

# *Parshas Vayigash*

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## *1. The Double Edged Sword of Conscience*

The Torah tells us that Yehudah approached the Viceroy to vindicate his brother Binyamin and prove his innocence. Yehudah said, **“And now, if I come to your servant my father and the youth is not with us – since his soul is so bound up with his soul – it will happen that when he sees the youth is missing he will die...”** He was conveying to the Viceroy that to detain Binyamin and not allow him to return to his father, who loved him dearly, would cause Yaakov an untimely death. Yehudah was presenting his case in a way that depicted the Viceroy of Egypt as a person who was insensitive and cruel without any degree of compassion.

Yosef asked all those present to vacate the room and only he and his brothers remained. He said, **“I am Yosef, Is my father alive?”** The Torah states, **“But his brothers could not answer him because they were left disconcerted before him.”** When they heard that the Viceroy of Egypt was in fact their brother, they were speechless. Rashi explains that the reason Yosef’s brothers were overwhelmed and could not utter a word was because they were embarrassed. The level of guilt and shame they felt caused them to remain mute. They realized at that moment how unjustly they had treated their brother when despite his pleas for mercy, they sold him into slavery.

The Midrash states, **“Woe to us on the Day of Judgment. Woe to us on the day that we will all be rebuked. Yosef who was the youngest evoked such a degree of guilt in his brothers when they realized what they had done to him. Thus, causing them not to be able to respond. At the end of one’s passing when Hashem will admonish us for our failings, how much more will we be embarrassed and speechless in the presence of G-d?”** The Midrash is telling us that whenever one transgresses there is always a degree of justification. Yosef’s brothers had justified their cruel and insensitive actions towards their brother. However, when they were forced to recognize that they had acted wrongfully they were overwhelmed with embarrassment. So too, when standing before the Heavenly Court to be judged, one will be embarrassed when he recognizes that all his justifications were baseless and he will be overwhelmed with guilt and shame.

Chazal compare the embarrassment that Yosef’s brothers felt to what one will feel on that day of ultimate Judgment. It is evident from Chazal that just as Yosef’s brothers justified their decision to kill their brother regardless of its ramifications, when a person sins he must justify his decision to transgress regardless of its seriousness. Therefore, on the Day of Judgment when he is confronted with Truth and is no longer able to delude himself, he will be overwhelmed with guilt and embarrassment.

The Bais HaLevi offers another understanding of the verse - **“I am Yosef, Is my father alive?”** He points out that the brothers had already informed Yosef that their father was alive when they returned to Egypt. He asks – then why was it necessary for Yosef to ask his brothers – “is my father alive?” He explains that in fact the question is rhetorical and not to be answered. When Yehudah recounted all the events that had transpired from the time they had arrived in Egypt to the present moment, he described Binyamin’s special relationship with his father and pleaded with the Viceroy not to take him. Yaakov had a special love for his young son and because of his advanced age, this might jeopardize his life. Nevertheless, the Viceroy demanded that Binyamin remain in Egypt. As a result, Yehudah was characterizing the Viceroy as compassionless and

insensitive towards them. If the Viceroy withheld Binyamin, it would be an unjustified act of cruelty. Therefore, it was imperative for him to release Binyamin so he could return to his father.

When Yosef revealed his identity and stated - **“is my father alive?”** he meant to communicate to his brothers, “You just portrayed me as a person who has no concern for an aged father and who is without conscience because of my lack of compassion. However, when you sold me into slavery, despite the extreme consequences to our father, there was not even a moment’s consideration of how your actions would affect him although his love for me was even greater than his love for Binyamin.” Yosef was saying to his brothers that they were painting him as a cruel person but were not reflecting on their own behavior, which had been no less cruel and insensitive to their father.

The Bais HaLevi thus explains that the embarrassment to Yosef’s brothers came about when they realized their own behavior towards their father was no less inhumane than their accusation against the Viceroy. Therefore, this caused them to be overcome with shame. Accordingly, their overwhelming embarrassment was not from having sold Yosef but rather from the cruelty and insensitivity they demonstrated towards their father.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that one is not permitted to deprecate anything except for idolatry. How do we understand this? If one behaves this way, it implies that he thinks it has no relevance to him. However, it is likely that if he introspects and honestly reflects on himself, he will realize that he may have relevance to the negativity that he is ridiculing. If one would focus on his own values and behavior and recognize his failings, he would not have the interest in denigrating anything outside of himself. When he does this, it is an indication that his own sense of self is beyond reproach.

