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Parshat Vayigash

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UNEASY QUESTIONS

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

In most surprising ending in a Biblical saga, 11 men stood before their youngest brother, Yoseph, humiliated and threatened. Yoseph, in his role as viceroy of Egypt, had incarcerated Binyamin and left his siblings fighting him for his release. Otherwise, they would have to answer an aging father who would certainly die if Binyamin would not come home. They pleaded, begged and cajoled — then they threatened to go to war over Binyamin. Yoseph is impressed.

Suddenly he reveals himself as the brother they had sold to slavery 22 years ago. “I am Yoseph,” he declares. “Is my father still alive?” The brothers stood in shock and disbelief.

Many commentaries ask why Yoseph asked a question when he knew the answer. His brothers spoke all along about their father and the anguish he would sustain lest Binyamin not be returned to him. What message was Yoseph sending?

A man walked into the office of Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn with tears flowing down his cheeks. “Rebbe,” he pleaded, “I need your help. I have no means of supporting my family, and my wife has gone into severe depression as the doctors suspect one of our children may have leukemia. I am at the verge of bankruptcy and only despair looms on the horizon.” The Rebbe’s sympathy was obvious. Quickly he took all the money that he had in his desk and then summoned his sexton. “Have you any cash on you?” the Rebbe asked. “I need whatever you can spare to help a Jew in trouble. “The gabbai (sexton) responded to his mentor’s request and handed the sum of nearly \$2,000 to the Rebbe. After the indigent man left the house the Gabbai innocently asked the Rebbe, “That was not for the man who just left here — or was it?”

“Surely,” exclaimed the Rebbe. He has nine children, including one who may be very ill. His wife is on the verge of a breakdown and he is in a state of despair.”

“Despair?” exclaimed the sexton. “Nine children? That man has two kids, a wife who shops nicely on the Avenue and makes a modest living. Things may be a little tight — but he’s not at all desperate!

“You mean his wife is not ill?”

“No!”

“His child is not ill?”

“No!”

He is not even going bankrupt?”

“By no means!”

“Wonderful,” the Rebbe smiled, “I could not bear to hear the pain of such terrible news. How good is it to hear that one less Jew is suffering.” The next day the Rebbe called in his Gabbai and returned the \$2,000 he had borrowed from him.

In revealing himself to his brothers, Yoseph had choice words to tell them. He could have chided them, taunted them and called their misdeeds upon them. He didn’t. All he wanted to know is, “How is father feeling? Is it really true that he survived the tragedy of my sale? Is he still able to come see me?”

Often when we are wronged we have opportunities to harp on the conduct of those who harmed us. In his opening revelation Yoseph didn’t. He picked up the pieces. He did not choose to discuss the past deeds that were dead and gone. He just wanted to speak about the future, his father, and his destiny.

Why Yosef Could Not Hold Back Any Longer

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

In what must be one of the most dramatic events in all of Chumash, Yehuda pleads with his brother and asks one more time for Yosef to relent and not keep Binyamin as a prisoner in Egypt, which would minimally cause his father great pain and might even in fact kill him. Yehuda goes through virtually the same story he related at the end of Parshas Miketz, except that this time it has a different ending: “Yosef was not able to hold back... I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?” The Torah’s narration continues: “The brothers were unable to respond to him, because they were frightened in his presence.” (Bereshis 45:1-3)

If Yehuda is merely repeating the same argument that he already advanced in Parshas Miketz, why was he successful this time, whereas he previously failed? I saw two different explanations as to what happened over here that suddenly caused Yosef to stop.

The Ramo in Shulchan Aruch cites (in the name of the Rokeach) that when a person begins to *daven* (pray) *Shemoneh Esrei*, he should advance three steps. The source of the Rokeach’s advice is that the word “*VaYigash*” (and he approached) occurs in relation to prayer three times in Tanach. We learn from here that when someone begins *Shemoneh Esrei*, he should step forward three steps.

