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בס"ד

Parashat Vayiggash Part I

1. Judah's Plea

After Judah demonstrated the deep sense of guilt and remorse he and his brothers had for selling Joseph into slavery, the viceroy focused attention on the crucial detail that had precipitated their hatred and jealousy of Joseph in the first place: their father's choice of Rachel and her sons for preeminence. He declared that they are all free to return home except for Benjamin, who must remain as a slave.

Judah realizes it is up to him to gain Benjamin's release. He is the leader of the brothers, he guaranteed Benjamin's safe return to their father and it was his idea to sell Joseph into slavery, the punishment for which he is prepared to accept. Although he had been speaking with the viceroy he now steps closer to him (וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלָיו). He desires a private hearing (בְּאָזְנֵי אֲדֹנָי, "in the ears of my lord") as well as allowance for being bold, which should not be taken as a sign of disrespect (וְאַל יִחַר אַפְּךָ בְּעַבְדְּךָ, "and do not be wroth with your servant"), for he has great esteem for the viceroy (כִּי כְמוֹךָ כְּפָרְעֹה, "for you are like Pharaoh"). In a deferential yet moving talk, delivered in a decorous manner in what is widely considered a masterpiece of oratory, he presents a sincere plea for compassion. He displays the superlative qualities he had been acquiring in his evolving transformation.

He selectively reviews the conversations the brothers had with the viceroy starting from the beginning of their interaction. He engages in slight variation in order to simplify matters (declaring one brother dead instead of "is no more [around]") and to portray everything in its most advantageous light. We do not suspect that in his recapitulation he fabricated any detail of dialogue the brothers had with the viceroy for he surely would not risk getting caught in a falsehood in such dire circumstances. He omits reference to the spy accusation, to the extra silver and to the goblet. He is able to do so because he knows the brothers are

totally innocent of any wrongdoing in the present despite their inability to proffer an effective defense. The situation they are in is inexplicable as far as present-day causes are concerned. "Evidence" was "discovered" and to protest would be to impugn the veracity of the viceroy or his staff. He focuses on the deep emotional bond between Jacob and Benjamin. After quoting the viceroy's use of the word "father" he mentions it thirteen more times (in a talk of 218 words). His true, inner stand on the crucial issue about which Joseph is solely interested shines commendably forth.

From the first part of Judah's talk it turns out that, previously unbeknownst to the reader, when the viceroy originally demanded that the brothers bring Benjamin, they had begged him not to be required to do so. They spoke of Jacob's love for his youngest son and referred to separating father and son as a possible cause of death. (They were probably primarily referring to the death of Jacob, but the statement was ambiguous and could also translate as referring to the death of Benjamin, pointing to his tenderness and attachment to his father.) We now learn that the viceroy had summarily and harshly dismissed their powerful emotional plea. Perhaps this information was previously denied the reader to preclude stirring up feelings of hostility toward Joseph. After all, he was subjecting his aged father to a wrenching experience even after having witnessed great sympathy on his brothers' part for their father's relationship with Benjamin. (See our *Miqqes Part II* study for a discussion of Joseph's motives.)

Judah next described Jacob's reluctance to send Benjamin. Here too, the reader finds words not previously encountered. Although Jacob had manifested favoritism toward Rachel and her sons (see 42:38), he probably never said to his other sons, "you know my wife bore me two sons," as he is now quoted as having said. Judah likely verbalized and

exaggerated what he never actually heard but had long presumed, that his father thought of Rachel as his only true wife. This further advances the indication of Judah's acceptance of Jacob's prerogative.

In his following argument, Judah emphatically declares that Jacob will die if the brothers return without Benjamin, a tragedy that they would be guilty of having brought about. There is not the slightest hint of complaint about Jacob's preference. We must ask: If Jacob does die why would the brothers be deemed the cause of his death? This may be a manifestation of conscience pangs, secretly acknowledging their culpability for having caused Jacob his profound grief to begin with by selling Joseph. After all, if Jacob does die because Benjamin does not return with his brothers, the true reason would be the combination of his having lost both Joseph and Benjamin.

Alternatively, it is possible that Judah's contention is a delicate implication that the ensuing tragedy would be the viceroy's doing. It would be a case of deferentially placing the blame on themselves instead of on the authority, as is customary when speaking with an individual of high rank upon whom one wishes to place responsibility for a negative outcome.

