

The Gradual Journey to Forgiveness

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS



Parashat Vayiggash opens with the dramatic encounter between Joseph and his older brother, Judah. Judah, who years earlier had cooperated with his brothers to betray Joseph, seems to be on the verge of losing his father's other favored son, Benjamin, as well. He makes an impassioned plea to Joseph, offering himself as a hostage in Benjamin's stead. As it turns out, Judah's altruism is more than Joseph can withstand. While he was able to hold back and hide his identity numerous times, letting his brothers squirm in discomfort before the strange Egyptian man, this time is different. Joseph reveals his identity. The moment is one of closeness, of reconciliation, and of Joseph's recognition that it was not his brothers' deeds but rather God's plan that had guided the events of his latter years.

Given the absence of any hint of hatred on Joseph's part, it is easy to be blinded by the ostensible ease of the moment. Joseph is indeed absolutely forgiving. Rashi, in his commentary on Genesis 45:12, quotes a midrash which imagines Joseph proclaiming, "just as I bear no hatred against Benjamin, my brother, for he was not involved in selling me, so too do I harbor no hatred in my heart against you" (Tractate Megilah 16b). Despite Joseph's readiness to forgive at this point, it is important to note that his reaction is not a spur-of-the-moment decision. His journey toward forgiveness spans three encounters with his brothers, for forgiveness is not born of one dramatic moment but is a product of patience and time.

In the first encounter with his brothers, Joseph is an Egyptian vizier—in charge of rationing Egypt's abundant provisions in a time of famine. Jacob sent ten of his sons down to Egypt to procure food. The Torah states, "When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them" (Genesis 42:7). Joseph accuses his brothers of being spies,

confines them to jail for three days, and then demands that they return to Canaan and bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, down to Egypt. The Hebrew word *vayitnaker* suggests absolute estrangement and alienation. Memories of his plight at their hands still haunt him. Trust is absent altogether. Joseph does not know whether the brothers have repented for their actions or even felt remorse. And so "Joseph turned away from them and wept" (Gen. 42:24). Hiding, followed by a cry of pain, is the initial response.

Joseph's second encounter with his brothers brings him a step closer toward reconciliation. This time, Joseph reestablishes more of a connection to his family. Joseph seeks news of his father, asking, "How is your aged father of whom you spoke? Is he still in good health?" (Gen. 43:27). Furthermore, once Joseph lays his eyes on his younger brother Benjamin, he is overcome by emotion, though at this point he is still careful to hide his tears from his brothers: "Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there. Then he washed his face, went out and restrained himself" (Gen. 43:30). It is through Benjamin, the brother that had not participated in the conspiracy against him, that Joseph begins to reconcile with his past. The alienated Joseph who had spoken harshly in his first encounter begins to let down his guard. Emotions surge. One senses that Joseph desires to reveal himself. However, he controls himself once more and subjects his brothers to one final test to be sure they are truly repentant. Everett Fox, a noted scholar of Bible, comments, "only by recreating something of the original situation—the brothers are again in control of the life and death of a son of Rachel—can Joseph be sure that they have changed" (*The Five Books of Moses*, 202). To this end, Joseph instructs that his silver goblet be placed in Benjamin's sack. He sends his steward to retrieve the men, the goblet is discovered in

Benjamin's bag, and the brothers are sent into a panic at the prospect of losing Joseph's only full brother, son of Jacob's beloved Rachel.

And so we enter the third encounter. A repentant Judah pleads with Joseph on behalf of a father who has already "lost" a child dear to his heart. Judah's genuineness and contrite spirit, along with his moving words, penetrate the emotional wall Joseph had built around himself. Unlike Joseph's response in the second encounter, this time he can no longer restrain himself. The wall has collapsed; he now weeps in the presence of his brothers: "His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace" (Gen. 45:2). Finally, Joseph is able to confront these Canaanite "strangers" as equals and more importantly, as brothers. Joseph's process of forgiveness and reconciliation comes full circle.

The trials and tests he placed before his brothers have shown him that they regret their actions and are sincere in their wish to protect their father and youngest brother from further loss and pain. They have earned Joseph's trust, and he is ready to release the bitterness that he has kept in his heart for so long, to make peace with the past, to forgive. But it is not in the passion of one moment that Joseph forgives; his forgiveness is the result of a process—from absolute alienation to tentative trust, to a complete, cathartic embrace. And, as Fox insightfully remarks, "once the brothers pass the test, life and covenant can then continue" (202).

May we strive to model the forgiving soul of Joseph.

With wishes for a Shabbat shalom.