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Vayigash 5783

On Being Consistent to a Fault

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 6, 1968)

The drama of Joseph and his brothers, which draws to a climax in this morning's Sidra, is a source of endless fascination. One significant aspect of this strange narrative is that Joseph's actions towards his brothers are incomprehensible, both to the brothers who do not recognize him and to us who already know who he is. To the very end, both they the brothers and we the readers are perplexed: they, by the Egyptian prince who seems irrationally bent upon tormenting them, and we by the anomalous and mysterious motives of Joseph in continuing to conceal his identity from them and carrying out this elaborate spiel. Then, suddenly, all becomes clear. Joseph's revelation of his identity is also the revelation of a master plan, conceived by a master-mind, a marvelous and beautifully consistent course of action. The purpose of this program is to help them to achieve teshuva, repentance or rehabilitation, to regain their sense of dignity and purge themselves of their shame. For this is the grand goal of Joseph, to which all his actions are inclined and aimed.

Their sin was that of hatred for their half-brother Joseph, the son of Rachel, a hatred which resulted in endangering his life. Now, Judah was willing to endanger his own life for the remaining half-brother, the other son of Rachel, Benjamin. The brothers thus fulfilled the requirements of teshuva. How beautifully everything falls into place and pattern! How symmetrical, how apropos! And how aptly does all this mesh with Joseph's earlier plan, which came to the fore in the two great dreams about their sheaves bowing to his sheaves, and about the sun and the moon and the stars bowing to him, Joseph. No wonder that Pharaoh was so impressed by this young Hebrew lad. He is indeed wise beyond words, the *tzophnat paaneiah*, the one who has all the answers and solves all the problems. Moreover, his plan for his brothers' teshuva is right, it is moral. That is why the Rabbis were moved to declare

that *hanun ve'rahum, zeh Yosef ha-tzaddik*, the expression, "merciful and gracious," refers to the righteous Joseph.

And yet, the Sages found cracks and chips in this picture of Joseph. Joseph was wise, and his heart was in the right place; but something was amiss. Perhaps one might say that he was just a bit too clever, the plan was too smooth, the operation too consistent.

For instance, when testing his brothers, he gave Benjamin a far greater portion. Did he not take too much of a chance in arousing those old and latent jealousies? Did he not realize that they are, after all, but human? And then when he arrested Simon before their very eyes--was that not too cruel, though perhaps necessary? And when he demanded of them that they surrender to him Benjamin as a slave because of the theft of the cup, he caused them so much grief that *va-yikre'u simlotam*, they tore their garments as a sign of anguish. It is true that this act on his part was one aspect of a consistent plan; but it was pitiless and harsh, he might have yielded to human emotions, he might have somehow softened the blow. In fact, the Rabbis tell us that Joseph was repaid generations later for this act of agony that he caused his brothers: Joseph's descendant Joshua, who had otherwise experienced an unbroken string of successes in leading Israel in the conquest of Canaan, had one difficult setback in the war against the city of Ai, and so grief-stricken was Joshua that he tore his clothing in anguish!

Finally, and most important, Joseph heard, no less than ten times, his brothers referring to their father Jacob as *avdekha avinu*, "thy servant our father." Ten times he permitted them to refer to his own father as his servant! It is true that this was part of his consistent fulfillment of the dream whereby the sun too, symbolizing Jacob, will bow down to Joseph. But the Rabbis were terribly angry with Joseph for allowing this piece of disrespect ten times over

again. In punishment, they declare, Joseph lost ten years of his own life which he would have been permitted to live out had he not countenanced this discourtesy to his own father.

In a word, Joseph was consistent to a fault! He hewed too closely to his original plan. When a plan is overly consistent, when it leaves no room for contingencies, then it becomes a machine--the kind of machine that grinds up human hearts and emotions, that leads brothers to grief, that makes servants of parents, and that ultimately diminishes the life of the master-mind himself. It is here that Joseph erred. He was too consistent and not sufficiently compassionate; too calculating and not sufficiently kindly.

Does this mean that we must make a virtue of inconsistency, that it is good to be illogical and self-contradictory? Of course not! One ought always to have a framework, a philosophy, some solid criteria by which to judge men and events and oneself. But never should the framework be so massive that you have to cut down the picture of life in order to fit it into the frame. Never should consistency be so rigid that you become callous to the cause of compassion. Never should a theory thwart the truth. In the general organization of one's *Weltanschauung*, one ought always to strive for consistency, for otherwise life is haphazard and even hazardous. But, an overall consistent philosophy of life does not necessitate a stifling and petty consistency in every small segment of experience. For then, consistency becomes nothing more than the excuse for a closed mind.

What is it that is wrong with over-consistency?

First, over-consistency makes one inhuman. If I believe in the plan above all else, then I will follow it to the bitter end even if I must steamroll over people and feelings. This was the error of Joseph, who had a marvelous and even generous plan, but followed it to its logical conclusion without compassion.

