

Kol Rina  
An Independent Minyan  
Parashat Vayigash  
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Vayigash in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3224/jewish/Vayigash-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3224/jewish/Vayigash-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

Judah approaches Joseph to plead for the release of Benjamin, offering himself as a slave to the Egyptian ruler in Benjamin's stead. Upon witnessing his brothers' loyalty to one another, Joseph reveals his identity to them. "I am Joseph," he declares. "Is my father still alive?"

The brothers are overcome by shame and remorse, but Joseph comforts them. "It was not you who sent me here," he says to them, "but G-d. It has all been ordained from Above to save us, and the entire region, from famine."

The brothers rush back to Canaan with the news. Jacob comes to Egypt with his sons and their families—seventy souls in all—and is reunited with his beloved son after 22 years. On his way to Egypt he receives the divine promise: "Fear not to go down to Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation. I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again."

Joseph gathers the wealth of Egypt by selling food and seed during the famine. Pharaoh gives Jacob's family the fertile county of Goshen to settle, and the children of Israel prosper in their Egyptian exile.

Haftarah in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/610065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/610065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah mentions the fusion of the kingdoms of Judah and Joseph during the Messianic Era, echoing the beginning of this week's Torah reading: "And Judah approached him [Joseph]."

The prophet Ezekiel shares a prophecy he received, in which G-d instructs him to take two sticks and to write one on, "For Judah and for the children of Israel his companions" and on the other, "For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions." After doing so he was told to put the two near each other, and G-d fused them into one stick.

G-d explains to Ezekiel that these sticks are symbolic of the House of Israel, that was divided into two (often warring) kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom that was established by Jeroboam, a member of the Tribe of Ephraim, and the Southern Kingdom, that remained under the reign of the Davidic (Judean) Dynasty. The fusing of the two sticks represented the merging of the kingdoms that will transpire during the Messianic Era — with the Messiah, a descendant of David, at the helm

of this unified empire.

"So says the L-rd G-d: 'Behold I will take the children of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side, and I will bring them to their land. And I will make them into one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be to them all as a king...'"

The haftorah ends with G-d's assurance that "they shall dwell on the land that I have given to My servant, to Jacob, wherein your forefathers lived; and they shall dwell upon it, they and their children and their children's children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever."

### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

The Birth of Forgiveness (Vayigash) by the Rabbi Sacks(z"l) Legacy Trust

<https://rabbisacks.org/birth-of-forgiveness-vayigash/>

There are moments that change the world: 1439 when Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable-type printing press (though the Chinese had developed it four centuries before); 1821 when Faraday invented the electric motor; or 1990 when Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web. There is such a moment in this week's parsha, and in its way it may have been no less transformative than any of the above. It happened when Joseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers. While they were silent and in a state of shock, he went on to say these words:

**"I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen. 45:4-8)**

This is the first recorded moment in history in which one human being forgives another

According to the Midrash, God had forgiven before this,[1] but not according to the plain sense of the text. Forgiveness is conspicuously lacking as an element in the stories of the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and Sodom. When Abraham prayed his audacious prayer for the people of Sodom, he did not ask God to forgive them. His argument was about justice, not forgiveness. Perhaps there were innocent people there, fifty or even ten. It would be unjust for them to die. Their merit should therefore save the others, says Abraham. That is quite different from asking God to forgive.

Joseph forgave. That was a first in history. Yet the Torah hints that the brothers did not fully appreciate the significance of his words. After all, he did not explicitly use

the word 'forgive'. He told them not to be distressed. He said, "It was not you but God." He told them their act had resulted in a positive outcome. But all of this was theoretically compatible with holding them guilty and deserving of punishment. That is why the Torah recounts a second event, years later, after Jacob had died. The brothers sought a meeting with Joseph, fearing that he would now take revenge. They concocted a story:

**They sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers for the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. (Gen. 50:16-18)**

What they said was a white lie, but Joseph understood why they said it. The brothers used the word "forgive" – this is the first time it appears explicitly in the Torah – because they were still unsure about what Joseph meant. Does someone truly forgive those who sold him into slavery? Joseph wept that his brothers had not fully understood that he had forgiven them long before. He had no anger, no lingering resentment, no desire for revenge. He had conquered his emotions and reframed his understanding of events.

