

*Some Comments on Vayiggash*  
*Rabbi Eliot Malomet December 31, 2022 7 Tevet 5783*

**Breaking Down Joseph's Emotional Breakdowns**

Joseph's First Breakdown	Joseph's Second Breakdown	Joseph's Third Breakdown
<p><i>Parashat Mikketz Gen. 42:24</i></p>	<p><i>Parashat Mikketz 43:30-31</i></p>	<p><i>Parashat Vayiggash 45:1-2</i></p>
<p>Context: Joseph has demanded that they bring Benjamin down to Egypt. Talking among themselves, the brothers admit their guilt for their cruelty in ignoring Joseph. Joseph overhears them and weeps.</p>	<p>Context: On their second visit, the brothers come before Joseph with Benjamin. Joseph recognizes him, is so moved by the presence of his full brother, that he exits the room and weeps.</p>	<p>Context: Judah has just completed his emotional speech begging Joseph to relent for the sake of their elderly father. Joseph ejects everyone from the room and weeps.</p>
<p> <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויסב מעליהם ויבן</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">וישב אליהם</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">וידבר אליהם</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויקח מאתם</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">את שמעון ויאסר אתו</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">לעיניהם:</span> </p> <p><i>He turned away from them and wept.</i>  <i>Then he returned to them;</i>  <i>he spoke to them and had Shim'on taken away from them,</i>  <i>and imprisoned him before their eyes.</i></p>	<p> <span style="background-color: yellow;">וימהר יוסף</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">כייצקמו רחמיו</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">אל אחיו</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויבקש לבכות</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויבא החדרה</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויבך שמה:</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">וירחץ פניו</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויצא</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויתאפק</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויאמר</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">שימו לקחם:</span> </p> <p><i>And in haste—for his insides were so kindled toward his brother that he had to weep—Yosef entered an inner-room and wept there.</i>  <i>Then he washed his face and came out, restrained himself, and said: Serve bread!</i></p>	<p> <span style="background-color: yellow;">ולא יכל יוסף</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">להתאפק</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">לכל הנצבים</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">עליו ויקרא</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">הוציאו כל איש</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">מעלי</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ולא עמד איש</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">אתו</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">בהתנדע יוסף</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">אל אחיו:</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">ונתן את קלו</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">בבכי</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">וישמעו מצרים</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">וישמע בית</span>  <span style="background-color: yellow;">פרעה:</span> </p> <p><i>Yosef could no longer restrain himself in the presence of all who were stationed around him;</i>  <i>he called out: Have everyone leave me!</i>  <i>So no one stood with him when Yosef made himself known to his brothers.</i>  <i>He put forth his voice in weeping: the Egyptians heard, and Pharaoh's household heard.</i></p>
<p>Setting: How does the idea of public and private space enhance the story? When the brothers first appear, <b>Joseph is in a public space</b>. There are all sorts of people around him. He <b>turns away</b> from everyone, <b>creating a private space within the public space</b> and concealing his private identity and maintaining his public persona. Note also: In Joseph's first dream, the brothers' sheaves <b>encircled</b> him: <span style="background-color: yellow;">נהגה תסבינה</span> (Gen. 37:7). Here he <b>circles</b> away from them: <span style="background-color: yellow;">ויסב מעליהם</span>.</p>	<p>Setting: <b>Joseph exits from the public space to a private space</b>. It is now more difficult to conceal his private identity in public. He is alone. Where else has he been alone? The pit. Potifar's house (that is, until his wife grabbed his clothing). The jail cell.</p> <p>A few other examples of characters who experience alone-ness: Jacob prior to his encounter with the assailant (Gen. 32:25). Isaac prior to his meeting Rebekah (24:63). Abraham after the Sodom confrontation with God. (18:33)</p>	<p>Setting: Joseph ejects everyone out of the public space and keeps his brothers there. <b>He transforms the official public space into a private space</b> in order to reveal his private identity. Ironically, in the public space, he is <i>Tzofnat Paneah—the one who reveals the hidden</i>. In this temporary private space, he is simply <i>Joseph</i>. In public he has power over others. In private, he barely has power over himself.</p>
<p>Comment: In this instance he doesn't weep loudly; nor did his face become terribly flushed. He has a quiet pang of emotion from which he quickly recovers. He tears up but doesn't lose it. He regains composure quickly and takes decisive action. While not stating so explicitly that <i>he restrained himself</i>, he demonstrates that, after his brief moment of misty eyes, he is once again in control of his emotions.</p>	<p>Comment: The emotions rise up in Joseph very quickly. He knows he is going to cry. He exits and goes to another room. He cries there to such an extent that he has to wash his face to make it seem that he was in control of himself. He then returns to his brothers and all the attending people. In this transitional moment, it is harder for him to control his emotions.</p>	<p>Comment: Joseph knows he's going to break down. He expels everyone. While during the first encounter he tears up, in this final scene, he sobs uncontrollably. His official public space has contracted into an intimate private space. His public persona has now vanished enabling him to reveal his true self. <b>To put forth voice</b> is an unusual expression. It occurs only one other place in the story of the spies. (Num. 14:1).</p>

**And the Egyptians heard, and Pharaoh's household heard.**

Joseph didn't want to reveal himself to his brothers in the presence of the Egyptians. They couldn't see him, but they could **hear** him. As with all momentous events, the first to know are those within earshot. Only then, is the information relayed to the principals in charge. (On 9/11, the President

was informed shortly after the event.) Pharaoh understood immediately that this personal moment would have political ramifications. His main interest is to keep control over his people. In order to do so, he has to keep control over Joseph. By inviting the family down to Egypt, he can maintain his interests, and eliminate any chance of losing Joseph.