After adding the information that he personally guaranteed his father Benjamin's return, Judah's plea reaches its apex. He offers to sacrifice his own freedom and substitute himself as a slave in place of Benjamin. He concludes with an emotional pronouncement expressing the sheer impossibility of his returning without his youngest brother to witness his father's death.

Joseph is convinced that a metamorphosis had indeed taken place in his brothers. He can no longer contain himself and dismisses all outsiders from the room. This obviously includes the interpreter who previously was always between them (as stated in 42:23).^{*} Opprobrious details concerning his family are not to be shared with others. He breaks out in crying as he reveals his identity.

2. Joseph's Revelation

After stating, "I am Joseph," he asks **הַעוֹד אָבִי חַי** (according to most translations: "Is my father still alive?" [45:3]). Since the brothers had continuously

been telling him that their father was alive, his question might be taken as implying suspicion of fabrication, particularly on Judah's part, inconsistent with the spirit of reconciliation and warmth that he exhibited!

Some have assumed that Joseph felt the need for confirmation that his father was still alive. He surely detected Judah's variations and exaggerations but ignored them, as on all essential points he came through superbly. But concerning Jacob, he wanted to know if the account was true or concocted to arouse compassion. Thus, his question may be viewed as a sincere query. When an answer was not forthcoming he did not pursue the point because he realized that the brothers were overwhelmed and could not then speak.

This explanation is unconvincing. First, such an interpretation – that Joseph at such a sensitive moment was expressing to his brothers his suspicion that they had been lying to him – views him as uncharacteristically inconsiderate. In all his interactions with them after his revelation he is shown to possess extraordinary concern for their welfare. Second, had the text intended to imply that he had doubted their story on an issue so important to him we would expect it to indicate the resolution of his doubt, but he never returns to that question. Obviously, he believed them. Indeed, his interactions with his brothers contain strong indications that Jacob was still alive.

The very fact that all the brothers returned that morning to the viceroy instead of continuing home as the steward had advised them (with twice the extra silver in their sacks, which might eventually cause them additional problems if they remain) surely constitutes compelling evidence that Jacob was still alive. Had he passed away it is inconceivable that they all would abandon their families and sacrifice their freedom for Benjamin, except as a gesture of deep repentance. In that case, they surely would have renounced gross deception such as outright lying about their father, despite the fact that Judah had engaged in slight variation and exaggeration. And Judah's volunteering himself as a slave in place of Benjamin after the viceroy rejected their offer of all of them becoming slaves is also an indication of Jacob being alive.

Some have interpreted the words הָעוֹד אָבִי חַי (“Is my father still alive?”) as an exclamation, with the effect of, “Whew! My father is still alive!” However, it is questionable if the Hebrew הָעוֹד, with the ה prefix, which in such a deployment generally indicates a question, can carry such a translation. In a refinement of this explanation, perhaps Joseph’s question should be viewed as a spontaneous impulse of a natural desire for more specific confirmation, even had he believed his brothers. In matters important to a person this is usual. In addition, in highly emotional moments people often repeat questions even when they know the answer. Upon second thought, though, he realized it was unnecessary and inappropriate and did not pursue the matter.

The NJPS translates the phrase thus: “Is my father still well?” In Akkadian – the eastern Semitic language that was the *lingua franca* of the ancient Near East – and in other Semitic languages, the word corresponding to חַיָּה is known to mean both “alive” and “well,” and it is likely that the same dual meaning obtains in biblical Hebrew.

Rabbi S.D. Sassoon proffered a similar interpretation of the verse, “And you who are holding fast to Hashem your G-d הַיּוֹם כִּלְכֶם הַיּוֹם” (Deut. 4:4). (The NJPS translates the last three words as “are all alive today.”) There, Moses contrasts the faithful who are *hayim* with those mentioned in the immediately preceding verse, “for every man who followed *Ba’al Pe’or*, Hashem your G-d destroyed from your midst” (v. 3). Taking into account that the idolatrous service of *Pe’or* included sexual rites (Num. 25), Rabbi Sassoon translated *hayim* as meaning remained healthy, specifically from contamination with venereal disease. He explained this in accordance with Joshua’s lament concerning the lingering effect of the *Pe’or* sin, “from which we have not yet been fully cleansed” (Josh. 22:17). That lingering effect seems to refer to the continued incidence of venereal disease in Israel, given that there is no indication that at that time service of *Pe’or* was still being practiced in the nation.

