

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
Parshat Vayiggash: Genesis 44:18-47:27
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Once again, we near the end of this year's journey through *Sefer Bereishit*. After this week's *parshah*, we have just one more portion before we close out Genesis for this year and turn to *Sefer Shemot*.

One centerpiece of this week's *parshah* is Joseph's revelation of his identity to his brothers who have returned to Egypt with Benjamin. Up until this point, the brothers have not given any indication that they recognize this Egyptian official as their brother Joseph, who they sold into slavery decades earlier. For me, the pivotal moment in this week's portion comes in Genesis 45:3 as Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers who are dumbstruck as he does:

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל־אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֵבֶי תְּחִי וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו:

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" His brothers could not answer him, as they were so dumbfounded on account of him.

It does not take a lot to imagine the complicated emotions flowing in that room at the moment of Joseph's revelation. The Torah captures the brothers' shock, noting that they were unable to respond to Joseph in the face of his revelation. The Hebrew is *נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו* /*Ki niv-halu mi-panav* –rendered here as "dumfounded." In his contemporary translation, Everett Fox renders *niv-halu* as "they were terrified." Others render it as "shocked" or "panicked." Rashi reads it as a reaction reflecting the emotional baggage the brothers have carried since the day they threw Joseph in the pit.¹ He reads their stunned reaction as resulting from the shame they have carried since that fateful day, as well as the lie they have been living with their father (and themselves.) Rabbi Judah Loew, the *Maharal* of Prague, goes a bit further, seeing the brothers' panic as possibly reflecting fear that he might repay them for their actions long ago, especially given his current position and power in Egypt.

This is amplified by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in his commentary as he notes,

Joseph, of course, knew who [these men before him] were the entire time, but the brothers were overcome by confusion and fear over the sudden revelation. Until now, they considered Joseph to be completely lost, even if they may have dreamt that one day they would discover him as a slave somewhere and possibly even free him. However, now he is present before them as an eminent personality, their apparent antagonist, the ruler in whose hands their fate rests.

In *Ohr HaTzafun Bereishit* 39:3, Rabbi Nossan Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Novardok offers this perspective:

¹ Cf: Genesis 37:18ff

Joseph's revelation to his brothers was great news for them. They had looked for him throughout the whole land of Egypt, entering through special gates and scattering in different markets to find him . . . They feared that he would be assimilated among the Egyptians, or that perhaps, he might be completely lost from the world. Neither could they face their father's grief.

Now, he suddenly appears before them alive, and standing in a high rank in the land of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. They also realized that in the act of selling him, they did him no harm. On the contrary, it was the reason for his rise to greatness, from which came salvation from destruction [as a result of the famine] for the whole world. It is just as Joseph claimed in their presence: "Now, do not be sad, nor be angry in your own eyes. You sold me here because God sent me before you to be a lifesaver."

The mélange of feelings coursing through the hearts, minds, and souls of the brothers had to be overwhelming. Though maybe not as dramatic, any one of us may be able to think back to a time when we found ourselves facing our own complex range of feelings.

The Alter continues,

Nonetheless, when Joseph revealed himself [to his brothers], they were terrified of him and were unable to get a word out of their mouths. [They felt] an abundance of shame for how they had felt towards him, which led to them selling him, even though Joseph did not rebuke them at all. Rather, he sought to calm them. When he said: "God sent me before you to give you a remnant in the land, and to give you a lifeline to be refuge."² [Nonetheless,] they could not relax, nor could they find a word in their mouths to respond to him.

The Alter suggests that we might understand the reaction of the brothers in this way:

They might have been more satisfied had Joseph not spoken words of comfort and reconciliation to them, but rather acted cruelly towards them, and severely punished them. They might have seen this as [providing closure,] an end of what they [expected as] punishment for [what they had done. This is hinted at in Genesis 50:15 when they state after their father's death:] "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!"

However, after Joseph did not rebuke them at all, and furthermore, he comforted them, there was no limit to their shyness and their terrible panic before him.

² Genesis 45:5

The Alter turns to a larger theme of *Din*/Judgment, applying the lessons of this episode to our standing for judgment before the Holy One on *Yom HaDin* – the Day Judgment. However, as we prepare to conclude *Sefer Bereishit* for this year, with all its all-too-real stories of human and family relationships, I want to remain on the level of our lives and relationships as we read this portion.

Though the calendar page turned this week is that of the secular calendar, such moments are, nonetheless, reflection points for us. They provide opportunities, which in our tradition are constant, as we are reminded by our weekday liturgy with the Intermediate Blessings in the *Amidah* for *Teshuvah*/Repentance and *S'lichah*/Forgiveness. The inclusion of these two important values in our daily liturgy are an ever-present reminder that we are all works-in-progress. We need not wait for the *Yamim Noraim*/Days of Awe (and Repentance), our personal *Yom HaDin*, or other such moments to course-correct. Indeed, our study and practice of *Mussar* is a constant reminder of and process for such course correction!

We each have our own baggage from thoughts, words, deeds, and interactions over the course of our lives, or perhaps just over the course of 2024. As we join our world in marking the arrival of 2025, perhaps we can focus our *Heshbon HaNefesh*/Accounting of our Souls on where in our own relationships we might want to turn towards healing that which is broken, so that our own “unfinished business” can feel finished, as the Alter suggests with Joseph’s brothers. Even if we can heal one small bit of brokenness, we can start 2025 from a stronger place and have a foundation upon which we can build, and rebuild, in the months, and the year ahead.

FOR FOCUS:

- As you read the story of Joseph’s reunion and reconciliation with his brothers, with whom do you most closely identify?
- Which *middot* call to you in the words and actions of the brothers in this highly charged episode?
- In which relationship(s) might you wish to apply some of what you learn from our *parshah* this week?