

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayigash  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Vayigash – Stepping forward to pray

At the beginning of this week's Parasha of Vayigash, we read about the fateful confrontation of Yehuda with the viceroy of Mitzrayim. Unbeknown to Yehuda, the true identity of this viceroy is his long-lost brother Yosef.

There was a lot riding on this confrontation between Yehuda and the Egyptian viceroy:

- Yehuda's younger brother Binyamin was accused of stealing the viceroy's precious silver goblet and he was facing a life time of slavery.
- Yehuda had guaranteed Binyamin's safe return. If anything happened to Binyamin, Yehuda would suffer the consequences in this world and the World to Come.
- Their elderly father Yaacov had already suffered the loss of his beloved Yosef and Shimon. If he lost Binyamin as well, who knew what effect this would have on him.

The Parasha begins with Yehuda stepping forward to confront the viceroy. The Torah uses the words ויגש אילו יהודה (Vayigash Eilav Yehuda) – “And Yehuda approached him”.

The word 'vayigash' is used on two other occasions throughout Tanach in relation to a supplication that was made at a critical juncture.

The word 'vayigash' first appears in relation to Avraham Avinu when he prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>1</sup> The Torah recounts in great detail this intense prayer of Avraham as he bargained with Hashem to save these cities. As we discussed in Darchai Noam for Parashat Vayera, this Tefillah by Avraham arguably led to the salvation of Lot, who was the ancestor of the righteous Ruth. Therefore, this prayer by Avraham ensured the creation of the Davidic dynasty and ultimately the Mashiach, who will be a scion of the Davidic dynasty, and who will ultimately bring the entire world to its successful conclusion!

The other place in the Tanach that the word 'vayigash' appears is in relation to Eliyahu HaNavi. In a dramatic moment, Eliyahu Hanavi confronted the wayward Northern kingdom of Israel and challenged them to choose between serving Hashem and worshipping idols:

*And Eliyahu approached (vayigash) all the people and said, "How long will you hop between two opinions? If the Hashem is God, go after Him, and if the Baal, go after him." And the people did not answer him a word.*<sup>2</sup>

The people are unable to answer Eliyahu's challenge. Eliyahu then challenged the priests of Baal<sup>3</sup> to a showdown on Har Carmel<sup>4</sup> in front of the people. Eliyahu built an alter to Hashem and the false prophets built an alter to the Baal. Eliyahu claimed that only Hashem would send down a miraculous fire to consume his sacrifice. The priests of Baal called out to Baal but were not answered. Eliyahu then turned to Hashem in prayer and beseeched Him to send down a Heavenly flame. In an enormous Kiddush Hashem, his

<sup>1</sup> Parashat Vayera, Breishit 18:23.

<sup>2</sup> Melachim Aleph 18:21.

<sup>3</sup> Baal was a common form of idol worship that was very difficult to eradicate.

<sup>4</sup> Which is located in the modern-day city of Haifa.

prayers were answered, prompting the entire Jewish people to declare “Hashem is the true G-d”. Eliyahu managed to turn around the belief system of almost the entire Northern Kingdom of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

### **Why do we take three steps forward before the Amidah?**

It is customary to take three steps forward before beginning the Amidah. One of the reasons that is given for this practice is that the three steps correspond to these three uses of the word ‘vayigash’ that we just described. Thus, as we step forward towards Hashem to commence our prayer, we can strive to recall the supplications of these three great men. This can help to set the scene for our own supplication that we are about to commence.

- Just like Yehuda’s supplication to Yosef, there is a lot riding on our Amidah as we pray to Hashem to fulfil all of our vital needs – including our health and our livelihood.
- Just like Avraham’s prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah, we have no idea what far-reaching impact our tefillot might have.
- Just like Eliyahu’s prayer in his confrontation with the priests of Baal, our prayer has the power to strengthen our belief systems and to fortify our emunah. And by increasing our own emunah we can enhance the emunah of others through our example.

As an aside, other reasons are provided for this practice of taking three steps before the Amidah. The Mechilta explains that the three steps are based on the three barriers that Moshe had to pass through on Har Sinai to enter into Hashem’s realm to receive the Torah.<sup>6</sup> This can also be a powerful idea to help us to achieve the right frame of mind as we commence our prayer. Just like Moshe was stepping into Hashem’s inner sanctum, when we pray the Amidah we too are standing before the Shechinah (Hashem’s Divine presence). If we truly internalise before Whom we are standing when we pray it can totally transform our Tefillot.

The Rama writes that the three steps express one’s desire to come closer to Hashem and to stand before Him in prayer.<sup>7</sup> We should be eagerly stepping forward and keen to take advantage of this wonderful opportunity to have a private audience with the Creator of the Universe!

The word ‘vayigash’ means to approach. We have seen that the Tanach uses this word when great men step forward to do what needs to be done at the time. They humble themselves and pour out their hearts in prayer and supplication, focusing on the needs of others. We should pause briefly before stepping forward and approaching Hashem to pray and try to develop the right frame of mind. Contemplating the fact that we now have an opportunity to approach our Creator can help us to improve our kavana (concentration) during tefillah.

Let’s try something this week:

1. When taking 3 steps forward to pray, focus on one of the ideas presented above to increase your kavana and take your tefillah very seriously:
  - Try to remember the powerful ‘vayigash’ of Yehuda – there is a lot riding on our prayers
  - Try to remember Avraham Avinu’s altruistic ‘vayigash’ – we have no idea what far-reaching impact our tefillot might have
  - Try to remember Eliyahu’s brave ‘vayigash’ – our prayers can strengthen the emunah of ourselves and others
2. Imagine Moshe stepping forward to greet Hashem Himself to receive the Torah.
3. Imagine that you are stepping forward, eager and keen to have a private audience with Hashem.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>5</sup> See Melachim Aleph 18:17–39 for a description of this fascinating incident.

<sup>6</sup> Mechilta, Shemot 20:18.

<sup>7</sup> Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 95:1.