

Vayigash: Joseph Reveals His Identity to his Brothers and the Guarded Conversation
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January 4, 2025 4 Tevet 5785



When the brothers came down to Egypt the first time, the Torah says: (Gen. 42:6)

Now Joseph was the vizier of the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground.

We assume that this encounter took place in an official location, either a plaza where large numbers of people gather, or a public building where all the comings and goings are noted. When their provisions ran out from the first trip, the brothers returned to Egypt bringing Benjamin, to prove to Joseph that they were not spies. Joseph then planted his silver chalice in Benjamin's sack, accusing him of theft and then taking him as his servant. **וַיָּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה** - *Then Judah came near to him* to plead for amnesty on Benjamin's behalf. The choice of the word, **vayigash** is deliberate. It is one of the key words running through the Joseph story and key to several other stories in Genesis.¹ When we carefully observe how it is used here, we gain a deeper appreciation of how the story moves from public to private space, mirroring Joseph's transition from a powerful, dispassionate, public regent to a vulnerable, emotional, private brother. The further the story moves to the interior, the closer we get to Joseph's true identity.² This chart tracks how the stages of Joseph's "reveal" correspond with the movement from public space to the innermost private space.

VERSE	MOVEMENT
וַיָּגֶשׁוּ אֵלָיו הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר עַל בֵּית יוֹסֵף וַיַּדְבְּרוּ אֵלָיו שְׂמַח הַבָּיִת. (בר' מג:יט)	When Joseph sees them on this second visit, he orders a meal to be prepared for them in his

¹ Key words are words that link the stories together. Examples: the brothers throw Joseph into a **בור-pit**, (Gen. 37:24) and Joseph's cell in Egypt is also referred to as a **בור-pit** (40:15, 41:14). The brothers ask Jacob to **הֵכֵר-recognize** the bloodied tunic (37:32), Tamar asks Judah to **הֵכֵר-recognize**, his seal, staff, and cord to prove that he is the father of her child (38:26), **וַיִּכְרֶה-Joseph recognizes** his brothers but **לֹא הֵכִירוּ-they don't recognize him**, (42:7-8). **וַיָּגֶשׁ-he came near** also links up with other important key stories in Genesis, Abraham before God (18:23), Jacob before Isaac prior to stealing the blessing (27:22, 27), Jacob

They came close to the man overseeing Joseph's house, and spoke to him at the entrance to the house, (Gen. 43:19)	home. This encounter is taking place at the entrance of the house. The story moves from public space to the threshold, the boundary between public and private space. Joseph's identity is guarded.
וַיִּבְנֶה יְהוּדָה וְאֶחָיו בֵּיתָה יוֹסֵף... וַיָּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה	Judah appeals to Joseph to save Benjamin. The brothers move from the threshold of private space, into the heart of private space, the home. Joseph is about to reveal his identity.
When Judah and his brothers reentered the house of Joseph... Then Judah came near to him... (44:18)	
וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אָחָיו גִּשּׁוּ נָא אֵלַי וַיָּגֶשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף. אַחֲיָכֶם.	Joseph can no longer control his emotions. He makes everyone leave so that he can be left alone with his brothers. The brothers are now in the most interior space of the building, defined by a wall and a door through which the others exit. This is where Joseph reveals himself.
Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come forward to me." And when they came forward, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. (45:4)	

Rashi takes us deeper into Joseph's personal space. Here is Rashi's comment on Joseph saying to the brothers, **גִּשּׁוּ נָא אֵלַי** - **Come forward to me:**

רש"י: גִּשּׁוּ נָא אֵלַי: רָאָה אוֹתָם נִסְגָּרִים לְאַחֲרֵי, אָמַר עֲכָשׁוּ אֶחָי וּבְלִמּוּס, קָרָא לָהֶם בְּלִשׁוֹן רֶכֶּה וּמְתַנַּנּוּנִים, וְהִרְאָה לָהֶם שֶׁהוּא מְהוּל.
Rashi: Come forward to me: He saw them backing away and told himself "Now my brothers are embarrassed." He called to them in soothing language and showed them that he was circumcised.

According to Rashi, Joseph calls them to **come forward** because they **backed away** from him when he revealed his identity to them. But that detail is not in the Torah. Neither is the notion of their embarrassment.³ Joseph calls them to come forward in order to comfort them. But when Rashi says that Joseph showed them that **he was circumcised**, we cannot help but be a little shocked. That would have undoubtedly been the ultimate revelation! But Rashi, basing this comment on a midrash,⁴ is not trying to be sensational here. On the contrary,

at the well (29:10), Jacob and his family prior to reconciling with Esau, (33:3, 6, 7).

² Yonatan Grossman, Joseph: A Tale of Dreams, Hebrew. Rishon Lezion, 2021, p. 361.

³ This idea comes from Midrash Tanhuma Vayigash 5:15. **כִּיֵּן שָׁרָה יוֹסֵף שֶׁהֵיטָה לָהֶם בּוֹשָׁה גְדוּלָּה, אָמַר לָהֶן, גִּשּׁוּ נָא אֵלַי, וַיָּגֶשׁוּ. Joseph saw that they had great shame, so he said to them, "Come forward to me."**

⁴ Bereishit Rabbah 93:10. **גִּשּׁוּ נָא אֵלַי וַיָּגֶשׁוּ, הִרְאָה לָהֶם אֶת הַמִּלָּה** The exact translation of this is that he showed them **the circumcision**. Rashi words it more delicately, he showed them that **he was circumcised**.

he is taking the story to its ultimate conclusion. This is, quite literally, the naked truth. Following the transition through the different spaces, from public, to threshold, to home, to inner sanctum, we arrive at the ultimate zone of Joseph's identity: his body.