We may support this translation of *hai* as “healthy” from within the Joseph narrative. When the viceroy greeted the brothers upon their return to Egypt, he asked a two-part question regarding their father: הַשְּׁלוֹם אָבִיכֶם הַזֶּקֶן (“Is your elderly father well?”) and attached to it הָעוֹד חַי (“Is he still *hai*?”). They answered –

directly in accordance with his questions – שְׁלוֹם לְעַבְדְּךָ לְאָבִינִי עוֹדֵנוּ חַי (“Your servant our father is well, he is still *hai*” [Gen. 43:27-28]). The first clause of both the question and answer (centered on *shalom*) clearly refers to an aspect of well-being. The second clause of both employs usage that is virtually identical to Joseph’s הָעוֹד אָבִי חַי (“Is my father still *hai*?”). Particularly in the response of the brothers, it is unlikely that the second clause means, “he is still alive” since they had already responded concerning his well-being. In the viceroy’s greeting question it probably also has such a meaning; the expression is likely a hendiadys, and the full question translates, “How is your elderly father, is he still well?”

3. Reconciliation and Reassurance

The stunned brothers could not respond. Joseph has them come closer, transmitting a feeling of intimacy, and continues speaking. First, he reinforces their awareness that he is indeed Joseph their brother, “that you sold me to Egypt.” This latter statement, which may have terrified the brothers, seems to have been an innocent remark with no intention to hurt or threaten with the memory. In the exuberance of the moment, thinking it necessary to convince his brothers that it indeed is he, he felt it proper to cite a “proof.” The sale links them at the point of separation. He followed with remarks to lift their spirits and pointedly expresses no complaint or malice toward them.

He immediately softens his statement concerning their sale of him to Egypt by touching on the theological. “And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves that you sold me here because G-d sent me before you to be a sustenance...for five more years remain [during which] there will be no plowing or harvest. And G-d sent me before you to establish for you survival in the land” (45:5-7). In a magnanimous conclusion to the point, he adds that, “and now, it was not you who sent me to Egypt, but G-d” (45:8). He relates to their act as one that was not done by them but by divine will. Some have viewed these words as an indication that he believed their act to have been compelled by G-d, exonerating them to a degree. However, in a future statement he clearly negates such an interpretation when he elaborates on this point.

Years later, after Jacob passed away, the brothers express the fear that Joseph may repay them for what

they did to him, knowing, of course, that their evil intentions toward him were real and stemmed from their free will. They did not fully believe that the high-minded commitment he made to them upon revealing himself – that he harbored no feelings of revenge and will always sustain them – was totally genuine. They thought he might have made those statements because of their father, so they beg him for forgiveness. On that occasion he tells them, “Do not fear, for am I in place of G-d? You intended evil upon me, G-d intended it for good in order to...sustain many people. So now do not fear, I will sustain you” (50:19-21). He acknowledged that their action was of their choosing, not compelled by G-d, and for which they are ultimately accountable to G-d despite the fact that He utilized their choice to provide great benefit to them.

In his earlier statement, “and now, it was not you who sent me to Egypt, but G-d” (45:8), he was saying in effect, “and now let us put everything behind us, let us consider it as if it was not you who sent me to Egypt,” not that such was the fact but that was how he chose to relate to the matter. Knowing they repented, he had no interest in recalling their past behavior; he wanted them to get over the past and move forward with their lives. We should not interpret him as saying that the mystery of G-d’s employing human actions to further His goals vitiates human free will in the relevant matter.

That being said, our narrative, as do many others in Scripture, does bring out the point that G-d utilizes human choice to further His goals. In describing to his brothers the leadership position to which G-d had elevated him in Egypt, Joseph interprets it as all part of the divine plan for their welfare.

