

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

vayigash connotes a powerful physical and emotional proximity. Avraham is not just talking - *vayedaber* - with God - he is approaching him, and in that approach, Avraham is demanding that God be God's best self.

With this context, we can re-read the beginning of our own parashah. Up until this parashah, Yosef exists in a bifurcated world. Yosef is both Egyptian and a child of Yaakov, bnei Yisrael. Until Yosef forgives his brothers, he cannot fully merge his past with his present. When Yehudah approaches Yosef, Yehudah not only offers Yosef a means of reconciling his past, but more importantly, he obligates him. Yehudah's radical proximity to Yosef forces Yosef to live up to the ethical standards of forgiveness and openness, of merging worlds, and of being both an Egyptian and a stranger.

Yehudah and Yosef's interaction is all the more poignant due to the fact that it is Yehudah out of all the brothers who approaches and pleads with Yosef for Binyamin's life. The same Yehudah who, only seven chapters earlier, crafts the idea of selling Yosef. When Yosef looks at Yehudah, he is not only confronted by his brother, but he is also confronted with the prospect of teshuvah. And once Yosef is faced with teshuvah, he cannot look away. In many ways, Yosef's overflowing of emotion represents the two aspects of teshuva. On the one hand, he is accepting and forgiving Yehudah; and on the other, he is asking for teshuva for himself.

Yosef could have lived the rest of his life without ever telling his family he was alive. In today's world, we also often find it easier to hide from those we disagree with or those who have caused us pain. We'd rather retreat into our enclaves, where we know and agree with all those around us. However, Yosef and Yehudah's interaction teaches us that this is neither sustainable nor the goal of human interaction. Peak humanity is an intimate and loving encounter between two people; it is a dialogue of accountability and openness. Just as Yehudah had the courage to approach Yosef and Yosef had the courage to forgive him, we too should strive to be the people who both approach and forgive.

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Vayigash

January 4, 2020 | 7 Tevet 5780

Annual | Bereshit 44:18-47:27 (Etz Hayim p. 274-289; Hertz p. 169-177)
 Triennial | Bereshit 44:18-45:27 (Etz Hayim p. 274-279; Hertz p. 169-172)
 Haftarah | Ezekiel 37:15-28 (Etz Hayim p. 290-292; Hertz p. 178-179)

D'var Torah: Intimate Accountability

Liza Bernstein, Conservative Yeshiva Advanced Lishmah Fellow 2019-20

Last week's parashah, Miketz, abruptly ended in the middle of a conversation between Yosef and Yehudah. After framing Binyamin for stealing a goblet, Yosef declared that he would imprison Binyamin, and Yehudah passionately began pleading with Yosef to take himself as a slave instead of his youngest brother. Our parashah, Vayigash, resumes with Yehudah stating his final pleas. By the end of Yosef's encounter with Yehudah, Yosef erupts into tears and reveals himself as Yosef, their lost brother. Up until this point, Yosef has remained in complete silence over his identity. Even when he excused himself to cry after seeing Binyamin, Yosef chose to remain silent. Why, then, is it Yehudah's speech that finally causes Yosef's revelation? Why now?

The answer to our question may be found in the name of the parashah itself - *vayigash*. Our parashah begins with "ויגש אליו יהודה" - Yehudah went up to him. The word *vayigash* means to approach or come near someone. The first time this word appears in the Torah is in the eighteenth chapter of Bereishit. After Avraham overhears God threatening to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham approaches God - ויגש אורחם - and demands justice - האף תספה צדיק עם רשע - Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?

