

Parashat Vayigash, Rabbi James Proops

As we reach the climax to the story of Yosef and his brothers, we read about the ‘great reveal’ which sees the Egyptian Viceroy disclose his true identity. The scene is one we are all familiar with. They brothers have been recalled to the presence of Yosef and his ‘missing goblet’ has been found in the sack of Binyamin, who now faces the most severe of punishments. The spotlight turns to Yehudah who steps forward to plead the case for releasing Binyanim and offers himself in his place. It is clear from the Torah’s account that there is something in Yehudah’s speech which resonates deeply with Yosef and causes him to choose this moment to lower his disguise and break down in emotion. We can see however, that there was very little in the words of Yehudah which was new or unknown to Yosef, so what was it specifically that had such an impact?

Rav Yehudah Shaviv zt”l, a beloved teacher at Yeshivat Har Etzion, offers an insightful and novel approach to this question. Based on the Abrabanel’s insight that it would be impossible for a commoner to actually approach someone of Yosef’s stature, the highest ranking official in Mitzrayim, he explains that when our *parahsa* states, “וַיִּגַּשׁ אֶלְיָוִי יְהוּדָה הַ” - Yehuda approached *him*”, he was actually approaching Binyamin and not Yosef. He bases this on the the previous *pasuk* (the final verse in last week’s *parasha*) in which Binyamin is sentenced to slavery. Yosef states “הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ הוּא יִהְיֶה-לִּי עֶבֶד” - He in whose possession the goblet was found shall be my slave”. Rav Shaviv points out that clearly the words *הָאִישׁ* and *בְּיָדוֹ* describe Binyamin, therefore when the following *pasuk* states *וַיִּגַּשׁ אֶלְיָוִי*, that too refers to Binyamin.

The relevance of this insight is extremely powerful and adds a greater dimension to our understanding of the scene. Having been accused and seemingly sentenced for his alleged crimes, Binyamin must have felt terrified, anxious and alone. It is at this moment that Yehudah, who had instigated the selling of Yosef, goes over to Binyamin and stands with him in solidarity. It is from this position, standing together with his youngest brother, that Yehudah engages with the Viceroy and pleads his case. We can imagine Yehudah placing his arm around the shoulders of Binyamin, encouraging him that he will not be deserted. Upon seeing this gesture of love and support, that of Yehudah taking his place by Binyanim’s side in stark contrast with the image of abandonment which haunted him, Yosef saw that there

had been a great change in Yehudah. It was this clear demonstration which caused Yosef's emotions to overcome him and the catalyst to his revealing his true identity.

We see in the example set by Yehudah that very often the greatest statements of solidarity are made through demonstrable actions. While the words of Yehudah to Yosef were no doubt sincere, by taking his place next to Binyamin who was at his most vulnerable, Yehudah showed an unbreakable level of support which would have been an incredible comfort and a great source of strength.

It has been reported that across the country the cases of depression have tripled during the pandemic. One study suggests that one in four adults are experiencing acute anxiety and severe negative impacts on their mental health. These findings can be explained by a great number of factors, including fear for one's health, the health of family members and the economic strain that is being felt across society. Another important reason is the impact of social-distancing, isolation and quarantine. Never before in recent history have people been so distant from one another and spent so much time alone. While we can't physically go and stand together, we must continue to find creative ways to bridge those gaps and demonstrate our love and support for one another through other mediums. No one must be allowed to feel abandoned or alone during this prolonged crisis but we must search them out and follow the example of Yehudah, ensuring that they know we are still with them.

Shabbat Shalom