Second, it is simply unscientific. It involves too much trust in reason, and therefore out of concern for a consistent rational pattern I may fail to respect newly discovered facts and new situations. A theory that ignores facts, that twists logic instead of revisiting itself, that wards off unpleasant challenges by ignoring them, is simply wrong.

It is interesting that in the history of Talmudic methodology, the protest against extravagant dialectics, called *pilpul*, was largely a reaction against over-

consistency. The protest against *pilpul*, from fifteenth century Prague to sixteenth century Poland to eighteenth century Lithuania, was a reaction against constancy so strong and theory so powerful that they would not be prejudiced by mere facts.

Instead, there is a similar movement in contemporary American philosophy, which expresses itself in contempt for "ideology." The word "ideology" is taken as a synonym for the enthronement of the theory beyond any revision because of encounter with new facts.

An example of this disdain for facts in favor of a consistent theory is the matter of dialogue between Jews and Christians. One would have thought that after the Six Day War and the terrible betrayal of the Jewish community by those who had expressed such desires for dialogues with us, that we should be done with the whole business. Indeed, some honorable and honest proponents of dialogue issued retractions soon after the Six Day War and announced that they finished with them. Yet, too many Jews preferred to go their old way and have refused to abandon the dialogue movement and all that it implies. It is a pity that only a week or two ago an official of the Conservative movement authoritatively declared that his movement is in favor of more dialogues, not less. Apparently, a "line" once taken, must be continued to infinity even if it leads--no place... How wise was Ralph Waldo Emerson when he declared that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Third, over-consistency is religiously sinful. It is a sign of a lack of humility before God. It assumes that humans have complete control over the future, that we can avoid surprise and novelty and contingency by exercising our own wisdom and shrewdness. It means that we have over-confidence in our own reason and ability, and therefore that we really read God out of the world, that we substitute our plans for His, or, at best, we presume to know His plans to the last iota. Even religious folk, perhaps especially religious folk, ought never dare such presumptions. It is an act of arrogance against God: *ein hokhma v'ein eitza v'ein tevunah negged ha-Shem*, there is no wisdom and no counsel and no understanding against the Lord. The religious objection to over-consistency is in the form of a plea for humility, of an acknowledgment of our own limited visibility in the skies of history and our willingness to be guided by divine instruments too.

But finally, and perhaps the most serious objection

to consistency-to-a-fault is that it is self-defeating and sometimes suicidal.

The best and most painful example of such over-consistency is the harsh and unwarranted criticism now being levelled against the forthcoming World Conference of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Synagogues in Jerusalem, which I hope to address later this week, and for which I leave tonight with the rest of The Jewish Center delegation. This Conference is to be the first international meeting of Orthodox Synagogue leadership in our times, in order to consult with each other, to benefit from each other's experiences, and help the less developed Orthodox communities, as well as to demonstrate our interest in world-wide problems and perhaps provide for the first time an address for Orthodox Judasim in the world. That is all we have in mind--it is rather modest, perhaps too modest.

Yet we have sustained relentless criticism and a barrage of charges against us by the extreme right wing of Orthodoxy. I do not intend to analyze here all that is involved in the World Conference, nor to go into all the details of the opposition. I do not think that we ought to ponder what our critics say, and that it ought to be a concern of ours. In doing so, let it be said to their credit that they are consistent; and to their discredit and our dismay, that they are consistent to a fault--suicidally so!

The issue, to put it clearly, is: the reconstruction of the Sanhedrin. The late Rabbi Maimon, the first Minister of Religions of Israel, had long advocated the reconstitution of this supreme judicial body of Jewish Law. Many other rabbis were opposed, fearing that this would be the opening for unwarranted reforms. In addition, they dislike the idea of Jewish legal decisions being proclaimed by a hierarchy, and preferred that such verdicts be issued by those recognized by the consensus of world Jewish opinion as qualified authorities. Furthermore, they had halakhic doubts as to whether a Sanhedrin could be legally reconvened in our day.

Now this is a debatable issue about which men of good will can differ. Without any comments on the issue itself, let us for the sake of argument grant a point: it is wrong, for whatever reasons one may choose, to reconstitute the Sanhedrin today.

From this point on, however, reason is slowly abandoned, till nothing is left that makes much sense except in psychological terms of fear, retrenchment, and introversion.

After the movement for a Sanhedrin waned and was all but forgotten, the opposition to it kept on as a matter of general principle. When Religious Zionists wanted to build a headquarters for the Chief Rabbinate in Israel, the Hechal Shelomoh, the same right wing groups suspected that it was a cloak for a Sanhedrin--and banned entrance to the building. To this day, the ban stands though it is largely ignored. Are they consistent? Certainly!

Then, every time we spoke of Orthodox leadership of different countries and communities meeting together, immediately the threat was raised of a ban against the Sanhedrin directed against such a meeting. Consistent? By all means.

