

Short Comments on Parashat Vayiggash
Rabbi Eliot Malomet December 11, 2021 7 Tevet 5782

בראשית מ"ד:כ' ונאמר אל-אדני יש-לנו אב זקן וילד זקנים קטן ואחיו מת ויותר הוא לבדו לאמו ואביו אהבו:

Genesis 44:20 *We told my lord, 'We have an **old father**, and there is a **child of his old age**, the youngest; his **brother is dead**, so that he alone is left of his mother, and his father dotes on him.'* Judah's petition to Joseph compresses so much information! Almost every single word alludes to previous texts and stories. Abraham is זקן-old prior to dispatching his servant. Isaac is זקן prior to blessing his sons. The brothers never explicitly say that Jacob is זקן. Joseph is the one who says it! וילד **how is your old father!** הזקן **child of old age** here refers to Benjamin, but originally it refers to Joseph! **his brother is dead**. Wait! Nobody ever came right out and said that Joseph was dead! They always said, **he is not here!** And **he is alone!** Nice! An allusion to the story of Jacob and the Mysterious Assailant where Jacob is described as **ויותר יעקב לבדו**. Why does the Torah do this? For one, it enriches the experience of the text. But perhaps on a deeper level it conveys to us a central truth in life: this story contains echoes of every other story. Our stories are bound up in one another's stories. That's what it means to *bound up in the bonds of life*.

מ"ה:א' ולא-יכל יוסף להתאפק ל כל הנצבים עליו ויקרא הוציאו כל-איש מעלי **ולא-עמד איש אתו** בהתנגע יוסף אל-אחיו:

45:1 *Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!"* **So there was no one else** about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. This is just amazing storytelling! The tension is at the breaking point! The dramatic irony is at its peak: we know something the characters don't know. We watch as the stage is cleared. The implicit message (and joy) of this passage is that while Joseph sends all the non-family members out of the room, **WE are still in the room with him!** This is the intimacy of Torah! This is **our** story! **We** are there with **our** family as this is happening!

מ"ה:ח' ועתה לא-אתם ש'לחתם אתי הנה כי האלקים וישלמי **לאב** לפרעה ול**אדון** לכל-ביתו ומשל בקל-ארץ מצרים:

45:8 *So, it was not you who sent me here, but*

*God; and He has made me **a father** to Pharaoh, **lord** of all his household, and **ruler** over the whole land of Egypt.* Father, lord and ruler, that's how Joseph sees himself in Egypt. And this is where we experience some tension with what he is saying, because in truth, while Joseph has tremendous power, he serves at the pleasure of Pharaoh. He is not a free man at all. Besides, the brothers might be wondering, who speaks about himself that way? Read the story carefully and you will discover that when the brothers restate what Joseph says to Jacob, it's quite different.

מ"ה:ט'-י"א מהרר ועלו אל-אבי ואמרתם אליו זה אמר בנה יוסף שמני אלקים לאדון לכל-מצרים רדה אלי אל-תעמד: וישבת בארץ-אשן והקית קרוב אלי אתה ובניך ובניך ובצאנך ובקרך וכל-אשר-לך: וכל-פלתי אתה ישם כיעוד חמש שנים רעב פו-תגרש אתה וביתך וכל-אשר-לך:

45:9-11 *"Now, hurry back to my father and say to him: Thus says your son Joseph, 'God has made me **lord** of all Egypt; come down to me without delay. You will dwell in the region of Goshen, where you will be **near me—you** and your children and your grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all that is yours. There I will provide for you—for there are yet five years of famine to come—that you and your household and all that is yours may not suffer want.'* Joseph wants the brothers to state that he is an **lord**. The key words of this text are found in the exact middle: **near me-you**. Joseph's goal: to re-create his relationship with his father and to reconstitute the family in Egypt, where they will be totally dependent on him.

מ"ה:י"ד-ט"ו ויפל על-צוארי בנימן-אחיו ויבך ויבנימו בנה על-צואריו: וינשק לכל-אחיו ויבך עליהם ואחרי כן דברו אחיו אתו:

45:14-15 *With that he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and **Benjamin wept on his neck**. He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him.* Not to be picky, but the text only tells us that Benjamin wept on Joseph. With the brothers, Joseph is the one who kisses the and weeps on them, but **they, don't, weep, on, him**. An omission? I think not!