With this explanation of Bais HaLevi, we can now understand the Midrash, **“Woe to us on the Day of Judgment. Woe to us on the day that we will all be rebuked...”** It means that because we looked outside rather than within ourselves, we were not able to recognize our own failings. Consequently, we will be judged and rebuked for this on the Day of Judgment.

## ***2. The End Does not Justify the Means***

The Torah tells us that after Yosef revealed himself to his brothers they were overwhelmed with shame. In an effort to console them, Yosef said, **“...do not be distressed, nor reproach yourselves for having sold me here, for it was to be a provider that G-d sent me ahead of you. For this has been two of the hunger years in the midst of the land and there are yet five years in which there shall be neither plowing nor harvest.”** It would seem that this statement by Yosef would have been enough. However, Yosef continues, **“Thus G-d has sent me ahead of you...And now it was not you who sent me here but G-d...”** This concluding statement seems superfluous and redundant. Yosef had already explained to his brothers that they did not cause him to be in Egypt, but rather, it was the Will of Hashem. Why does Yosef repeat, **“Thus G-d has sent me ahead of you...And now it was not you who sent me here but G-d...”**

It was pre-ordained by Hashem that Yaakov and his family should go to Egypt to begin the bondage. Avraham, our Patriarch, was told by Hashem, in the Covenant Between the Parts, that his children will be strangers in a land that was not their own. They would be enslaved and afflicted and ultimately they would go out with great riches. The beginning of this decree of bondage began with Yaakov and his family's descent to Egypt. If Yosef had not been in Egypt, then Yaakov would not have had any interest or desire to leave Canaan to go there; and thus would have been taken in iron shackles. However, because of Yaakov's special love for his son Yosef, he said, "I must go and see my son before I die." Thus, the bondage began.

When Yosef calmed his brothers with his first statement, which expressed that it was G-d's Will that caused him to be in Egypt and not their choice, he effectively relieved them of their guilt. He was concerned that his consoling words would also have the effect of relieving them of any culpability, since in essence their decision to sell him brought about the proper result. Yosef therefore had to clarify this point – that his being in Egypt was unrelated to their choice and he was only there because it was the Will of Hashem.

The fact is that the actions of Yosef's brothers were unconscionable because they should have been sensitive to his pleas and not have sold him into slavery. However, if they were made to believe that the result of their actions was for the good, then this would have justified the means to a greater end. Therefore, Yosef said to them, "**Thus G-d has sent me ahead of you...And now it was not you who sent me here but G-d...**" in order to make it clear that the result was unrelated to their decision and therefore they would have to do teshuvah (repent) and correct the wrong that they had done.

One cannot justify unacceptable behavior for the sake of a positive outcome. If something is ultimately meant to be, it will happen regardless of one's involvement. It was the responsibility of Yosef's brothers to be compassionate and sensitive to his pleas. The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that when Yeshayah HaNovi visited Chizkeyahu HaMelech on his sickbed, he said to him, "you will never leave your sick-bed alive. You will not recover because you have sinned." The claim against Chizkeyahu was that he did not procreate. Chizkeyahu said to the prophet that the reason he did not engage in procreation was that he saw through Divine Inspiration that he would father an evil son. The prophet responded, "Why are you getting involved in the hidden agenda of Hashem?" Meaning, that one must fulfill his obligation regardless of its consequences. It is irrelevant if the offspring were meant to be good or evil. We must function and behave within the context of Torah regardless of our belief that the end should justify the means or the means should justify the end. These positions are totally unacceptable. This is what Yosef was communicating to his brothers - "I am here because G-d wanted me to be here – unrelated to your unconscionable actions."

### ***3. Yosef's Qualification as the Provider for Torah***

The Torah tells us that when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, they initially did not believe him. Yosef then said to them, "**Come close to me...**" Rashi cites Chazal who explain this verse to mean that Yosef had spoken to his brothers in a gentle and beseeching manner and he

showed them he was circumcised. By making this fact known to them it was a confirmation that it was indeed Yosef.

