

Parashat Vayiggash opens with Judah's impassioned plea to Joseph, begging him to release Benjamin from captivity in order to spare their father Jacob from further anguish at losing, again, a son of his favored wife Rachel. Deeply moved by Judah's words, Joseph can keep his identity a secret no longer, and the brothers are finally reunited. From his high station in Egypt, Joseph has toyed cruelly with his brothers—perhaps as their comeuppance for having sold him all those years ago. What is it now that finally stirs his mercy powerfully enough that he changes course? Judah's detailed personal narrative—describing his family's multiple misfortunes and their emotional toll—is the key that unlocks Joseph's stubborn heart.

The times we live in behoove us to listen to others' personal narratives—stories of compounded losses, of broken and displaced families, of risking everything because of an intolerable and life-threatening status quo. Judah and his brothers are not technically refugees (they fled famine, not persecution), yet they are in a similar position of complete vulnerability, begging for mercy from foreign powers—that-be. Our parashah shows how the stories of people's lives have the potential to stir compassion in their listeners far more than geopolitical analyses. Indeed, it was the image of one three-year-old boy, *zikhrono livrakhah*, that finally awakened the world a few months ago to the Syrian refugee crisis that had been unfolding for years. Considering complex issues in human terms can motivate people to think and act differently—just as Judah's narrative catalyzes the change in Joseph's attitude towards the foreigners before him. Personal stories reveal the deeper truth of a situation, activating the listener's empathy as he or she reflects on another's plight in terms of his or her own humanity.

As Syrian refugees reach the doorsteps of countries across the globe, including our own, we must listen to their stories in light of our own Jewish national story—from the Bible to the Second World War, when the United States sent over 900 Jewish refugees on the S. S. St. Louis back to Europe. Polling from the early 1940s shows that a majority of Americans did not want Jewish refugees entering into their midst. As HIAS's recent rabbinic letter to Congress puts it: "In 1939, our country could not tell the difference between an actual enemy and the victims of an enemy. In 2015, let us not make the same mistake." Let us listen to the stories of the refugees, and allow the pathos of those desperate personal narratives to stir us to action—as Joseph was stirred to action by one powerful personal story so long ago.

Parashat Vayiggash 5776

פרשת ויגש תשע"ו



The Values of a Jewish Home

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Shortly after Jacob arrives in Egypt Joseph—undoubtedly eager to introduce his father and his patron to each other—arranges an audience with Pharaoh for his father. Following the time honored traditions of polite conversation, Pharaoh asks a prosaic question: "How many are the years of your life?" (Gen. 47:8) (Perhaps we should not be surprised at this question; this pharaoh is the only biblical figure known to have celebrated his birthday.) But rather than limiting himself to answering Pharaoh's question, Jacob adds, "Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns" (47:9). A modern analogue would be to ask a perfect stranger the innocuous question "How are you?" and have him respond with a catalogue of his trials and tribulations. No doubt Pharaoh thought to himself, as Jacob recited his woeful litany, the ancient Egyptian equivalent of, "All I said was 'hello!'"

Yet while the incongruity of Jacob's response to Pharaoh's question is in some sense humorous, Jacob's words are heart-rending. They grow out of the existential and ideological divide that separates Jacob from his son. One can speak of three differences between their perspectives.

For Joseph, his reunion with his father is the culmination of the most joyous events of his life. He occupies a place of power, fame, and fortune. His dreams have been fulfilled and his brothers, having unwittingly played a role in their fulfillment, must now not only acknowledge their truth but also accept as their savior the brother they sought to kill. He has been reunited with his beloved brother Benjamin. And he is together once more with his father Jacob—and in Egypt, where his Jacob can see how his son, a stranger in a land not his own and a former slave, has become the second most powerful man in the land. In this Joseph is like any other son, wishing his father to admire him and bask in his accomplishments. But Joseph also wants to show Jacob that his dreams were not idle ones and that Jacob's gift to Joseph of a multicolored robe was a prefiguration of Joseph's future success: Joseph's family is now dependent upon him and he wears the robes of royalty.

