

Vayigash

Today's parsha, Vayigash (Va-ye-gash), tells the dramatic story of Joseph's reunion with his brothers. Many scholars believe it portrays the most emotional scene in all of Torah. On the surface, it's a story of family reunion and the ever recurring theme of Jewish survival, but there is much below the surface. Events which take place in Vayagash impact Judaism from ancient days through the future Messianic Era. It will take a melding of history, religion and psychology to appreciate this parsha. So with the help of many excellent commentaries with titles that include *Can Love Overcome Resentment*, *The Day Forgiveness Was Born*, *Path to Repentance*, *Judah's Chutzpah and Love Among Brothers*, I will try to provide some parsha enlightenment and a few messages for our day. Vayagash" the first word in today's reading translates as "And he went up". It refers to Judah's physical approach toward Joseph (who the brothers still believe to be an Egyptian) to plea for Benjamin's life.

Initially Vayigash seems to be Joseph's story, the 6th parsha in Bereishit in which he stars. But to a great extent it's just as much the story of Judah, the fourth born of the 12 brothers, whose actions will have the greater impact on the future of our people. It's noteworthy that the structure of today's Torah reading is rather odd because it begins at exactly the same place last week's parsha ended, actually mid-conversation. The silver goblet has been found among Benjamin's possessions, he has been detained, the brothers have been told to return to their father without him, and they are pleading for his release. Dr. Yisroel Susskind, a clinical psychologist who just happens to write Torah commentary, suggests this is

due to a mystical occurrence in the narrative. Analyzing the human behavior, he suggests when the brothers begged for Benjamin in the previous parsha they were motivated by guilt. But this week, an entirely new idea is introduced- the brother's guilt has been replaced by concern, compassion and a pure love that transcends all previous felt resentments. This is central to today's Torah reading.

Let's start with a brief summary. Judah approaches Joseph, offering himself as a slave in his brother's place and speaking passionately about the dire impact that losing Benjamin will have on their father Jacob. When Joseph sees his brothers' loyalty to one another, their contrition and their sincere concern for Jacob's welfare, he is moved to tears. After ordering all of the Egyptians to leave the room, he proclaims *"I am Joseph"* and asks *"Is my father still alive?"* Once they finally comprehend it is really Joseph standing before them, the brothers are overcome with shame and remorse for their past actions against him. But Joseph comforts them saying. *"It was not you who sent me here, but G-d. It has all been ordained from Above to save us and the entire region from famine."*

The brothers are sent home to tell Jacob that Joseph is alive and to bring the family to Egypt where Joseph can help them survive. Once he knows not only that Joseph is alive but that he has remained a nice Jewish boy, Jacob agrees to go to Egypt with his sons and their families. Interestingly, this sojourn is considered to be the first Diaspora of the Jewish people. Jacob's clan numbers seventy in all, the Torah describing them as 70 souls. As they travel, G-d speaks to Jacob saying *"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."* There, after 22 years, Jacob is finally reunited with his beloved son. Joseph amasses great

wealth by selling food and grain to the Egyptians during the famine. Pharaoh gives the fertile area of Goshen to Jacob's family where they settle and become shepherds. The children of Israel prosper in their Egyptian exile.

The idea that G-d is with us in times of hardship or exile and will eventually redeem us from it, as He promised Jacob on the journey to Egypt, is repeated often throughout our history. Today's haftorah also ends with an assurance from G-d that our people "*shall dwell on the land He has given Jacob, where our forefathers lived; and they shall dwell there, they and their children and their children's children, forever*". This pattern gives me faith that somehow, someway, despite all the political events that seem to endanger the existence of Israel, there is a promise from G-d that it will work out well in the end. There is a prayer in our Shabbat siddur just before the mourner's kaddish which extends the ever so longed for happy ending to each of us. It says we Jews are *not allowed* to despair. As sons of Abraham, under all circumstances, we have a purpose and we know where we are headed... to the Messianic Era and the kingship of G-d. I like being told I am not allowed to despair so I make it a point to read this paragraph every week. This idea is rooted in today's parsha.

