

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Vayigash  
December 2020 / Tevet 5781

[darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com)  
[www.darchai-noam.com](http://www.darchai-noam.com)

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Vayigash – Passing judgement on yourself

In this week's Parsha of Vayigash, Binyamin is threatened with slavery by the Egyptian viceroy (who is actually Yosef). Yehuda makes an impassioned plea on Binyamin's behalf. He tells the viceroy that if Binyamin does not make it back home safely, it would be too much for their elderly father Yaakov to bear. Yosef cannot hold himself back any longer and he finally reveals his identity to his brothers. He cries out in a loud voice:

*“I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him because they were in shock before him. (Breishit 45:3)*

Yosef's question about his father being alive seems strange. Yehuda had just been explaining that Yaakov was elderly and would not be able to cope with the news if Binyamin did not come back home. This demonstrates clearly to Yosef that, as far as the brothers knew, Yaakov was still alive when the brothers had left home. Furthermore, Yosef had already asked the brothers earlier if Yaakov was alive<sup>1</sup> and the brothers had answered in the affirmative. Why would Yosef ask them the same question again? Was Yosef hoping for more up-to-date information? As far as I know, they did not have instant communication in those days. How could the brothers be expected to find out?

Various commentators present a number of answers to this question:

- Yosef was very concerned for his father and this was the first thing on his mind. He therefore asked the question again.
- Yosef understood that Yaakov was alive but he was now asking whether he was still healthy and active.<sup>2</sup>
- Yosef suspected that the brothers might have been untruthful when they said that Yaakov was alive because they were trying to gain sympathy from the Egyptian viceroy. Now that Yosef had revealed his true identity, he wanted to confirm that Yaakov really was alive.
- Some have suggested that Yosef's question was actually a rebuke of his brothers.<sup>3</sup> Yehuda had argued strongly that Yaakov would not survive the loss of Binyamin and for that reason he must be returned safely at all costs. Yosef was implying that the brothers were not so concerned about Yaakov's reaction to bad news when they decided to sell Yosef into slavery!

Let's focus on the final explanation. It seems that his brothers got the message loud and clear as we can see from the second half of the pasuk quoted above: “But his brother could not answer him because they were in shock before him”.<sup>4</sup> The Midrash<sup>5</sup> seems to accord with the idea that Yosef was rebuking his brothers. The Midrash comments on Yosef's question as follows: “Woe to us for the Day of Judgement, woe to us for the day of rebuke!”

The Beit Halevy explains that the experience of the brothers mirrors the experience that we will all have on the Day of Judgement. How so? We see that the brothers had been accusing Yosef of being cruel towards

<sup>1</sup> See last week's Parasha Miketz, Breishit 43:27-28.

<sup>2</sup> This is suggested by the Tur.

<sup>3</sup> The Beit Halevi and the Chafetz Chaim take this approach.

<sup>4</sup> An alternative explanation is that the brothers were in shock from Yosef revealing his identity.

<sup>5</sup> Midrash Rabba 93:10.

the elderly Yaakov when Yosef threatened to keep Binyamin as his slave. But in reality, it was the brothers themselves who were guilty of that sin. We see that the brothers were effectively passing judgement on themselves. That is how we will be judged too. Hashem puts us in situations where we have the opportunity to judge someone else for doing something that we ourselves have done. If we judge the other person favourably in those circumstances, then we ourselves will be judged favourably in the same circumstances. But if we judge them harshly, then we will be shocked to discover that we are actually passing judgement on ourselves.

When Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn was a young child, he famously asked his father why we have two eyes. Wouldn't one eye be enough? His father explained that the left side is the side of gevurah or strength. The left eye is the critical eye, we should use that eye to focus on ourselves, to identify our faults and search out for areas where we can improve. The right side is the side of chesed. We should use our right eye when looking at others, in order to see their positive attributes and to judge them favourably.<sup>6</sup>

This insight might help us to understand an enigmatic Gemara in masechet Brachot<sup>7</sup>. The Gemara gives advice to someone who is concerned about the evil eye: "If he is concerned about the evil eye, he should look at the side of his left nostril". How does one look at their left nostril?<sup>8</sup> Firstly, one needs to close their right eye, the eye that glosses over faults and only sees the good. Then they have to use their critical left eye to focus in closely on themselves, to the exclusion of everyone else.<sup>9</sup> By focusing on one's own faults, one will get into the habit of seeing themselves in a critical light and seeing others in a favourable light. It is only natural that this will make one more beloved by others.

Most of us seem to get this a little mixed up. We look at ourselves with our right eye and we look at others with our left eye. This reminds me of a joke:<sup>10</sup>

*Two mothers were chatting about their newly married children.*

*Mother 1: How is your son?*

*Mother 2: Terrible! He could have done much better with his shidduch. His new wife is just plain lazy. She sleeps in every morning, she doesn't work and she doesn't even cook! They have to order take away every night!*

*Mother 1: How about your daughter?*

*Mother 2: Fantastic. She married a real mensch. He lets her sleep in every morning, he insists that she doesn't go to work and he buys her dinner every night!*

Though it's not natural or easy, with a lot of work we can try to be judgemental only of ourselves but not others. In this way we will be using both of our eyes the way that Hashem intended.

Let's try something this week:

1. Imagine how the brothers must have felt when they understood the rebuke implied by Yosef's question. Imagine how bad we will feel on Judgement Day if we are judged harshly for all of our sins – and then try to be self-critical to ensure proper teshuva.
2. Think about cases where we have judged others unfavourably and try to judge them favourably. Can we come up with justifications for the other person's behaviour? Consider what would be our perspective if we were in the other person's position.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

\* To subscribe to Darchai Noam, please email [darchai.noam@gmail.com](mailto:darchai.noam@gmail.com) with the word 'Subscribe' in the subject.

---

<sup>6</sup> For our readers that are ophthalmologists, I acknowledge that having two eyes also assists with depth perception. (However, this feature of our eyes also incidentally helps us to avoid seeing other people superficially and to recognize that they have depth!)

<sup>7</sup> Brachot 55b.

<sup>8</sup> Without using a mirror of course.

<sup>9</sup> Go ahead and try it. (But you might not want to try this in public.)

<sup>10</sup> An oldie but a goodie.