And now that we have scheduled this world-wide meeting of synagogues, mostly of laymen, not one of whom, laymen or rabbis, particularly intends to convoke a Sanhedrin sub rosa and become the first member, the same extreme group here and in Israel accuses us of doing just that, and in a series of newspaper ads declares that Orthodox Jews may not attend this Conference. Consistent? No doubt; but consistent to a fault--an irrational, wrong-headed, misplaced, extravagant, and dangerous consistency that is destructive of the interests of all Orthodox Jews, those on the right as well as those in the center and on the left.

We live in a time of disintegration--of the home and the family, of religious and nations, of man himself. Assimilation is eating away at the fringes of the Jewish communities of the entire world. This is a time to seek out unity, not to snuff it out before it begins; a time to consolidate, not condemn; a time to ban futile issues, not to issue futile bans; a time for realistic construction, not unrealistic consistency.

As the Jewish Center delegation joins our fellow-American Jews in meeting with fellow-Orthodox Jews throughout the world, we do so in the knowledge and conviction that *kol kavvanotenu le'Shem shamayim*, all our intentions are for the sake of Heaven. We are sad that others do not understand us and do not join us.

Our main prayer is that our modest goals be achieved and that they inspire us to yet greater goals; that those who are now suspicious be convinced of our integrity and join us, lending us of their piety and their passion, their scholarship and their commitment, so that all together we may fulfill the great verse of the prophet Malachi: *az nidaberu yir'ei ha-Shem ish el re'ehu*, then will those who

fear the Lord speak each man to his friend. When will we prove the authenticity of our status as *yir'ei ha-Shem*, those who fear the Lord? When will we converse with each other, when *az nidaberu*, not condemn; when we will talk, not vituperate; in other words, when we fear God and not

the times in which we live, when we will revere Heaven and not be frightened by lurking suspicions; and above all, when we will relate each of us to his fellow Jew as *ish el re'ehu*, a man to his friend.

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The Anxiety of Approach

Dr. Erica Brown

We all have moments on our way to a difficult encounter or conversation when all we want to do is withdraw, turn around, or run away. It's the walk into the doctor's office to get the results of a biopsy, or the agonizing moments before a break-up. It's the march into the boss's office to resign or request a raise or the quick inhale of breath before a tough conversation with a child, a spouse, or a friend. Feelings are high. Outcomes are unpredictable, and we fear the worst.

The name of our Torah reading is taken from its very first word: *vayigash* from the Hebrew root *nagash*, meaning 'to bring close' or 'to draw near.' The setting is high drama. Judah approached Joseph with trepidation after Joseph accused his brothers of theft: "Then Judah went up to him (*vayigash*) and said, 'Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh'" (Gen. 44:18). The simple translation of *vayigash* here fails to communicate the tension implied in the Hebrew. But a review of the root word as it appears throughout Genesis reveals that this verb is used very specifically to describe the beginning of potentially fraught encounters, what I call the anxiety of approach. *Nagash* is not merely 'to come close' but to do so when the situation is highly charged or emotional.

Abraham boldly approached God in defense of any pious person in Sodom: "Abraham came forward (*vayigash*) and said, 'Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?'" (18:23). The same verb is used when Jacob deceptively approached his father disguised as Esau:

"So Jacob drew close (*vayigash*) to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau'" (27:22). The tremulousness conveyed by this word is used immediately before this verse (27:21) and repeated a few verses after it (27:25).

Later in the Jacob and Esau narrative, when the two brothers meet up years later, Jacob's family approach Esau hesitatingly, understanding the possible danger and vulnerability of their position. The verb appears twice in these verses: "Then the maids, with their children, came forward (*vatigashna*) and bowed low; next Leah, with her children, came forward (*vatigash*) and bowed low; and last, Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed low," (33:6-7). When Joseph's brothers were brought into his house and accused of theft, they protested to a member of his retinue: "So they went up (*vayigshu*) to Joseph's house steward and spoke to him at the entrance of the house" (43:19). Uncomfortable feelings can lead to poor choices, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes in *Not in God's Name*, "Religious people in the grip of strong emotions – fear, pain, anxiety, confusion, a sense of loss and humiliation – often dehumanise their opponents with devastating results."

My personal favorite example of this verb is the two times it appears immediately after Joseph reveals himself in Genesis 45, surely one of the most dramatic and traumatic of biblical moments: "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come forward (*g'shu na*) to me.' And when they came forward (*vayigashu*), he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt'" (45:4). In our mind's eye, we imagine Joseph dressed regally and sitting upon a throne towering over his poor brothers. He curls his index finger towards him as he says words that could only, in the brother's hearing, signal a death threat. They inch forward as he says something they never, ever expected to hear. Joseph was alive. There would be a steep price to pay now. Yet Joseph embraces Benjamin instead and speaks with kindness to his shocked brothers. Joseph saw divine intervention in his strange and difficult path and opened an unexpected portal to reproachment.

What we find in example after biblical example is that even though each confrontation was potentially

treacherous and even explosive, the risky encounter took place and often yielded unanticipated positive results. That's because these individuals were extraordinary leaders who understood what was required of them in the moment.

