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Parshat Vayigash: Love in Loss

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Sterilized masks covered our faces, but I could see through the thin veil dividing the healthy from the sick just how much he loved her. She arrived at the hospital athletic and health-conscious, but was now plagued with the fear, vulnerability, and anger that accompanied her new debilitating diagnosis. He gazed at her lovingly, as he described *their* struggle, *their* pain, *their* disbelief. He wondered aloud why closeness and intimacy bubble up at the darkest of times. Why were their family members just reaching out to show love now? Why not show love when we are healthy as well?

I am reminded of my interaction with this patient and her husband today as we read *Parshat Vayigash*. The *parshah* begins *in medias res*, in the middle of a narrative of betrayal and deception, dreams and preservation, famine and abundance. We hear of Yehudah's plea to Yosef to allow Binyamin to return to Yaakov. We witness Yosef confront his brothers and rebuild his relationship with his father. And we learn both how Yosef saves many lives with his rations and how he brings his family to the land of Goshen. Indeed the *parshah* weaves together moments of longing and loss with promises of life and abundance.

I believe this emotionally wrought *parshah* challenges us to reevaluate how we respond to strife and lacking in our own lives. We read about it daily in the newspaper-- a train derails, health care costs rise, innocent victims of hate suffer. Or maybe in our own lives we are touched by physical or mental illness; or perhaps by private fears, doubts, and anxieties. *Tehillim* and *tefillah* are no strangers to the reality of suffering and the cries of sorrow inherent in the human experience. In fact our *siddur* models an inextricability of human petition and Divine empathy.

The question our *parshah* raises in the wake of Yosef's complex and laden reunion with his family is, 'How do we respond to this very real pain in our lives?' The text answers with three potential models: Yehudah, Yosef, and Yaakov.

Yehudah frames his yearning, fear, and anguish through 'ויגש', literally 'he approached', or as Onkelos and the Targum Yerushalmi read, 'וקרב', 'he drew closer' (Bereshit 44:18). Yehudah strives to resolve and reason with his reality, addressing the pain head-on. He steps into the conflict; he is a first-responder to his own strife. Here we see the very human need to make order of chaos, to both make sense of theodicy and to proactively rebuild. Yosef on the other hand, responds with an outpouring of the heart, 'ויבך', 'he sobbed' a primal cry that at times relieves him and at other times renders him debilitated and silent, incapable of functioning. But in his cry, Yosef also reaches out to those he loves, asking his brothers to come closer, 'גשו-נא אלי', 'please come to me' (Bereshit 45:4). This reveals another natural human response to pain-- the need to be comforted and heard-- to know that we are not alone, to seek forgiveness and to forgive.

And finally, we learn of Yaakov's response to pain. When Pharaoh asks him, 'כמה ימי שני חייו?', 'How many are the days of the years of your life?', Yaakov responds that his days are 'מעט ורעים', 'few in number and terrible' (Bereshit 47:8-9). He feels inadequate when compared to his ancestors and openly shares his sorrow, guilt, and regret. This response illustrates the need for honesty in our processing of pain. When we cry out to God, as well as when we share our struggles with those close to us, we crave a raw and unbridled outpouring of the soul. We cannot deny our pain.

While these three models are not exhaustive of the human response to suffering, they do reveal the multiplicity inherent in the grieving and processing of pain. When we are lonely, afraid, and even facing death, how do we respond? Do we step closer and engage, or do we cry? Are we confused, or unable to respond? Are we silent, or do we retreat? Are we embarrassed, do we preserve, or do we sacrifice everything, so that we may live and not die? And all the more so, how do we respond in times of plenty? Are we grateful? Are we greedy? Or are we completely unaware? What are our seven years of famine and our seven years of plenty?

I cannot help but think back to my patient and her husband. He responded to *their* pain with unfaltering love and self-identification. But in his 'ויגש', in his stepping forward, he realized his own loneliness and demanded that our presence and support extend beyond moments of pain.

I believe this husband's commentary, his prayer for an elevation of love in our daily lives is embodied in the relationship between the verb 'גש' and the proper noun 'גשן', 'Goshen', in our *parshah*.

The *shoresh*, root, 'גש', which we see used in the forms 'ויגש', describing Yehudah's approaching, and 'גשו', elucidating Yosef's plea to his brothers to draw closer to him, points to a relational, human yearning for connection. It is the pooling of our natural, shared responses to suffering.

Goshen, 'גשן', on the other hand is etymologically complex, perhaps a derivation of the Egyptian 'Kesem', 'inundated land' or the Semitic 'Gesem', 'to cultivate'. Goshen refers to the geographical district in Egypt east of the lower Nile, which was prime crop and grazing terrain and the land in which Yosef's family settles at the end of the *parshah*. Goshen is also the first region that the Israelites pass through in the exodus from Egypt. Thus, Goshen points to the fruition of our connections-- the abundance that comes from our support of each other in times of pain and scarcity. Goshen, 'גשן', is the result of 'גש', it is the depth and vitality of a relationship filled with the love my patient's husband demanded.

May we each search within ourselves for the love and honesty required to hold others in their moments of pain. May we feel heard and supported in our vulnerability. May we be patient with ourselves, whether we are a Yehudah, a Yosef, or a Yaakov. May we hear the cries of those around us and respond with an open and humble heart. And may we recognize the value of just responding, being present, and sitting with ourselves, with each other, and with God in our shared scarcity and abundance.



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