So what can we learn from Joseph? Dr. Susskind (the psychologist mentioned earlier) recaps the great suffering Joseph has endured: being kidnapped at age 17 and sold into slavery, then left for years to decay in a dungeon, the victim of false accusations. Clinically speaking, Dr. Susskind says he would not have been surprised if Joseph had developed a twisted personality, determined to take his every revenge on a cruel world and punishing those responsible for his woes. He

states *“That Joseph managed to overcome these moral challenges is admirable; that he managed to utilize his talents for the common good is commendable; that he managed to triumph over the injustices he had personally suffered and still approach the world with integrity is remarkable.”* Because Joseph is able to disregard these insults to self and set about saving the world from famine, he is known in Torah as “the great provider”. He not only provided humanitarian aid to the impoverished, but also left us a spiritual legacy. The Jewish people as a whole are compared to Joseph, and we are enjoined to provide for others as he did. And we do. We *are* committed to providing for the needy and we’re pretty good at it. It’s also remarkable that Joseph was able to maintain his faith in G-d, even while impoverished and in pain. The same is true of so many of our Jewish heroes, Hannah Sennesh, Eli Wiesel, Victor Frankel, and Rabbi Akiva who we are told recited the Shema while being tortured to death. Faith often seems to be strongest when circumstances are dire, but a belief that things will be okay can be helpful in lighter moments too, as illustrated by the following three-line story: *A village is desperately in need of water. All of the villagers go out at the same time to pray for rain. One boy brings his umbrella. That’s true faith.*

Rabbi Lord Jonathon Sachs, wrote a wonderful D’var Torah entitled Joseph the Reframer. After pointing out how many pioneers in the field of psychotherapy have been Jewish, from Sigmund Freud to the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, Rabbi Sachs notes the important contributions of three Jews in particular, Viktor Frankl, Aaron Beck and Martin Seligman. Frankl created the method known as logotherapy, based on the belief that human behavior is motivated by the search for a life purpose. Aaron Beck was the joint creator of the very successful form of treatment, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Martin

Seligman gave us Positive Psychology, the discipline of achieving happiness through acquired optimism. The point is not that Jews seem overly drawn to psychoanalysis, but that all of these different approaches are based on one simple yet profound idea: *If we change the way we think, we will change the way we feel.* The mental shift this involves has come to be known as *reframing*. Just as the same painting can look different when placed in a different frame, so can a life. The facts don't change, but the way we perceive them does. Frankl wrote he was able to survive Auschwitz by consciously seeing himself every day as if he were in a university, giving a lecture on the psychology of the concentration camp. He consciously transformed all that was happening to him into illustrations of points he was making in a lecture, and somehow rose above his circumstances by observing them as if they were already in the past. Reframing tells us that though we cannot always change our life circumstances, we *can* change the way we see them, and this can make all the difference.

This is exactly what Joseph did in today's parsha. He rose above the feelings of anger and resentment he had toward his brothers for the suffering they caused him, by shifting his experiences into a different frame. *Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for G-d sent me before you to preserve life ...it was not you who sent me here, but G-d.*" With these words Joseph feels differently about his entire past. He no longer sees himself as a man wronged by his brothers, but as a man charged by G-d with a life-saving mission. He sees that everything that has happened to him was necessary so he could achieve his purpose in life: to save an entire region from starvation during the famine, and to provide a safe haven for his own family. This single act of

reframing allows Joseph to live without a burning sense of injustice and enables him to forgive.

Rabbi Sachs concludes that Joseph was a precursor of modern psychology because he showed us while we cannot change the past, by changing the way we *think about* the past, we can change the future. To paraphrase him, *“Joseph’s example can give us the strength to survive, the courage to persist, and the resilience to create a new and better day.”* I have a picture in my house of me with my parents, my husband and my sister. One day I realized with teary eyes that the only person still alive in that picture was me. But for some wonderful reason I immediately had this saving thought: Since I was lucky enough to be the one to experience life and watch my children grow, I had to do that joyfully. I began to see it as my responsibility to live fully and be happy because I was now living for everyone in that picture. Loving my life was a way to honor their memories. Reframing my past changed my future.

