

# Vayigash: The Courage to Approach

Source Sheet by Rabbi Amy Bernstein

## Genesis 44:18

(18) Then Judah went up to him and said, “Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh.

## בראשית מ"ד:י"ח

(יח) וַיֵּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיָאֲדֹנָי יִדְבַּר-נָא עִבְדְּךָ דְּבַר בָּאֲזִנִּי אֲדֹנָי וְאַל-יִחַר אַפְּךָ בְּעִבְדְּךָ כִּי כָמוֹךָ כְּפָרְעָה:

## Genesis 45:1-5

(1) Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone withdraw from me!” So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. (2) His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh’s palace. (3) Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still well?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dumbfounded were they on account of him. (4) Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come forward to me.” And when they came forward, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. (5) Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you

## בראשית מ"ה:א'-ה'

(א) וְלֹא-יָכַל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק לְכָל הַנֹּצְבִים עָלָיו וַיִּקְרָא הוֹצִיאוּ כָל-אִישׁ מֵעָלָי וְלֹא-עָמַד אִישׁ אִתּוֹ בְּהַתְּוֹדַע יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו: (ב) וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-קֹלֹ בִבְכִי וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּשְׁמַע בֵּית פַּרְעֹה: (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חָי וְלֹא-יָכְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו: (ד) וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו גִּשׁוּ-נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגֹּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִמָּה: (ה) וְעַתָּה אֶל-תַּעֲצְבוּ וְאַל-יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הֲנֵה כִּי לְמַחְיָה שָׁלַחַנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם:

sold me hither; it was to save life  
that God sent me ahead of you.

**Aviva Zornberg** (*The Beginning of Desire* pp. 334-335)

He begins, surprisingly, by squarely attacking their sore point: "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt" (45:4). His reference to the unmentionable fact of the sale is, however, made in a context of brotherhood. On one level, he is simply identifying himself in the only way that is totally convincing: this secret of the sale is the most potent proof of his identity. But he defuses some of the tension of this memory, by describing himself-in spite of everything-as "your brother."

He then tells them: "Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither." He lets them know that he understands their ambivalent response to his reappearance: they are heartbroken at what they did to him, so many years before, and they are frustrated at their own humiliation. They are genuinely saddened by their cruelty of the past; at the same time, they are resentful at the way they have been hoist with their own petard. Unwilling to bow to the adolescent Joseph, they sold him into slavery; now they find themselves bowing to him, in entire subjugation."

Joseph's strategy is essentially to reveal to his brothers a Joseph empathic with their inner conflicts. The main thrust of his speech serves to show them his loving interpretation of his own history: the sale was for the sake of life, his cruel experience was, in fact, a mission to save the family from starvation in the famine years. God's plot is the only level of the narrative that matters to him, he tells them. And ultimately, the purpose of purpose of his speech is to provide them with a narrative to tell their father, to defuse the shame of their situation. The core of his speech is: "Now, hurry back to my father and say to him: Thus says your son Joseph..." (45:9)-a message to his father that will proclaim Joseph's personal credo, his vocabulary of self-creation.

**Kay Greenwald** (from Torat Chayim - Vayigash)

In the Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 12b, we read, "Bar Hinena the Elder said in the name of Rav: When a man commits a transgression and then is ashamed of it, all his iniquities are forgiven him." We do not know if Judah feels shame after selling Joseph into slavery, but we can well imagine that he begins to feel shame upon returning home and confronting his father's grief. As the years go by and Judah loses his own sons, his sense of shame must have increased. Only a man who has faced his own shame could act so bravely and selflessly before the second-most powerful man in Egypt.

We are not so different from Judah. For most of us, shame comes when we begin to realize the consequences of what we have done the harsh word spoken to our life partner, the quick reaction when our child annoys us, the insulting response to our coworker. Their injury becomes our shame. Unlike Judah, however, many of us find it difficult to own what we have to do to apologize, to try to make things right, to refuse to commit the same sin when given an opportunity to do so again.

At a time of year when at least for those of us in the Northern Hemisphere the days are short and the earth seems dark, this story offers us the hope that even in the darkest times of our lives there can be reconciliation and healing. It reminds us that we should not wait to experience our own pain before we empathize with the pain of those around us. Every day brings a new opportunity to apologize to those whom we have hurt, to right our wrongs, to change and become better people than we were before.

**Rabbi Marc Margolius** (from Mindful Torah For Our Time, IJS weekly Torah commentary)

There are indeed such moments which call for us, like Judah, to disregard and transgress usually appropriate and necessary boundaries to say that which needs to be said, and to do that which justice requires, without being paralyzed by concern for the unknowable consequences. Certainly, this quality characterized the lives of the classic Hebrew prophets. It is an essential

element in our spiritual tool box, even if it is to be used sparingly.

