



Parashat VaYigash: Torn Between Father and God

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia

In his royal chambers, covered in fine Egyptian linen sheets, Zaphenat Pa'aneah, aka Joseph the Hebrew, wakes up screaming, awash in cold sweat. His wife, the delicate noblewoman Asenath, finds his shaking hand and holds it, whispering "you had that nightmare again, honey?" Her husband is too startled to talk, taking a deep breath before answering, "yes, the same old nightmare, my father died before I had a chance to see him and tell him the good news." He suddenly turns to her, half asking, half accusing, "What if I'm wrong? What if God wants me to reunite with him? And what if he dies before we meet again? I cannot bear that thought!"

Asenath, sighing, sits up next to him and says in a soothing voice, "I understand how you feel, dear, maybe you should go visit him. He will be very glad to see you, I'm sure."

"But I can't. I must know that my brothers have fully regretted their actions and that I will be accepted in the family, not becoming a target again. I need to wait for the famine to arrive because as long as they are comfortable, they will never express regret. There is also a little voice that tells me to wait for the full realization of my dreams. But you know that the most important thing is that God put me here for a reason. I am on a mission from God, and that mission is to prepare the infrastructure for my family to arrive, survive, and thrive in Egypt. God promised my great grandfather Abraham long years of exile, and he put me here to guarantee that my nation does not perish. It is not about me and my love for my father! It is about the future of the nation!"

"I guess this is a sacrifice you must make," his wife concludes. "Obviously you want to run back to your dad, sing the good news, and live with him happily ever after, but you put all this aside for the greater good. God demands this from you, and no one said it is easy to assume such great responsibility..."

The tormented viceroy, somewhat relaxed by expressing his anxiety and hearing Asenath's voice of compassion and reason, tries to fall asleep, while torn images float in his mind's eye. He is sitting on his father's knees, laughing; The brothers walk away from the pit, laughing; Jacob, sobbing, wearing sackcloth, sitting on the ground;

Joseph with his son Ephraim on his knees, laughing. He then drifts away into few hours of blissful sleep, only to wake up to another day of conflicting emotions, hidden behind the rigid mask of an efficient administrator.

Years later, after Joseph has reunited with his father, brought him to Goshen, and settled him and his family in the choicest land in Egypt, there is still one question which bothers him, and yes, wakes him up at night.

That question is: did my father ever forgive me?

At this point my [imaginary] editor intervenes: Jacob? Forgive Joseph? I thought that Joseph had to forgive Jacob for sending him on a dangerous mission, or for favoring him over his brothers and making him a target for their anger and jealousy. I thought the brothers had to apologize to Joseph and to their father, but I do not see a reason why Joseph would have to appease his father. After all, he had done nothing wrong. He was abducted, kidnapped, betrayed, sold to slavery, and thrown to prison. He clawed his way to glory and success and was eventually able to reunite with his family and provide for all their needs during the harsh years of famine. What does he have to apologize for?

I will have to answer that I believe that Jacob had a very good reason to be angry with Joseph. It is a reason I was not able to fully comprehend until I became a father myself, until I saw a mother's anxiety and grief when she mistakenly thought that her child has gone missing, and until I had to comfort and talk to bereaved parents.

We can say, without doubt, that of all the losses one might experience, the loss of a child is the hardest of all. A child is expected to be present in the parents' life until their end, and so the loss of a child is in essence the loss of the future and of all hope, causing the parents to sink into depression and despair. Just this past week America was shocked by the death of Debbie Reynolds only one day after her daughter, Carrie Fisher. Todd Fisher, Reynolds' surviving son, said that his sister's untimely death seriously affected his mother and was partially responsible for her stroke. He added that her last words were: "I want to be with Carrie!" Bereaved parents are overcome by feelings of guilt or a sense of failure in their role as their child's protectors, and the forced severance of their ties to the child can put them in an existential vacuum. A study conducted in Israel found that even ten years after the tragedy, it continues to be the focus of the parents' life.

In light of all this, let us remember that when Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, he tells them that the famine started two years previously (Gen. 45:6), meaning that he has already served as the viceroy for at least nine years, seven years of abundance and two years of famine. It is highly probable that when the brothers returned to their father and told him that Joseph is alive and that for the last nine years he was a powerful figure in Egypt, Jacob reacted, at least inwardly, with anger

at and contempt for Joseph, who did not bother to inform Jacob that he is well and alive.

