

Parashat Vayigash

December 26, 2020, 11 Tevet 5781

Torah: Genesis 44:18-47:21; **Triennial:** 45:28-46:27

Haftorah: Ezekiel 37:15-28

The Torah that Made the Rabbis Cry
Ilana Kurshan

Parshat Vayigash contains one of the dramatic high points of the book of Genesis, in which Joseph reveals his true identity. Until this point, Joseph has acted like a stranger toward his brothers—a fitting punishment for those who refused to treat him like a brother when they threw him into the pit. Joseph accused his brothers of being spies and then listened in on their conversation while pretending he did not speak their language; he bound and detained Shimon; and he framed his brothers for two acts of theft which they did not in fact commit. Now at last, in this week's parsha, Joseph sheds his harsh exterior and bursts into tears before his brothers. It is a moment so stirring and emotional that even the Talmudic rabbis cry.

By the time he finally breaks down, Joseph has been holding back tears for a while. When his brothers return with Benjamin, Joseph is so consumed by emotion that he hurries out of the room to sequester himself in an adjacent chamber lest he cry in front of them. He manages to keep a stiff upper

lip only until the end of Judah's impassioned plea that he be detained instead of Benjamin. Judah speaks of the sorrow that would overcome their father if the other brothers were to return without Benjamin. The thought of Jacob missing and longing for a beloved child unleashes the floodgates in Joseph, who dismisses all his attendants and then announces to his brothers: "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" (Gen. 45:3) His sobs are now so loud that all the Egyptians can hear, and the news of Joseph's brothers reaches Pharaoh's palace as well.

Joseph's sobs continue to reverberate through the generations. The rabbis mention Joseph's revelation to his brothers in the context of a discussion in Hagigah (4b) about particularly affecting biblical verses that moved them to tears. As emerges from their discussion, each rabbi had a different verse that he was unable to recite without falling apart. Some of their choices are more understandable than others; Rabbi Ami, for instance, was particularly affected by a verse from Lamentations, the biblical book takes its name—at least in English—from the act of weeping. But for Rabbi Elazar, the biblical verse he finds most poignant is the response to Joseph's revelation: "His brothers could not answer him, so affrighted by his presence" (Gen. 45:3). Rabbi Elazar explains what he finds so unsettling about this verse: "If the rebuke of a man of flesh and blood was so much that the brothers were unable to respond, when it comes to the rebuke of the Holy One Blessed Be He, all the more so!" After years of assuming that Joseph was dead, the brothers have now seen his face again. As Rabbi Elazar understands it, their immediate response is the terror of being held accountable for the crimes of their youth.

But whereas the brothers are terrified of being rebuked by Joseph, Rabbi Elazar derives from this verse a terror of being rebuked by God. This Talmudic discussion appears in the opening pages of the first chapter of tractate Hagigah,

which is about the biblical commandment to appear before God on the three pilgrimage festivals. As Rav Huna notes on this same page of Talmud, the biblical word for the commandment to “appear” before God (*yeyra-eh*) can also be read as the commandment to “see” God (*yireh*), which also serves to explain why the largest concentration of mystical material in the Talmud appears in this tractate. Rabbi Elazar is thus reading the story of Joseph’s revelation in the context of Rav Huna’s account of a reciprocal revelation in which we see God and God sees us. What was true for Joseph’s brothers is true for all of us: Being seen means exposing who we really are and being held accountable for our actions. And so when we fallible human beings appear before God, we all have reason to quake in our boots.

The Talmud in Berakhot (28b) offers insight into what it means to be seen by God in another story of weeping, this time involving Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai on his deathbed. This is the same rabbi who was famously carted out of Jerusalem in a coffin by his disciples who pretended he was dead so as to save his life; he then encountered Vespasian and pleaded with him to save the world of Torah learning even at the expense of the Temple. After previously faking his death and appearing before a flesh-and-blood king, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai now lies on his deathbed for real, prepared to meet the King of Kings. He begins to cry, and he explains to his concerned disciples the reason for his tears: “If I were being led before a flesh-and-blood king who is here today and gone tomorrow, who if he is angry with me, his anger is not eternal... even so I would cry. Now that I am being led before the supreme King of Kings who lives and endures forever; who if He is angry with me, His anger is eternal...will I not cry?”

The story in Berakhot ends with Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai’s disciples requesting a prayer from their sobbing rabbi before he dies. He responds, “May it be God’s will that the

fear of heaven be upon you like the fear of flesh and blood.” The disciples are surprised; shouldn’t they fear heaven more than they fear mortal human beings? But as their teacher tells them, when people sin, they usually hope that no one else can see them; whereas in fact they should be concerned about being seen by the all-knowing and all-seeing God.

Like Joseph’s brothers, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai is terrified about being held accountable for the fateful choices and trade-offs he made earlier in life. He knows that when we are seen by God, we are seen in our full humanity – with all our strengths and weaknesses, our failures and successes, our defenses and vulnerabilities revealed. God sees with an unvarnished gaze all our missed opportunities and unrealized possibilities. When we stand before God, we have no secrets; there is no place to hide.