Forgiveness does not appear in every culture. It is not a human universal, nor is it a biological imperative. We know this from a fascinating study by American classicist David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (2010).

[2] In it he argues that there was no concept of forgiveness in the literature of the ancient Greeks. There was something else, often mistaken for forgiveness: appeasement of anger.

When someone does harm to someone else, the victim is angry and seeks revenge. This is clearly dangerous for the perpetrator and they may try to get the victim to calm down and move on. They may make excuses: It wasn't me, it was someone else. Or, it was me but I couldn't help it. Or, it was me but it was a small wrong, and I have done you much good in the past, so on balance you should let it pass.

Alternatively, or in conjunction with these other strategies, the perpetrator may beg, plead, and perform some ritual of abasement or humiliation. This is a way of saying to the victim, "I am not really a threat." The Greek word *sugnome*, sometimes translated as forgiveness, really means, says

Konstan, exculpation or absolution. It is not that I forgive you for what you did, but that I understand why you did it – you could not really help it, you were caught up in circumstances beyond your control – or, alternatively, I do not need to take revenge because you have now shown by your deference to me that you hold me in proper respect. My dignity has been restored.

There is a classic example of appeasement in the Torah: Jacob's behaviour toward Esau when they meet again after a long separation. Jacob had fled home after Rebecca overheard Esau resolving to kill him after Isaac's death (Gen. 27:41). Prior to the meeting Jacob sends him a huge gift of cattle, saying "I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me" (Gen. 32:21). When the brothers meet, Jacob bows down to Esau seven times, a classic abasement ritual. The brothers meet, kiss, embrace and go their separate ways, not because Esau has forgiven Jacob but because either he has forgotten or he has been placated.

Appeasement as a form of conflict management exists even among non-humans. Frans de Waal, the primatologist, has described peace-making rituals among chimpanzees, bonobos and mountain gorillas.[3] There are contests for dominance among the social animals, but there must also be ways of restoring harmony to the group if it is to survive at all. So there are forms of appeasement and peace-making that are pre-moral and have existed since the birth of humanity.

Forgiveness has not. Konstan argues that its first appearance is in the Hebrew Bible and he cites the case of Joseph. What he does not make clear is why Joseph forgives, and why the idea and institution are born specifically within Judaism.

The answer is that within Judaism a new form of morality was born. Judaism is (primarily) an ethic of guilt, as opposed to most other systems, which are ethics of shame. One of the fundamental differences between them is that shame attaches to the person. Guilt attaches to the act. In shame cultures when a person does wrong he or she is, as it were, stained, marked, defiled. In guilt cultures what is wrong is not the doer but the deed, not the sinner but the sin. The person retains their fundamental worth ("the soul you gave me is pure," as we say in our prayers). It is the act that has somehow to be put right. That is why in guilt cultures there are processes of repentance, atonement and forgiveness.

That is the explanation for Joseph's behaviour from the moment the brothers appear before him in Egypt for the first time to the point where, in this week's parsha, he announces his identity and forgives his brothers. It is a textbook case of putting the brothers through a course in atonement, the first in literature. Joseph is thus teaching them, and the Torah is teaching us, what it is to earn forgiveness.

Recall what happens. First he accuses the brothers of a crime they have not committed. He says they are spies. He has them imprisoned for three days. Then, holding Shimon as a hostage, he tells them that they must now go back home and bring back their youngest brother Benjamin. In other words, he is forcing them to re-enact that earlier occasion when they came back to their father with one of the brothers, Joseph, missing. Note what happens next:

**They said to one another, "Surely we deserve to be punished [ashemim] because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's**

**why this distress has come on us” ... They did not realise that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. (Gen. 42:21-23)**

This is the first stage of repentance. They admit they have done wrong. Next, after the second meeting, Joseph has his silver cup planted in Benjamin's sack. This incriminating evidence is found and the brothers are brought back. They are told that Benjamin must stay as a slave.