One behavior that distinguishes leaders from followers is the willingness to take an uncomfortable risk to achieve a new state of relationship or negotiation, a risk others would rather not take even if it resulted in a larger platform of influence, a better, more honest relationship or a larger salary.

Susan Scott, in her important book, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time*, writes, "Never be afraid of the conversations you are having. Be afraid of the conversations you are not having." She is concerned that we entertain high levels of denial about problems that prevent us from discussing them with authenticity and integrity. She challenges us to look in the mirror and ask: "When was the last time I said what I really thought and felt? What are the leaders in my organization pretending not to know? What are members of my family pretending not to know? What am I pretending not to know?"

She uses a creative and extreme example to illustrate

As Time Goes By

Rabbi Joshua (*The Hoffer*) Hoffman z"l

After Ya'akov and his family come to Egypt, Yosef presents Ya'akov to Pharaoh. Upon seeing Ya'akov for the first time, Pharaoh asks him, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" Ya'akov answers, "The days of the years of my sojourn have been a hundred and thirty years ; few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not reached the days of the years of my forefathers in the days of their sojourn" (Bereishis 47:8-9). This conversation between Pharaoh and Ya'akov appears to be very strange. What prompted Pharaoh to ask Ya'akov how old he was, and why did Ya'akov answer by saying that he his life had been bad and short in comparison to his forefathers? Rabbi Elie Munk, in his *The Call of the Torah*, notes that there seem to be two basic approaches in the midrashim and among the commentators, regarding the nature of this conversation, and whether Ya'akov answered properly or not. These two approaches, however, may be reconciled, as I will try to

the point with organizational life. A friend of hers who is a high-level executive told Scott that a brave employee came into his office with a large bucket of sand and poured it on the rug. The executive couldn't believe it and asked what prompted this outrageous behavior. The employee replied: "I just figured I'd make it easier for you to bury your head in the sand on the topic I keep bringing up and you keep avoiding." Rather than fire him, the executive admired his courage and promoted him.

Scott is not suggesting that you try the bucket trick with your boss, but she is suggesting that fierce conversations are unavoidable and usually necessary. To that end, she offers some helpful tips and a seven-step formula for navigating them with less emotion and more control to achieve better outcomes. Most importantly, she cajoles her readers to become truth tellers: "Everyone wants one person in the world to whom they can tell the truth and from whom they will hear the truth. Become that person." This isn't because it's easy. It's because, as she writes, "There is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us."

Can you describe your own "vayigash" moment? Is there a difficult conversation you need to have that you're avoiding? Who do you trust to tell you the truth?

demonstrate.

One approach to this conversation, followed by Chizkuni and others, is that Pharaoh, seeing Ya'akov with white hair and beard, thought that he was very old, and had therefore lived a long, fulfilling life. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, in his *Toras HaMikra*, suggests that Pharaoh wanted to know the secret of attaining a long life. Following this approach, Ya'akov's answer is explained in various ways. Some commentators, as noted by Rabbi Munk, say that Ya'akov was following the general pattern set by Yosef when his family came to Egypt, to lessen themselves in the eyes of Pharaoh so that they would be left alone, able to live in their own far-off province. Rabbi Avraham, son of the Rambam, writes that Ya'akov was telling Pharaoh that the world to come is of primary importance, and one's life in this world is only secondary. Therefore, he referred to his life here as a mere 'sojourn,' and said that it was short and difficult. According to Rabbi Goren, Ya'akov

was telling Pharaoh that one cannot lengthen the years of his life through mere natural means, because ultimately it is God Who decides how long and how well a person lives. In this way Ya'akov was trying to continue in the way of his forefathers, influencing not only his family, but other peoples as well. The best way to do this, Ya'akov felt, was through the avenue of the king, who would in turn influence his entire nation. The common factor among all of these explanations is that Pharaoh's question to Ya'akov was prompted by something positive he saw in him, and that Ya'akov's response was a proper one.

There is, however, another explanation of the conversation between Pharaoh and Ya'akov that indicts Ya'akov, not only for the answer that he gave to Pharaoh, but for Pharaoh's question, as well. The Da'as Zekeinim MiBa'alei Tosafos cites a midrash which says that God declared to Ya'akov, "You lament your unhappy life even after I have saved you from the hands of Eisav and brought back to you your daughter Dinah and your son Yosef." As a punishment for speaking in this way, God shortened Ya'akov's life, so that he died thirty-three years before his time, dying at the age of one hundred forty-seven instead of one hundred eighty, as he was originally scheduled for. God thus deducted thirty-three years from his life, continues the midrash, one year for each word in the two verses that comprise the conversation between Pharaoh and Ya'akov. Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz, in his *Sichos Mussar*, notes that Ya'akov was punished even for the words that Pharaoh had uttered, because it was the aged, troubled visage that Ya'akov projected which prompted Pharaoh's original question about his age. Ya'akov's aged appearance reflected an inner sense of suffering and discontent with the trials that he had gone through in the course of his life. When he articulated this sense of suffering, then, he was punished not only for what he said, but also for the way in which he bore the trials of his life, as reflected in his visage.