When the famine began in Egypt, the only way one could purchase grain was through Yosef himself. The Egyptian people came to complain to Pharaoh that Yosef was being too demanding of them. One would think that the basis for the complaint was that Yosef was overcharging them for the grain. However, Chazal tell us differently.

Pharaoh asked his subjects, “Why is it necessary for you to purchase grain from Yosef if you knew that the years of famine were coming? You should have stored away grain during the years of plenty in preparation for the seven years of famine.” To this, the Egyptians responded by saying, “We did store way grain; however it rotted.” Pharaoh immediately understood that the reason their grain had rotted and Yosef’s did not was because Yosef had decreed it. After becoming aware of this reality, Pharaoh said to his subjects, “Just as Yosef decreed that your grain should rot, he could decree that we should all die! Therefore, it is imperative that you heed the dictates of Yosef.”

The Midrash tells us that Yosef had set a precondition to be eligible for the purchase of grain. One needed to have himself first circumcised in order to purchase grain. As a result, of this demand, all Egyptian men in the land became circumcised. How do we understand Yosef’s demand that all Egyptians must have themselves circumcised?

The Arizal explains, based on Rambam’s work *Guide for the Perplexed (Moreh Nevuchim)* that the value of circumcision is that when the foreskin (orlah) is removed it curbs the sexual drive of the male. Yosef understood that the Jewish people would be spending an extended period in Egypt, a spiritually depraved society, and this would ultimately have a serious impact upon the spiritual state of the Jewish people. Therefore, Yosef tried to elevate the Egyptian population to a higher level through circumcision so that the effect of the exile would be less damaging on the Jewish people.

If all the Egyptians were circumcised, how did Yosef prove his identity to his brothers? The Gemara tells us that before Sinai, the obligation of circumcision vis-à-vis the Jewish people was only the cutting of the foreskin (*milah*), without peeling back and removing it (*priah*). The commandment of circumcision that was given to Ishmael, the son of Avraham (even post Sinai), was **only milah**. However, since Sinai, if a Jew only had *milah* without *priah*, it is considered as if he is not circumcised. The Patriarchs and their family observed the Torah in its entirety even before Sinai. Therefore, Yosef’s circumcision was not only *milah* but also *priah*, which was unlike the Egyptians. Therefore, Yosef’s brothers immediately understood that the Viceroy was indeed their brother.

The Shalah HaKadosh writes that the only reason the Arabs are able to remain in the Land of Israel is that they are circumcised. The Torah tells us that the prerequisite for inhabiting the Land is that one must be circumcised. As one can see, there has never been a people who have occupied the Land for an extended period other than the Jews and the Arabs. The Shalah explains however that because the Arabs are only partially circumcised, their stay in the Land is only temporary. The

Jew who is fully circumcised has a permanent relevance to the Land. Thus, in order for one to be connected to the location of holiness, Eretz Yisroel, one must be fully circumcised.

After Yosef had proven to his brothers who he was, he said to them, **“You have seen with your own eyes...Therefore tell my father all my glory in Egypt and all that you saw...”** Rashi explains that what Yosef is saying to his brothers is, “You have seen with your eyes my glory, that I am circumcised as you are, and I speak Hebrew as you do.” Since Yosef had already sufficiently proven himself to his brothers through the fact that he was circumcised as they were, then what is he adding by saying, “You have seen with your eyes my glory, that I am circumcised as you are, and I speak Hebrew as you do”?

Yosef was communicating that they must tell their father Yaakov that he was now the Viceroy of Egypt and therefore in a position to properly prepare Egypt for the Jewish exile. This was demonstrated through his glory, which was his circumcision. His ability to speak Hebrew demonstrated that he also had the capacity to create an environment of holiness in Egypt despite the depravity of the society.

Yosef rose to be the position of Viceroy of Egypt. He was the sole provider of sustenance for the entire world. When Yosef said, “you see my glory” he was referring to the power that he possessed as Viceroy in Egypt. When Yosef mentioned that he was circumcised like his brothers (milah with priah), he was indicating that his spirituality was no less than that of his brothers. Although Yosef was in the depraved environment of Egypt for many years without any spiritual support, he was not diminished in any way. In addition, Yosef said that he spoke the Holy Tongue – Hebrew. Since he had all of these qualities, he was able to create an insular environment for the Jewish people in Egypt. Yosef wished to communicate to them the level of appreciation and understanding of spirituality that he possessed, despite his involvement in the material world as Viceroy.