If we could have read Jacob's mind at the moment, he is told by his sons that Joseph is alive, what would we find? Maybe this:

"Joseph is alive! Joseph is alive! This is incredible. It is unbelievable. I should feel happy and joyous, but I am not. How could he do this to me? Alive, for nine years a king, or second in command, and not even a word? I was dead! Dead for decades. He could have saved me the pain of at least nine years. 4,730,400 minutes of unbearable pain and agony! And what was he doing meanwhile? Taking a walk with his wife and children, while I am mourning here, deprived of my beloved wife and her firstborn son? No. This cannot happen."

Jacob indeed reacts with disbelief (45:26) (לא האמין להם), because he cannot believe that Joseph has been alive and never notified him. When he finally digests the news, he reacts with a death-wish: Enough [of this life of misery]. My son Joseph is still alive, let me go and see him before I die (45:28).

After decades of mourning for his son, Jacob is an empty shell. No joy can bring him back to life and all he wants now is to die without further suffering. He makes no effort to mask his feelings when he meets Joseph, his lost son, for the first time, and there could be no greater contrast between Joseph's giddy excitement and between Jacob's rigid, frozen posture. As Jacob approached the land of Goshen, Joseph harnessed his horses to his chariot by himself, without seeking his servants' help. He traveled up to Goshen to meet his father and he presented himself to him. At that moment, Joseph's great sensitivity, which we have witnessed several times in his encounters with his brothers, overwhelms him. He embraces his father and cries uncontrollably. But his father, amidst all this commotion, remains unmoved. He repeats, like a mantra, the statement he made when he first heard that Joseph was alive, and tells his son, I can die now, after I saw your face, because I know you are alive. Jacob refuses or is unable to cry. His tears have dried up years ago. He rebukes Joseph, maybe subconsciously – why didn't you call me? You could have sent a servant, a messenger, or come yourself. Why did you torture me?

Joseph tries to explain. He tells his father, as he has already told his brothers, that this was all a divine plan. God wanted me in Egypt to secure your future, dad. I could not risk the mission by sending a message to you. I am a Hebrew slave, a prisoner, who rose to power and bypassed all the seasoned politicians in Pharaoh's court. They were waiting for me to make a mistake, and sending messengers to Canaan or going there myself, would be just the mistake they were looking for, because of the great tension between the two countries. They would have executed me and that would have been the end of my mission. Who would have provided for you then, dad?

Joseph pleads with his father. He wants him to understand how much he ached and yearned for this reunion. How else can one explain his constant concern with his father's well-being and the fact that the first question he had for his brothers after revealing his identity was: is my father still alive?

He had to bide his time until all the gears aligned to permit Jacob to come to Egypt safe and sound, and he did care about his father, but he had to suppress his love and emotions and be practical. Jacob does not make it easy for him. He tells him that it was not his concern to provide for the family as a preparation for the future exile in Egypt. Let God see to that, he exclaims. Who knows, maybe if you would have come back to me and we all prayed together things would have changed, or you would inform us of the upcoming famine and we would store grains, just as you did in Egypt.

They keep arguing on their way to see Pharaoh, who is very curious and excited to finally meet the long-lost patriarch of his viceroy's clan. Joseph presents Jacob to Pharaoh, and the monarch politely asks him, as was probably customary in Egypt, how old he was. The question is delivered to Jacob by his son, Joseph, who serves as a translator. Jacob looks at his son, expressionless, and whispers through tight lips, "tell him that my life was short and miserable, I had a bitter life, devoid of joy, my wife dead, my kidnapped son rising to power but never thinking of me and my grief."

Joseph politely thanks his dad, and turns to the king to translate:

"My father says that he is a hundred and thirty-seven years old, he loves this country and the place you have designated for the family, and he thanks Your Highness for your generosity."

And we, the readers, remain with the question whether Jacob ever forgave Joseph and with our own dilemmas: when we feel that we have a religious duty, when we think that we are on a mission from God, do we pay attention to the feelings and needs of those who may be affected by our commitment to that mission, especially those we are trying to help? How does one evaluate the immediate benefit or relief versus the future greater good?