**“What can we say to my lord?” Judah replied. “What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' guilt. We are now my lord's slaves—we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.” (Gen. 44:16)**

This is the second stage of repentance. They confess. They do more; they admit collective responsibility. This is important. When the brothers sold Joseph into slavery it was Judah who proposed the crime (Gen. 37:26-27) but they were all (except Reuben) complicit in it.

Finally, at the climax of the story Judah himself says “So now let me remain as your slave in place of the lad. Let the lad go back with his brothers!” (Gen. 42:33) Judah, who sold Joseph as a slave, is now willing to become a slave so that his brother Benjamin can go free. This is what the Sages and Maimonides define as complete repentance, namely when circumstances repeat themselves and you have an opportunity to commit the same crime again, but you refrain from doing so because you have changed.

Now Joseph can forgive, because his brothers, led by Judah, have gone through all three stages of repentance: [1] admission of guilt, [2] confession and [3] behavioural change.

Forgiveness only exists in a culture in which repentance exists. Repentance presupposes that we are free and morally responsible agents who are capable of change, specifically the change that comes about when we recognise that something we have done is wrong and we are responsible for it and we must never do it again. The possibility of that kind of moral transformation simply did not exist in ancient Greece or any other pagan culture. Greece was a shame-and-honour culture that turned on the twin concepts of character and fate.[4] Judaism was a repentance-and-forgiveness culture whose central concepts are will and choice. The idea of forgiveness was then adopted by Christianity, making the Judeo-Christian ethic the primary vehicle of forgiveness in history.

Repentance and forgiveness are not just two ideas among many. They transformed the human situation. For the first time, repentance established the possibility that we are not condemned endlessly to repeat the past. When I repent I show I can change. The future is not predestined. I can make it different from what it might have been. Forgiveness liberates us from the past. Forgiveness breaks the irreversibility of reaction and revenge. It is the undoing of what has been done.[5]

Humanity changed the day Joseph forgave his brothers. When we forgive and are worthy of being forgiven, we are no longer prisoners of our past. The moral life is one that makes room for forgiveness. [1] There are midrashic suggestions that God partially forgave, or at least mitigated the punishments of Adam, Eve, and Cain. Ishmael was said to have become a penitent, and there are midrashic interpretations that identify Keturah, the woman Abraham married after the death of Sarah, with Hagar, implying that Abraham and Isaac were reunited and reconciled with Sarah's maidservant and her son.

[2] David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. [3] Frans de Waal, *Peacemaking Among Primates*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989. [4] See Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. [5] Hannah Arendt makes this point in *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 241.

### Leaning In - With Reckless Compassion: VaYigash by Rabbi Aviva Richman

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/leaning-%E2%80%94reckless-compassion>

What is the tone of Yehudah's approach to Yosef? Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 93:6) offers three different angles: an approach for war, an approach for appeasement, or an approach for supplication. While these may seem very different from each other—and indeed, they are first presented by the midrash as a three-way disagreement—we then see a harmonistic opinion that Yehudah was ready for all of them—for whatever the moment demanded: “If for war—I come; if for appeasement—I come; if for prayer—I come.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea that Yehudah approached “for war” is the most surprising of these three, especially since the Torah's intended tone seems to be supplicatory rather than violent.<sup>2</sup> Yet, some of our earliest biblical interpretations dramatically expand on this theme of Yehudah stepping up to fight, taking *vayigash* (ויגש) as an indication of aggression. In one early Targum, Yehudah becomes “mighty like a lion” and opens his mouth like a “lion roaring.”<sup>3</sup> In a midrash that picks up on this early tradition, the phrase that encapsulates Yehudah's respect and submissiveness—“for you [Yosef] are like Pharaoh” (Genesis 44:18)—becomes a derogatory insult.<sup>4</sup> What it means to be like Pharaoh is to issue a decree that won't be fulfilled; Pharaoh decreed that all Israelite boys would die, but they did not. Similarly, Yosef decrees that he will keep Binyamin as a slave; but Yehudah asserts he will not be able to. Further, like Yosef is second in command to Pharaoh, Yehudah presents himself as second in command to his father, the “ruler” of the land of Canaan. He essentially presents his opening stance for war between Canaan and Egypt, ready to draw his sword and kill everyone in Egypt—including Yosef and Pharaoh—to get his brother back.<sup>5</sup> In response to Yehudah's threat of violence, Yosef calls to his son Menashe. One stomp of his foot makes the whole palace tremble. Suddenly,

supplication looks like a more appealing tactic, and Yehudah shifts course.<sup>6</sup> In these early traditions, Yehudah's initial approach is definitively a fighting stance. Only afterwards does he back down into a supplicatory mode.

