

Parashat Vayigash וַיִּגַּשׁ

Torah: Genesis 44:18–47:27

Haftarah: Ezekiel 37:15–28

Patching Up a Relationship

General Overview

We come now to the dramatic climax of the story of Joseph. Without question, this story is one of the most exciting, intense, and beautifully constructed narratives in all of the Scriptures. In this last and greatest episode, Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers, is reunited with his father, Jacob, and provides a temporary home for his family in Egypt to save them from the terrible famine that was devastating the western Near East.

Exposition

The commentary on this parasha will focus on four segments of this emotional conclusion to the story of Joseph. In our remarks, we will comment on Joseph:

- I. Patching Up a Relationship
- II. Preserving a Remnant
- III. Preparing for Redemption
- IV. Picturing the Redeemer

In this excerpt from Parashat Vayigash, we will focus on section I, Patching Up a Relationship.

I. Patching Up a Relationship

A. *An Emotional Finish*

There are so many deep emotions waiting to surface in this dynamic conclusion to Joseph's story. First, think of Jacob. He was quite aged for he told Pharaoh in 47:9 that he was one hundred and thirty years old. Yet, he had spent many of his latter years in sorrowful grief over the loss of his favourite son, Joseph. Even though he had eleven other sons he could still not be comforted from what he thought of as the death of Joseph. He was in great need of being reunited with his dear son.

Then there were the eleven brothers of Joseph. How did they feel about what happened? This is something Joseph has been sitting on the edge of his throne waiting to know! This is the main reason he devised the tests that he carried out on them. He wanted to find out how they felt about his departure and to see if there was any repentance or remorse.

We do not know exactly how all of them felt, but we are provided with a glimpse of some of their emotions. The first indication of how they felt is in 45:3 when Joseph first reveals his identity to them. The text says, "But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence." According to BDB, the Hebrew word translated "terrified" (from the root *b-h-l*, ב-ה-ל) carries

with it the sense of being unable to speak because of strong feelings of dismay, or even from being terrified.¹

Of what were they so afraid? Although the text is not altogether conclusive, it seems reasonable to posit that they may have been terrified by what Joseph may do to them. Here was Joseph, a man who had just about all the power of Egypt at his disposal. Here were they, guilty of attempting to murder their brother out of jealous anger. What were they to expect? They did not know Joseph's heart. Consequently, from their standpoint, they had every reason to be frightened of him.

We have some hint in a previous sidra that they may have been feeling some regret for what they did to him. For example, in chapter 42 we read about their deliberating whether or not the apparent test that Joseph laid upon them was as a result of their actions to him. Hence, 42:21 says, "Alas, are we being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us? That is why this distress has come upon us" (JPS).

Based on this previous information and their terror of him now, it is safe to assume that not only may they have been feeling repentant, but also frightened about any possible retribution which may come their way from Joseph. Thus, it appears, they desperately needed to be reconciled with him.

Finally, there was Joseph. What was he feeling? Previously we have had significant glimpses into his emotions. When his brothers first approached him during their initial trip to Egypt, in 42:24, we are told that when Joseph overheard them discussing what they did to him, "He turned away and began to weep." Again, on the second visit when he saw Benjamin for the first time since coming to Egypt, the Scriptures say: "Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there" (43:30). Finally, in this portion, Joseph bursts into tears for a third time when he reveals himself to his brothers, and then again for a fourth time when he is reunited with his father. Boy, can he cry!

We want to focus for now on Joseph's emotional outburst upon revealing his identity to his brothers in 45:2. Very few people feel comfortable with emotional outbursts. However, Joseph's society was different. People at that time and in that part of the world lived under very different conditions, standards, and social behaviour than most people in the West today. The text says that Joseph, "Cried in a loud voice!" Why? Rabbi Munk says, "They were tears of happiness and preoccupied by the great joy of finally seeing the long years of terrible trials and moral suffering come to an end."²

B. The Steps of Reconciliation

The tears of Joseph were a sign to his brothers that they had nothing to fear and that reconciliation was on the horizon. Proper reconciliation is a process, and not a one-time act. Certain conditions have to be met; certain attitudes have to be shared in order for full reconciliation to take place.

1. Honesty

Immediately after Joseph calmed down from having broken the news of his true identity to his brothers in 45:3, he again addressed them. This time, he not only revealed himself as their brother Joseph, but described himself as "he whom you

sold into Egypt.” Why did he put it that way? He could just as easily have described himself as “Joseph, the brother of Benjamin,” or “Joseph, the first son of Rachel.” Though it is difficult to tell exactly what was in Joseph’s mind, we nevertheless have a suggestion. Perhaps Joseph may have known a valuable secret about the process of reconciliation. The secret is this: *honesty*.

