

Rabbi David Wolkenfeld
ASBI Congregation
VaYigash 5782

Approaching and Holding Back

On the night of November 21st of 1196, a mob of crusaders burst into the home of Rabbi Elazer ben Yehudah Kalonymous, most famous for his book of Jewish ethics and practice, “The Perfumer” or Sefer HaRokeah.” Rabbi Elazar, a descendant of the famous Kalonymous family - the founding fathers of Ashkenazi Jewry, was sitting at his table, writing a commentary to the Torah. He had just finished writing his commentary to Parashat Vayeshev - the portion that introduces the story of Yoseph and his brothers.

The crusaders murdered his wife, Dolce, and his two daughters, Belette and Hannah. Rabbi Elazar and his son Yaakov were wounded but survived. Many of the greatest rishonim and communal leaders suffered greatly at the hands of antisemitic violence during the medieval period. Indeed, up to our own times, great Torah scholars and dedicated communal servants have not been immune to antisemitic violence and lived and died, suffering defeats and achieving hard-won victories alongside their Jewish brothers and sisters in every century and in every corner of the planet.

But I am thinking of Rabbi Elazer today because he was the first to describe and to explain the custom that most of us have to take three steps forward before reciting the Amidah, the prayer of standing-devotion. Rabbi Elazer explained that the three steps forward correspond to the three occasions in Scripture where the word VaYigash which means “and he approached” appears in the context of approaching for prayer or entreaty. One of those three occasions is the opening word of this week’s Torah portion - the section of the Torah in which the story contained in the portion that Rabbi Elazer was writing about on that fateful night reaches its climax.

The first VaYigash of the three is Avraham’s audacious approach to God to pray on behalf of the people of Sedom. The second VaYigash is Yehudah, stepping forward to confront the Egyptian viceroy to plead for mercy for Binyanim. The final VaYigash is that of Eliyahu Hanavi, begging God to confirm Eliyahu’s faith in the eyes of the people at the famous confrontation with the priests of Baal.

Yehudah’s VaYigash, in this week’s portion, the only one of the three which is a confrontation with another human being exists in Scripture in between two other VaYigash moments in which people confront God in ways that are both humble and bold. Yehudah’s bravery in taking responsibility for his family is echoed by Yosef who can no longer restrain himself from sharing his identity with his brothers.

וְלֹא-יָכַל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַמֵּץ

Yosef could no longer control himself and so clears the room of all the Egyptians and onlookers so that he can finally reunite with his brothers.

According to Rashi, Yosef could not bear to have the Egyptians present in the room as a private and tragic piece of family history was brought into the open. Ramban, however, explains that Yosef was unable to hold back any longer. Everyone in the room was so moved by Yehudah’s heartfelt speech. They were all joining in on behalf of Binyanim and Yosef himself did not have the strength to hold out any longer.

Thus, we have a parallel between the moment of VaYigash, a prayerful stepping forward, and the moment of וְלֹא-יָכֹל יוֹטֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק the inability to hold back and restrain and contain some truth that must break free. This dynamic is so core to being a compassionate and empathetic human being. דְּבָרִים הַיּוֹצֵאִים מִן הַלֵּב נִכְנָסִים אֶל הַלֵּב. Sincere words that come from the heart can penetrate the heart of others. And when our hearts are penetrated, the compassionate, empathetic and human reaction is to share the piece of truth we hold inside.

The compulsion to share the truth is also the engine of prophecy. Prophecy, in Scripture, can be uncomfortable. It is uncomfortable to share unpleasant truths. It is uncomfortable to share truths that could destabilize relationships and threaten those in power and undermine a comfortable lifestyle. But the truth that the prophet perceives cannot be contained or restrained.

I had an experience two weeks ago which is uncommon for me, but which all of you can avail yourselves frequently and I recommend that you do: while on vacation I sat in shul with no professional obligations to think about and I listened carefully to the Haftarah. Actually, they asked me to read the Haftarah which helped me to pay attention to the words.

Amos describes a sinful Jewish government which suppressed prophecy. The corrupt government did not want the destabilizing impact of prophets calling people to build a society on a foundation of justice and mitzvot. Amos explains that prophecy cannot be restrained:

אַרְיֵה שָׁאֵג מִי לֹא יִירָא אֶד-גִּי הֵ דִבֶּר מִי לֹא יִנְבֵּא:

When a lion roars, who is not afraid? When the Lord God speaks, who can refrain from prophesying.

According to the Jewish understanding of prophecy, there can be no new guidance in any prophetic message because the Torah of Moshe is complete and final. Prophets, instead, channel God's message to the Jewish people, which in every generation and in every place, is a message of loyalty to the Torah itself. The power of the prophetic moment comes when a prophet so thoroughly resonates with that Divine message that he or she cannot hold back and even though it is dangerous and uncomfortable to share inconvenient truths, they must nonetheless be said.

Like Yehudah, we can speak to others, whether to other people or God, with sincerity and clarity and passion. Like Yosef, we can let ourselves be moved and share our truths with those who need to hear it. As Amos taught, the message of God needs to be shared once it has been heard. In our prayer life, in our family life, and especially in our public lives, we owe it to the world to share with the world our perception of what is true and what is good and what is just. And as we take our steps forward to approach God, as Rabbi Elazer taught, we can speak to God with that same integrity and boldness, and promise God that we will be receptive to whatever message God shares with us in return.