Every aspect of Yosef’s accomplishments was linked to his own spirituality and this is why he succeeded. The Mishnah states, “Im Ein kemach, Ein Torah – if there is no flour there is no Torah.” Meaning, if one does not have material, he is not able to attain the spiritual –Torah.

Yaakov, our Patriarch, created a partnership between his two children Yissachar and Zevulun. Yissachar’s function was to be fully immersed in Torah and Zevulun’s responsibility was to be the seafaring merchant. He spent months traveling to achieve financial success in order to support the endeavors of Yissachar. The Torah states at the end of the Book of Devarim, “Moshe had blessed the tribe of Zevulun by saying, “Zevulun rejoice in your going out and Yissachar in his tent of Torah.” What is the basis for Zevulun’s rejoicing? Was he only rejoicing over the potential material success that was at hand? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Moshe was saying that Zevulun should rejoice in his endeavor to achieve financial success because it would support the Torah of Yissachar. His rejoicing was not because of the material success in and of itself. The level of Zevulun’s appreciation of Torah was unique. He understood that his responsibility to succeed in the material was an imperative because without it Torah could not flourish.

We learn from Yosef and Zevulun that the only way one can assume the role of a provider for

Torah will be determined by one's understanding of the value of the Torah that is being studied. It was only because of Yosef's own level of spirituality that he was able to create an insular society that would guarantee the spiritual survival of the Jewish people.

#### ***4. The Role of Yosef and Yehudah Vis-à-vis the Klal Yisroel***

The Torah states, **“He (Yaakov) sent Yehudah ahead of him to Yosef, to prepare ahead of him in Goshen...”** Rashi offers two explanations of this verse. The first, based on the Targum, is that Yaakov simply wanted Yehudah to go ahead of him to establish the community of Goshen and settle it according to Yaakov's wishes. Another explanation offered by the Midrash is that Yaakov wanted Yehudah to go to Goshen ahead of him in order to establish a Bais Talmud (a Yeshivah). This is a location designated for rendering halachic (legal) rulings and the study of Torah. Evidently, since Yaakov chose Yehudah to establish the Bais Talmud, he must have been the most qualified person. It was not that he wanted Yehudah to choose a piece of real estate and oversee the construction, but rather, he wanted Yehudah to consecrate the location and infuse it with spirituality. Why was Yehudah best suited for this task?

Evidently, he was the most qualified to establish the Bais Talmud because of his dimension of Torah knowledge and spirituality. However, this is difficult to understand. Before his brothers sold Yosef into slavery, the Torah tells us that Yisroel (Yaakov) loved Yosef more than all of his children because he was his “Ben Zikunim – (literally a child of his old age)”. The Targum Unkelos interprets this to mean that Yosef was the wisest of Yaakov's children. Because of his intellectual capability, Yaakov had transmitted all the Torah that he had studied in the Yeshivah of Shem V'Aver. Clearly, Yosef was a Torah giant. If this is the case, then why did Yaakov choose Yehudah to establish the Bais Talmud?

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra tells us, “The descendents of Esav (and Amalek) could only fall in the hands of descendents of Rochel.” The Gemara explains that whenever the Jews were engaged in battle with Amalek, the descendents of Rochel were involved. Esav himself personified physicality and materialism. The Gemara is teaching us that the only ones who are qualified to dominate and subordinate physicality (Esav) are the descendents of Rochel. Although she is known to be one of the most beautiful women ever to live, she consecrated her existence to serve Hashem. Her spirituality dominated her physicality. Yosef, being a person of unequalled beauty and ability, consecrated his life to serve Hashem as his mother had done. Therefore, there is nothing in the physical existence that Yosef does not dominate.

As Viceroy, Yosef was the master of Egypt and therefore was the provider for the Jewish people. He sustained them by providing every material amenity that was needed. The function of the progeny of Rochel was to dominate and utilize the physical for a spiritual end. The function of the progeny of Leah was to deal directly with the spirituality of the Jewish people. Yehudah, the son of Leah, who represents the royalty and leadership of the Jewish people was the one to consecrate and infuse the location with spirituality.