It might seem that Yehudah's violent stance is at odds with the two other approaches we see in midrash—appeasement and prayer—but, counterintuitively, these tactics may actually align. When Bereishit Rabbah relates Yehudah's initial stance of aggression, it closes by pointing out how Yehudah's words were meant to appease Yosef, his brothers, and Binyamin all at once.<sup>7</sup> Not only his supplication, but perhaps also Yehudah's anger and passion—and his willingness to defend Binyamin even by force—may be exactly what Yosef needs to hear to be reassured of a change of heart. In this entirely irrational fantasy of Yehudah going to war with all of Egypt to save his brother, Yosef might hear echoes of a different unarticulated fantasy: Yehudah wishing he could do whatever it would take to get his other brother, Yosef, back.

We find the same word *vayigash*—and the same three-fold midrashic interpretation—when Avraham approaches God to argue on behalf of Sedom.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, this makes sense linguistically: both Yehudah and Avraham are speaking up to power with a specific request. But it is not totally coherent to compare Yehudah “approaching” another person with Avraham “approaching” God. In particular, what would it mean for Avraham to approach God “for war”? Was Avraham really ready to fight God? What form would that battle take, with what weapons, and towards what ends?<sup>9</sup>

Taking the lessons from the reading of Yehudah's approach, perhaps it means that Avraham, too, was articulating that he was ready to do whatever it would take to defend Sedom, even if that meant taking up arms against God. And, perhaps, this is exactly what God wanted to hear—the depth of Avraham's compassion, even to the point of irrational recklessness. Yehudah musters this reckless compassion for his brother, *qua* brother, as someone who is “one of the tribes and has a share in the inheritance.”<sup>10</sup> The extent to which he is ready to fight for Binyamin is exactly what indicates to Yosef he is treating Binyamin like a brother. Strikingly, Avraham holds this same reckless compassion for total strangers.<sup>11</sup>

The richness of these moments are not merely meant as dramatic scenes in the extended narrative of Sefer Bereishit. We are supposed to learn from Yehudah and Avraham's three-fold posture of “approaching” every time we step forward in prayer.<sup>12</sup> When we take three steps forward, approaching God before the Amidah, we can tap into the same urgency and sense of high stakes as Yehudah preparing to wield his sword.<sup>13</sup>; Or, as the Talmud describes Hannah, we have to be ready to sling our words at God like “arrows” coming out of the “bow” that is our lips.<sup>14</sup> In

this fighting stance, we step into a role of caring passionately about the world around us, and being on the alert for unfairness and injustice as inheritors of Avraham's covenant of "tzedakah umishpat" (Genesis 18:19).

We might ask: who am I to go to battle for all of this every single day? According to the hassidic master Sefat Emet, Avraham was plagued by the same question. He points out that we rarely see Avraham praying to God, because mostly he was too "humble" to pray.<sup>15</sup> The Sefat Emet teaches that, when Avraham heard of the impending destruction of Sedom, he had to "approach for war" against himself, not sure if it was worth opening his mouth in prayer because of a sense of his own inadequacy and smallness.<sup>16</sup> He triumphed over his inner instinct to keep quiet because he was overcome by his sense of compassion. Yehudah, as well, may have been racked by guilt and a sense of inadequacy when defending Binyamin, because he knew that he failed as a brother before. But this does not stop him when he has to act out of necessity. Avraham and Yehudah both represent stepping up with whatever it takes, not out of self-confidence, but from a sense of responsibility to do what the moment calls for, even when we personally don't feel up to the task.