Right from the beginning of their renewed relationship, somehow Joseph knew that if there was going to be a genuinely revived relationship between him and his brothers it must be based on complete honesty. Accordingly, Joseph gently and kindly reminded them what they had done to him. He did not minimize nor exaggerate their wrong. Instead, he spoke of it honestly before them.

This is always the first step in any reconciliation between estranged people. In order for there to be a healthy relationship between them, there needs to be honesty concerning the things that separate. Continuing along these lines, it is interesting to note that commentator Nahum Sarna considers Joseph’s statement, “At once a reassurance and a rebuke.”³ It was a rebuke in that Joseph wanted his brothers to know that *he* knows what they did to him. However, it was a reassurance in that “I shall behave as a brother should even though you were un-brotherly.”⁴ Moreover, it was also an assurance to them that he wanted to reconcile.

2. Encouragement

The second thing Joseph did in the process of reconciliation with his brothers was to encourage them. We find this in 45:5 where he told his brothers, “And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.” He knew that they were in a very vulnerable emotional state at that point. Therefore, he addressed their emotions and gave them assurance that as far as he was concerned they did not need to feel as they did.

This is a very important step in the reconciliation process. Whenever something comes between people, strong emotions always come with it. Sometimes there may be feelings of bitterness. At other times, there may be feelings of regret or remorse, such as in the case of Joseph’s brothers. Joseph did not minimize what they did, but he did try to assure them that there are other ways to view the situation. This leads us to the third step in Godly reconciliation...

3. Focus on God’s Purposes

We know from the names, which Joseph gave his two sons born to him in Egypt that he spent time thinking about the hurt he felt from his brothers’ treatment of him. That is one reason why he named one of his sons “Manasseh.” For Joseph himself said when he named his son, “God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.” This name indicates that there was a time when Joseph indeed, thought about his hardships, but a time came when he no longer focused on those things. Instead, he had a better way of thinking. He focused on God and His purposes in all the trials. Thus, he told his brothers that the reason he could forgive them so easily was that “it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (45:5).

There are at least two important parts to this incredible statement in 45:5. First, Joseph was recognizing that God was the one in control of these events. True,

his brothers sold him into slavery, but they did not realize that it was God moving them. They could not see it. In fact, it is hard for us to see it. To most, what they did was utterly shameful and sinful. Yet, Joseph had the ability to see that it was really the hand of God. Can we see it, too?

Moreover, let us take this thought a step further. It was not that God was reacting to a miserable situation or turning a man-made event into something for Himself. In a very real way, that would make man sovereign. On the contrary, Joseph knew it as it really was: it was God who was performing His will all along.

Indeed, without a high view of the absolute sovereignty of God, it would be extremely difficult for estranged people to turn aside from their differences and reconcile with each other. The man of God is always aware of how the sovereign hand of His Maker is both the mover and the shaker of man's events, both good and bad. Joseph knew this well.

The second important part of Joseph's statement about God's sovereignty which we need to see, is his awareness of what it was that God was doing. It is one thing to know that God is doing something special, but another thing to know *what* it is that He is doing. Joseph apparently spent time thinking about what God was doing in orchestrating the events of his life. Because of that, he had a deep-seated confidence in his knowledge of God's plan. Knowing what God was doing made it much easier for Joseph to reconcile with those who did him wrong. He was able to look beyond the wrong and see specifically what God was doing.

C. So Israel Will Also Reconcile With Tears

The ancient rabbis saw something remarkable in the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. In our opening quotation of the Midrash we read,

As Joseph became reconciled to his brothers from the midst of weeping, so will the Holy One, blessed be He, redeem Israel from the midst of weeping, as it says, "They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them; I will cause them to walk by rivers of waters," etc. (Jeremiah 31:9)⁵

To the ancient rabbis, Joseph's errant brothers are a picture of a wayward Israel whom God will someday in the future reunite to Himself when He works repentance in the nation. On that day, Israel will be spiritually reconciled with God forever and will experience a time of great lamentation in the process.

¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* ("BDB") 96.

² Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bereshit*, 587.

³ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Commentary: Genesis*, 308.

⁴ *Ibid*, 308.

⁵ Bereshit Rabbah 93.12