

## הלכות שבת פרק כד:יג

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Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Shabbat 24:13

Since some of the people are not artisans, and are idle all their days, such as travelers and caravaners (for they manage to avoid labor all their lives), if they were permitted to walk and speak and move [things] about as they do on all other days, they would not end up engaging in a *shevita ha-nikeret* (a differentiated rest).

Often the Talmud will offer a range of related laws without expressing the coherent goal standing behind them. We have seen an example of this phenomenon over the last several weeks. We have studied a range of sources from the Talmud propounding Rabbinic expansions on Shabbat rest. We have not encountered, however, a single statement that distills the major concern standing behind these non-Torah prohibitions.

In the source above, Maimonides (who was born in Cordova, Spain, on March 30, 1135, died in Egypt on December 13, 1204, and was popularly known as the Rambam ) sums up the vision of Shabbat underpinning these Rabbinic requirements in a single phrase: *shevita ha-nikeret*. The Rambam understands the Sages as demanding not only that we rest on Shabbat, but that the quality of that rest be different from our rest on other days. The unemployed also refrain from work, but without an elevation of the spirit. Our rest on Shabbat is to be transcendent, a taste of the world redeemed. It should consist of behaviors that are differentiated from our weekday idleness. Thus, the Sages demand that we walk, speak, and arrange our lives differently than during the week. May we find in Shabbat, a window into the world to come, a world that we build with our own behaviors.

Questions:

1. Can rest be more than abstaining from labor? How?
2. What are ways that we can differentiate our Shabbat rest from our weekday rest?

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# Torah from JTS

Parashat Va-yiggash

Genesis 44:18 - 47:27

January 3, 2009

7 Tevet 5769

## Parashah Commentary

**This week's commentary was written by Rabbi David Ackerman, rabbi, National Outreach, JTS**

This Shabbat, whatever our politics, we stand together with concern and worry as our brothers and sisters in Israel engage in yet another battle in what often seems like an unending war. The ongoing terror of rockets, fired arbitrarily into southern Israel, along with Israel's military response, unite us in shared anguish. We also share in the hope for a just end to this battle, to this war, and to all wars.

Grief and guilt, anguish and worry, unite us and perhaps they always have. The recent terror attacks in Mumbai rallied Jews of all persuasions, united in grief by the senseless murders of Rabbi Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg, the four souls at the Chabad House, and the hundreds killed elsewhere in Mumbai. The acute awareness that as Jews we can be the victims of horror at any moment powerfully connects us to one another, our everyday disagreements, at least for the moment, set aside.

The still evolving financial scandal surrounding Bernard Madoff's alleged fraud has served to unite Jews of varying stripes in yet another way. Joined together in shame and embarrassment, we jointly share in the painful recognition that we as a people are by no means exempt from destructively dishonest behavior. As a friend of mine put it a couple of weeks ago when the story first broke, echoing a sentiment felt in many American Jewish psyches, "why did he have to be Jewish?"

The famous Talmudic notion that *kol yisrael areivim zeh ba'zeh* (all Israelites serve as pledges/guarantors for one another) [Bavli Shavuot 39b] shares an inner architecture with this past month's headlines.

The Talmud offers its slogan in an effort to explain the idea that individual Jews fall by virtue of one another's guilt. With great interpretive ingenuity, the Talmud begins with a brief clause from Leviticus 26:37: *v'kashlu ish b'achiv* (and they shall fall upon one another). The Bible's words form part of the gruesome description of maladies and curses that will befall the people of Israel should they choose to disregard the commandments.

The Talmud inserts the word *transgression—avon*—into this phrase as a way, I think, of deepening and internalizing the Bible's original concept of shared responsibility. The Talmud's interpretive move makes us responsible not only for one another's physical well-being, but also for one another's spiritual and ethical fitness. To step forward as a pledge against the anticipated, future transgressions of another is what the Talmud has in mind. Talk about a heavy responsibility.

Parashat Va-yiggash offers us a more uplifting vision of Jewish connectedness and unity, and when enriched by the week's haftarah, one of Ezekiel's great dramatic

statements of future hope, we arrive at a concept of Jewish unity that is truly, and startlingly, inspiring.

Va-yiggash describes the dramatic reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers. The brothers have returned to Egypt, this time with Benjamin in tow, to secure provisions from Egypt's second in command. Joseph knows who they are, but they fail to recognize him. Joseph has set up his brother Benjamin by placing a silver goblet in his sack, a clever means of entrapping his clueless brothers. Unable to defend themselves against the charge of theft, the brothers turn to Judah to speak on their behalf. Judah steps up to the task and offers a richly emotional plea the high point of which is his restatement of the promise he made to Jacob to guarantee Benjamin's well-being with his own. "For your servant guaranteed (*arav*) the youth before my father saying 'if I do not bring him to you I will stand guilty before you forever'" (Gen. 44:32).