We learn from the use of the word vayigash that our posture towards others and towards God inform each other. Perhaps daily prayer is about cultivating the stance of "leaning in" (hagashah) to the claims our lives and our world make on us. We might feel too small or too flawed, or that the problem is too large. We might feel like daring to express love and investment is a reckless risk doomed for failure and disappointment. Even so, we take three steps forward. May our readiness to put up our best fight yield unexpected receptivity and graciousness. And even if it doesn't, encoding the stance of vayigash into our daily lives teaches us that the only thing to do each day is to step up yet again.

Shabbat Shalom.

<sup>1</sup>Bereishit Rabbah 93:6: "ויגש אליו יהודה, רבי יהודה רבי נחמיה ורבנן, רבי יהודה אומר הגשה למלחמה, היך מה דאת אמר (שמואל ב י, יג): ויגש יואב והעם אשר עמו למלחמה, רבי נחמיה אומר הגשה לפיוס, היך מה דאת אמר (יהושע יד, ו): ויגשו בני יהודה אל יהושע לפייסו. רבנן אמרי הגשה לתפלה (מלכים א יח, לו): ויגש אליהו הנביא ויאמר ה' אלהי וגו'. רבי אלעזר אמר פשט להון אם למלחמה אני בא, אם לפיוס אני בא, אם לתפלה אני בא.

<sup>2</sup>See Yehudah's repeated uses of the words אדון, נא, and עבד (Genesis 44:18-34). <sup>3</sup> The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (<http://cal.huc.edu/index.html>) is an amazing resource for Aramaic targum traditions. This tradition is found in Targum Neofiti (1st-4th century Aramaic translation and interpretation of Torah from the Land of Israel) to Genesis 44:18: "וקרב לוותיה וקרוב לוותיה." In a fragment of this targum from the Cairo

Genizah, it reads instead: “תקיף ומתגבר כאריא.” This reference to a lion is likely based on Ya’akov’s blessing to Yehudah in Genesis 49:9: גור אריה יהודה.

<sup>4</sup> Continuation of Bereishit Rabbah 93:6: “ כי כמוך כפרעה מה פרעה גוזר ואינו מקיים אף את גוזר ואין את מקיים, מה פרעה להוט אחר זכרים, מה פרעה מלך ואת שיני לו כך אבא מלך לו בארץ כנען ואני שיני לו.”

<sup>5</sup> See the Targum Neofiti’s formulation: “ דילמא לא אתאמר לך או דילמא לא אשתמע לך מה דעבדו שמעון: ולוי תרין אחיי בכרכה דשכם דעלו בגווה וקטלו בה כל דכורא מן בגלל דסאיבו בגווה ית דינה... כל דכן בגלל בנימן אחונן דהוא ממניין שבטייא ואית ליה חולק ואחסנא בפילוג ארעא ואנא חילי תקיף מן חילהון דשמעון ולוי בשבועתא אם אשלוף סייפי מן תייקא לא אתיבנא לגווה עד זמן דקטיל אנה כל מצראי מינך אנה משרי ובפרעה רבך אנה מסיים.”

<sup>6</sup> Continuation of Bereishit Rabbah 93:6: “ אמ' ווי דין רפיש מן דבית אבא, כיון דחמא מילייא כן, שרי.”

<sup>7</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 93:9: “ אמ' ר' חייא בר בא כל הדברים שאת קורא שדבר יהודה ליוסף בפני אחיו עד שאת מגיע ולא יכל יוסף להתאפק (בראשית מה א) היה בהם פיוס ליוסף ופיוס לאחיו ופיוס לבינימן, פיוס ליוסף, ראו היאך נותן נפשו על בניה שלרחל, פיוס לאחיו, אמ' ראו היאך הוא נותן נפשו על אחיו, פיוס לבינימן, אמ' לו כשם שנתתי נפשי על אחיך כך אני נותן נפשי עליך.”