When Avraham approaches - *vayigash* - God, an intense intimacy takes place between them. Avraham is not just talking to God; he is holding God accountable. Avraham is declaring the very essence of God and asking, will you not live up to yourself? Or are you not the God I thought you were? In this conversation,

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D'var Haftarah: Nostalgia & Renewal

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Ezekiel yearns for a time when the northern kingdom, Israel, will again be joined together with the southern kingdom, Judea, as one united nation under a Davidic king. To understand this prophecy, one needs a little historical perspective on who Ezekiel was and the events which affected his thinking. He lived during the destruction of the First Temple and the fall of Judea in 586 BCE. All of these “events” he experienced after having been exiled to Babylonian some thirty years earlier. This together with the tragic fall of the northern kingdom of Israel some 150 years earlier haunted him and shaped his thinking about the restoration the “Jewish” world which had been lost.

These feelings were only natural. As Gershom Scholem, the prominent Israeli historian, has noted, redemption in the Jewish tradition was never simply a spiritual matter, it always involved national restoration on the stage of history. For Ezekiel, who experienced what he did, this entailed an idealization of the past projected onto the future. Why do I say idealization? A brief look at the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah show us that unity and harmony were a rare commodity. Only one king, David, managed to hold the “whole” nation together and, even during his reign, the life of the nation was anything but simple. We idealize David on account of his abilities, but, in retrospect, we must remember that what we glorify was not always as pretty as we remember it.

Ezekiel’s vision seems to have been a mix of this nostalgia along with a desire for renewal: “And I will make them a single nation in the land... and single king shall be their king and they shall be no more two nations... and I will cleanse them and they shall be My people and I will be their God. And My servant David shall be king over them and they shall all have a single shepherd. And by My laws they shall go, and My statutes they shall keep and do them” (verses 22-24)

Was Ezekiel prophesying the miraculous return of the historical David who would restore the past or a leader in his mold? It is unclear to us today how far Ezekiel took his nostalgia. Later sages, though, debated this point: “Said Rabbi Yehuda said Rav: In the future the Holy One Blessed be He will bring about a ‘new’ David... Said Rav Papa to Abaye: But isn’t it written: And David My servant will reign over them forever? (abridged from Sanhedrin 98b)

The bottom line for us is that we should be inspired by the past and even the idealized picture it inspires, but try to build the best present and future we can.

Parashah Study: The Art of Double-Speak

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The last parashah ended with the “discovery” of the goblet that had been “planted” in Binyamin’s bag. The Egyptian lord (Yosef) declines their offer of collective punishment, announcing that only the one in whose bag the goblet was found will remain as a servant, the rest shall return to their father in peace.

Text: Bereshit 44:18-20

18And Judah approached him and said, “Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word in my lord’s ears and let your wrath not flare against your servant for you are like Pharaoh. 19My lord had asked his servants, saying ‘Do you have a father or brother?’ 20And we said to my lord, ‘We have an old father and a young child of his old age, and his brother is dead... 22And you said... ‘Bring him down to me that I may set my eyes upon him.’

- Why is Yehudah the one to approach Yosef? (Think back to last week’s learning.)
- How would you have expected Yehudah to approach the Egyptian lord that has just declared that Binyamin will remain as a servant (for supposedly stealing the goblet) while the rest are to return home? Does the speech meet your expectations? Why?
- What arguments do you think would be most likely to win the case? Why?
- Try reading the full speech (Bereshit 44:18-34). What parts do you think would have affected Yosef the most?
- Do you think that Yehudah had any suspicion that the Egyptian lord, before whom he must plead his case, is Yosef?

Commentary: Rashi on Bereshit 44:18-20

And let your wrath not flare: From here you learn that he spoke to him harshly.

My lord had asked his servants: From the beginning, you came upon us with a pretext. Why did you have to ask all these [questions]? Were we looking to [marry] your daughter, or were you looking to [marry] our sister? Nonetheless - **we said to my lord** - We did not conceal anything.

- What is Rashi (following Midrash Bereshit Rabba and Tanhuma) doing with the speech?
- Based on this reading, how would you describe Yehudah’s mood?
- Do you think that this reading is what Yehudah tried to convey to Yosef (consciously), or is it what he wished he could say (subconsciously)?
- Try continuing this “double-speak” reading. What might the message be?