

Vagigash 5780  
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Come Close

On New Year's Eve, Scott and I attended the wedding of a family friend from Chicago. Our son Benjy was the Best Man and he also signed the Ketubah. We caught up with some of our old friends, and it was good to see them. But I must confess that it is not easy to be back in that world as a visitor. Leaving that community and my leadership position there meant severing my relationship with a place and people that hold nearly all of my adult memories. And although my life there was good in many ways, leaving was a process that, of necessity, involved rejecting or relinquishing aspects that no longer fit. Growth requires breakage, and re-encountering the places and people that formed us is not simple.

In today's *parashah*, Yosef sobs uncontrollably as he reveals his identity to his brothers. His outpouring of emotion is so powerful that when he says, "I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?" (Gen. 45:3), his brothers are too dumbstruck to respond. As I studied the *parashah* this week, I kept returning to Yosef's sobbing. I felt like his sobs expressed some of my own feelings of rupture, loss, longing, love, and coming to terms with what is. I'd like to share some of what I learned about that with you today.

By this point in the Yosef narrative, he thinks he has put his early life completely out of mind, as he says: "God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home" (Gen. 41:51). Of course, he is fooling himself. I believe that in the moment when Yosef can no longer control himself--"*lo yachol l'hitapeik*" (Gen. 45:1) and breaks down, he realizes that. In that moment of clarity, he sees himself and his family for who they are. Aware that that little has changed in anyone's essential character, nonetheless, he feels pulled toward them despite their troubled past. Yosef intuits that everyone has followed the path intended for them and reassures his brothers that "it was to save life that God sent him" to Egypt (Gen. 45:5). Yet that realization, while affirming and empowering, also brims with pain.

Onkelos, one of the earliest Torah interpreters, whose translations reflect ancient understandings of the text, says that when Yosef can no longer *contain* himself--*l'hitapeik*, the text actually means that he can no longer *strengthen* himself--*l'hitchazek*. His fortress falls away at that moment. The commentator Rashbam agrees, adding that only by repressing his emotions has Yosef been able to achieve his greatness. But now his emotions pour out, raw and real.

And, against pragmatism, the only people he wants to be with at that moment are his brothers.

Ramban notes that Yosef sends his Egyptian servants away so that he can state explicitly to his brothers: "I am the one you sold." Rashi and others chime in that Yosef does not want the Egyptians to see his brothers' shame. One of my favorite commentators, the Netziv, opines that although Yosef cries out when he makes himself known, he speaks the words "I am the one you sold," quietly, to the only people who can understand what that means in their family context. It is a painful, intimate moment, not a catharsis, not an "I told you so," nor a celebration. His words put on the table the reality created by his and his brothers' personal qualities and the parenting they experienced.

We like to think that Yosef finally reveals himself to his brothers because he sees that they have repented and changed, but I find that a wishful and unsubstantiated reading of the text. When Yosef accuses his brothers of being spies and demands that they bring their younger brother to him, they conclude that they are finally being punished for not heeding their brother's cries, or, as Reuven says, for their murderous intent and the removal of their brother from the family. Acknowledging that they are getting what they deserve is *not* moral growth, as they already know the wrongfulness of their deed when they commit it. The real proof would be seen in brotherly protectiveness, but they neither express regret over what they did to Yosef, nor show any concern over what might happen to Binyamin if they bring him to Egypt.

Moreover, they tell Yosef that they are honest men, but when their money is put back in their bags, the brothers make no rush to return it. They leave their brother Shimon imprisoned in Egypt and stay home in Canaan until their food runs out again. Then, when they must return to Egypt to replenish, their only stated concern about bringing Binyamin comes with regard to how it would upset their father, Yaacov. After all those years, they still yearn to please him. Reuven ineptly tells his father, "You may kill *my* two sons if I do not bring [Binyamin] back to you" (Gen. 42:37). Yehudah, however, does show some integrity. If there is any evidence of moral growth, it is when he tells their father: "Send the boy in my care...I myself will be his guarantor; if I do not bring him back to you...I shall stand guilty before you forever...Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father" (Gen. 44:33-34).

Beyond that morsel, I find no evidence that the brothers or their father have evolved morally. Yosef can see that they are who they are, he is who he is, and it is time for them to come together anyway.

Several commentators see fear of recrimination in the brothers' stunned silence. But the Mizrachi (Rabbi Elijah Mizrachi, ca.1455 – 1525) says they are *not* afraid, and that is precisely because of Yosef's sobs. His sobs say what his words cannot: that after all that has happened, he still loves them.