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, in his *Pirkei Torah*, does not mention Rabbi Shmuelevitz's explanation, but offers one of his own along somewhat similar lines, although with a different message. While, according to Rav Shmuelevitz, Ya'akov's shortcoming was his lack of appreciation for the gift of life no matter what the circumstances under which it is lived, according to Rav Gifter, it was his failure to appreciate the function of the troubles that he had gone through in his life. Referring to the comments of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto in his classic work, *Mesillas*

Yesharim, Rabbi Gifter says that God tests people so that they will grow, and, therefore, whatever suffering Ya'akov had endured was really for his own benefit. Because he did not appreciate this fact, God deprived him of his full measure of years, because he would not use them properly, in any case, and, therefore, prolonging his life would really serve no function.

Rabbi Munk notes that according to the Ba'al Haturim on the beginning of parshas Vayechi (Bereishis 47:28) there was a different reason for Ya'akov's life being shortened by thirty-three years. In parshas Vayeitzei, when Lavan told Ya'akov that someone had stolen his teraphim, or gods, Ya'akov responded that if the teraphim would be found with anyone in his family, then 'lo yichyeh' - that person shall not live. As it turned out, Rochel had stolen the teraphim, and, because of the curse that Ya'akov had inadvertently pronounced on her, she died before her designated time. Since Ya'akov brought about Rochel's early death, he was punished through having his own life shortened by thirty - three years, corresponding to the numerical equivalent of the meaning of the words 'lo yichyeh.' Rabbi Munk writes that this reason for the shortening of Ya'akov's life is not, fundamentally, in conflict with the reason given in the midrash cited in the Da'as Zekeinim, because they are both based on the premise, found in the Talmud (Ta'anis 11a), that God is more exacting with righteous people than he is with ordinary ones, and punishes them severely for even small offenses.

Following Rabbi Munk's approach in reconciling the two different reasons given for Ya'akov's premature death, perhaps we can reconcile the two different approaches to his conversation with Pharaoh, as well. As we have seen, according to Rav Avraham, son of the Rambam, as well as Rabbi Goren, Pharaoh's question was prompted by his admiration of Ya'akov's stately appearance as a dignified elder. Ya'akov wished to exploit this admiration in a positive way and thereby influence Pharaoh - and through him the Egyptian people - to lead a moral life informed by belief in the one God, just as Avrohom and Yitzchok before him had constantly tried to influence people to improve their ways. However, despite his good intentions, Ya'akov described his life experience in a way that could be misconstrued, and interpreted as lacking somewhat in appreciation to God. Although, for most people, this nuance in presentation would not have been considered as reprehensible, for Ya'akov it was.

Alternatively, we can suggest a different way of reconciling the Ba'al HaTurim's reason for Ya'akov's early death and the Da'as Zekeinim's reason. There was, it seems, a question of inconsistency involved on Ya'akov's part. Rabbi Eliyohu Dovid Rabinowitz Teomim, known as the Aderes, in his notes to the Ba'al HaTurim, points out that Rochel stole Lavan's teraphim because she wanted to cure him of his addiction to idolatry, and, therefore, Ya'akov's declaration that whoever had them with him would die was misplaced. Perhaps, then, we can explain that Ya'akov was being inconsistent when he spoke of the days of his life as being short and bad in an attempt to influence Pharaoh to lead a moral life. After all, he had not tried to influence Lavan to abandon his idol worship when the opportunity arose, as Avrohom, for example, had done when he smashed his own father's idols as an attempt to prove that he was mistaken in his beliefs. If Ya'akov was truly following in the ways of Avrohom, he should have tried to influence Lavan, as well. Because he did not, his description of his life to Pharaoh as short and bad was not justified as being a means of influencing Pharaoh to guide his life through a belief in God, and, therefore, his life was shortened by thirty-three years.

On a different note, perhaps we can add that the way in which Ya'akov presented his reply to Pharaoh, saying that the days of his life had been short and bad, seemed to ignore the message that Yosef later gave to his brothers, that

what they had considered as bad was really good. As we explained last week, the entire process of the sale of Yosef was part of the divine plan for the exile and redemption of the Jewish nation, which would culminate in its entrance as a nation into Eretz Yisroel. The entire process was thus guided by divine providence, just as life in Eretz Yisroel is entirely guided by divine providence (see Netvort to parshas Mikeitz, 5765, available at Torahheights.com). This accounted for Yosef's allusion to the spies when he spoke to his brothers. By thinking that Yosef's dreams of ruling over them and providing them with grain reflected something bad, they failed to realize that this scenario was part of the process of exile and redemption, and was thus really for their benefit. Ya'akov's statement that his life had been bad projected this kind of approach to the process, as well. Perhaps, then, Ya'akov's punishment for the wording of his reply was somewhat akin to the punishment received by the nation for listening to the spies in the time of Moshe. For each of the forty days of the mission of the spies to scout the land, the nation was punished by having to wander in the wilderness for a year. Ya'akov's punishment of losing one year of life for each word in the conversation he had with Pharaoh, thus, somewhat paralleled the punishment that came as a result of the evil report of the spies, because they both reflected a similar error in approach to the process that was necessary for the ultimate possession of Eretz Yisroel by the nation.