<sup>8</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 49:8: “ (ויגש אברהם) וגו' ר' יודה ור' נחמיה ורבנין ר' יודה אמר הגשה למלחמה (היך) דאת אמר ויגש יואב והעם אשר עמו למלחמה וגו' (שמואל ב' י יג), ר' נחמיה אמר הגשה לפיוס היך דאת אמר ויגשו בני יהודה אל יהושע (יהושע יד ו) לפייסו, רבנין אמ' הגשה לתפילה היך דאת אמר ויהי כעלות המנחה ויגש אליהו וגו' (מלכים א' יח לו), אמר ר' לעזר פשט ליה אם למלחמה אני בא אם לפיוס אני בא אם לתפילה אני בא.”

<sup>9</sup> The early Targum traditions on Yehudah’s readiness to fight suggests that the concept of the hagashah is more original to the Yehudah story. I am assuming this interpretive tradition originates with Yehudah and is then transposed and applied to Avraham in midrash. For more exploration of these themes between Avraham and Yehudah and the meaning of hagashah in prayer, see Rabbi Elie Kaunfer’s essay for Parashat VaYigash 5781, “The Meanings of Approach,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/meanings-approach>.

<sup>10</sup> See Targum Neofiti. This phrasing also appears in other targumim.

<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Avraham is likely motivated in part by wanting to rescue Lot, for whom he literally has already gone to war (in Genesis 14). The relationship between courage to act on compassion towards others versus family is also complex for Avraham, as he does not put up a fight at all about sacrificing his own son (in Genesis 22).

<sup>12</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 49:23 evokes Avraham’s “approach for war” as a mode for all prayer leaders: “ ויגש אברהם וגו'... ר' פינחס ור' לוי ור' יוחנן מש' מנחם דגליא זה שעובר לפני התיבה אין א'.”

<sup>13</sup> The three steps before the Amidah are connected by the Sefer ha-Rokeia’h (Hilkhote Tefillah #322) to the three places the Tanakh uses the word ויגש: Avraham (Genesis 18:23), Yehudah (44:18), and when Eliyahu confronts the prophets of Ba’al (1 Kings 18:36).

<sup>14</sup> See Berakhot 31b on Hannah’s prayer as “slinging words at God.”

<sup>15</sup> See my comments on Sarai—not Avram—being the first to pray in Parashat Lekh Lekha, “Unlikely Origins of Prayer,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/unlikely-origins-prayer>.

<sup>16</sup> Parashat VaYera (1878): “נלחם עם עצמו אם להתפלל... / Who did he fight here?... he fought with himself whether to pray...”

### Faith by Numbers by Joel Seltzer

<http://www.jtsa.edu/torah/faith-by-numbers/>

Most often, when I describe my own faith in God, I liken it to a number line from middle school math class. On the left are the negative numbers, in the center is the lonely zero, and to its right are all the positive numbers, stretching toward infinity. There have been times in my life when my “belief number” was solidly positive; periods where I was inspired by Jewish teachers and expanding my knowledge base, times of solitude and sanctity in nature, times spent in the warmth of community and finding meaning in mitzvot.

And there have also been times where my “belief number” slid significantly negative; a loved one with cancer, a funeral for a friend, social unrest, and yes, a global pandemic.

I find it comforting to discuss my faith openly in this way, for unlike Maimonides, my faith is not “perfect”; nor is it static. Instead, it is dynamic and filled with the potential for skepticism. Or said another way: “I believe with a perfect faith in the existence of my doubt.”

Perhaps it is my “doubt-filled faith” which has always made me feel theologically distant from the Biblical figure of Joseph.

In Parashat Vayiggash, we read of the moment when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, ending the ruse that caused them to bring his youngest brother, Benjamin, down with them to Egypt.

*Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still well?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him.*

*Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come forward to me.” And when they came forward, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt. (Gen. 45 3–8)*

Three times in Joseph’s speech to his brothers he makes clear that it was Elohim, God, and not Joseph’s brothers who designed that he be brought down to Egypt. Indeed, it was lemiyah, for the sake of keeping others alive, that God sent Joseph down to Egypt. So, Joseph wasn’t offering forgiveness to his brothers; in fact, he was saying thank you—a thank you born from his deep faith in God’s plan.