How complicated it is to love and seek closeness with people who are imperfect, people who have hurt us, and with whom we have behaved imperfectly. How vulnerable it makes us to lower our guard, hold nothing back, and risk opening ourselves to whatever baggage will come at us from the other side. Yehudah and Yosef represent what it is like for us to confront the reality of being in relationship with other people, after the gloves have come off and things have gotten serious, when there is dark water under the bridge, and yet, there we are, standing on it together.

I want to suggest that we can learn something useful from what Yehudah and Yosef do in the breathtaking encounter where Yosef cries and makes himself known. So let's look closely at what they do. Yehudah takes the lead. Before he speaks to Yosef, the text says "Vayigash eilav" (Gen. 44:18)--Yehudah drew near and approached the yet-unrevealed Yosef. That move opens the door to a different kind of interaction. When Yehudah begs to take Binyamin's place as Yosef's slave on account of their father, Yosef melts. Yehudah's words alone do melt him. We know that because until now, the brothers' willingness to stand in for each other has not moved Yosef. The difference is "*vayigash*"--Yehudah draws near. And his move is reciprocated, mirrored by Yosef when he makes himself known. Seeing the fear in his brothers' eyes, Yosef says, "*G'shu na eilai*" (Gen. 45:4)- Please, approach me, come close to me."

When Scott and I were preparing for our own wedding, Rabbi Bill Lebeau taught us something I will never forget, about the breaking of the glass at the end of the ceremony. He said, in all relationships, there will be shattering and breakage. And our task, when that happens, is to turn toward each other and embrace. Turn toward the one from whom you feel most like turning away. Surrender the distance between yourself and the pain of working it out.

What is happening when we turn toward one another instead of turning away? The midrash offers an answer to that question. Our sages exegetize the word "*vayigash*" through its root, drawing on how the same root is used elsewhere in the *Tanach*:

R. Yehudah says "*vayigash*" means "approaching," as in approaching for war.

R. Nehemiah says "*vayigash*" means "approaching" as in appeasement, or conciliation.

The Rabbinic majority says it means “approaching” as in prayer, when one beseeches God (Gen. Rabbah VaYisash 93).

Each meaning involves turning toward and drawing close, yet their intentions are quite different.

R. Elazar ties them together in this imagined reading: Yehudah said to Yosef: I am ready for these three possibilities. If for appeasement, then great. If for prayer, then I will beseech you. If for war, then stand opposite me, and I will stand opposite you (Midrash HaGadol to Gen. 44:18, p. 754; see a slightly different version in Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Introduction p. 66). In other words, I am here with you in this intimate space, ready for whatever unfolds, knowing that it may be any of those, or, perhaps more likely, a mixture of all three.

Recently I learned another midrashic understanding of the word “*vayigash*” from Rav Elie Kaunfer:

R. Yehudah says: “*Vayigash*” is the language of love. I like that, because the word used for Yosef’s revelation is an intimate *word--hitvadah*, which means to be known intimately. It is the same term used biblically for sexual relations, potentially the most intimate way of knowing and being known by another person. Yosef’s sobs, I think, create that level of intimacy. And here is what’s important: **Yosef has never been stronger or more admired as a character than he is at the moment when his strength fails him, and he is just Yosef, a man with a past, who has been hurt, yet seeks renewed intimacy.** When we read his story, we realize that we were never as invested in his ingenuity as much as we were interested in his emotional integrity.

Yosef’s family yearns for reconciliation--not because they have advanced morally, but simply because human beings need closeness. I would like to believe that Yehudah, Yosef, and the others approach each other because they yearn to grasp the love they hear in Yosef’s sobs.

Like Yosef and his brothers, when we encounter people who were once part of our lives, we often find that their essence and character have not changed. And, when a breach occurs in our current relationships, we know that the way out is not likely to come from either party changing their nature. Yet we *can* turn toward each other.

**It takes courage to step into that fragile and imperfect space and seek closeness.** Yehudah and Yosef model for us the good that can come from doing so in a posture of openness to whatever the interaction may bring. If we are ready to let down our walls,

listen with fresh ears, and try to find the right words to express what we need, we have a chance of meeting our deep, human need for connection, closeness, and love.

May we find the courage we need to be like Yehudah and Yosef, turning toward the people in our lives and inviting them to draw near to us, and may we welcome their turning toward us with hope and confidence that whatever we are is enough.