

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Yaakov was surrounded with divine glory but could not see past his immediate needs. He was like we are at those times when we walk beneath the unimaginable beauty of the sky but don't look up because we are obsessed with our feet. The same Yaakov who could feel that "God is here and I did not know! How awesome is this place!" (Bereshit 28:17) could also fall right back into small-mindedness. That's why I identify with Yaakov. I feel surrounded by what Rav Kook calls revealed divinity (*ha-elohut ha-mitgalah b'olam*) which he also calls "all light, all truth, all beauty, and all goodness". Everywhere I see those things – light, truth, beauty, goodness – so like Yaakov I cannot deny that God is here. And yet so much of the time I find myself staring at my feet instead of looking at that remarkable ladder.

Why is it so easy to ignore the burning bushes all around and instead focus on our immediate needs?! Is that really the best use of itself that *my mind* can come up with?! If so, it seems to need some kind of re-calibration. Again we are confronted with Rambam's interpretation (The Guide 1:2) of the curse of exile from Gan Eden: To cleave to the tree of obsessive thoughts about fears and desires (*etz hada'at tov ve ra*). If this is what Yaakov is struggling with, then his struggle is mine. Since we need the things that Yaakov asked for like safe travel, food and clothes, the struggle is not to ignore those things. It is to see beyond them to the revealed divinity all around.

According to the Zohar (IR III 138a), in our parashah this week, Yaakov was transformed. When it says, "and Yaakov's soul came alive" (Bereshit 45:27) it means he achieved a higher state of consciousness. The Zohar teaches that Yaakov had become so focused on his personal drama that he could no longer perceive God. But at that moment he awoke to God's presence all around him. Sometimes it takes a great shock like Yaakov's to wake up. But the Zohar also teaches (ZH Bereshit 14b) that waking up can be as simple as looking at the sky. There is a bigger picture. Revealed divinity – light, truth, beauty, goodness – is all around. When his soul came alive, Yaakov knew again "God is here! How awesome is this place!" May it be God's *Ratson* – Will – that all our souls become awakened like *Ya-akov Avinu* - Yaakov our Father.

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# TORAH SPARKS

## Parashat Vayiggash

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Annual | Genesis 44:18-47:27 (Etz Hayim p. 274-289; Hertz p. 169-177)  
Triennial | Genesis 46:28-47:27 (Etz Hayim p. 282-289; Hertz p. 174-177)  
Haftarah | Ezekiel 37:15-28 (Etz Hayim p. 290-292; Hertz p. 178-179)

## D'var Torah: Yaakov Redeemed

**Dr. Shaiya Rothberg**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

I've found that at different points in my life, I've had different attitudes towards the Biblical characters. For most of my life, I haven't liked Yaakov. He's always struck me as somewhat narcissistic, lost inside his head in various schemes, and therefore causing suffering for himself and others. He's disappointed me: Is this the ideal to which we are supposed to aspire? But this year my attitude has changed. I don't feel judgmental about Yaakov. I identify with him.

Take for example Yaakov's response to the mind-blowing divine encounter he had when leaving home on his way to Haran. Yaakov beholds the vision of the ladder, rising from the earth into the sky, with Y-H-V-H revealed at its top, and angels to the right and left. In the vision, he is promised to inherit the land and establish a great people. In response, Yaakov bargains with God in a way that would make you cringe if you saw him played like that in a movie. He skips over the land and the nation and basically says (Bereshit 28:20), "Ok Y-H-V-H, if you give me safe travel to Haran and back, as well as food and clothing, then You can be my God."

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# D'var Haftarah: Challenge of Reconciliation

**Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

The animosity between Yosef (Joseph) and his brothers is a central theme of the Yosef stories. It has been building up over three parshiyot and in this week's parashah it comes to a climax. Yosef has orchestrated the great confrontation, and Yehuda, from among the brothers, has taken up the cudgel of representing the brothers against their adversary, Yosef, who has yet to reveal himself as their long-lost brother who had been sold into slavery. This conflict did not end with Yosef and Yehuda. It foreshadows the later division between the Northern Kingdom of Israel (often identified with Yosef) and the Southern Kingdom of Yehuda (identified with its namesake). And so too, the reconciliation which takes place between the two in our parashah, may be intended to present a model for the future.

