

What Makes Groups Reject Their Own?

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"The best way to bring folks together is to give them a real good enemy." –The Wizard of Oz in Wicked (2024)

Joseph's brothers resent him so much they can't even stand the sight of him: וַיִּשְׂנְאוּ אֹתוֹ וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוֹ לְשָׁלוֹם (Gen 37:4)—they hated him so much they could not *dabro leshalom*. The commentators disagree on the meaning of *dabro leshalom*, whether it means the brothers could not speak peaceably to him or couldn't even greet him with a simple "hello." Seforno argues that while the brothers had to talk to Joseph about issues of family business, they did not speak to him about private matters, rendering them more like distant acquaintances than brothers. Either way, the picture is clear: Joseph is hated with a simmering vengeance.

True, he is grandiose and clueless; he entertains "megalomaniacal aspirations" (Steinsaltz on Genesis 37:8) in which the entire family—parents included—bows down to him. Worse still, he is his father's favorite. But do these dynamics explain why he ends up at the bottom of a pit barely escaping a brotherly execution? Couldn't the brothers have gone on grumbling to each other and moved on with their day?

It turns out that the brothers' hatred runs far deeper than mere grumbling. When Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers and their flocks near Shekhem, the brothers spot his approaching figure on the horizon. That mere distant sight is enough to ignite their murderous rage. Before Joseph can even reach them, before he can utter a single arrogant word, they're already plotting his death. As the text tells us, *vayitnaklu oto lahamito*—they conspired to kill him (Gen. 37:18).

Although this ancient family drama may seem remote, similar group dynamics play out in modern settings, including in my own work as a Clinical Pastoral Educator. Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) takes place in small psychodynamic-like groups where students training to become chaplains meet regularly to examine case materials, discuss personal challenges, and foster professional and spiritual growth. The training model exists in a unique space between education and therapy. While the small group format allows for deep learning and reflection, it can also stir up complex dynamics and emotional turbulence when participants come together. While thankfully none of my students have tried to kill each other, when in group, buckle up. The ride can be a bumpy one.

To make sense of group tensions - whether in training programs or among Joseph's brothers - we can turn to psychoanalytic group theory. Wilfred Bion, a pioneering psychoanalytic theorist on group dynamics (and WWI tank commander who knew a thing or two about human aggression), shed light on this dynamic. Similar to Freud's division of ego and id, Bion posited that every group contains two groups: the Work group (W), which focuses on the actual task the group has gathered to accomplish, and the basic assumption group (ba). The latter group operates on an unconscious level; it holds the basic assumption that the group has gathered either to 1. obtain security from a powerful figure (baD—dependency); to 2. fight/flee from an enemy (baFF—fight/flight); or to 3. await a magical solution to emerge from a special relationship or pair within the group (baP—pairing).

Clearly, this particular band of brothers acts as if they have to fight a dreadful, despised enemy; they operate like a basic assumption fight/flight group. It's not just that they

hate Joseph because he is grandiose and self-involved (he is, and they do); rather, Joseph threatens their group cohesion on a deep psychological level. He must be eliminated, or else they will disintegrate. The brothers, however, don't know this. Groups are often unaware of these underlying currents swirling beneath the surface.

A basic assumption group, then, operates on unconscious emotional drives rather than rational task-focused behavior. You might *think* you're meeting with other faculty to decide next year's undergraduate curriculum, or that you're sitting down to a nice family dinner, or that you've gathered together to herd your father's flock in Shekhem, but on the basic assumption level, you're likely doing something altogether different.

Back to our parashah: וַיִּתְנַקְלוּ אֹתוֹ לְהַמִּיתוֹ—the brothers conspired to kill Joseph. Thankfully, it's different in training groups; yet while people don't throw their group-mates into a pit, they find other ways to "kill" them. They ignore them, talk over them repeatedly during discussions, shoot down their ideas before they're fully expressed, or exclude them from informal gatherings and side conversations.

The Ohev Yisrael, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, an 18th-century predecessor of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, understood something profound about group dynamics that psychoanalytic thinkers would later articulate differently. From Rashi's commentary that אִתּוֹ (oto) means אִלָּי (eilav), "with him," he writes:

Rashi is hinting at an ancient secret here . . .
When Joseph approached his brothers and they plotted in their thoughts to kill him, it would have been impossible for them to actually complete the deed, God forbid, without [connecting to] the spiritual quality of Joseph the Righteous. [The brothers] did not have the ability to approach him and take him to kill him, to bring their thoughts

from potential into actual deed. (Ohev Yisrael, Vayeshev 4:2)

In other words, to harm someone, you paradoxically need to connect with them first. The brothers needed to somehow spiritually connect with Joseph's essence to even be capable of executing the plot against him—there's a paradoxical intimacy required even in their violence. They can't really kill him any more than they can kill a part of themselves, and one could argue that even if they did, that which he represented inside them could not be killed.

As a group facilitator, my job is to intervene in order to bring the Work and basic assumption group(s) into contact; the more the basic assumption, i.e. the unconscious group, is manipulated, the less it obstructs the work group.¹ Similarly, the parashah ultimately teaches us that consciousness of our aggressive impulses is the first step in transforming them. Just as the brothers needed consciousness to transform their murderous impulses, groups need awareness of their basic assumptions to function effectively. In chaplaincy training groups, in staff meetings, in family systems, and in any group setting, acknowledging the natural human tendency toward aggressive exclusion can help us pause before acting on these impulses. We don't have to resolve it; we only need to acknowledge it.

Joseph's story, though it begins with violent rejection, eventually leads to reconciliation and growth—but only after all parties develop greater self-awareness and emotional maturity through their various trials and tribulations. The work of collective healing, like the work of group development, requires us to hold both the reality of our aggressive impulses and the possibility of their transformation through consciousness and compassion. Both are our human inheritance.

¹ Bion, W.R. (1961). *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*. London: Tavistock. p. 135.