Yosef, in fact, was greater than his brother Yehudah. Yaakov loved him more than any of his other children because he was the wisest. However, his ability does not determine what role he will play vis-à-vis the destiny of the Klal Yisroel. For example, the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells a story about a non-Jew who was interested in converting on the condition that he should be able to officiate as the High Priest. Hillel Ha Zokain (Hillel the Elder) began teaching him the law that a non-Kohen who officiates in the Temple is liable for spiritual excision. Hillel told the non-Jew that this law would even apply to Dovid HaMelech if he were to officiate. The non-Jew was taken aback. He therefore concluded, "If King David is not qualified to officiate in the Temple then I definitely am not." Hillel explained that if one is not the descendent of Aaron HaKohen, regardless of his greatness, he is not qualified.

The function of the offspring of Rochel was to accommodate the physical aspects of the Klal Yisroel. Regardless of Yosef's qualifications as a Talmud Chacham, his function was not to engage in the spirituality of the Klal Yisroel. It was Yehudah, the son of Leah, who was to go to Goshen and infuse that location with spirituality.

Chazal tell us that there will be Moshiach Ben Yosef (The Moshiach who descends from Yosef) and Moshiach Ben Dovid (of the Davidic line). The function of Moshiach Ben Yosef will be to lead the battle against Gog and Magog at the end of time. His role is to defeat the enemy of the Jewish people through physical confrontation. After the victory will be achieved, Moshiach Ben Dovid will proclaim the Name of Hashem and disseminate spirituality throughout the world. He will be responsible for the spiritual elevation of the Klal Yisroel, which can only follow after the physical battle has been won.

Similarly, Yosef prepared the community with all that was needed to sustain the Jewish people in Egypt. He set aside Goshen; he managed the grain supplies, etc. All of Yosef's endeavors vis-à-vis the Klal Yisroel involved engaging the physical for the sake of a spiritual consequence. For example, as the Viceroy Yosef required that all Egyptian males should be circumcised as a prerequisite for receiving grain. The act of circumcision is a physical act, which has spiritual ramifications. Without Yosef's involvement, there could be no Klal Yisroel.

Yaakov established a relationship between Yissachar and Zevulun. Yissachar's life was only dedicated to Torah and spirituality with no material responsibility. Zevulun was the seafaring merchant and responsible for the total material support of Yissachar. The spirituality achieved by Yissachar was not possible without Zevulun's support. Yosef was the Zevulun of Klal Yisroel and Yehudah, vis-à-vis establishing the Bais Talmud, represented Yissachar – the spiritual.

## ***5. How does One Get the World to Understand Something that is Intrinsically Special***

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov arrived in Egypt, Yosef went to meet him. The Torah states **"Yosef harnessed his chariot and went up to meet Yisroel his father in Goshen."** Yosef was the Viceroy of Egypt, the most revered and powerful man in Egypt. He determined life and death through the distribution of grain during the years of famine. The aura of Yosef was greater than

life. The Torah tells us that when Yosef became aware that his father was in Egypt he chose to harness his own chariot rather than delegating it to one of his many servants. One would think that this would be beneath a man of Yosef's stature, who was feared and awed by the world, to engage in such a menial task. How do we understand this?

The Torah tells us regarding Avraham, that he harnessed his own donkey when he was told to perform the *Akeidah* (The Binding of Yitzchak). Chazal explain that although Avraham was 137 years old at the time and he could have had one of his servants hitch his donkey, he did it himself because "Love supercedes all protocol." Avraham's love for Hashem was to such a degree that at that moment all that existed was doing the Will of G-d. His sense of self did not exist at that moment. We also find that when Bilaam (the prophet for the nations of the world) embarked on his journey to curse the Jewish people he hitched his own donkey. Chazal explain the reason for this is, "Hate supercedes all protocol." Bilaam's intense and all consuming hate for the Jewish people caused him to be singularly focused on his mission to destroy the Jewish people. His own existence at that moment had no relevance.