The True Leadership

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jan 5, 2017)

Everyone knows the famous Medrash on the pasuk *Va-yar es ha-agalos asher shalach Yosef*—when Yaakov saw the wagons that Yosef sent, the pasuk says *va-techi ruach Yaakov avihem*. Suddenly, he felt rejuvenated and inspired. But what's so special about these *agalos*? And Rashi quotes a Medrash that Yosef was hinting at the *sugya* of *Egla Arufa* that he learned with Yaakov when they last saw each other. And the question that the Acharonim ask is: On the simple level, it was a secret sign, because any impostor would not have known what *sugya* they last learned. And on a deeper level, Yaakov didn't know if it was still the same Yosef, holding strong to his *mesorah*, or whether he assimilated and turned into Egyptian. By alluding to the last *sugya* they were learning,

Yosef showed that he was still thinking about Torah and loyal to his traditions.

But why specifically the *sugya* of *Egla Arufa*? *Agalos* means wagons, while *egla* means calf. It's the same letters, but it's not the same word. So why did Chazal pick this *sugya*? What were they hinting at here?

Perhaps we can explain it based on the meaning of *Egla Arufa*. There is a murder victim, and we need to do a special ritual of *kaparrah*. But who should take responsibility for this? The elders of the city—*ziknei ha-ir*. You find the nearest city, and the leaders of that city must bring this *Egla Arufa* and say: *Yadeinu lo shafchu es ha-dam ha-zeh*. Did we have a *hava amina* that the elders killed this guy in the middle of the highway? No. It means

they took responsibility for him by making sure there would not be any dangerous situations, and by not letting people go without food, water, and proper protection. Otherwise, they are not deserving of *kaparrah*. When they see something happening to another Jew, they must take responsibility and say: We must stand up and do everything possible to take care of our brethren. We are the leaders who use our power to take care of the Jews. And if we don't, it's a problem—we must learn our lesson and change from now on. What Yosef is *meramez* to his father is all about the meaning of leadership. What was Yosef's problem? He said: I am in the middle, and all the other sheaves bow down to mine, and all the heavenly bodies bow down to me. Yosef saw himself as a leader. But he thought that a leader is someone in charge and to whom everyone bows down. It's someone who has power and is better than everyone else. And that's what the brothers saw. That's what made them resent him so much. Maybe

Blinded by the Lights

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

How could they? How could such moral people, who founded an ethical lifestyle of kindness and compassion, act so cruelly toward one another. Perhaps the behavior of the brothers toward Yosef could be chalked up to momentary weakness. Every human being has fleeting indiscretions and these otherwise ethical people, let their jealousy and insecurity get the better of themselves. After selling their brother into slavery, one thing led to another, and they found themselves covering up their murder with a brazen lie.

Yosef's conduct, however, is more incomprehensible. His manipulation of his brothers is deliberate and relentless, as he methodically ensnares them in a ruse to coerce them to bow before. All this maneuvering just to realize his dreams. He incarcerates Shimon on trumped up charges of espionage and subsequently entraps Binyamin, traumatizing the rest of the brothers who desperately surrender themselves as ransom.

In the Torah's description, Yosef's admission to his brothers is attributed to his inability to maintain his composure, implying that he fully intended to escalate the situation and instill greater terror, but was emotionally unable to carry through. Had his knees not gone weak he would have continued his scheme.

the message Yosef sent to Yaakov is: I know that you were teaching me about leadership. It doesn't mean being more powerful than someone else. It means using your power to take responsibility for people to ensure that nothing happens to them. It's about taking *achrayus* for the *klal*. And that's exactly what I am doing now. Because I became a leader in *Mitzrayim*, I now have *achrayus* to take care of the family, and I recognize that leadership doesn't mean being better than everyone else. And now that I am a leader, I know it's not about me. It means that I must take responsibility for everyone else. Perhaps Yaakov already believed that Yosef was alive and still remembered his *girsu de-yankusa* of what it meant to be a Jew. But once he saw that Yosef understands the meaning of true leadership, he realized that the family would get back together, live as one people, and become a *Klal Yisroel*. And that is what rejuvenated him and inspired him to see the future of the Jewish people. *Shabbat Shalom*.

How could Yosef act so callously? What possible influence can overpower even righteous people, allowing them to behave in this fashion? The answer, in part, is that Yosef fell victim to one of the most treacherous character traits, a trait we call ambition.

Aiming High

God endowed us with ambition, empowering us to believe in our own talents, to dream of grand accomplishments and to work tirelessly toward seemingly unattainable lofty goals. By implanting us with ambition, God raised the bar of human capabilities.