What are the three times? The first time is by Avraham (Bereshis 18:23), when he approaches *Hashem* to plead that Hashem not destroy Sodom. The third time is by Eliyahu (Melachim I 18:36) when he approaches Hashem in prayer during his confrontation with the prophets of Baal. In both of those places, it is obvious that they were *davening*. The other time, writes the Rokeach, is our parsha: “*Vayigash Elav Yehuda...*” (Bereshis 44:18) The Rokeach understands that this was in fact *tefillah*. Yehuda was not merely speaking to Yosef anymore. He was in fact *davening* to the *Ribono shel Olam*.

The lesson we learn here is the following: I am sure Yehuda had already *davened*. But he *davened* once again. This is one of the great lessons of *tefilla*. We can *daven* and *daven* and *daven*, and our *tefillos* are seemingly not answered, but then there is a breakthrough. This is what the Gemara says (Berachos 32b) that if a person sees that his prayers are not answered, he should *daven* more. “Hope to *Hashem*, strengthen yourself and He will give you courage, and hope to *Hashem*.” (Tehillim 27:14)

The Gemara says that Moshe Rabbeinu *davened* to *Hashem* the *gematria* (numerical equivalent) of the word “*Vaeschanan*,” which is 515 times! Until *Hashem* had to insist “...Do not continue to speak to me about this matter.” (Devorim 3:26) Why was Moshe asked to stop praying? The implication is that if he would pray just one more time about the matter, he would be forcing the Hand of *Hashem*, so to speak, and *Hashem* would need to let Moshe into *Eretz Yisrael*.

A similar thing happened here with Yehuda as well. Why did this argument win the day with Yosef, as opposed to all the previous arguments? The answer is that this request came together with another prayer. This was one last *tefilla* to *Hashem* that Yosef should have compassion. However, this time, the *tefilla* was answered.

That is one approach. I saw the other approach in the Ohr Hachaim haKadosh.

The Ohr Hachaim invokes the principle “As water reflects a face back to a face, so one’s heart is reflected back to him by another.” (Mishlei 27:19). The wisest of all men teaches us a foundational principle in human relations. The way you feel about someone is usually reflective of the way the person feels about you. Just like when someone looks into water, he sees a reflection of his own facial expression, that is the way it works with interpersonal relationships. If you love someone, as a rule, he will love you back. If you can’t stand someone, as a rule, the feeling is mutual.

The Ohr Hachaim haKadosh says that the following is happening here: Up until this point, Yehuda had terrible thoughts about this hard-hearted cruel viceroy of Egypt. He begged him, he told him about their old father, but nothing helped. “I can’t stand this guy. He is such a *rasha!*” That is how Yehuda and his brothers approached Yosef up until this point. Now, however, Yehuda overcame his feeling of despise. Yehuda knew the secret of “As water reflects a face back to a face, so one’s heart is reflected back to him by another” (Mishlei 19:19) and he made it his business, with great effort, to feel and show love and kindness towards this Egyptian viceroy. Yehuda was convinced that if he would manage to feel love and compassion for the viceroy, it would invoke a mutual feeling of compassion in him. And indeed, that is what happened. It worked like a charm.

This was not a simple matter of a person putting a smile on his face. Yehuda needed to work on his deepest emotions to get to the point where that smile was completely genuine. It was hard, but once he did it — “As water reflects a face back to a face, so one’s heart is reflected back to him by another.”

“Then Yehuda approached him and said: If you please, my lord, may your servant speak a word in my lord's ear and let not your anger flare up at your servant - for you are like Pharaoh” (44:18)

The Kli Yakar writes that when a person is angry, he acts illogically and can easily make mistakes. Chazal explain that when a person becomes angry he becomes a different person. This is not just a reaction; it is a natural extension of anger. To ensure that his words would be heard, Yehuda knew that he would have to calm Yosef down first. He asked Yosef not to be angry so that he would hear what he had to say. Yehuda could have offered the most sensible argument in the world, but if Yosef was angry, it would go in one ear and out the other. This is one of the ways in which anger adversely affects a person.