One would think that regarding Yosef harnessing his own chariot, despite being the Viceroy of Egypt, Chazal would have said that this is another example of, "Love supercedes all protocol." Yosef's special love for his father Yaakov would have caused him to be blinded to his own status. However, Chazal do not say this. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Yosef harnessed his own chariot to "give honor to his father". It was not because of his love that he lost sight of who he was, as Avraham lost sight of himself in serving Hashem. Yosef's intent was to honor his father. The difficulty is – if this was an act of respect for his father, how was this communicated to Yaakov? Evidently, this is not the correct understanding.

When Yaakov arrived in Egypt at the age of 130 years, he was aged and appeared frail. His advanced level of aging was obvious, as we see from Pharaoh's comment upon meeting Yaakov, "I have never seen such an aged person." Clearly, Yaakov's appearance did not allow any one to appreciate or understand who he was. Yaakov in essence was more than a living angel who radiated holiness. When Yaakov arrived in Egypt, the famine ceased. His blessing to Pharaoh caused the Nile to rise in the presence of the Egyptian monarch. However, initially how was one able to have understanding of who Yaakov actually was?

Yosef knew the misconception that people would have about his father. So he made the decision as the Viceroy of Egypt (the most powerful, feared and revered person in the world), to harness his own chariot for the sake of greeting him. Through his actions Yosef communicated that despite who he was, his father Yaakov was far superior. Thus, Yosef honored him by harnessing his own chariot so that the Egyptians would have a semblance of understanding and an appreciation of the dimension of Yaakov. In this way, they would have a minimal understanding that Yaakov was greater than the Viceroy of Egypt.

When the Holy Ark was brought back to Yerushalyim after being in captivity, Dovid HaMelech (the conqueror of all Israel) danced with great intensity before the Holy Ark. This was done in full public view in the presence of the entire Jewish people. Michal his wife (the daughter of King Shaul) witnessed him dancing in public before the Holy Ark and rebuked him for displaying such unbecoming behavior for the King of Israel. Dovid responded by saying, "It is irrelevant... I am honoring Hashem." Not only did Dovid not see this as a belittlement, but what he wanted to

convey to the Jewish people was that there was nothing greater than Hashem. He, in the presence of Hashem, was nothing.

Shlomo HaMelech says in Mishlei (Proverbs), “There is neither wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against Hashem.” The Talmud explains that if there is an issue of Chilul Hashem (desecrating G-d’s Name) one does not acknowledge the Torah Sage. Hashem’s honor supercedes everyone’s honor, regardless of his or her status.

The Talmud states that a king is not permitted to waive his honor. If a person transgresses the wishes of the king, he can be put to death. The Gemara at the end of Tractate Makkos tells us that when Yehoshaphat, the King of Yehudah, would see a Talmud Chacham he would rise from his throne, go over to embrace and kiss him, saying, “*Rebbe! Rebbe! Mori! Mori!* – My Rebbe, My Teacher!” Yehoshaphat demonstrated through his behavior that regardless of his status, the honor of the Torah superceded his own. He was teaching the people that nothing is comparable to the importance of Torah, which is represented by the Torah Sage.

The Gemara (in Makkos) states, “The foolish Babylonians who stand in the presence of a Sefer Torah (Torah Scroll) but do not give honor to the living Torah Sage.” The Talmud Chacham is an embodiment of living Torah while the Torah scroll itself is only a holy object.

When a person of prestigious status, who is revered, honors a Torah Sage while foregoing his own honor, he is demonstrating to all that the honor of Torah is paramount. This example allows others to appreciate the value of a Talmud Chacham.

The Gemara tells us that the world stands in the merit of thirty-six hidden tzaddikim (devoutly righteous people). Someone once said to Reb Chaim of Volozhin, the primary disciple of the Vilna Gaon, that it was obvious that the Vilna Gaon was one of the thirty-six tzaddikim. He asked how is it possible that the 36 tzaddikim are unknown if the Vilna Gaon can be identified as such? Reb Chaim of Volozhin responded that the greatness and the devoutness of the Vilna Gaon that is known to the world is insignificant compared to what is actually hidden. The world has only an inkling of who what the Vilna Gaon truly was. Thus, he was one of the “hidden” tzaddikim whose merit sustains the world. This was also said by Reb Shlomo Zalman Ohrbach z’tl regarding Reb Shach z’tl.