Ezekiel, who lived at the time of the Babylonian exile, was deeply concerned with this divisiveness and the search for its resolution. In general, Ezekiel felt that human beings were incapable of fixing things by themselves. If the nation was to be brought together, God would have to make it happen and so the symbolic representation of two pieces of wood being joined together was meant to inform the people of what God had in store for them - "Thus said the Lord God: I am going to take the stick of Yosef, which is in the hand of Ephraim and the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I will place the stick of Yehuda upon it and make them into one stick; they shall be joined in My hand." (verse 19)

The rabbinic sages seem divided over the question of human autonomy and the capacity for human beings to control their own lives and to deal with problems on their own. Two midrashim on this prophecy illustrate this conflict. The first reflects Ezekiel's way of thinking: "A time to tear and a time to repair" (Ecclesiastes 3:7): 'A time to tear' – As it is written: 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day' (1 Samuel 15:28); 'A time to repair' – As it is written: 'They shall be joined in Your (God's) hands'. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2) This midrash views life through a deterministic prism. God is the author of events. Humans are but actors in the play.

Alternatively, in another midrash, the children of Israel are seen as agents of their own fate. Yaakov, the father of the tribes, gathers his children together before him to charge them with his expectations of them after his death: "Gather yourselves together" (Genesis 49:1) – Yaakov warned his children against dissension, commanding them to be united, as it says: 'take one stick... and join it' (See Ezekiel 35:16) When the children of Israel unite themselves as one, they prepare themselves for redemption. What follows this? 'And I will make them one nation in the land.'" (adapted from Bereshit Rabbah 98:2 Theodore-Albeck ed. 1250) This proactive model appeals more to our way of thinking. It sees human autonomy as

a means for creating a better world and it sees it as our responsibility to restore peace among our people. Then, and only then will God lend a hand.

## Parashat Vayiggash Self-Study

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb**, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This parashah opens with a great monologue by Yehuda (Judah). Yosef (Joseph) reveals his identity to his brothers, the family goes to Egypt, and Yosef helps the Egyptians survive the famine in a manner that makes almost all of them subservient to Pharaoh.

1) Last week we left off with Binyamin (Benjamin) having been "caught" stealing the silver goblet and facing a life of servitude in Egypt. Now Yehuda steps up and gives a passionate speech explaining the dire consequences of Binyamin not returning home (44:18-34). In the end, he offers himself instead of Binyamin since he had guaranteed his father that he would return Binyamin. Why do you think that Yehuda told the Egyptian that he has vouched for Binyamin's return?

2) After introducing himself to his brothers, Yosef says 'don't be upset that you sold me to Egypt' (45:5). When he asked the butler to speak on his behalf to Pharaoh he claimed to have been kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews (40:15). What do you think actually happened, and why does Yosef seem to tell two different stories?

3) Yosef continues to speak to his brothers, telling them about his position and about his plan to sustain them, and finally hugs Binyamin and then the rest of them (45:1-15). Only then do his brothers speak to him. What do you think they said? (The Torah does not tell us.)

4) The Torah gives a detailed list of those descendants of Yaakov that came to Egypt. Between the lines, we find some interesting things. The people are divided according to the mother who bore them, with the concubines attached to the wife that they had been given to. Only one woman is actually given the title "the wife of Yaakov" (66:19) who do you think received the title? Whose point of view is represented by this list?

5) After the family arrives, Yosef presents them to Pharaoh (46:31-47:6). He first briefs his brothers about what they are to say to Pharaoh and then takes 5 of them, not the whole 'mishpochah,' to the monarch. Why do you think that Yosef is keeping tight control of the situation?