

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?

Parashat Vayigash – Thinking about others

In this week's Parasha of Vayigash we read about the emotional reunion of Yosef and his brothers. The Midrash helps give us a fuller picture of events in the Chumash. It allows us to go behind the scenes and into the minds of the characters. However, this is one episode that is so full of emotion and drama that we don't really need the extra details of the Midrash to bring the story to life. It is an inherently moving story.

Yosef had not seen his brothers for over 20 years. The last time they were in contact (in last week's Parasha) the brothers had wanted to kill him. Ultimately, they threw him into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions and then sold him as a slave. Now, after all those years, the brothers came to Yosef during a terrible famine to buy food to support their families. Yosef recognised them but they did not recognise him. Yosef had a hard time containing his emotions, especially when he finally saw his full-brother Binyamin.

Then Yosef rushed because his compassion was stirred for his brothers and he wanted to weep. So he went into the room and wept there. He washed his face and went out and fortified himself...” (Parashat Miketz, Breishit 43:30)

Just imagine the intense emotions that Yosef was experiencing. Imagine the thoughts that were swirling around in his head at this time. Could he forgive his brothers for what they did to him? Did they regret their actions? Does his dear father Yaakov miss him? Is he still part of the family? Should he take revenge?

With these powerful emotions, Yosef was finally about to reveal his true identity to his brothers:

*Now Yosef could not restrain himself in the presence of all who stood before him, so he called out, “**Remove everyone from before me!**” Thus no-one [else] remained when he made himself known to his brothers. (Our Parasha, Breishit 45:1)*

This is perhaps one of the most dramatic and emotion laden incidents in the entire Torah. Given this backdrop, Rashi's explanation of why Yosef was careful to send out the Egyptians from the room is truly astounding:

He could not bear that Egyptians would stand beside him and hear his brothers being embarrassed when he would make himself known to them.¹

After being treated so cruelly by his brothers, most people in Yosef's position would probably not be too concerned about the brothers' embarrassment! Most people would be thinking more about themselves at this point. Given the intense emotions, Yosef could be forgiven for blurting out his identity in front of whoever happened to be there.

Remarkably, Yosef had the presence of mind to make the effort to see things from his brothers' perspective and he was careful to protect them from any potential embarrassment.

¹ Rashi's commentary to Breishit 45:1, based on the Midrash (Tanchuma Vayigash 5)

The following stories give examples of people who went out of their way to protect their fellow man from feeling embarrassed.

Reuven was walking home from shule together with Rabbi Cohen and he took advantage of this opportunity to discuss certain issues with him. Reuven noticed that the Rabbi was walking extremely slowly. The Rabbi was not elderly and thank G-d he was healthy. Reuven was therefore surprised that he was walking at a snail's pace. After a while, the Rabbi returned to a more common walking pace and Reuven felt more comfortable. Later, Reuven realised what had happened. Ahead of them was a young man with a medical condition that affected his gait. Rabbi Cohen was careful not to overtake this young man and he deliberately walked slowly until the man reached his home. The Rabbi was able to imagine how a young man in his twenties would feel to be overtaken by a man in his late 60s.²

Rabbi Akiva Eiger³ was one of the leaders of European Jewry in the early 19th Century. His future father-in-law was so proud that this Torah genius would be joining his family. The engagement party was held at the local shule hall and Rabbi Eiger gave a lengthy talk which dazzled the audience with his brilliance. But then a terrible storm hit the town and none of the guests could leave. Everyone had to spend the entire Shabbat in the shule. At the same time, there was another engagement party being held in the shule. This chatan was not of the same calibre as Rabbi Eiger. In fact, quite the opposite. His future father-in-law was not very proud of his less-than-average future son-in-law. Over the course of the Shabbat, Rabbi Eiger was asked to speak a few times. However, something was amiss. Rabbi Eiger stumbled over his words, he forgot what he was going to say in mid-sentence and he was not able to answer simple questions. His father-in-law was quite upset and he even contemplated calling off the wedding! Later, when the storm cleared and the other groom had left, Rabbi Eiger made a "remarkable recovery" and once again dazzled everyone with his sharp mind. He explained to his father-in-law that he was concerned about causing embarrassment to the other groom, and therefore he deliberately made himself appear inept. Though his future father-in-law knew that Rabbi Akiva Eiger was great, only after that Shabbat did he understand how truly great he was.

In the middle of an intense and emotionally-charged situation, Yosef was able to put himself in his brothers' situation and tried to reduce their embarrassment. When we are not in the middle of such an emotional hurricane, how much more so should we be able to focus on the feelings of other people!

Let's learn from Yosef and try our best to be aware of other people's feelings and guard them from embarrassment.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to put ourselves in the position of others. Try to imagine how they are feeling and how our actions might cause them pain or embarrassment.
2. Try not to be distracted by strong feelings of our own or let them overtake our sensitivity to others.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² This is based on a true story which I heard many years ago. Unfortunately, I no longer recall the identity of the Rabbi.

³ 1761 – 1837.