“And Yosef said to his brothers: I am Yosef. Is my father still alive? But his brothers could not answer him because they were left disconcerted before him” (45:3)

When Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, all of their questions about what had been occurring to them were answered. By his simple statement of "I am Yosef," many things that had happened to them in the past immediately became clear. Similarly, writes the Chofetz Chaim, throughout history, people have lived through difficult times and have had questions about events and the reason why certain things have happened. But at the end of days, Hashem will reveal Himself to the whole world and say "I am Hashem." Just as with Yosef, this simple statement will clarify history and many questions that have been asked will be answered and will be understood.

“And, behold, your eyes see, as do the eyes of my brother Binyamin, that it is my mouth that speaks to you” (45:12)

What did Yosef mean by saying that “you see... that my mouth is speaking with you”? Rashi says that he was speaking in Hebrew. Another possible explanation is that Yosef was referring to his previous comments recognizing that Hashem had arranged for him to end up in Egypt so that he could support his family. He told his brothers that his words expressing his ability to see the hand of Hashem everywhere could only have been learned in the house of Yaakov Avinu and were conclusive proof that he was Yosef.

“Then he fell upon his brother Binyamin’s neck and wept; and Binyamin wept upon his neck” (45:14)

Rashi explains that Yosef cried for Binyamin because the two Batei Mikdash built in his territory in Eretz Yisrael would be destroyed. Binyamin, in turn, cried for Yosef because the Mishkan in Shilo, part of Ephraim’s territory in Eretz Yisrael, would be destroyed. Why did they choose this moment to cry for the destroyed sanctuaries? The answer is that the destructions happened because of *sinas chinam*, baseless hatred. It was the same lack of unity which had been displayed by the brothers that would lead to the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash in the days of their descendants centuries later. They cried because they foresaw that this terrible infighting would still cause much damage in the future.

“And they told him, saying: Yosef is still alive, and that he is ruler over all the land of Egypt; but his heart rejected it, for he could not believe them” (45:26)

The word “moshel,” “ruler,” has the same letters as “shalem,” “complete.” A person who wishes to lead others has to perfect himself first and make himself complete before doing so. Without working on oneself, there is no way that a person can guide others. “Moshel” also contains the same letters as “shalom,” “peace.” A true leader is someone who can create peace. A leader’s focus, whether in the workplace, community or home, should be to foster a harmonious atmosphere among all those working together.

“And they said to Pharaoh: We have come to sojourn in the land, since there is no grazing for your servants’ flock, for the famine is sever in the land of Canaan; now, if you please, allow your servants to dwell in the region of Goshen” (47:4)

The brothers first told Pharaoh that they had come to sojourn and stay in Egypt temporarily. Then they concluded with a request to dwell in Goshen, seeming to indicate that they would take up long-term residence in the land. Aren’t these two expressions contradictory? Wherever we are in exile, even though we remain aware that we are not living in our true homeland, it is necessary to build the basic infrastructure of Jewish life. *Yeshivos* and *shuls* must be built so that people are able feel comfortable in their neighborhood and have their physical and spiritual needs met. This helps the community become stronger and enables it to flourish and grow. Having a sense of tranquility in one’s current surroundings is healthy and important for peace of mind. At the same time, one should not lose sight of the fact that he is in exile.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Dealing with Suffering

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

"Pharaoh said to Yaakov, 'How many are the days of the years of your life?' Yaakov answered Pharaoh, 'The days of the years of my sojourns have been one hundred and thirty years. Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not reached the life spans of my forefathers in the days of their sojourns.'" ([Bereishit 47:8-9](#))

At the momentous meeting between Yaakov and Pharaoh, Pharaoh asks Yaakov his age. Yaakov gives a lengthy answer, explaining that he endured a very difficult life, but he had not lived as long as his fathers. This dialogue is difficult to understand. It's strange that of all the things that Pharaoh could have asked Yaakov, he chose to ask him his age. Equally enigmatic is Yaakov's lengthy and seemingly pessimistic answer about the pain that he had suffered.