He also raised the bar of religious excellence as ambition inspires us to transcend our humanity and break through life's restraints to better encounter Him. Ambition convinces us that we are capable of surpassing religious experiences such as mastering the infinite word of God or of partnering with Him in the redemption of human history. Without ambition self-doubt would cripple us and these achievements would be impossible. Ambition is a catapult, both for human achievement and for religious excellence.

The Dark Side

However, there is dark side to ambition, and to our

desire for honor and our lust for power. Firstly, ambition often draws our attention inward to ourselves, our accomplishments, and our ego, thereby drawing us apart from God. The Tower of Babel is a cautionary tale of what occurs when ambition inspires a project which isn't built on a platform of religious sentiment. Through ambition we exalt ourselves even against God.

To his credit, Yosef avoided this first pitfall of ambition, preserving awareness of God, even after achieving glory and title. He constantly mentions God's name, even after he is appointed to royalty. It is one thing to cite God while an indentured servant or while rotting in a prison cell. It is quite another to attribute his meteoric success as a dream teller to God, or to name his two children, now princes, in appreciation of God extending care for him in Egypt. Despite his considerable ambition, Yosef doesn't ever turn away from God. However, he does turn away from his brothers.

Self-Absorption

Beyond the hazards it poses to our relationship with G-d, ambition also causes us to trespass moral red lines. Ambition is an elastic trait, which wraps itself around our noble thoughts and our idealistic values. Ambition convinces us that our aspirations are selfless and serve noble purposes when, more often, we are just feeding our insatiable desire for honor or reputation. Ambition deludes us into believing that we are acting out of public interest when, in reality, we are pursuing personal agendas of honor and fame.

Ambition is so dangerous precisely because it is self-delusional, self-absorbing and deafens us to moral conscience. Unlike easily discernable temptations, the lure of ambition masks itself as idealism. Monsters of unbridled ambition destroy the lives of others, who either impede their goals or distract them from their grand achievements.

Yosef was a dreamer, deeply believed in his own leadership potential, and assumed that he would lead the family into a glorious future. He is the first in sefer Breishit to face the challenge of ambition. Avraham lived in Israel as an itinerant guest without land or home, and Yitzchak lived a sedentary life with little drama and little opportunity for fame and power. For his part, Ya'akov spent his entire life as the underdog, struggling against adversity, with little time for delusions of grandeur.

By contrast, Yosef had eleven other brothers who are also participants in a joint historical project of nation

building. Ambition drives Yosef's belief in his own stellar future, and validates any means toward achieving that future, including behavior which appears to be emotionally exploitative. As he rises to power, Yosef may not ignore God, but he neglects his brother's emotional welfare.

Manifest destiny

What about the brothers? It appears they were misled by a different illusion. It wasn't ambition but over-confidence in their manifest destiny which blinded them to moral integrity. The "math" seemed pretty straightforward: Leah, not Rachel was obviously the matriarch of the Jewish future. Though Ya'akov had originally intended to marry Rachel, divine providence intervened, assuring that Leah would be first to wed him. In the ensuing years, fertile Leah bore abundant children, while barren Rachel struggled to bear two. Rachel's early passing was further evidence that she had been disqualified as the mother of Jewish leadership.

Yosef's own behavior merely reinforced the preconceptions of his self-assured brothers. Yosef kept company with the children of handmaidens rather than with the more refined and well-bred children of Ya'akov's actual wives. Yosef's favored relationship with Ya'akov also fit into their simplistic narrative. History was merely repeating itself one generation later. Yitzchak had favored a wicked child, but, luckily, his course was corrected by his wife. By favoring an errant child, Ya'akov was committing a similar error of judgement and it was up to his children to course-correct by sidelining Yosef.

Destiny was very clear, and the brothers were confident that they were on the correct side of history. When held up to the larger calculus of destiny, selling a wayward brother into slavery was dismissed as a necessary and insignificant misdemeanor.

If ambition blinds us to moral codes, confidence in destiny simplifies the moral complexities of life. Belief in a clear and unmistakable future, acquits us of adherence to halacha or to general moral codes. Sometimes the swagger of destiny is even more hazardous than the blindness of ambition. Intoxicated by destiny, we absolve ourselves of personal conscience. We convince ourselves that history is calling us to something larger than ourselves and larger than our own judgement. Everything is dwarfed by destiny

The land of destiny

We are currently living through Jewish destiny. We have returned to the land promised us by G-d, and are inching

derived from trees planted generations earlier by their ancestor Avraham, so too, do their own spiritual and biological roots date back to another time. The lesson is that they must build upon the foundations of the past, so that their future will be one of stability, security and sanctity” (*Peninim on the Torah*, Eleventh Series, p.77-78).

This timeless lesson applied not only to the generation of those who descended to Egypt, and those who ascended from Egypt, but to us as well. Each generation builds upon the foundations of our forefathers, and our future lies in our past.

