

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Vayigash
December 23, 2023 *** 11 Tevet, 5784

Vayigash in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3224/jewish/Vayigash-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Vayigash," means "And he approached" and it is found in Genesis 44:18.

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.

Vayigash Haftarah in a Nutshell: Ezekiel 37: 15-28

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 on one, "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 Space Between: Vayigash by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z'l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayigash/the-space-between/>

"What do porcupines do in winter?" asked Schopenhauer. "How can they stay warm?" If they come too close to one another, they will injure each other. If they stay too far apart, they will freeze. Life, for porcupines, is a delicate balance between closeness and distance. It is hard to get it right, and dangerous to get it wrong. And so it is for us.

That is the force of the word that gives our parsha its name: *Vayigash*. "And he came close."

Then Judah came close to him and said: "Pardon your servant, my lord, let me speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself." *Gen. 44:18*

For perhaps the first time in his life, Judah came close to his brother Joseph. The irony is, of course, that he did not know it was Joseph. But that one act of coming close melted all of Joseph's reserve, all of his defences, and as if unable to stop himself, he finally disclosed his identity:

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" *Gen. 45:3*

How can we be sure that *Vayigash* is the key word? Because it contrasts with another verse, many chapters, and many years, earlier.

But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to

kill him. *Gen. 37:18*

Right at the beginning of the story, when Joseph was sent by his father to see how the brothers were doing, tending the sheep, they saw him from far away, from a distance. Imagine the scene. They cannot see his face. All they can see is the richly ornamented cloak, the “coat of many colours,” that so upsets them. This coat acts as a constant reminder that it is he, not they, whom their father loves most.

From far away, we don't see people as human beings, and when we stop seeing people 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 Joseph and his brothers was distance. They were too far apart in every way.

Which is why it was only when Judah came close to Joseph – *vayigash* – that the coldness between them thawed, and they became brothers, not strangers to one another.

Too much distance and we freeze. But if we get too close we can injure one another. That was the story of Jacob and Esau. Think about it. Jacob bought Esau's birthright. He stole his blessing. He wore Esau's clothes. He borrowed his identity. Even when they were born, Jacob was clutching Esau's heel.

It was only when there was a distance between them – the 22 years in which Jacob was away from home, with Laban – that the relationship healed, so that when they met again, despite Jacob's fears, Esau embraced and kissed him and treated him like a brother and a friend.

Too close and we hurt one another. Too distant and we freeze.

How then do we make and sustain relationships, if the balance is so fine and it is so easy to get it wrong? The Torah's answer – already there in the first chapter of the Torah – is: first separate, then join. The verb *lehavdil*, “to separate,” appears five times in the first chapter of Bereishit. God separates light from darkness, the upper and lower waters, sea and dry land. Separation is at the heart of Jewish law – between holy and profane, pure and impure, permitted and forbidden.

In Judaism *kadosh*, holy, means separation. To sanctify is to separate. Why? Because when we separate, we create order. We defeat chaos. We give everything and everyone their space. I am I and not you. You are you and not I. Once we respect our difference and distance, then we can join without doing damage to one another.

First separate, then connect. That seems to be the Jewish way.

Heart-wrenching separations also appear at both ends of the Abraham story. At

the beginning of his mission, Abraham was told to separate himself from his father, to leave his home and journey to a new land, faraway. Towards the end he was told to separate himself, in different ways, from each of his two sons. These painful episodes represent the agonising birth-pangs of a new way of thinking about humanity. But ultimately, we see his sons standing together again, and he is reconciled with both.

That is how God created the universe, and that is how we create real personal relationships. By separating and leaving space for the other. Parents should not seek to control children. Spouses should not seek to control one another. It is the carefully calibrated distance between us in which relationship allows each party to grow into full individuals. And then to be seen, when we stand back and really look at them – but not too far back.

The most beautiful symbol of the problem and its resolution is the ceremony of havdallah at the end of Shabbat and especially the havdallah candle. The wicks are separate but the flame they make is joined. So it is between husband and wife. So it is between parent and child. And so it is, or should be, between siblings. Distance damaged the relationship between Judah and Joseph. *Vayigash* – Judah's act of drawing close to his brother – restored it.

Vayigash: An Emotional Reunion

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/table-for-five/2023/12/19/vayigash-an-emotional-reunion/>

How was Joseph able to subdue his desire for revenge against brothers who horribly wronged him?

Table for Five: Vayigash

(in partnership with the Jewish Journal of Los Angeles)

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me," and they drew closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

– Gen. 45:4

Rabbi Benjamin Blech, Professor of Tamud Yeshiva University

It is perhaps the most unexpected and the most dramatic moment of meeting in the entire Torah. How was it possible, the reader wonders, that Joseph – now ruler of Egypt – is able at last to confront the brothers who had long ago sold him into slavery, reveal his identity to them, and yet subdue desire for revenge and suppress hatred for brothers who horribly wronged him?

