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Kol Rinah
Parashat Vayigash
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You have to understand how Judah was feeling. He swore he would bring back Benjamin to his father. But the vizier's cup has just been found in Benjamin's bag. Judah cannot deprive his father of another son. He lives with the guilt of having done it once. He cannot let it happen again.

But he has no power, no might, no armies, no arms. All he has are his body, and his words. And so he approaches this vizier, comes closer to him, trying to appeal to him, to appease him.

Please, my Lord, he pleads. Please.

But the irony, the pathos, here, is that this is not just a man pleading for his brother's life, and his father's life too, which is bound up with the brother, before a stoic, foreign vizier.

This is Judah pleading before his brother Joseph, who he sold into slavery, not willing to let repeat the same mistake.

Judah is looking deep inside himself—when it says *vayigash eilav Yehudah*, Judah approached *him*, it's usually understood as Joseph, but perhaps Judah is approaching himself—moving away from who he was or and no longer wants to be—someone who would leave without his brother, someone who would lie to his father. And maybe he's getting closer to his own essence, as one chasidic commentator (Or HaMeir) puts it, approaching who he has become, or wants in this moment to be. And now he has the chance.

He is approaching his truest, best self.

And since we are never there, there's always an aspect of aspiration, of approaching that—of prayer, and hope—that we can be that best version of ourselves, that we'll have the strength to be who want to be and who we can be, and who we need to be.

Vayigash—approaching—always means prayer, teaches the midrash. To get closer requires us to open ourselves, to feel and to know what's missing, and to ask for help in finding it, in doing it.

And yet, the answers don't come from outside. As that same chasidic rebbe explains, *vayigash eilav Yehudah*, and Judah approached, and said *bi adoni*, please my lord, as it's usually translated, or literally “within me is my Lord.” God, who cannot be contained, whose presence, whose *kavod malei olam*, whose glory fills the world, is inside me, is inside each of us.

To approach ourselves—that *penimiyut*, that place of inwardness, is to approach the *kudsha brich hu*, the Holy One of Blessing.

Judah needs to find himself, find that point of holiness inside of him, and let the vizier see it, so that maybe, just maybe it will melt his heart, melt his will, melt his anger.

Judah has to make himself even more vulnerable than he ever has before—he has to come close, and be himself like he has never been before.

But Judah is not just this Judah from the Torah. Each of us is Judah. Judah—Yehudah—is every Yehudi—every Jew. We are all Judahs, we are all Yehudim. Each of us has moments, interactions, that call for us to be more ourselves than we are used to being, more ourselves than we even are sure we can be.

Every one of our relationships has an aspect of distance in it, distance we must bridge and overcome, where we need to draw closer, where a part of our character, our identity, craves a greater intimacy, a greater sense of being known, and knowing someone else.

To be human means to ever be seeking to overcome the existential loneliness that defines us.

But before we can draw close to anyone else, or allow anyone else to approach us, we have to be inside ourselves and feel that loneliness, that need to be known, that need not to be alone.

Judah is not just looking to save his brother. Judah, like each of us, is looking for his brother.

And soon enough, Judah discovers the person he is approaching *is his* brother.

Joseph says his name twice. The second time, he says, “I am Joseph, your brother, who you sold into Egypt.” He’s saying he’s Judah’s actual brother. But first, Joseph says, only “I am Joseph,” giving his real name—sharing his fraternal humanity with Judah.

When someone shows us that spark inside themselves that illuminates their truest, best self, we can respond only, “you are my brother,” “you are my sister.”

What do we want from this shul, this community? We want to know and be known, to be challenged and supported in being our best, truest selves, to discover and rediscover that God is within each of us—to be delighted in what we find in ourselves, and what we find in the person sitting next to us, across from us.

We are all Yehudah, seeking to approach, to find the holiness we sense, the holiness we seek, in ourselves and others. If we can only feel that deeply enough, deeply enough for others to know we’re feeling it, by the kind smiles on our faces, and the sparkle in our eyes...

Joseph feels what Judah feels, and Joseph himself becomes overcome. Yet Joseph has also been looking for his brothers, his whole life. Just like us.

As we daven Musaf, be Yehuda—be Yehudim. Feel his urgency, his need to connect, his need to be his most sincere, real self. Feel his concern for his Benjamin, his worry for his father, his aching regret for Joseph. And feel his certainty, and know that you can find that inner point of holiness. Believe that when you see it clearly inside yourself, others will too.