מ"ה:כ"ו ויגדו לו לאמר עוד יוסף חי וכי-הוא משל בקל-ארץ מצרים ויבך לבו כי לא-האמין להם:

45:26 *And they told him, “Joseph is still alive; yes, he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt.” His heart went numb, for he did not believe them. They tell Jacob not that Joseph is an **אב-father** or an **אדון-lord**, (which is the term he wanted them to use) but that he is a **משל-ruler**. They took the most oppositional of his terms and made it their central message. Why? Because that is the term they used back at the dreams. *Are you going to rule over us?* They have anxiety about him.*

מ"ו:א' ויסע ישראל וכל-אשר-לו ויבא בארזה שבוע ויזבח זבחים לאלהי אביו יצחק:

46:1 *So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. Why the sacrifices? Why Beer-sheba? Beer-sheba is the southernmost point associated with the family. More importantly, it is where God appeared to his father, Isaac, and there is already an altar there. We sense Jacob's apprehension in descending to Egypt. The sacrifices elicit a divine response of reassurance. Do not fear...I will go down with you.*

מ"ו:ה'-ז' ויגם יעקב מבאר שבע וישאו בני-ישראל את-יעקב אביהם ואת-טפם ואת-נשיהם בעגלות אשר-שלה פרעה לשאת אתו: ויקחו את-מקניהם ואת-רכושם אשר רכשו בארץ כנען ויבאו מצרמה יעקב וכל-זרעו אתו: בניו ובני בנותיו ובנות בניו וכל-זרעו אתו מצרמה:

46:5-7 *So Jacob set out from Beer-sheba. The sons of Israel put their father Jacob and their children and their wives in the wagons that Pharaoh had sent to transport him; and they took along their livestock and the wealth that they had amassed in the land of Canaan. Thus Jacob and all his offspring with him came to Egypt: he brought with him to Egypt his sons and grandsons, his daughters and granddaughters—all his offspring.* This is such a stunning passage. Note the contrast between the two ways the family is described. 1) Sons, their father, their children, their wives. 2) Jacob and all his offspring; his sons; the sons of his sons; his daughters; the daughters of his daughters; all his offspring. There's something happening here. Up until the descent to Egypt the family is on the verge of falling apart. Each son has a wife and his own children, and each could go his own way. But the descent to Egypt reconstitutes the family as a unit once again under the patriarchy of Jacob (but also under the governorship of Joseph). On the one hand, they were all supposed to become a nation. But it seems that, on the other hand, this wouldn't have

happened without the clan's descent to Egypt. They will flourish there, but also be enslaved.

מ"ו:כ"ט ויאסר יוסף מרפבתו ויעל לקראת-ישראל אביו גשנה ויקרא אליו ויפל על-צוואריו ויבך על-צוואריו עוד:

46:29 *Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while.* The equivalent of getting his personal chauffeur and limo. We can appreciate his power and office, but a tad showy, no? Why doesn't Joseph go meet him at the border, at the port of entry? Because Joseph is not free to come and go as he pleases. Who is crying upon whom? The verse is unclear. But let's go with this: Joseph falls on his father's neck, Joseph cries on Jacob. Jacob is deeply moved for sure, but he does not have any tears left in him. He's done all his crying for Joseph years ago.

מ"ז:י' ויברך יעקב את-פרעה ויצא מלפני פרעה:

47:10 *Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and left Pharaoh's presence. A stunning encounter: the real father meets the surrogate father. Pharaoh is awestruck by what must have appeared to him as an ancient human being. When asked his age, Jacob replies with melancholy. Gracious but also curt, Jacob blesses him - an echo of the Mysterious Assailant: I will not let you go until you bless me (33:26), and a foreshadowing of the Exodus, Pharaoh to Moses: take your sheep... and go, and bless me too (Exod. 12:32). Having met his son's boss, Jacob has sized up the situation. Very nice. So you're a Pharaoh. Mazel tov. But I can see that he's always watch his back with you.*

מ"ז:כ"ו וישב ישראל בארץ מצרים בארץ גושן ויאחזו זה ויפרו וירבו מאד:

47:27 *Thus Israel settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly.* It's hard not to hear an echo of the first verse in the Joseph story: וישב יעקב בארץ מגורי אביו בארץ כנען: Now Jacob was settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan.(37:1) We note the differences. Before he was Jacob, here he is Israel. Egypt is a world power. Canaan, a place to herd sheep. Egypt has provinces. Canaan has villages and nomads. Egypt is where Jacob's sons acquire holdings; Canaan is where Jacob's father sojourned, and where Israel is, in the future, supposed to acquire an אחוזת עולם (17:10) a permanent holding. These two texts set us up for the tension between these two lands.

Shabbat Shalom!

שבת שלום!

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