Can we derive any other meaning from this interpretation? Considering that it is located in a 5th century C.E. source when Jews had already internalized the experience of early Hellenistic persecutions, perhaps. In the Hellenistic world, male Jews who wanted to assimilate did so by reversing their circumcisions.⁵ Here the midrashist is portraying Joseph, the ultimate assimilationist, as a Jew who nevertheless retained the most intimate symbol of his Jewishness. Throughout Jewish history, Jews developed ways of identifying themselves to each other. Most of the time, this would not be necessary, as they could identify each other by dress or language or by some other visual cue. But when those identifiable markers were absent, especially if it was necessary to conceal one's Jewishness, Jews would resort to private codes.

There are Holocaust accounts of Jews in hiding, in the forest or elsewhere, identifying other Jews by saying "Amcho?" which is code for "Are you one of us?" To which the answer would be a nod or the reply, "Amcho." And Jewish males were often outed by their circumcisions. As Jews, we are often on the lookout for other Jews, especially when we travel. Many of us have had experiences of being in a foreign country and wondering if a particular person or couple in our proximity is Jewish. It usually does not take long to find out. We will identify ourselves by mannerisms, speech, or an obvious cue, like saying we went to see a movie on Christmas Eve. Discovering the often-concealed Jewish identities of celebrities is a favorite pastime, which Adam Sandler plays upon in his famous Hanukkah song: *David Lee Roth lights the menorah, So do James Caan, Kirk Douglas, and the late Dinah Shore-ah...*

The Brothers' Guarded Response and Conversation:

ויפל על צווארי בנימן אחי ויבך ובנימן בכה על צווארי. וינשק לכל אחיו ויבך עליהם ואחרי כן דברו אחיו אתו.
He flung himself upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. Then he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After this his brothers spoke with him. (Gen. 45:14-15)

Look at this verse carefully you will discover a hidden story. What is the difference between Joseph's interaction with Benjamin and Joseph's interaction with the rest of his brothers? With Benjamin there is mutual **neck-falling** and **weeping**. With the rest of the brothers there is **kissing**, but there is no **neck-falling**; there is **weeping**, Joseph **weeps on them**, but **they do not weep on him**. What does that mean? According to some commentators, the lack of reciprocity here suggests that the brothers have not taken full responsibility for the past. But we disagree. On their first encounter with Joseph they say, **Truly, we are guilty: concerning our brother!** (Gen. 42:21).

And in the scenes prior to Joseph's reveal, they express remorse. Judah's speech to Joseph is nothing but a great confession. On the other hand, while they do own up to their deed, they also feeling slightly ambivalent about this moment. As overwhelmed as they are to see Joseph after all these years, they might have just a little resentment for the anguish that he just put them through. Why didn't Joseph reveal himself to them at the beginning? Why did he have to make them squirm so much? Why couldn't he have revealed himself sooner, and

Donny Osmond | Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat (1999 Film)



not prolong his father's wait and risk that he might not have lived long enough to see him again? They do not cry because they are too conflicted. And perhaps even in this emotional moment, they are still reconciling themselves to the latent conflicts in this very complicated family of one father and four mothers, two of whom who are sisters, and two of whom who are servants. The tension is still palpable after all these years. And yet, after all this, **his brothers spoke with him**. But the Torah does not tell us what

they talked about. That is left to our imagination. But here again, attention to subtlety will add a deeper appreciation of the story's texture. Here they are speaking to each other, but we recall that at the very beginning of the story, they did not. It says:

וישראל אהב את יוסף מכל בניו כי בן זקנים הוא לו ועשה לו כתנת פסים. ויראו אחיו כי אתו אהב אביהם מכל אחיו וישנאו אתו ולא יכלו דברו לשלום. (בר' לז:ג-ד)

Now Israel loved Joseph above all his sons, for he was a son of old age to him, so he made him an ornamental tunic. His brothers saw that it was he whom their father loved above all his brothers, so they hated him, and could not speak to him in peace. (Gen. 37:3-4)

After Joseph's reveal, they speak to one another. Perhaps they are apologizing, or asking pertinent logistical questions about life in Egypt, and how they are going to manage bringing their father down. The brothers speak to Joseph, but are they at peace with him? That's the lingering question of this moment. One would expect that if the Torah was going to conclude this scene to match the opening scene of the Joseph story with perfect symmetry, it would have said something like this: **ויבך וינשק אחיו ויבך עליהם ואחרי כן דברו אחיו אתו לשלום**—*after this, his brothers spoke peaceably with him*. But it doesn't. It just says that **they spoke with him**. Our takeaway? Reconciliation is complicated. There is always an aspiration for peace, but it is left to us to figure out whether the peace is there, or whether in fact there

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Today is day 456 of the captivity of the hostages. They are always in our thoughts. We pray for them and their families. May God comfort the bereaved and heal the wounded and shield Israel from terror. In memory of Yuval Shoham son of Prof. Effy and Oshrat Shoham, killed in Gaza last week. May his memory be a blessing.

⁵ This is noted in the book of 1 Maccabees 14-15. The practice of reversing circumcision is called epispasm.