It is an act of piety that earns only Joseph, of all the patriarchs, the recipient of

the title Tzadik in the Bible – Yosef Ha-tzadik, the righteous one. But what was his secret? How was it possible to transcend the anger of his betrayal, the fury against the abuse by his own family? A fascinating biblical commentary sees the answer hidden in the full phrase Joseph utters: “I am your brother Joseph whom you sold into Egypt.” After all these many years of prison, of turmoil, of changing circumstances from poverty to prominence – THE REAL ME HAS NOT CHANGED! I AM STILL YOUR BROTHER JOSEPH, SON OF JACOB .

Joseph was a victim but he never allowed himself to be victimized. He had every reason to hate but he understood that hating, as philosophers explain, is like burning down your own house to get rid of a rat. Anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering. It was the wisdom that enabled Victor Frankel to survive the horrors of the Holocaust: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” Joseph’s secret was simply this: Joseph changed Egypt – but Egypt never changed Joseph.

[Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz, Founder, JewsForJudaism.org](#)

On a sweltering summer day in Israel, my wife and I witnessed a horrible accident. A 14-year-old Israeli girl was hit by a car, thrown into the air, and crashed down on her head.

There is an expression, “Heroes are made, not born.” In my case, years of training as a police chaplain prepared me for this moment. While others froze, I ran to this girl’s side, and after determining that she was not breathing and had no pulse, I started CPR and brought her back to life. I am not a hero. However, it was not a coincidence that I was in the right place at the right time. King David’s statement, “The footsteps of man are established by God” (Psalms 37:23), teaches that God’s divine providence guides us to events such as this accident. Once we encounter a specific situation, our responsibility is to react and do the right thing.

Once Joseph identifies himself to his brothers, they are terrified that he will seek retribution for selling him into slavery. However, Joseph reassures them by proclaiming, “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5). By pointing out that it was God Who had orchestrated his descent to Egypt, Joseph was proclaiming the Jewish belief in Divine Providence. We need only to see through the world’s materialism and recognize that there is a higher power.

[Kari-Gila Bookbinder Sacks, Therapist/Chai Lifeline Case Manager](#)

Since the tragic day of October 7th, Jews the world over have reconnected with each other and their Jewish identity. This bittersweet bonding is reflected in our Parsha, which tells the quintessential, deeply moving story of family reunification. When Yosef tearfully asks his estranged siblings to approach, so he can finally

reveal his identity and reunite with them under G-d, the Torah uses the expression **גִּשְׁוֹנֵי אֵלַי וַיִּגְשׁוּ**. "Please come close to me, and they came close." Chazal explain the term as not merely 'to approach', but 'to touch' or forge the closest human connection possible.

Just as Yosef and his siblings, despite their past, couldn't contain their love for each other — so, at this frightening time, there is a proliferation of unconditional lovingkindness among us, despite our differences. The war itself is a protective act of love for our land and people. We see Jews of every background going out of their comfort zones to save, support and sacrifice for each other in all kinds of ways. How do we truly come close and understand each other's needs? Eye contact. Actually seeing eye to eye allows us to best respond to others – family or foe. My Dad taught me figuratively to always look the "enemy" in the eye when confronting life's challenges. In the merit of our brave soldiers literally facing our enemies and dying Al Kiddush Hashem, let us embrace as one caring family and bring the ultimate salvation to our precious nation. Am Yisroel Chai.

[Cantor Michelle Bider Stone, Temple Beth Am](#)

I recently returned from a whirlwind trip to Israel with the LA Board of Rabbis, and what I am holding onto most are all the hugs. We met a leader from a southern kibbutz, staying at a hotel with his community while his family is elsewhere. He carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, yet his family isn't by his side. I asked if I could give him a hug. One hug turned into four.

When we walked into a program bringing together Israeli and American rabbis for camaraderie and prayer, I didn't know that a former colleague was the organizer. Once again, one hug wasn't enough. I probably hugged him 10 times over the course of the night. When we visited Hostage Square, all we could do was hug tightly. In addition, I had waited seven long weeks to hug my close girlfriends. In the previous verse, Joseph's brothers are stunned silent when Joseph reveals himself after so many years. He tells them "Please come closer to me." Our commentators give many reasons why Joseph asks them to come closer, but they miss the most obvious one. The brothers were in shock. They needed to feel held in this moment. The same now for the Jewish people. I experienced how each hug I gave in Israel repaired something shattered – for me and for them. Our family is suffering. We need to come closer, for both physical hugs and metaphorical hugs that can be felt across the ocean.

[Rabbi Nicole Guzik, Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple](#)

At first glance, one might read the verse as implying Joseph seeking an immediate connection with his brothers. He takes one step towards his brothers, requesting a step towards him in return.

