

Drash

Parshat Vayigash

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Shabbat Shalom!

There is so much to discuss in Parshat Vayigash. It is filled with intense emotion - from fear to joy. Its moral compass is quite broad. And, of course, it celebrates reconciliation.

Vayigash, to approach or come close. What happens when Yehuda approaches Yosef? He thinks he's talking to some grand official. Yehuda is willing to take the place of his younger brother Binyamin, to be a slave, perhaps Yosef's slave. Yehuda realizes that his father Yaakov would die if he lost Binyamin. After all, Yaakov has already spent, perhaps years, mourning the supposed death of his favorite son Yosef.

When Yosef hears Yehuda's plea, he can't restrain himself any longer. He bursts into tears.

אָנִי יוֹסֵף, הֲעוֹד אַבִּי חַיִּים? I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

His brothers can't answer. They're so shocked, so scared of him.

Joseph says to them, "Come forward to me." When they do, he says, I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves, because you sold me hither. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance."

Yosef knew well his brothers' nature. He wanted them to bring his father Yisrael from Canaan to Mitzrayim as soon as possible. So he gave them some explicit instructions,

אל-תִּרְגְּזוּ בַדֶּרֶךְ: "Don't fight on the way."

What did Yosef mean? Rashi offers three explanations.

(1) אל תהעסקו בדבר הלכה שלא תרגזו עליכם הדָּרֶךְ.

Don't get involved in a discussion about halakhah, so that you don't get lost along the way. Yosef was worried the trip would take too long.

(2) אל תפסיעו פְּסִיעָה גְּסָה וְהִכְנָסוּ בַחֲמָה לְעִיר.

Don't take really big steps. Make sure you get to a town while it's still light out.

This concern seems to be about their safety. The Gemara (Taanit 10b) suggests that taking huge steps is bad for you, and that it's safest to travel only when it's light out.

3) ולפי פשוטו של מקרא יש לומר, לפי שהיו נקלמים, הנה דואג, שמא יריבו בדרך על דבר מכירתו, להתנכח זה עם זה ולומר על ידך נמכר, אתה ספרת לשון הרע עלי, וגרמת לנו לשנאתו:

The peshat. Yosef knew his brothers were ashamed. He worried that they might fight along the way, blaming each other for selling him. They might say things to each other like: You're the one who told lashon hara (gossip) about Yosef, and that's what made us hate him. Yosef is concerned that the brothers might blame and fight each other.

All of these explanations share the point of view that Yosef cares deeply about his brothers, and is not holding a grudge against them. What can we learn from Yosef? Why is it often so hard to forgive people who have hurt us?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, offers some intriguing observations concerning Parshat Vayigash. According to Rabbi Sacks, perhaps for the first time in his life, Yehuda sees Yosef as a human being, although, ironically, he doesn't recognize him. Contrast this closeness with the incident in Parshat Vayeshev, when Yosef was just 17. His brothers were plotting to kill him. "ויראו אותו" "they saw him in the distance." According to Rabbi Sacks, from far away, we really don't see each other as human beings. and when we stop seeing each other as human beings, and they become instead symbols, objects of envy or hate, people can do bad things to one another. The whole tragedy of Yosef and his brothers was distance. They were too far apart in every way, which is why it was only, when Yehuda came close to Yosef, that the coldness between them thawed, and they became brothers, not strangers to one another.

In sum, says Rabbi Sacks, too much distance, and we freeze. But if we get too close, we can injure one another. How then do we make and sustain the relationship, if the balance is so fine, and it's so easy to get it wrong? The Torah's answer, says Rabbi Sacks, is first separate, lehavdil, then join. Once we respect our difference and distance, then we can join without doing damage to one another.

Today, we Jews throughout the world are more fragmented than ever. It's bad enough that not only do we strongly disagree with each other about so many issues, especially concerning the definition of antisemitism, the morality of Israel's actions, and Israeli human rights organizations' findings and reports. We stubbornly refuse to listen to and talk with each other about these and other concerns. Too often, this lack of unity has resulted in marital separations and broken friendships, so heated have been our arguments and debates.

Where is a Yosef to unite us once more and make us see reason? Do our fierce arguments cease only in the wake of violent antisemitic incidents, such as that which took place in Australia on the first night of Chanukah? Have we Jews forgotten the necessity and importance of reconciliation? What will it take for us to realize that, in the long run, now, more than ever, being so few in number, we must care for, protect, and depend upon each other to keep the Jewish People alive and whole? What person, force, or mechanism will finally reunite us, so we can concentrate on preserving and enhancing Judaism and our Jewish peoplehood? כן יהי רצונך May it be God's will!

Shabbat Shalom!