Judah's "holy boldness" in Vayigash, his drawing near, breaks through Joseph's defenses: "lo yachol Yosef lehitapek, Joseph could no longer restrain himself." (Genesis 45:1). Sobbing, he reveals his true identity, embraces his astonished brothers, and invites his father to reunite with him in Egypt. History is replete with such instances of audacious words and actions which unlock impasses and create new pathways for moving forward. Today, there is no shortage of political and interpersonal stalemates which seem to demand similar audacity.

This week's portion invites each of us to explore how we too might wisely and mindfully "step up" and apply our capacity for chutzpah towards sacred ends. When it is needed, may we—fully cognizant of its sacred origins and potential pitfalls—wisely and forcefully apply our mindful chutzpah, our "holy boldness," to break through logjams obstructing the unfolding process of life. May our words and actions arise from love, penetrate sealed ears and hearts and, like Judah's, elicit compassion, forgiveness, and repair.

**Rabbi Shefa Gold** (from *Torah Journeys*)

ALL THE SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE and blessings of Vayigash rest on a pivotal moment — the moment when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. He steps out from behind the mask of power, the mask of the false self, and weeps aloud. These are the tears of profound relief and of love unbound. This moment of expansion is the result of Joseph's embrace of a paradox. Two seemingly contradictory truths live inside Joseph, and when he can hold them both, then the true self is set free from artifice.

LATER IN THE STORY Joseph describes this moment to his brothers. "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." (Genesis 50:20) On some days we acknowledge the deep woundings that we have suffered; we mourn the loss of innocence; we confront the face of evil. And on some days we absolutely know that those very same wounds are the source of our compassion and power; we celebrate the essential rightness of the path of Life

in all its turnings, understanding that what feels like evil is an aspect of the goading force that unfolds the soul to its true breadth.

And there comes a day when both these perspectives exist at once. On that day joy and anguish meet within us and the resulting alchemical reaction explodes the boundaries of the false self. On that day we are set free. This freedom allows us to come out of hiding, to finally tell the truth and reveal ourselves.

### **Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman**

Judah's negotiations encompass four principles that we should keep in mind:

1. Listen carefully. It is strange that Joseph punishes Benjamin's "theft" by claiming him as a servant in his court. We generally fire servants who rob, not hire robbers to be servants. The Tosafot suggest Judah figured that out, and concluded Joseph was not telling him the whole truth; he must have wanted Benjamin to stay for other reasons than he said. Putting two and two together, Judah deduced Joseph was Benjamin's long-lost brother, anxious for reconciliation, not revenge.

2. Talk in private. Judah avoids a public showdown, where backing down would entail losing face. During a word "in private," however, he knows that Joseph may concede.

3. Be persistent. Tradition wonders what new information Judah has, in order to warrant a request for this private audience, and decides that he doesn't have any at all. He merely wants to repeat the conversation that he and the brothers have had with Joseph all along, hoping that an old argument may get heard differently at a more auspicious time. At the end of Genesis, we will see Jacob blessing Judah as a lion who "crouches and waits" for his prey -- a reference, our commentators say, to the patience that he shows as he awaits the right moment for his argument to be heard anew.

4. When your patience flags because the other party seems unbending, take time alone to cool off, then return to the conversation. The Kotzker rebbe noted that literally, our verse reads, "Judah approached him. Joseph" and

understood the extra word "him" to mean "himself."

When Judah almost despaired of convincing Joseph, he "approached himself," and only after some time alone, renewed his arguments for Benjamin's welfare. Parashat Vayigash tells us to recall the friends we have stopped talking to, the people who have hurt our dignity, and the family members against whom we hold a grudge. We can approach them for a word in private. We, too, can seek reconciliation, not revenge.

### **Rabbi Jonathan Kraus**

As we reach the climax of the Joseph story, the Torah reports: "The news [that Joseph's brothers had come] reached Pharaoh's palace (Genesis 45:16)." However, the text literally says: "The voice [Heb., "kol"] was heard in Pharaoh's house."

In reference to this verse, Rabbi Plaut quotes the Zohar as follows: "The word for news, "kol".... is written without the usual "vav" (a Hebrew vowel), that is, [the Hebrew word is written] in a constricted fashion. For it is the voice that is small which is often heard more than any other. This also teaches us to pray silently, for God hears the prayer of the heart."

This wonderful commentary (based on a subtle detail of spelling in Hebrew) teaches that the most effective form of communication (with God or other human beings) is not the loudest or the most verbose. On the contrary, we are most likely to be heard when we remove "noise" and "static" of all sorts. If human expression is a genuine offering of the heart, even a quiet word may have the resonance to be heard in the halls of power. In fact, if the expression is genuine, we may not need words at all. The essence of prayer is to offer the heart's yearning, its grief, gratitude and wonder. For that purpose, music, movement and even silence may sometimes be better vessels than words. Whichever tools we use, beneath all the noise, may we find our own authentic voices. May we hear and may we be heard.

*Source Sheet created on Sefaria by Rabbi Amy Bernstein*