The Ramban and Rashbam explain that Yaakov looked extremely old, and his appearance struck Pharaoh so much that he was aroused to ask how old Yaakov actually was. Yaakov answered him that although he was very old, he looked even older due to the many difficulties that he underwent in his life.

It still remains difficult why Yaakov offered such a seemingly pessimistic answer. Rabbi Aharon Leib Shteinman suggests that Yaakov did not want to arouse the jealousy of Pharaoh, so he emphasized the difficulties of his life.

Regardless of the reason for his answer, the Sages are critical of Yaakov, and note that he was severely punished for this dialogue. The Daat Zekeinim cite an astounding Midrash:

"At the time that Yaakov said, 'few and bad have been the days of my life', The Holy One said to him, 'I saved you from Esav and Lavan, I returned Dina to you, and also Yosef, and you complain about your life that they were few and bad?! By your life, the number of words from 'and [Pharaoh] said, until the 'days of their sojourns' so too will be reduced from your years, that you will not live to the age of your father, Yitzchak'. Because Yitzchak lived for 180 years, and Yaakov only lived for 147 years."

This Midrash criticizes Yaakov for characterizing his years as few and bad.[1] As a punishment, Yaakov lost one year for every word in that dialogue, amounting to 33 words, and he only lived to 147 instead of the 180 years of his father's life.

There are two very important points that can be derived from this Midrash. The first is an incisive observation from Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz.[2] He points out that Yaakov himself only used 25 words - the other 8 words comprised of the Torah's description of Pharaoh's initial question to Yaakov about his age. It's understandable that Yaakov was penalized for his own negative assessment of his life, but why should he be punished for Pharaoh's question?

Rav Shmuelevitz explains that Yaakov looked so old because of his attitude towards his sufferings. Had he not felt so negative about his life, then he would never have appeared so old, and he would never have aroused Pharaoh to immediately ask his age. Thus, in the same way that he lost 25 years for his attitude towards his pain, he even lost 8 years because that same attitude caused him to look in such a way that caused Pharaoh to even ask the question. This teaches us that a person's internal attitude reflects on his outward appearance, and if such an appearance transmits a negative message, then a person is held responsible for that.

A second important point can be gleaned from a careful reading of God's criticism of Yaakov. God did not say that Yaakov did not endure any difficulties, rather He focused on the four great difficulties that Yaakov faced in his life - Esav's threat to Yaakov, Yaakov's torrid time with Lavan, the episode of Dina's abduction, and the disappearance of Yosef. God noted that ultimately, He saved Yaakov from the threats of Esav and Lavan, and returned Dina and Yosef home. It seems that the emphasis of the criticism of Yaakov was that he focused on the pain of those events when instead he should have stressed the fact that God saved him each time, despite the fact that he endured untold suffering in the midst of those episodes.

This is a very powerful lesson. When delivered from an ordeal, how does one relate to the past events: does he focus on the pain and suffering, or on the final, positive result? God's stern rebuke of Yaakov teaches us that each person has an obligation to focus on the positive ending and not dwell on the pain. Moreover, Rabbi Shmuelevitz's additional observation makes an even more demanding requirement - that even if a person underwent great suffering, he still has a responsibility to radiate a happy expression.

May we merit to learn the lessons of the dramatic conversation between Yaakov and Pharaoh.

An Eye on the Future

By Rabbi Berel Wein

The dramatic moment that Joseph has dreamed of for decades has finally arrived. His dreams are to be fulfilled and he has achieved the ultimate triumph over his brothers who doubted him and his integrity. And at that moment, when he is at the zenith of his power, he breaks down and weeps. He is unable to control his emotions and his care for his brothers and his father and for the future generations of the Jewish people overwhelms him.

