

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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5 TEVET

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

In Pieces or In Peace?

Then Yehuda approached him and said, "If you please, my lord, may your servant speak a word [...] and may your anger not flare up at your servant..." (44:18)

This week's *parsha* opens with the epic showdown between Yehuda and Yosef. Rashi (ad loc) comments that Yehuda spoke to him harshly, and for this reason, Yehuda felt compelled to ask Yosef not to get angry. The Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah* 93:8) further elaborates on this theme: "Yehuda asked his brother Naphtali 'How many markets (full of people) are there in Egypt?' Naphtali went to check and told Yehuda, 'There are twelve.' Yehuda turned to his brothers and told them, 'I will destroy three of them and you destroy the rest until no one remains.' When Yosef saw that the brothers threatened to destroy the entire country he said, 'It is better that I reveal myself to them.'"

Seemingly, Yehuda and the brothers were preparing for a violent confrontation with Yosef. However, Rashi in *Parshas Vayeira* seems to paint an entirely different picture: "And Avraham approached and said..." (18:23). Rashi (ad loc) says we find three types of "approaching" in the scriptures; we find 1) approaching for war (by Yoav captain of King David's army), 2) approaching for appeasement (by Yehuda and Yosef), and 3) approaching for prayer (by Eliyahu). This Rashi in *Vayeira* indicates that Yehuda was approaching Yosef to try to appease him, yet in this *parsha* Rashi says that Yehuda spoke harshly to him and, according to the Midrash, even threatened him. How can Rashi in *Vayeira* conclude that Yehuda's approach was to try to appease Yosef?

The classic example of appeasement is that of Neville Chamberlain's response to

Germany's demands for territorial conquest and rapprochement of areas that they had lost in the Great War. After many meetings and detailed negotiations, Chamberlain's response, in brief, was "okay." Believing he had forestalled another European World War, he came back to London declaring that he had achieved "peace in our time." Winston Churchill, Chamberlain's main foe in the British parliament, later termed Neville's efforts as "the great surrender."

This distinction is key. Appeasement is not the same as surrender. In fact, surrender is one of the worst responses to conflict because capitulation merely indicates that you have no interest in fighting, but it doesn't resolve anything. Appeasement comes from the French "*apaiser*" – to bring to peace. Surrender doesn't create peace, just a ceasing of hostilities for the time being.

The only way to create a real peace is through negotiations, and negotiations can only be successful when both parties come from a position of strength. This is true in relationships as well. When one party in a relationship feels aggrieved, the proper response isn't merely "you're right." This just indicates that you surrender because you don't want to fight. The person who feels wronged hasn't really been validated, in fact the message received is "it's not worth the effort to fight with you." The better approach is validating their feelings and conveying your desire to resolve the issues through conversation and actions.



Yehuda is in effect warning Yosef: "I am perfectly capable of going to war with you – I am prepared to inflict heavy damage as well as take some losses myself. But I would prefer to work out some sort of arrangement between us." Yehuda is not trying to beg Yosef for mercy, hoping that he will get what he wants through a surrender. He is negotiating from a position of strength, looking for a compromise that will bring an understanding between them and a lasting peace. That is what appeasement is supposed to be.

Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha* Yosef instructs his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds, and since shepherds are a תועבת to Egypt, he would send them to Goshen (45:33-34). The common translation of this word (Rashi, Onkelos, and others) is an abomination; since the Egyptians worshipped their sheep as deities, once they informed Pharaoh that they were shepherds by occupation, he would become disgusted and send them away from him to Goshen.

However, the Zohar has a completely different take on this exchange. According to the Zohar, shepherds were actually revered in Egypt, even considered like deities themselves. This can easily be understood as shepherds actually take care of their deities – the sheep.



My Son, My Father

And they told him, “Yosef is still alive, and he is ruler over the entire land of Egypt.” But he had a turn of heart, for he did not believe them (45:26).

Upon returning to Eretz Yisroel with the incredible news that Yosef was still alive, the brothers were initially met with disbelief from their father Yaakov. He finally accepted that his son Yosef was still alive when “*he saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him*” (45:27). This is difficult to understand. Even if Yaakov suspected that the brothers had a role in Yosef’s disappearance, what possible reason could they have for spinning another lie, one that with some effort could be verified? Furthermore, his son Binyamin, who had no part in Yosef’s disappearance, could also confirm that his brother Yosef was still alive. Why did Yaakov choose not to believe Binyamin?