And yet, the rabbinic commentators do not read the text so simply. Sforno, an Italian commentator on the Torah, suggests Joseph feels embarrassed by his outbursts. His crying is loud, rouses interest and reaching out for his brothers is an attempt to minimize and cover his shame. Chizkuni, a French commentator, sees the approach as a sign of Joseph amplifying his brothers' dignity, trying to draw attention away from the spectacle. In either case, Joseph's reunion and admission is not something meant for public display. Even in his emotional state, perhaps Joseph knew that true reconciliation would only occur behind closed doors.

The last few months have been more than ugly between friends and family. I wholeheartedly believe lies and rhetoric must be publicly called out and dismissed. This is not a time for Jews to stand idly by. But I do believe the Torah suggests that if reconciliation is desired between friends or brothers, strategic steps must be considered. Steps that invite each other in. Steps that welcome understanding and minimize shame. In these darkest moments in Jewish history, we should open our eyes to those seeking friendship. Let's invite them in, step by step. An amplification of renewed respect and dignity. A shared desire to walk forward in embrace.

[Vayigash: Language of the Heart from the Accidental Talmudist](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/words-of-torah/2023/12/19/vayigash-language-of-the-heart/)

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/words-of-torah/2023/12/19/vayigash-language-of-the-heart/>

"And Judah approached Joseph and he said, 'Please my master, allow your servant to speak in the ears of my master and do not become angry at your servant for you are like Pharaoh.' " (Genesis 44:18)

When Judah pleads with the "Egyptian viceroy" not to take Benjamin as a slave, he doesn't know that this powerful official is actually his own brother Joseph. He doesn't know the viceroy understands Hebrew; until this moment they've been communicating through an interpreter. So why does Judah now ask to speak in the viceroy's ears, in a language an Egyptian wouldn't understand?

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soleveichik explains that Judah wants the viceroy to hear the raw emotion in his voice as he pleads for his younger brother. The language of the heart doesn't need translation. A similar situation happened to the great sage known as the Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, 1838-1933.) A harsh decree against the Jews had been passed and the Chofetz Chaim went to a government official to plead for mercy on behalf of his people. As a translator began to translate the Chofetz Chaim's words from Yiddish, the official interrupted and said that no translation was necessary. The emotion in the rabbi's voice came through loud and clear and the decree was lessened.

Rabbi Soleveichik provides another insight into this verse, focusing on the art of persuasion. If you want to convince somebody of something, you first have to

make sure they're open to hearing what you have to say. If the person is close-minded, even the most articulate argument won't make a difference. When Judah asks if he can "speak in the ears" of the viceroy, he's asking for a fair hearing. Benjamin Rose finds a powerful lesson in this teaching. Before launching into an impassioned attempt to convince someone of something, start by saying "If what I say makes sense, are you willing to change your mind?" Imagine how much better the world would be if we all had the humility to listen fairly to an opposing argument!

[Vayigash: Judah's Journey from the Accidental Talmudist](https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/words-of-torah/2023/12/19/vayigash-judahs-journey/)

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/words-of-torah/2023/12/19/vayigash-judahs-journey/>

Torah portion Vayigash contains one of the most emotional moments in the entire Hebrew Bible. Recall that in the Torah portion from two weeks previous (Vayeshev) Jacob's favorite son Joseph, born to Jacob's favorite wife Rachel, is thrown into a pit by his envious older brothers, who then sell him to a passing Arab caravan. Through an incredible series of events, the exceptionally righteous and charismatic teenage slave winds up saving Egypt from famine and becoming viceroy of the most powerful empire on earth. Now, years later, Joseph's brothers have come to Egypt to purchase grain from the mighty "viceroy," not recognizing him as the brother they betrayed so long ago. Joseph doesn't reveal himself immediately but rather tests his brothers to see if they've changed. He agrees to help them, but only if Benjamin, (Joseph's only full brother) remains behind as his slave.

Years earlier, Judah was the brother who sold Joseph to the Arab caravan. Judah then underwent a series of life challenges which led him to improve his character. Now, Judah steps forward to plead with the "viceroy" to let Benjamin go and offers himself as a slave instead. Joseph, overcome by emotion, reveals his identity to his brothers, who are deeply remorseful for their past sins against him.

Our sages teach that true repentance is when a person has the opportunity to commit a sin he's committed before but instead refrains and does a good deed instead. In the past Judah sold a son of Rachel into slavery. Now, he protects a son of Rachel by offering himself as a slave. Judah may be the first character in the Bible to work on himself and become a better person! Most Jews today are descended from Judah, and we must emulate our illustrious forefather by doing the difficult inner work necessary to perfect our character so that we can better serve God and those around us. *****

[Yahrtzeits](#)

Cornelia and Francesca Peckman remember their father Albert Abram Peckman today.

Karen Brandis remembers her mother Pauline Grossel on Sun. Dec. 24.