Following in this vein, the Sefat Emet (Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847–1905) sees Joseph’s use of the phrase “I am your bother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt” as being similar to God’s words to Moses in Exodus 34:1. There, following Moses’ smashing of the original tablets, God says:

*“Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered.”*

In Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 87a we find a midrash of Reish Lakish on this phrase “which you shattered”:

*“Yishar Kohakha—that you shattered them!” “Good for you for breaking them!”*

Therefore, the Sefat Emet explains, in both Joseph’s recollection of his brothers selling him into slavery and in God’s commandment to Moses to inscribe new tablets to replace the ones he broke, a past mistake is brought up not as a moment of admonishment, but as a profound statement of gratitude; a gratitude that is born from faith. God has a plan. Even in the deepest and darkest pits of despair, like the one Joseph found himself in, *gam zu letovah*[1] (this too can be designed for good; designed to be *lemihyah*, to bring life).

In his commentary to our parashah, the Netivot Shalom (Rabbi Sholom Noah Berezovsky, 1911–2000) shares a story from the Zohar about what makes Joseph such a unique figure of righteousness and faith in our tradition.

*Rabbi Abba was walking on the road, when he saw two divine miracles take place to a man who was seemingly unaware. Rabbi Abba asked him why he merited such miracles? The man explained that each and every day he forgives all those who do wrong to him; but not only that, he also seeks to pay them back with goodness! At this Rabbi Abba cried: “This is even greater than what is said about Joseph, since this one not only forgives completely, but he also returns them an immediate kindness!”*

Perhaps surprised by Rabbi Abba’s statement in the Zohar that this man’s actions were “even greater” than Joseph’s, the Netivot Shalom explains:

*And why was this greater even than Joseph? It is because Joseph’s faith came to him due to his exceeding holiness, that he was never conditioned to see that anything could be for bad, seeing as it was all part of the Divine plan; Joseph only saw the purpose, the ultimate vision of how things would turn out in the end.*

These past two years have, at times, felt like we have all been living in Joseph’s pit. The walls surrounding us and separating us feel tall and immense, and it has been a struggle to see the light at the end of the pandemic’s tunnel. As such, it is only natural that my “belief number” on that number line has seen its slides to the left, questioning the very purpose of the darkness which seems to envelop us. But these past two years have also been about surrendering the once-held illusion that we have such careful control of our lives, our careers, our families, and our very own bodies. We have all been taught the difficult but important lesson that the

very “normalcy” of our lives might be irrevocably disrupted because of something we cannot even see with our naked eye.

And so, as we emerge from the darkness, I hope that we will turn to Joseph and borrow his ability to see not merely the present, but the purpose of God’s plan for our lives. And although I believe with a perfect faith in the existence of my doubt, I pray that this experience also pushes me and my “belief number” firmly toward faith.

[1] See B.T. [Taanit 21a](#)

### Yahrtzeits

Craig and Anita Miller remember their daughter Audrey Miller (Leora bat Hannah va Alta) on Sun. Dec.12 (Tevet 8)

Cornelia, Francesca, and Melita Peckman remember their father Albert Abram Peckman (Avram ben Moshe) on Wed. Dec.15 (Tevet 11)

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### Coming Up At Kol Rina

Shabbat Morning, live and in-person at Kol Rina, December 11, beginning at 9:45

Shabbat morning services will take place indoors at the Kol Rina space. Masks and full vaccination are required for all services indoors. We hope you will join us!

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Next installment of our lecture series by Dr. Ruth Calderon will take place  
December 12

Dr. Ruth Calderon, Israel’s leading secular scholar of Talmudic narrative, will teach her second lesson via Zoom from Israel on Sunday, December 12, beginning at 1:30 PM. Her topic for the second lecture will be "Politics: How the president Rabban Gamliel was removed from office." The series is presented by the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, in cooperation with Congregation Beth Shalom of Bloomington, Indiana and Temple Beth Shalom of Livingston, New Jersey. This is an outstanding opportunity to hear a strikingly original thinker, provided **free of charge** and **open to all**.

To receive the Zoom link, please register on Eventbrite using the following link:  
<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/holiness-seen-and-unseen-3-talmudic-theses-dr-ruth-calderon-3-part-series-tickets-199398896467>