Jacob, on the other hand, cares only that he will have an opportunity to see his beloved son once more before dying. Joseph insists, in his instructions to his brothers, “And you must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen” (Gen. 45:13). Yet when the brothers describe Joseph in all his glory and point out the wagons that Joseph has sent to convey Jacob and his family to Egypt, Jacob responds, “Enough! My son Joseph is still alive! I must go and see him before I die” (45:27). To Jacob, Joseph’s present station in life is irrelevant. He cares not whether Joseph is a prince or a pauper; what is important is that Joseph is alive.

The perspectives of Jacob and Joseph also differ in that dwelling in the land of Egypt has very different significance for Jacob than it does for Joseph. At the moment when he reunites with his father Joseph has lived in Egypt for about 23 years, having arrived there when he was but 17. Whatever fond recollections he may have had of his life in Canaan were no doubt largely if not entirely overshadowed by the bitter memory of his brothers’ betrayal. It is not for nothing that he names his firstborn Manasseh thereby declaring that “God has made me forget entirely my hardship and my parental home” (Gen. 41: 51). And the trials and tribulations that befall him in Egypt notwithstanding, it is there that he rises to the heights of power and prestige. Thus he names his second son Ephraim, signifying that “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction” (v.52).

For Jacob the land of Egypt is yet another way station in a life of wandering and suffering. He has had to flee his father’s house to avoid his brother Esau’s wrath. In Aram he is under the thumb of a manipulative father-in-law whom he ultimately outwits but from whom he must flee as well. His beloved Rachel dies just as he is about to enter the land of his ancestors. This is followed by his daughter Dina’s rape and the consequent mass slaughter at Shekhem, and sexual usurpation of his concubine by his eldest son Reuben. Jacob finally returns home—just in time to bury his father Isaac. And now, in order to be reunited with the son whose disappearance has caused him years of constant grief, he must leave his birthplace once again to take up residence in a strange country. Rather than expressing this to Joseph directly he pours out his heart to Pharaoh, though presumably in Joseph’s presence.

Jacob also understands something that Joseph only comes to realize on his deathbed. Joseph is short-sighted and self-centered; he is seduced by his own dreams. For him the story has reached its happy conclusion. Now that Joseph has become viceroy and his family has joined him in Egypt they and their descendants, he believes, will live in peace and security under the benevolent protection of the pharaohs. But from his sojourn in Aram Jacob knows that there is a dark side to being a guest in a foreign land, as Jacob’s descendants will learn soon enough. And unlike Joseph, Jacob hears the voice of God, the God who has

made a covenant with Abraham and his progeny. He therefore knows that the destiny of his clan lies not in Egypt but in Canaan. It is only after God assures him that he—and his descendants—will be brought up once again from Egypt that Jacob consents to relocate himself there. And with his last breath Jacob requires Joseph to swear that he will ensure Jacob’s burial in Canaan.

And so it is for us. Our children do not necessarily share our dreams. We see them wandering toward Egypt, abandoning the land of their ancestors while believing that they have found their true home. At times we need to be with them in Egypt, hoping that by doing so we will help guide them back home. But above all we need, like Jacob, to know that it is enough that our children are alive and well—or at least we must at times accept it as being enough. And they must know that above all we love them, for with love all things are possible.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Judah’s Story, Our Stories, and the Stories of Refugees

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“They grabbed me and led me to a van. I told them: ‘I’m an old man. I’m not a threat.’ But they didn’t listen. On our way to the prison, they kept stopping on the street and collecting more people. They blindfolded me when we arrived and they beat me very badly. Then they put me with seventy other people in a room smaller than this one. It was very cold because it was December and I was barefoot because I’d lost my slippers. There was nothing but a hole in the ground for a toilet. We all had to face the wall. Anyone who looked toward the door would be shot. We stayed there for ten days. I barely slept or ate. There was no room to even sit down. Occasionally a guard would throw bread through the window for people to grab. I thought I’d eventually be executed. But on the eleventh day, they called my name and released me out into the cold to find my way home.”

—Syrian refugee now living in Amman, Jordan,
Humans of New York (blog by Brandon Stanton),
December 11, 2015