As Joseph’s brothers learn, even the sins we commit in secret, when no one else is watching, will ultimately be revealed. And as Joseph learns, even the tears we cry in secret, in the adjacent chamber, will ultimately be heard. We can spend our lives weeping in abject terror at the prospect of someday being seen for who we really are. Or we can seize the opportunities each day to ask ourselves honestly how we are seen by those around us so that when our time comes, we will not fear being seen by the King of Kings.

Keep It in the Family Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

The Parasha opens with Judah pleading with the Egyptian lord (Yoseph) for the release of Binyamin. Here is what follows:

Text: Bereshit 45:1-3

1Then Yoseph could not hold himself back (lehit'apek) before all them that stood by him; and he cried: 'Cause every man to go out from me.' And there stood no man with him, while Yoseph made himself known to his brothers. 2And he wept aloud; and the Egyptians heard, and the house of Pharaoh heard. 3And Yoseph said to his brothers: 'I am Yoseph; is my father still alive?' And his brothers could not answer him; for they were shook up before him.

- Yoseph arranges to be left alone with his brothers. Last time it nearly cost him his life. Why does he do this?
- Why do you think that Yoseph does not want any outsiders around when he reveals his identity to his brothers? Think about the ramifications of such a revelation to the brothers, the ramifications of their potential reactions for Yoseph.
- How do the people removed from the presence of Yoseph hear his crying? What do you think the text suggests that the Egyptians and Pharaoh's House heard?
- Why does Yoseph ask about his father after Yehudah had just pleaded on behalf of their old father?

Commentary: Ramban 45:1-2

*And Yoseph could not lehit'apek (hold himself back)... - Onkelos translated 'to strengthen himself'...The correct interpretation in my view is that there were many people present in Pharaoh's house and other Egyptians pleading with Yoseph to pardon Binyamin, for their compassion was stirred by Judah's pleas, and Yoseph could not strengthen himself against all of them. He called to his servants '**cause every stranger to go out from me**' and I shall speak with them. So they left him, and when they left **he wept aloud, and Egypt heard, ...** for they were still in the outer courtyard.... And the reason for removing them: So that they will not hear when he reminds them about the sale, for it will be an obstacle for them and for him; for the servants of Pharaoh will say that these are treacherous people who shall not dwell in our land...nor will they believe Yoseph anymore.*

- Why was Yoseph strengthening himself, according to Ramban? How does Ramban view the Egyptians?
- What pragmatic reason does Ramban offer for Yoseph's refusal to speak to his brothers in the presence of the Egyptians?
- Reading between the lines of this reason, how does Yoseph understand his own status in Egypt? What might be the reason for that?

Directing Violence

Bex Rosenblatt

Genesis tells an evolving story of sibling rivalry. The book starts with fratricide, with Cain inexplicably killing Abel. We follow the theme through every story in Genesis, ending spectacularly in the story of Jacob's twelve sons. These children born of rival sibling mothers are scheming against and with each other from the moment they enter the story. And yet, by this week's parasha, the brothers have reconciled, crying and hugging it out.

Likewise, our haftarah, Ezekiel 37:15-28, tells the story of enemies coming back together. The house of Judah is to be reconciled with the house of Joseph, of Ephraim. The Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah will come back together as one nation, under one ruler.

Both the parasha and the haftarah are rooted in the experience of exile. In the land of Egypt, the differences among the brothers seem smaller than the differences between the brothers, shepherds, and the natives, who despise shepherds. In the haftarah, Ezekiel writes of a great ingathering of the exiles from all the places to which they have gone. They will be returned to the land, to live together with each other.

There are a few concepts contained here that are both promising and deeply troubling. The first is sibling rivalry itself - the notion that at our core we feud with our siblings. This notion forms the basis of the Genesis narratives and serves as the explanation for why the Kingdoms of Judah and Ephraim often were at odds with each other. It is a notion fundamental to the way the Tanakh understands itself. And it

is a notion we would love to ignore. We'd like to skip straight over the family quarrels in Genesis and the wars between the Kingdoms and go straight to fraternal and national unity, as if that is the natural state of the world. Our stories suggest that it is not.

Rather, our stories suggest that sometimes unity is obtained only by defining an 'in' group and an 'out' group - that unity can happen among the brothers against the Egyptians and among the tribes against the world. The impetus to stop quarreling internally is a greater external threat. The root of this idea is that we are violent, that we will always fight on one level or another. (Rav Kook interprets this progression of understandings of the 'in' group a little differently. See his [Fourfold Song](#).)

If we accept that idea, as uncomfortable as it is, we can come to a little self-awareness about how that violence manifests. In our current world, we are able to unleash our violence as creativity, as problem solving against abstract enemies such as Covid-19 and climate change or meal planning and unread emails. And we can guard ourselves against unleashing our violence against our siblings, against those who do not always see themselves as fighting the same bigger enemy as we do.