## What Joseph Said to His Brothers; What Pharaoh Told Joseph to Say to His Brothers

Joseph to His Brothers (45:9-10)	Pharaoh to Joseph (45:17-18)
<p><i>Make haste, go up to my father and say to him: Thus says your son, Yosef: God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not remain! You shall stay in the region of Goshen, you shall be near me, you and your sons and the sons of your sons, your sheep, your oxen, and all that is yours.</i></p>	<p><i>And Pharaoh said to Yosef: Say to your brothers: Do this— load your animals and go, come back to the land of Canaan; fetch your father and your households and come to me! I will give you the good-things of the land of Egypt, so that you will eat of the fat of the land!</i></p>

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers he calls upon them to go back to Canaan immediately and bring their father **to me**. He then says, **you shall be near me**. Joseph's

message is clear: I am powerful. I am **lord of all Egypt**. That's an overwhelmingly impressive claim. But it is only part-true, because there is one lord who is the true lord of all Egypt, and that is Pharaoh. For Joseph the migration is all about having the family close to **him** so that **he** can provide them all their needs and also, lord over them! Pharaoh's message is subtle, but clear. Tell your brothers to get their father and **come to me**. In other words, ladies and gentlemen, lest you have any doubts. I am in charge. I call the shots. Don't forget that. You are here at my pleasure. Not Joseph's.

פרעה ליוסף מה: יז-יח	יוסף לאחיו מה: ט-י
<p>וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶל-יוֹסֵף אָמַר אֶל-אֶחָיו זֹאת עָשׂוּ טַעֲנוּ אֶת-בְּעִירְכֶם וּלְכוּ-בָאוּ אֶרֶצָה כְּנָעַן: וּקְחוּ אֶת-אֲבִיכֶם וְאֶת-בְּתִיכֶם וּבָאוּ אֵלַי וְאֶתְנֶנָּה לָכֶם אֶת-טוֹב אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְאֶכְלוּ אֶת-חֶלֶב הָאָרֶץ:</p>	<p>מְהֵרָה וְעָלוּ אֵלַי-אָבִי וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר בְּנֵךְ יוֹסֵף שְׁמֵנִי אֱלֵהִים לְאֲדֹנָי לְכָל-מִצְרַיִם רְדֵה אֵלַי אֶל-יַד-עַמִּיד: וְיִשְׁבַת בְּאֶרֶץ-גֹּשֶׁן וְהָיִיתִי קָרוֹב אֵלַי אֲתָנָה וּבְנֵי וּבָנֵי בְנֵיךָ וּבְאֶנְךָ וּבְקָרְנֶךָ וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-לָךְ:</p>

<p>וְאֶתְּהַ צְוִיָּתָה זֹאת עָשׂוּ קְחוּ-לָכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עֲגָלוֹת לְטַפְּכֶם וּלְנִשְׁיָכֶם וּבְשֵׁאתֶם אֶת-אֲבִיכֶם וּבְאֶתְּם: (מה: יט)</p>	<p><i>And you, you have been commanded: Do this— take from the land of Egypt wagons for your little ones and your wives, and carry your father down and come!</i> (45:19)</p>
<p>וַיְדַבְּרוּ אֵלָיו אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵהֶם וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הָעֲגָלוֹת אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח יוֹסֵף לְשָׂאת אֹתוֹ וְתַחֲלִי רוּחַ יִעֲלֶב אֲבִיהֶם: (מה: כז)</p>	<p><i>But they spoke to him all of Yosef's words which he had spoken to them, and he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to carry him down, and their father Yaakov's spirit came back to life.</i> (45:27)</p>

**What's the Deal With the Wagons?** We tend to overlook it, but like all little details, once you do a little digging, literally, they are significant. We have not encountered wagons yet in the Bible. That's because the preferred mode of transportation is the pack animal. According to Egyptologist Heidi Kopp-Junk, wagons were quite rare in ancient Egypt. *It can be assumed that wagons were considered luxury vehicles, as they were rarely seen and very expensive to purchase and maintain, since not only the vehicle but also the draft animals had to be bought as well. Carts as well as wagons meet the criteria for prestigious objects: they are rare, expensive, and accessible only to a few.*<sup>1</sup> Add to that the problem of few



roads, sandy and muddy conditions, and the necessity of feeding and watering the oxen and other draft animals to keep them healthy and functional. Sending wagons back to Canaan to pick up Jacob and the rest of the family would be the equivalent today of sending a fleet of Chevrolet Suburbans with tankers of fuel to refuel them as necessary. Prof. Kopp-Junk points out, as the illustration above shows, that *wagons seem to have played a more important role as a transport vehicle for the deceased than for the living*. If that is the case, what we have in this instance is one more example of how the Torah inverts Egyptian culture. The vehicle whose primary use in ancient Egypt of transporting the dead, is here used instead to transport the living! Is it a wonder that when Jacob sees this remarkable fleet he **comes back to life**! On the one hand, you would think that he was overwhelmed by the luxury. But what is concealed here is a direct anti-Egyptian message. We are going to Egypt for life, not death!

**SHABBAT SHALOM!**

<sup>1</sup> Heidi Kopp-Junk, *Wagons and Carts and Their Significance in Ancient Egypt*. Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections vol. 9 (June 2016), p. 27.