The other star in today’s parsha is Judah and his story is of greater significance than most of us know. Although he still thinks Joseph is the viceroy of Egypt, he approaches him to beg for the life of his younger brother. We’ve learned that the words of the Torah “and he went up” are commonly thought to mean Jacob approached the Egyptian viceroy, an action which would have taken extreme fortitude and courage. In fact, Mishnah states that all Egypt shook with the intensity of Judah’s conviction. However, Dr. Susskind suggests a different interpretation. He offers the possibility that the “him” Judah was nearing wasn’t the Egyptian ruler at all, but his father Jacob. Perhaps in this desperate moment as Judah pleads for Benjamin’s life, he finally fully realizes the cruelty of his

actions toward the young Joseph and the pain he caused his father years earlier. Perhaps it is this realization and a newfound compassion for his father that gives Judah the confidence to do the right thing this time, whatever it takes, that by finding peace within himself and letting go of old jealousies and hurt, Judah has returned to a loving attitude toward his father. *Vayagash...he has "drawn near" in a spiritual sense to Jacob.* It is witnessing Judah's heartfelt repentance and changed attitude that opens Joseph's heart to forgiveness. By taking it upon himself to assure Benjamin's safety, Judah corrects the sin which he took committed years earlier when he suggested selling Joseph into slavery.

Maimonides taught that the ultimate sign of repentance is to be tempted by the same sin in identical circumstances and nevertheless abstain. The brothers were provided with the opportunity to abandon Benjamin, but they repented and even tried to sacrifice themselves in his stead. When Joseph sees this, he forgives them and reveals his true identity. *Rabbi Sachs tells us this is the first time that forgiveness exists in the Torah because it is the first time we see evidence of true repentance in the Torah.*

So while the hero of this part of our history has become Joseph, it is Judah who leaves a stronger mark on Judaism. We have become known as Yehudim or Jews, because it was Judah who dominated the kingdom of the south, survived Babylonian exile, and conferred his identity on our people. Joseph may have been second to the Egyptian king, but *Judah* is the ancestor of Israel's greatest king, David, and it is from *Judah* that the Mochiach, the Messiah, will be born. Rabbi Sachs answers the question *Why Judah, not Joseph?* Because Judah, more than anyone else in the Torah, *changes*. The first repentant, he reverses his character. The name Judah means both "to thank" and "to admit" or "acknowledge". *Joseph*

is known in our tradition as a tsaddik, a righteous man, while *Judah* is known as the penitent. Rabbi Sachs summarizes with this thought *“However great an individual may be in virtue of his or her natural character, greater still is one who is capable of growth and change. That is the power of penitence, and it began with Judah.”* The ongoing attempt to become a better human being is critical, for each of us as individuals, and so that society as a whole can succeed.

There is one last, simple thing which, in my opinion, ultimately both drove Joseph to embrace his brothers and motivated Judah to authentically change, and that is love. Not wisdom, cajoling, rationalization or saying the right words, not even prayer or faith...but the clarity and compassion that stems from loving. Often when we feel angry or upset with someone, we are really hurt or afraid, sometimes deeply enough to block out the love that is hiding underneath. We’ve all experienced this during the heat of a good argument. But in almost every case, when we can pause, get back in touch with our love for another and express it, bad feelings are turned around.

In today’s Torah reading Joseph’s faith allows him to forgive his brothers and Judah’s authentic change of heart allows him to see family responsibility in a new way. They are finally unable to deny their love for each other and as a larger result, both brothers accomplish great things for our people. Our parsha heroes remind us that through reframing and focusing on what we love about those around us, we can forgive, we can change, and we can all do more good than we might have ever thought we could. Also, it wouldn’t hurt in life to bring your umbrella.