests from USY's Seaboard Region. For those who don't know, the Seaboard Region gathers teens from Maryland, Virginia, the District of Columbia, and northeastern North Carolina. So if you're sick of talking about the Red Sox or the Patriots, today is the day you can discuss the Orioles, the Ravens, the Tar Heels, the Nationals and quite possibly NASCAR.

I also want to recognize our own chapter of USY, guided by their advisor Shoshana Jacob and LUSY president Leah Blachman. Our USY chapter has been and continues to be a source of congregational pride and I hope that you've all been resting and saving your energy for this upcoming week at International Convention.

For my own edification, please raise your hand if you or your children:

Were ever involved with USY?
Attended a USY International Convention.
Served on Regional Board.
or are planning on attending a part of IC?

Please raise your hand if you are hosting! Thank you so much for your support. You help make Preconvention possible, so if you are a guest, please make sure to thank your host. Make sure to strip the sheets and clean up after yourselves!

From USY's International Convention, we turn to another convention, another gathering. In this week's Parashah, we finally get to read about the reunification of Joseph and his brothers.

For the past several weeks we have been following the Joseph narrative. We read how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, how Joseph was thrown in jail and eventually how he became the leader of Egypt. And today, in climactic fashion, he finally divulges his true identity.

The reunion takes place after it is revealed that Benjamin, Joseph's brother from the same mother, is in possession of Joseph's stolen silver goblet. His punishment: to be thrown into an Egyptian prison. Showing tremendous loyalty, leadership and love, Judah makes an impassioned plea, defends his younger brother, and asks that he take Benjamin's place.

Joseph, overcome by emotion decides that he can no longer contain the secret, and must reveal himself to his brothers.

You can imagine the tension in that room.

The Egyptians, eagerly looking on to see how their leader, the man they know as **פְּעֻנֵת פְּעֻנָּה**, will punish those who dared steal from him.

Joseph's brothers, anxiously looking up at this Egyptian ruler who will decide their family's fate.

And Joseph, seated on his throne, looking down at his brothers, looking down at the Egyptians, and no one knows who he really is.

The text reads:

Genesis 45:1

1 Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me."

Presumably, he leans forward, off of his throne and says:

אֲנִי יוֹסֵף

"I am Joseph."

The brothers, stood there, unable to respond.

Finally the brothers understand and process that he is Joseph, and plans are made to bring Jacob down to Egypt.

Now while it might be easy to believe that Joseph was sold, went to Egypt, went to Jail, interpreted dreams and became ruler of Egypt, you might be wondering how it is possible that the brothers didn't recognize Joseph. After all, he was their brother.

And we are in good company, because the rabbis too were perplexed by Joseph's **relative ambiguity**.

Rashi, the 11th century, French commentator explains that when Joseph was sold by his brothers – he was a young man without a beard. Today, when Joseph reveals his identity, he was an adult, with a beard and as result; he was unrecognizable to his brothers. What's more, his brothers already had beards and so now, their beards did not provide cover but rather served as an identifying mark for Joseph.

Ramban however, the 13th century Spanish commentator isn't convinced that Joseph's facial follicles were enough to mask his true identify. For Nahmanidies, Joseph's relative invisibility was due to his brothers expectations. Joseph was able to identify his brothers because he knew that sooner or later, the famine would cause them to come down to Egypt.

He was prepared, he was on the lookout for them. So when they arrived, he was ready. His brothers on the other hand had no reason to expect Joseph to ever reappear in their lives.

What's more, for the brothers, Joseph was an annoying little kid who no body liked. Since they weren't expecting to see him, especially in a position of power, they weren't even able to recognize him.

So what reason explains Joseph's ability to conceal his identity?

Who likes Rashi's explanation? Who likes Ramban's explanation?

I believe Ramban seems more plausible (especially when comparing to what we know historically about beards in Egypt).

Our own self-imposed expectations or assumptions about others leads to a type of blindness that prevents us from seeing what and who is right in front of us.

Said differently, our own expectations dictate what we see and cannot see. And our expectations of others limits what they can do and how they can be involved in our community.

Everyone look to your left - What if I told you that the person to your left was looking to start a high tech business this summer and was looking for summer interns. How eager would you be to talk to them at Kiddush.

Look to your right – what if I told you that the person to your right served in World War II and helped arm the atomic bomb. What would you ask them? Would you view their age and life experience as a barrier or as the very conduit that makes them interesting and worth getting to know.

Lastly, what if I told you that the person in front of you was a heart surgeon whose medical expertise had saved hundreds if not thousands of lives over the course of their career? How would they inspire you?

I'll speak to our USYers for a moment and remind them that over the course of the next few days you will meet nearly one thousand other teens and adults from all over the country. Undoubtedly, some will seem just like you – long sideburns, loud colorful USY t-shirts and have brown curly hair.

I encourage you to be open to all of them and especially the ones that aren't as similar to you. You never know if they will become your business partner, your doctor or maybe even your best friend.

And I am speaking to our Emunah community. We do so many wonderful things here at Temple Emunah to make people feel welcome and appreciated.

There are countless ways to get involved and I encourage you to read Rabbi Lerner's column in last month's bulletin which highlights many of the initiatives at our shul regarding welcoming K'rovei Yisrael, members of our community who are not Jewish yet are without a doubt part of the Jewish people.

I'd like to highlight two upcoming programs which seek to bring those on the periphery into the center of our community. During January and February Temple Emunah will be having

programs open to the entire community, but with a focus on inviting people who have different needs.

On Saturday, January 19 Temple Emunah will host its annual K'sharim Havdalah Happenings program. Together we will enjoy a musical Havdallah ceremony, a delicious dinner, and entertainment, as we invite adults and teens with special needs from outside our community to join us as we celebrate this wonderful evening! And we are looking for extra help with set-up, cooking, serving dinner and dessert, and general clean-up. For more information, please contact Terri Swartz Russell.

And I am most pleased to introduce one of our communities' newest initiatives: Mahaneh Emunah which will take place on Jan 25, on Purim Night and on March 22nd.

When speaking with campers about their favorite memories from camp, they often speak of how wonderful Friday Night is at camp. I invite you to read Rutie MacKenzie Margulies' article in the January HaHodesh.

We invite you to come experience Mahaneh Emunah, Temple Emunah's new monthly Shabbat service. Inspired by the warmth, energy and feeling of Shabbat at camp, Mahaneh Emunah will replicate the inclusive services pioneered at Camp Ramah in New England.

Services will take place in the social hall and will include dinner, spirited singing, dancing and a chance to relive Shabbat at camp. Under the auspices of the Family Education committee, this program represents Temple Emunah's commitment to creating a Jewish community accessible to all.

These expectations that we place on others have the potential to prevent us from getting to know the people who are next to us. According to Ramban, because the brothers had placed Joseph in a box, had defined who he was, they were unable to see him, even when he stood in front of their very eyes.

Whether at IC or in the confines of our community, I pray that we are open to seeing those who are in front of us and give them a chance to live up to their full potential and not just our expectations.

Shabbat Shalom