In a flash of reality, he realizes the consequences of his behavior and he pulls back from the abyss that would have destroyed the family of Jacob and prevented the creation of the people of Israel

The rabbis of the Mishnah long ago told us that wisdom lies with those who can see the consequences of their actions and behavior in advance. Joseph clearly sees that he has pulled the rope as tightly as he is able to, and that any further action on his part would have dire consequences for the very future that he himself envisions.

If there will be a Jewish people and if he reconciles with his brothers, he knows that he will be remembered eternally as the righteous Joseph. If he exacts full revenge, justified as that may be in his mind, he knows that he dooms himself to being, at most, a footnote in the story of human civilization. His behavior towards his brothers, Judah and Benjamin, carries with it not only righteousness and altruism but a certain degree of self-interest and self-preservation. He realizes that only with greater unity of the tribes of Israel will he be remembered and truly justified.

When Joseph was tempted by the wife of Potiphar, we are told by midrash that he was able to overcome that desire because he realized that by succumbing, he would become an outcast amongst the tribes of Israel. And, he would not be represented on the holy breastplate of the high priest of Israel. The rabbis warn us often that no matter what temptation or justification we may have for wanting to separate ourselves from the other tribes of Israel – many of whom we feel have failings or shortcomings or perhaps have even behaved incorrectly towards us – always brings sadness and personal disaster.

It is very tempting to go it alone and to not be burdened by the weaknesses and foibles of others. After all, we are aware that everyone but us is out of step! Nevertheless, we are constantly warned not to fall into that trap. Joseph realizes that he cannot go it alone despite his temporal power and personal righteousness. And, in the moment of his greatest triumph, he seeks to unite and reconcile and create the necessary vehicle that will make the Jewish people eternal and eventually triumphant morally and physically.

Cruel To Be Kind

By Sheldon Stern

The classes at Rabbi Friedman's yeshivah were given in the basement of his house, so there was often interaction between the students and his family. I recall an occasion in which the Rosh Yeshivah gave one of his sons a "Potch" for some, at least in my eyes, minor infraction. Rabbi Friedman read my face and told me, "You have no idea how much I love my children." Nick Lowe had a hit with "Cruel to be Kind." It contains the line, "You've got to be cruel to be kind in the right measure." This aphorism describes Yosef to a tee. His portrayal of a sadistic despot was beyond Oscar worthy, but he had only the best intentions, to expunge the stain of his brothers' sale from their ledgers. I'd like to focus on a verse, in this week's Parsha, which highlights our protagonist's softer side.

After revealing his true identity, Yosef, in 45:9 tells his brothers to hurry and bring their father to Egypt. At the end of the verse he added, "don't delay." Having told them to hurry, was it necessary to insert that addendum? Yosef's word choice was telling, "Al Taamod" which alluded to Leviticus 19:16, "Al Taamod Es Dam Reiecha." don't stand by your brother's blood. With this, Yosef opened a window to his soul. He was telling his siblings that the separation from his father was tantamount to a slow and agonizing death. Several months after the Lubavicher Rebbe's passing in 1994, his aide-de-camp Rabbi Leibel Groner spoke at the Young Israel of the Lower East Side. Rabbi Groner shared with us something the Rebbe had told him, "People make a big deal because notables often solicit my advice, but the only thing I care about is to be alone in my room with a Blatt Gemara." The same, and then some, held true for our icon. As McCartney sang in Hey Jude, "Yosef carried the world upon his shoulders." But as far as he was concerned, this was a necessary distraction from what really mattered, Talmud Torah, particularly learning at the feet of his sainted father. Okay, so why did he allow all those years to pass? As we said, running the world, as viceroy of Egypt, wasn't uppermost on Yosef's mind. Yaakov's favorite recognized that he was tasked with actuating G-d's plan, and this included their twenty two year estrangement, a "punishment" for Yaakov for the twenty two years in which he didn't honor his father. So, as Rod Stewart sang, Yosef was someone who was, "Never Thinking 'bout Myself."