Do we side with Jacob, who believes that Joseph should have redeemed him from his agony as soon as possible, or with Joseph, who lived a tormented life, torn between his desire to see his father and his sense of deep obligation to carry on with his mission from God?

Questions for Kids: Parashat VaYigash

1. Who was the brother who approached Yosef?
2. What did he request of Yosef?
3. What was Yosef's reaction at that moment?
4. Why did Yosef forgive his brothers?
5. Yosef hugs Binyamin, he kisses his brothers, and cries. Why are they still afraid of Yosef?
6. Who heard that Yosef's brothers arrived and what did he give them?
7. What did Yosef give his brothers to give to Yaakov?
8. When the brothers came back to Canaan they told Yaakov that Yosef is _____ and that he is the _____ of Egypt.
9. Who went with Yaakov to Egypt?
10. On the way to Egypt Yaakov had a dream. What did he receive in the dream?
11. What did Yosef do when he saw his father?
12. Which part of Egypt was given to Yosef's family by Pharaoh?
13. How did Yosef treat his father and brothers when they lived in Egypt?

Answer Guide for Parashat VaYigash

1. *Yehudah*
2. *To let Binyamin return with the brothers to Canaan.*
3. *He cried and told his brothers that he is Yosef.*
4. *Because they showed regret. They wanted to save Binyamin and did not want to abandon him.*
5. *Because they thought he is still upset at them.*
6. *Pharaoh. He gives Yosef's brothers wagons to bring their father and their families from Canaan.*
7. *Gifts and food.*
8. *Yosef is a live and he is the viceroy of Egypt.*

9. *Yaakov's whole family.*
10. *A blessing from HaShem.*
11. *Yosef hugged Yaakov and cried.*
12. *Goshen.*
13. *He gives them food and takes care of everything they need.*

Parasha Pointers: VaYigash

1. Yehudah's speech reveals new information. In 44:20 we can hear his guilt. 44:27 conveys the feeling of the brothers that Rachel was the favorite wife and her children the favorite children. 44:29 suggests that Yaakov suspected that his sons had something to do with Yosef's disappearance.
2. Though Yehudah, in 44:32, mentions the promise he gave Yaakov, he argues that he cannot back not because of the promise but rather because his father's agony will be too much to bear.
3. In 45:1 one word is used to say that Yosef made himself known to his brothers – ויתודע. This is the exact opposite, and maybe the closure, for Yosef making himself unknown, which is also conveyed in one word – (ויתנכר) 42:7).
4. Yosef's question, is my father still alive (45:3), can be understood as a rebuke. The brothers did not go back home after they told him previously that their father is alive, and therefore were not able to provide new information. Rather, the question is understood as saying "is my father still alive after what you did to him?"
5. Yosef does not notify Pharaoh about his family. He waits for the news to spread (45:16). Maybe because he wants Pharaoh to believe that the idea to bring the family to Egypt is his.
6. It is probable that Yosef pretended to refuse to bring his family for fear of burdening the Egyptian economy. He did it to get Pharaoh to say that it is a command (45:19).
7. Yaakov's reaction to the news that Yosef is alive has a negative element. He keeps saying that he can now die (45:28; 46:30). He is also negative in his response to Pharaoh (47:9). Is it possible that this negativity was directed at Yosef? Was Yaakov upset with his son for not letting him know that he is alive?
8. The word "abomination" in 46:34 is a euphemism for hallowed. The Torah does not want to respect pagan rituals and objects. Compare this to 43:32, where the hallowed bread is called abomination.
9. Yosef is so confident in his ability to get what he wants. He welcomes his family to Goshen before presenting them to Pharaoh. He tells his brothers what to say in order to settle in Goshen and his plan succeeds.
10. Yosef wins the Egyptians' loyalty by going against the accepted norms of sharecropping. After bringing them to the brink of poverty by

making them sell everything they own in return for food, he tells them that they will receive eighty percent of the crops. The revolutionary large portion of the sharecroppers benefited everyone because they had an incentive to produce large crops.

Enjoy reading and learning.

Shabbat Shalom