

*Parashat Vayigash (Genesis 44:18-47:27)*

*Parashat Vayigash* opens with “*Vayigash eilav Y’hudah*, and Judah approached him ...” (Gen. 44:18). Judah begs Joseph to take him as a slave instead of Benjamin (for stealing Joseph’s silver goblet). It is the longest speech in the book of Genesis; commentators have mined its structure and content for meaning for centuries.

Onkelos (~ 100 CE; Roman national who converted to Judaism) reads Judah’s speech as a rational and evidence-based appeal for justice; nothing can be refuted. Rashi (1040-1105; preeminent medieval Jewish commentator) reads the speech as an attack on Joseph for being capricious and untrustworthy. Midrash Tanchuma (~700-800 CE; collection of rabbinic interpretations) claims Judah accuses Joseph of breaking Egyptian law himself.

Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997; scholar who revolutionized the teaching of the weekly Torah portion) notices Judah uses the word “father” fourteen times in his speech. Given the Torah’s generally laconic style, this cannot be accidental. It suggests empathy, rather than logic or law, drives Judah’s motivation and strategy.

Judah speaks out because he alone among the brothers has lost two sons. He knows the pain the brothers have caused Jacob in the past and the pain Jacob would feel at Benjamin’s imprisonment. Judah also knows Joseph is a father. He hopes the references to his father will trigger Joseph’s empathy and mercy. Judah doesn’t approach Joseph’s person, he approaches Joseph’s heart. He ignores the external difference of station and instead appeals to the internal shared humanity.

According to this reading, Judah’s appeal pierces Joseph’s heart. Joseph drops his subterfuge prematurely and pronounces, “I am Joseph; is my father still alive?” (Gen. 45:3).

Gut Shabbos/Shabbat Shalom