Joseph speaks of himself as “ruler (*moshel*) throughout the land of Egypt” (v. 8). This phrase unwittingly corresponds to their bitter taunt upon his relating his first dream to them, “are you to rule (*hamashol timshol*) over us?” (37:8). In view of the continuing famine he asks his brothers to bring their father and the whole family to Egypt where he will settle them in the choice pasture region of Goshen and sustain them. In his message to his father he stated רָדָה אֵלַי (“come down to me”) followed by כִּן תִּנְרָשׁ אֶתָּה וּבֵיתְךָ (“lest you lose all, you and your family” [45:9, 11]). This reverses Jacob’s כִּי אֶרְדָּ אֶל בְּנֵי אָבְלִי שְׂאֵלָה (“for I will go down to my son, to the grave, mourning” [37:35]) and parallels what he had recently

said in the first signs of his “recovery,” רָדוּ שָׂמָּה...וַנְּחִיָּה (“go down there...that we shall live and not die” [42:2]).

Joseph embraced and wept upon Benjamin’s shoulder and then kissed and wept upon each of his brothers’ shoulders. Without mention of any specific words of dialogue, the text informs us וַאֲחֵרָי כִּן דִּבְּרוּ אֵתָּו, “and afterwards his brothers spoke with him” (45:15), stressing the fact that they then spoke with him. In context, it refers to verse 3, that the brothers were not able to respond to him because they were overwhelmed by the event. But this locution also recalls the status that obtained before they sold him, וְלֹא יָכְלוּ דַבְּרוּ לְשָׁלֵם, (“they could not speak with him peaceably” [37:4]), acknowledging the reconciliation.

Pharaoh greatly expanded on the invitation Joseph extended to his family. Joseph spoke of providing for his father and his family so that they survive the famine. Pharaoh enthusiastically instructs Joseph to tell his brothers to bring their father and their families for “I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and eat the fat of the land” (45:18). He adds that they should not be concerned with their belongings for “the best of all the land of Egypt is yours” (v. 20). Extraordinary statements. He was manifesting his gratefulness to Joseph for all he did for Egypt. One cannot help but think of the ungratefulness of the later Egyptian king “who did not know Joseph” (Exod. 1:8).

Joseph sent his brothers off with royal wagons at the instruction of Pharaoh and full provisions. He gave each brother a change of garments and to Benjamin he gave three hundred pieces of silver plus five changes of garments. They should all dress with dignity, but Benjamin more so. The *ketonet passim* had been a sign of Jacob’s favoritism for Joseph, a preference that caused the very gravest of problems and long-term suffering. However, Joseph recognized that his father’s decision concerning Rachel’s sons still stood. Although reconciliation had been long in coming, he remained faithful to his father’s judgment, which now appears to be more an insight than a predilection. The family was now united and good will prevailed while Jacob’s long-term preferences were accepted by all.

The brothers had sold Joseph for twenty [*sheqalim* of] *keseif* (Gen. 37:28); the mention of Joseph’s gift of silver to Benjamin is the final of twenty attestations of

the *kesef* stem in the Joseph narrative subsequent to that first, iniquitous instance, reflecting a cosmic settlement of the score.**

The final words Joseph says to his brothers as he sends them home are, אַל תִּרְגְּזוּ בַדֶּרֶךְ (“Do not become angry on the journey” [v. 24]). He knew that at the time he was sold his brothers had very different opinions as to how to deal with him; he had heard them discussing the matter when they were in detention, when they did not realize the viceroy understood what they were saying (42:21-23). He now desired to prevent them from accusations and recriminations. As nothing further is mentioned on this topic and the brothers enthusiastically report to Jacob on Joseph’s status in Egypt, it appears that Joseph had succeeded in establishing a sense of unity in the family.

Endnotes

* Confirmation that Joseph was now speaking to his brothers without an interpreter is provided at the end of the message that he asks them to transmit to their

father: “Your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth speaking to you” (45:12). Joseph emphasized it as a point of assurance that they would be able to convince their father of the amazing turn of events.

** That the brothers had received twenty pieces of silver (assuming they were *sheqalim*) for selling Joseph has been recognized as being in conformity with the practice of the time that a slave was valued at twenty *sheqalim*. Such is codified in the Code of Hammurabi, which states that an owner of a previously goring ox that gored to death a seigneur’s slave is required to pay twenty *sheqalim* to the slave’s owner (§ 252). In the legislation of the Torah, a number of centuries later (possibly reflecting the effects of inflation), the ox owner in such a case was required to indemnify the slave owner thirty *sheqalim* (Exod. 21:32).

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