Judah's pledge, his guarantee, bears no connection to Benjamin's sinfulness. Benjamin has committed no wrong after all. Rather, Judah guarantees Benjamin's life with his own; he acts, finally and forcefully, as a brother. Midrash Bereshit Rabbah (93:9) sees three layers of reconciliation in Judah's declaration. He reconciles with Rachel, he reconciles with Benjamin, and most importantly for the Torah's narrative, he reconciles with Joseph. Unity here derives neither from grief nor guilt nor worry, rather it flows from deeply held and shared connection and commitment.

The choice of haftarah to match the Torah's tale of reunification pushes the notion of shared destiny even farther. Ezekiel, following a divine command, performs a symbolic act—a piece of dramatic street theater—in which he fuses together two sticks, one marked Joseph and one marked Judah, to form one long stick. The key word in his prophecy, making eleven appearances in just fourteen verses, is the word *ehad*. Ezekiel's message couldn't be clearer. Joseph and Judah share a past; Joseph and Judah share a future. Their anticipated oneness reflects the inner unity of the whole people of Israel, an application made explicit by the haftarah's conclusion. We have been one and we will again be one; that's the point.

Va-yiggash and its haftarah suggest a vision of Jewish unity not limited to anguish and guilt. To be part of the people of Israel means to share a past and to share in a common hope for the future. The only gap in that formulation surrounds the question of the present.

In 1951 Abraham Joshua Heschel published an essay entitled "To Be a Jew: What Is It?" that took on the question of belonging to the Jewish people. A reworked version of that essay became the final chapter of Heschel's magnum opus, *God in Search of Man*, published in 1955. Here are his original words: "Why is my belonging to the Jewish people the most sacred relation to me, second only to my relation to God? Israel is a spiritual order in which the human and the ultimate, the natural and the holy enter a lasting covenant, in which kinship with God is not an aspiration but a reality of destiny. For us Jews there can be no fellowship with God without the fellowship with Israel. Abandoning Israel, we desert God."

Heschel then serves up a rich metaphor, one that connects beautifully with Ezekiel's great symbolic act in this week's haftarah: "Israel is the tree, we are the leaves."

Why stay connected to a unified Jewish people? Heschel's inspiring answer goes like this: "The future of all men depends upon their realizing that the sense of holiness is as vital as health. By following the Jewish way of life we maintain that sense and preserve the light for mankind's future visions."

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## **A Taste of Torah**

### **A Comment on Ramban by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz**

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 (Gen. 46:29).

**Ramban, "he presented himself to him,"** The correct interpretation appears to me to be that Israel's eyes were already slightly dim from age, and when Joseph . . . with a mitre on his head as was the custom of Egyptian kings, his father did not recognize him. His brothers also did not recognize him. Therefore Torah mentioned that when he appeared before his father, who stared at him and finally recognized him, his father fell on his neck and cried again over him, even as he had continually cried over him to this day when he had not seen him after his disappearance . . . It is understood whose tears are more constant—that of an old father who finds his son alive after having despaired of him and having mourned for him . . .

Parashat Va-yiggash is one of the most dramatic and emotional parashiyot of Torah. Having been cast into a pit, abandoned by his brothers, sold into slavery, and ascended to the heights of power in Egypt, Joseph, subsequent to a few tense encounters with his brothers, finally reveals his identity. He can no longer restrain himself in the presence of his brothers. And rather than lash out in fury against them, he offers them refuge in Goshen and urges them to return to Canaan to bring Jacob. The stage is set for a tearful reunion between father and son. Joseph travels by chariot to the land of Goshen and we are treated to the moment of embrace: "he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck for a good while" (46:29). Classical commentators are astir as they attempt to describe this moving encounter. Who presents himself to whom? And who embraces and cries? The ambiguity of the text in Hebrew is poetic, making it impossible for the thoughtful reader to identify the part being played by Joseph and that enacted by Jacob.

Going against the stream of most commentators (including Rashi) who believe that it is Joseph who presents himself, embraces his father, and cries on his neck, Ramban contends the text is focused on the father, Jacob. When Torah narrates that "he presented himself to him" or that "he looked upon him," Nahmanides argues that it is the elderly father with weak vision, Jacob, looking upon his son Joseph. It takes Jacob a bit of time to recognize his son again (most likely because of Joseph's Egyptian garb), but once he realizes that it is indeed Joseph, he embraces him and weeps on his neck. For as Ramban adds above, it is more likely that unceasing tears are coming from the father who despaired of ever finding his son again.

Still, as a reader of Torah, I am inclined to embrace the ambiguity of the text. To me, it is moving and poetic that our understanding is blurred at this emotional moment. One simply cannot distinguish between Jacob and Joseph. Their souls are bound up, one to another. Equally striking is the similarity of the language and encounter here with that of Jacob's reunion with Esau (Gen. 33:4). Brother is reunited with brother; and now father once again joins his beloved son. Just as it is difficult to differentiate Esau from Jacob, so too is it here with Jacob and Joseph.

May the loving and tearful reunions that were part of Jacob's life, serve as models for all of us—to build bridges with those with whom we have been estranged.

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