

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi David Levy

בראשית פרק מה פסוק יד
וַיִּפֹּל עַל צְוֹאֲרֵי בְנֵימִן אָחִיו וַיִּבְךְּ וּבְנֵימִן בָּכָה עַל צְוֹאֲרָיו:

Genesis 45:14

And he (Joseph) fell on the necks of Benjamin his brother, and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck.

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשה צג

יב וכי שני צוארים היו לו לבנימין אלא אמר רבי אלעזר בן פדת יוסף ראה ברוח הקודש ששני בית המקדשות עתידין ליבנות בחלקו של בנימין ועתידין ליחרב, ובנימין בכה על צואריו, ראה שמשכן שילה עתיד להעשות בחלקו של יוסף ועתיד ליחרב, ויתן את קולו בבכי,

Genesis Rabbah Parashah 93

Did Benjamin then have two necks? In fact, said Rabbi Elazar b. Pdat, "Joseph saw with a prophetic vision, that the two Temples would be in the future built on the portion of Benjamin, and that in the future they would both be destroyed." "And Benjamin cried on his neck" he saw that the Tabernacle would be in the future built in Shiloh on Joseph's portion and that in the future it would be destroyed, and he cried out.

This is an interesting moment in our midrash on Parashat Va-yiggash. In asking why the plural of *neck* is used in reference to Benjamin, Rabbi Elazar takes us far afield to the doubling of the word *neck* being a reference to both the first and second Temples. It is jarring, in this tender moment of reunion between Joseph and Benjamin, to imagine their attention drawn into the future and in that moment weeping for the destruction of the Temple rather than crying tears of joy.

Reading this makes me think of the breaking of the glass during a Jewish wedding ceremony. In a moment of sheer joy at the marriage, we break a glass to remember the Temple and that our joy cannot be complete in light of its destruction. Here, too, the Rabbis imagine, Joseph and Benjamin cannot fully enjoy their moment with the foreknowledge that the Temples will be destroyed.

Sometimes a midrash like this seems distant to us, in light of the fact that we don't mourn the Temple on a regular basis beyond a few comments in our liturgy. However, this week as we completed Hanukkah, we spent eight nights engaged joyously in the rededication of the Temple. In that light, I think we are more connected to the Temple and its symbolism than we tend to think. Moving from the shattered glass of the wedding to the celebration of Hanukkah, we can see then that the Temple is a symbol of the wholeness of the Jewish community living together with a shared vision and purpose. We celebrated, then, the moment of its restored glory this past week on Hanukkah, but we can also relate to the tears of Joseph and Benjamin, who sadly realize these moments are fleeting. May it be our blessing to build a stronger Jewish community so that our embraces need not be tearful but rather optimistic of a brighter future.

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Rabbi Marc Wolf
Vice Chancellor and Chief Development Officer
(212) 678-8933
mawolf@jtsa.edu

 **JTS** The Jewish
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Parashat Va-yiggash

Genesis 44:18–47:27

December 31, 2011

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. David Marcus, professor of Bible, JTS.

Parashat Va-yiggash continues the longest narrative in the Torah, that of Joseph and his brothers.

In the preceding two parashiyot, Joseph aroused the jealousy of his brothers with his dreams of grandeur and by being blatantly favored by his father, Jacob, who made for him a special ornamented tunic, traditionally known as a "coat of many colors." The brothers contrived to kidnap Joseph and sell him to caravan traders on their way to Egypt. In Egypt, Joseph was sold into slavery, but managed with God's help to rise to prominence in the house of one of Pharaoh's courtiers. There he resisted the advances of his master's wife, and, because she falsely maligned him, he was summarily imprisoned. However, once again with God's help, Joseph rose to a position of trust in prison and was able to interpret the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, Pharaoh's butler and Pharaoh's baker.

At about the time of the servants' dreams, Pharaoh also dreamed two dreams that bothered him enormously. None of his magicians or astrologers was able to interpret them, but then his butler, now released, informed Pharaoh of Joseph's interpretive abilities. Pharaoh had Joseph brought to him, and Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as the harbingers of seven good years and seven years of famine. Joseph also gave Pharaoh wise economic advice: to store up food during the seven good years in preparation for the lean years to come. Pharaoh then elevated Joseph to one of the highest positions in the land, and Joseph became the one in charge of distributing food during the years of famine.

It is during these famine years that Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy corn. Joseph recognized them, but they did not recognize him. Joseph tested them, first by returning their money surreptitiously and then by demanding that they bring his brother Benjamin to Egypt. When Benjamin arrived in Egypt, Joseph contrived to have him arrested for theft but allowed the other brothers to go home.

