

Sat 30 Dec 2006  
Vayigash  
Congregation Adat Reyim  
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## Vayigash

In parsha Vayigash the Joseph cycle reaches its climax. Joseph, an ex-slave and alien resident, has risen to be vizier to Pharaoh. Due to world wide famine, Joseph's eleven brothers have arrived to obtain food. On their return to Canaan, the goblet Joseph used for divination is found in Benjamin's sack. Joseph decrees that Benjamin, as penalty, is to become his slave. At this point Judah steps forward and, with a masterful speech, intercedes for his youngest brother.

Joseph's reaction to hearing Judah's words is recorded in the early verses of Chapter 45, the first one being:

Now Joseph could not restrain himself in the presence of all who stood before him, so he called out, "Remove everyone from before me!" Thus no one remained with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

Personally, I find that first statement hard to believe. Until this point in the Joseph cycle, there is no indication in the Torah text that Joseph has any trouble controlling his emotions. The midrash, at a few points, does indicate Joseph displays emotion. For example, when he learned that the Ishmaelites were taking him to Egypt, Joseph wept bitterly because he would be so far from Canaan and Jacob.<sup>i</sup> On the whole, however, Joseph appears to be a pretty cool cookie. When he is thrown into the pit by his brothers, when he is sold to the Midianites, when Potiphar's wife is unsuccessful in her attempted seduction, and when he is placed in the Egyptian prison, Joseph apparently accepts the situations and acts calmly and rationally. He tells Potiphar's wife that it would be wrong to have a sexual encounter with her, and when she disagrees, he runs away from her. Joseph is neither a complainer nor troublemaker while in prison. Indeed, the warden gave Joseph much of the responsibility for administration of the prison. Even when Joseph is told he would shortly be speaking to Pharaoh, all indications are that Joseph was in total control of his feelings and actions.

So how can it be that Joseph could not restrain himself after Judah spoke? I am not saying this was not the case! The omniscient narrator states it as a fact. It is not something the reader infers based on words or actions in the story. What I wonder is what happened all of a sudden to make Joseph lose control? One answer, indeed the usual answer, to that question is that Judah's eloquent plea overwhelmed Joseph's practiced detachment. Nehama Leibowitz analyzes Judah's speech detailing the many rhetorical devices employed to soften Joseph.<sup>ii</sup> For example, Judah uses "father," with its emotional undertones, fourteen times in seventeen verses. She describes this use of the word "father" in Judah's oration as calculated to arouse compassion in the hardest of hearts. The midrash, however, presents at least one other possible explanation for the loss of restraint. Joseph could no longer restrain himself because he was ordered by Pharaoh not to restrain himself. He was told to put an end to the charade.

There is at least one other interpretation of Judah's speech. The speech has also been read as a duel between the brothers. The opening word of the parsha, which is also the parsha's name, Vayigash, means "went up" or "approached." This word also occurs in the Tanakh for "approaching to do battle."<sup>iii</sup> Both Ginzberg and Leibowitz describe, from different view points, the verbal duel between Judah and Joseph. First, it was loud. It was so loud that not only was Pharaoh able to hear it, but the noise destroyed the cities of Pithom and Raamses.<sup>iv</sup> Later, as described in the book of Exodus, the Egyptians will force their descendents to rebuild these cities. All the brothers become involved in the dispute. Besides loud shouts, boulders are thrown, feet are stomped, threats to draw swords are made -- the midrash is quite exciting. Ginzberg writes that eventually Pharaoh "sent word to Joseph that he would have to concede."<sup>v</sup> So Joseph makes himself known to his brothers.

A third explanation for loss of control is given in the notes of the Stone Chumash and attributed to Ramban. Joseph was unable to resist the combined plea of Judah and the pleas of his attendants, who were moved by Judah's appeal.

Rashi, the 11th century French commentator, offers yet another rationalization. He translates the word "Vayigash" differently. His translation of Genesis 45:1 is along the lines of: "And Joseph could not tolerate all [the Egyptians] standing over him, and he called: 'Take out every man from my presene.' So no Egyptian stood with him when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers."<sup>vi</sup> This free interpretation of the Hebrew makes sense when one considers the second half of this verse.

The second part of the first verse of Chapter 45 has Joseph tell his attendants to leave him alone in the room. Joseph still has enough composure to clear the room of his attendants. Why would he do that? Philo offers multiple reasons<sup>vii</sup>: "... being influenced by his own affection and disposition, and from his desire to cause no shame to his brethren, and to give no cause of reproach against them because of their conduct toward him, he [Joseph] did not choose that any Egyptians should be present on the occasion of his first making himself known to them." According to Philo, the first reason for having the Egyptians leave is that Joseph naturally was predisposed toward privacy during the moment of reconciliation with his brothers. The second reason supplied by Philo is the reason Rashi translates the verse the way he does, so as not to bring shame upon his brothers. This is consistent with the characterization of Joseph as tzadeck.

However, there is another possibility. Perhaps, Joseph himself wanted to avoid being shamed. Rashbam<sup>viii</sup>, as noted in the Stone Chumash, felt Joseph believed it was unseemly for him to break into tears in front of so many outsiders. Or perhaps Joseph was concerned he would lose status had it become known that it was his brothers that initially sold him into slavery. Whatever the reason, all the Egyptian courtiers left Joseph alone with his brothers.

Time does not permit me to describe the various accounts of the manner in which Joseph finally persuaded his unbelieving brothers that indeed he was Jacob's son. Let me say that it is amazing how many midrashim there are. Each midrash is totally consistent with the parsha.

Those individuals interested in mussar find the verses of Chapter 45, including the verse we discussed, a source of inspiration for moral teachings. Again, due to time constraints, you will be spared these analyses.

Yochanan ben Bag Bag, the person that according to tradition<sup>ix</sup> was the potential convert to Judaism who asked Hillel to teach him the Torah while standing on one foot, said: Turn it and turn it again. This d'var turned only one verse, and even that verse has not been completely explored. Still, in contrast to Joseph, I will restrain myself, so that we may continue with our Saturday morning service.

Gut Shabbos.

## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> See Louis Ginzberg "The legends of the Jews", Jewish Publication Society of America, Vol II, pages 19 - 20.

<sup>ii</sup> Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Bereshit, Fourth Revised Edition, World Zionist Organization Department for Torah Education and Culture, Jerusalem, translated and adapted from the Hebrew by Aryeh Newman, no publication date.

<sup>iii</sup> II Samuel 10:13 "Joab approached, as well as the people with him, to do battle against Aram ..." Also compare Tz'enah Ur'enah, parsha Vayigash, Artscroll Judaica Series, Vol. I Bereishis, 1983, translated from the Yiddish by Miriam Stark Zakon.

<sup>iv</sup> Ginzberg, op cit., Vol. II, page 106.

<sup>v</sup> Ginzberg, op cit., Vol. II, page 110.

<sup>vi</sup> The Rashi Chumash, Bereshith, translated by Shraga Silverstein, Targum Press, 1997, Gen 45:1.

<sup>vii</sup> Philo, On Joseph, XL. The Works of Philo: New Updated edition, translated by C. D. Yonge, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1993, page 455. Philo lived in Alexandria, Egypt, from about 20 B.C.E to about 50 C.E. He served as head of the Jewish delegation that visited Rome during the reign of Caesar Gaius Caligula.

<sup>viii</sup> Rashi's grandson and brother of Rabbeinu Tam, 1085? - 1174.

<sup>ix</sup> See Pierke Avot, A modern commentary on Jewish ethic, edited and translated by Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, UAH Press, 1993, Mishna 5:22.