Chazal teach that the Avos were all supposed to live until the age of 180. In fact, only Yitzchak reached that pinnacle. Yitzchak represents Gevurah. This means that his life played out exactly as G-d envisioned and so there was no need for any adjustments or script revisions, if you will. This isn't meant as a slight to Avraham and Yaakov. As the Midrash relates Hashem took five years from Avraham as a kindness so that he shouldn't see Eisav go OTD, and Yaakov voluntarily ceded 33 years of his life to Dovid Hamelech to ensure Moshiach's realization. But Yosef was trying to do something even more difficult than what Yitzchak accomplished. When someone strayed, even an iota, from the path laid out by Hashem, this paragon of righteousness worked tirelessly, not only to get that person(s) back on the right track, but to effect such complete Tshuvah that the "sin" completely disappeared in G--d's reckoning.. And so there was no room for sentimentality. Certainly the tears he shed when he had quiet time with Binyamin demonstrated Yosef's true character, but as Quarterflash sang, when the need presented Yosef was able to, "Harden His Heart." And he developed this attitude from his mother who was ready to give away both this world and the next to avoid embarrassing her sister.

The Torah gives us enough glimpses to prove that Yosef wasn't some, as the Moody Blues wrote, "cold-hearted orb." And when Rachel gave Leah the signs, her heart was broken. The Potoker's grandson told me that his Zeide covered 7 blatt of Gemara a day during the 2 plus years that he hid in the Polish forest from the Nazis and Ukrainians. As the Potoker said, "I learned in order to keep my mind from what was going on all around me." So we see that even though our luminaries reached unimaginable heights they never lost their vulnerability and this made them sensitive to other people's concerns and frailties. That's why Yosef noticed that Paroah's two ministers were troubled. But this leads to a question, "Why did Yosef show this apparent "moment of weakness" when he said Al Taamod?" The Midrash which Rashi quotes in this week's Parsha tells us that when Yaakov and Yosef reunited, Yaakov said Shema. He did so because he wanted to channel his emotions into Ahavas Hashem. Yosef was definitely a chip off his father's block and so he could have kept a stiff upper lip, even at that euphoric moment. Yosef's reason, then, for saying Al Taamod wasn't because he couldn't control his feelings. If we return to Parshas Vayeshev we'll recall that Yosef incurred his brothers' ire for having tattled on them. So why did he do so? Yosef, unlike Kayin, rightly saw himself as his brothers' keeper. He understood that any mistake that he or his siblings made would redound for all generations with terrifying consequences. So too here. Yosef was telling his brothers that if they dilly dallied they'll be guilty of the Lav of Al Taamod, and will then need another dose of Tshuvah. So Yosef was following the principle of "an ounce of prevention." That's to say that he was warning them not to waste time by discussing who was to blame for what happened in the past. It was time to move on, and the time was now.

But this leads us to ask, "Can anyone survive living under such a crucible?" Obviously not, so what message can we derive from our Torah giants? The Gemara says that in the Ultimate Future Hashem will slaughter the Yetzer hora and it will appear to the Tzaddikim as a mountain of limitless size while to the Roshoim it will appear like the thickness of a single hair. So what does that mean? To keep oneself on the straight and narrow is no small feat. The Yetzer hora has an endless assortment of machinations to subvert us. At the end of days we'll see just how hard it was to avoid falling into his snares. Therefore, in our own small way, we can somewhat approximate what our forebears accomplished. We must keep in mind that every person is judged by Hashem, according to his/her potential. So this is one way of answering the question, but perhaps there's another approach. About a week ago, we recoiled from the horrific attack at Bondi Beach. As the initial shock wears off, we hear about the heroism of a number of individuals. And the same, of course, is true of the hostages who withstood their unspeakable ordeal. We pray to Hashem that we should never be tested, but invariably when the Jewish people face such crises their Yiddishe Neshamahs comes to the fore and, as Bowie sang, "We can be heroes, for just one day.". And it's these sacrifices which remind Hashem of the Akeidah and perhaps will be the springboard to prompt Moshiach's arrival.