All this has been told breathlessly without any breaks. In the original Hebrew, as in our Torah scrolls, remarkably there have been no paragraph markers since the beginning of last week's Parashat Mi-ketz. There is no other narrative in the Hebrew Bible that has such a continuous section of text without any breaks. This may sound surprising to those of us in shul who use *humashim* such as *Etz Hayim*, since these printed editions divide the story into chapters. But these chapter divisions arose much later than the rabbinic divisions of the text, and, although they are widely used today by Jews for convenience of reference, they were originally adopted by non-Jewish clerics in the 13th century.

Clearly the Rabbis, who did not put in any breaks, regarded the narrative we have just related above as one major act, and a new act starts with the beginning of this week's parashah, Parashat Va-yiggash, with a dramatic appeal by Judah for Benjamin's freedom. The impact of the rabbinic division is quite significant, for nowhere in Scripture is there a scene of such wrenching drama as Judah's appeal to Joseph for Benjamin's freedom. It is a scene full of ironies and revelations. It is ironic that Judah does not know that the person to whom he is appealing is his own brother. He sees only that he is pleading with one of the highest officials in the land, "akin to Pharaoh." It is also ironic that Judah, the very one who was responsible for selling Joseph into slavery, is now offering to become Joseph's slave. For his part, Joseph now learns for the very first time how his disappearance was reported to his father: that he had supposedly been killed by a wild animal. He also learns that his alleged death had caused his father such great grief that Jacob is now overprotective of Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin.

But, most importantly, Joseph realizes now that his brothers are not the same brothers who sold him into slavery. They have changed perceptibly; they are now ready to protect their younger brother Benjamin, and are now anxious that their father, Jacob, should not be caused further grief. It is no wonder that Joseph is overcome by emotion: "he could not restrain himself," and he asks everyone to leave him alone with his brothers, who can hardly believe their ears when Joseph reveals himself to them.

The Rabbis, aware of the power of this scene, made it the highlight of the parashah by making it stand as its opening scene, thereby giving it special prominence because it is this beginning portion that is read three times in the course of our liturgical week: we read it last Shabbat during the *Minhah* service; we have been reading it during morning services this Thursday; and, of course, we will read it this coming Shabbat in our Torah service.

So by placing this scene of the reconciliation of Joseph's brothers at the beginning of the parashah, the Rabbis impress upon us the fact that in Jacob's household, bitter family enmity has finally been eroded. There is now an end to the previously unending family strife. Judah's appeal has touched the heart of Joseph, who no longer bears enmity to his brothers. A family that was alienated by dysfunction has now been reconciled.

The message of the parashah for us is that alienated family members can

indeed be harmonized, recriminations among close relatives can come to an end, and, as in the case of Joseph and his brothers, fraternal reconciliation is indeed a possibility.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Parashat Va-yiggash provides the setting for an emotional family reunion as Jacob is reunited with his beloved son Joseph. After revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph sends them back to Canaan to share the revelation of his survival and rise to power with his father. At first, Jacob is shocked by the news, but then he insists on going down to Egypt to see his son. A very moving scene unfolds as Jacob arrives with his family in Goshen: "Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a long while. Then Israel said to Joseph, 'Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are still alive'" (Gen. 46:29–30). The ambiguity of the text is striking. Who is first to embrace whom? Who weeps on whose neck? How may we decode this sacred and precious encounter?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggests:

Joseph wept but Jacob did not weep. Joseph could still weep. Jacob was finished weeping. He had wept enough in his life. Joseph was still weeping even after Jacob had already spoken with him . . . Since he had missed Joseph, Jacob had had a dull monotonous life. He had not ceased from weeping; his whole life of feelings had been spent in grief over Joseph. In the meantime, Joseph had lived a life full of changes. He had no time to give himself up to the pain of separation. He was kept fully occupied with each of his different posts. Now when he fell around his father's neck again, he felt all the more what separation had really meant to him, and lived once again through the past twenty years. Jacob had already become Israel but Joseph still wept. (Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, 633)

Rabbi Hirsch deciphers this text masterfully. Insisting that Joseph is the initiator of the embrace, Hirsch paints a portrait of profound catharsis. While Jacob had had many years to mourn and dwell on the painful absence (and presumed death) of the son, the frenetic pace of Joseph's life had allowed the son to focus elsewhere—away from the pain of separation. It is only once he returns to the presence of his father that the buried emotions begin to flow forth again. Now, Joseph permits himself to cry—and to cry with a vengeance. Not only do the tears flow, but 20 years of separation and absence seem to pass before his eyes. "Jacob," on the other hand, "had already become Israel" through the pain he had experienced and wrestled with, Hirsch is correct in asserting. It is the realization that Joseph is still a part of the people Israel and the Land of Israel that leads to this lachrymose and loving moment of reunion.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.