Rashi (ad loc) is bothered as to why the Torah says that Yosef sent the wagons to transport Yaakov when the Torah previously stated that they were sent by Pharaoh (45:19). Rashi answers that although they were sent on the word of Pharaoh, Yosef told his brothers to use them as a sign in reference to the last Torah subject he studied with his father all those years ago. In Hebrew the word wagons has the same root as the word calf – Yosef was reminding Yaakov that they had last studied the laws of a calf whose neck is broken to atone for a city that didn’t properly care for a stranger who left their city unaccompanied.

One must wonder why Yosef, who had now been gone for several decades, never sent a message earlier to his father, whom he must have known would be worried sick over his disappearance. Though we will never know for sure, a component of his reticence was that for almost all of the time he was gone he was either a slave or a convict sitting in jail; not exactly uplifting news to give his father. He may have preferred that his father think him dead than languishing as a slave or a prisoner, which would cause him ongoing grief.

Yaakov, upon hearing the news that his son was still alive, must have been incredibly conflicted. On one hand, he was relieved that his son was still alive, long after giving him up for dead. On the other hand, Yosef had been steeped in the Egyptian culture of depravity for over two decades. What remained of his son Yosef, the one Yaakov taught all of the Torah he had learned in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever?

When Yaakov saw that Yosef sent him a sign indicating that his mind was on the last subject that they had studied before departing, he realized that **his** son, the one he had forged a real Torah bond with, was indeed still alive. This is why the Torah says, “*He saw the wagons that Yosef had sent to transport him, then the spirit of their father Yaakov was revived [...] My son still lives! I shall go and see him before I die*” (45:27-28).

Similarly, earlier in the *parsha* upon revealing himself to his brothers, Yosef asks, “*Is my father still alive?*” (45:3). On the surface this is a very odd question; for the last several interactions with his brothers they had been discussing Yaakov’s welfare. They had explicitly told him that their father was still alive. What was Yosef really asking?

Some have tried to answer this question by saying that it was a rebuke of the brothers, in effect saying: “After all you have done to him, is my father still alive?” This is difficult to accept because that would make Yosef’s rebuke sharp and sarcastic. Even if Yosef had said such a thing to his brothers, why would the Torah record it for posterity? Besides, the Torah portrays Yosef as sad and even weeping; the Torah doesn’t indicate that he was speaking angrily with them.

Perhaps we can answer this question in a similar vein; Yosef is yearning to know if there is any part of **his** father still alive.

Meaning, before Yosef was sold by his brothers, he had a special relationship with Yaakov; thus he’s really asking them if his father still misses him, in the way that a father misses a son. Yosef wants to know if there is any part of **his** father still left in Yaakov. Yosef isn’t asking about Yaakov’s physical wellbeing, he is asking about his personal father-son connection.

Did You Know Cont.

Pharaoh would therefore want to remove himself from their presence, and this is why he would send them to the best area in the land of Egypt (he calls it that in 47:6).

As we find in Rashi (*Shemos* 8:22), תועבת does mean abomination, but not because it was an abomination to the Egyptians. Rather, we translate it like that because the Egyptians **did** revere them and worshipped them, and to us as the Jewish people, worshipping other deities is an abomination. Although this is not the common understanding, this would explain two instances in the *parsha* where we see the Egyptians owning sheep. First, Pharaoh himself asked them to watch his own sheep immediately after learning they are shepherds (47:6), and later the people of Egypt sold Yosef their sheep for food (47:17).

But why shepherds and sheep? The Egyptians were, unsurprisingly, a very superstitious lot. They had literally over 2,000 gods that they worshipped regarding every single conceivable aspect of life, often with multiple gods per subject. However, several of the gods were similar as they were depicted through sheep imagery, most notably Khnum (the “First One” who created everything) who had a sheep’s head, and the more well-known Amun-Ra (the greatest of all the gods), who’s symbol was a ram headed Sphinx.



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