In the Janowska death camp, one cold, dark, wintery night, a shout pierced the air, ordering all prisoners to report to the large open field immediately. Upon arrival, the prisoners stood facing large open pits. The German voice shouted its ruthless and sadistic orders, “Each of you who values his life must jump over one of the pits and land on the other side. Those who cannot jump to the other side will be shot.” It was clear to the starving, feverish and diseased inmates that they would all die that night. They knew they did not have the strength to jump, and that to the SS and Ukrainian guards, this was just another devilish game.

Among the thousands of Jews on that field in Janowska was the Bluzhover Rebbe, R’ Yisrael Spira zt”l (1889-1989). He was standing with a friend, a non-religious Jew from a large Polish town, whom the rabbi had met in the camp. A deep friendship had developed between them. “Rabbi,” the friend said, “all our efforts to jump will be in vain. We

will only entertain the Germans. Let’s sit down and wait for the bullets to end our wretched existence.” “My friend,” the rebbe answered, “man must obey the will of G-d. If it is G-d’s will that we jump, then we must jump. If we fall into the pit, we will reach the World of Truth one second later.” The Rebbe and his friend were nearing the edge of the pits, which were rapidly filling up with bodies. As they reached the pit, the Rebbe closed his eyes and commanded in a powerful voice, “We are jumping!” When the rebbe and his friend opened their eyes, they were on the other side of the pit.

“We are alive!” the friend repeated over and over again. “Rabbi, for your sake, I am alive! There must be a G-d in Heaven! Tell me, rabbi, how did you do it?” The Bluzhover paused, and then he said, “I was holding on to my ancestral merit, clinging to the coattails of my father, grandfather and great-grandfather, of blessed memory. But tell me, my friend, how is it that you reached the other side of the pit?” Replied the rebbe’s friend, “I was holding on to you” (*Heroes of Spirit*, R’ Dovid Hoffman, p.135-137).

Our history does not start today, and our future does not begin tomorrow. The cedar trees that Yaakov took from Be’er Sheva to Egypt would remind the generation of the Exodus as they built the Tabernacle for the Divine Presence, that we have a long history, a strong mesorah, and a glorious past, upon which we build the future. And this eternal message and lesson must remain with us for all generations and all times. שאל אביך ויגדך וזקניך ויאמרו לך.

God is Approachable!

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The first words in Parshas Vayigash are ויגש אליו יהודה – telling us that Yehuda approached Yosef to beg that he allow Binyamin to return home to their father. Yehuda had personally guaranteed Yaakov that Binyamin would return home safely, and so now that Yosef wanted to keep Binyamin as his slave after discovering his goblet in Binyamin’s bag, Yehuda set out to plead that Binyamin be permitted to go home, offering to remain as a slave in Binyamin’s stead.

The Midrash offers an additional layer of interpretation to the words ויגש אליו יהודה, explaining that ויגש refers to *tefila*. As Yehuda approached Yosef to plead on Binyamin’s behalf, he also silently offered a prayer to Hashem.

Outwardly, he was speaking to Yosef, but in his mind, he placed his faith in Hashem, begging Him to come and help the family in this moment of grave crisis.

The Midrash here teaches us a vitally important lesson about *emuna* – that even as we perform our necessary *hishtadlus*, putting in the effort that we need to put in, we must recognize that the outcome always depends on Hashem, to whom we must always turn for help. Before any meeting, whether it’s a job interview, a business deal, parent-teacher conferences, or any other important appointment, we must reflect on the fact that ultimately, the outcome depends solely on Hashem, and we are to pray that He orchestrates everything for the best.

Rav Nachman of Breslav added that this *pasuk*, as understood by the Midrash, teaches us about a crucial prerequisite for *tefila*.

The expression ויגש אליו יהודה, which the Midrash understands as referring to Yehuda's approaching Hashem, alludes that we must always feel comfortable and confident enough to approach Hashem. One of the impediments to meaningful, heartfelt prayer is the sense of unworthiness that many people feel. They think about the inappropriate things they've done and said, all the mistakes they have made, and conclude that God is not interested in them, that He does not want to hear from them, that He wants to have nothing to do with them. Rav Nachman's most famous teaching is מצווה גדלה להיות בשמחה תמיד – that a person must always be happy (*Likutei Moharan*, 1:282).

It's Not What You Do, It's Who You Are

Rabbi Yehuda Mann

In this week's parshah, Yosef confronts his brothers and reveals to them that he is really their brother. As the Torah says: "Yosef said to his brothers: I am Yosef. Is my father still alive? But his brothers could not answer him because they were terrified of him." (Bereishit 45:3).

A midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 45:10) says the following on this verse: "Abba Kohen Bardala says: How we should worry before the days of judgment, the days of rebuke!... Yosef was the youngest of the tribes and his brothers couldn't bear his rebuke... All the more so when Hashem will judge each person as he is."

It is interesting to note that in other midrashim (Yalkut Shimoni Bereishit 152), the ending of the midrash is that "Hashem will judge people according to their actions." We can understand this edition; it is logical to judge people according to their actions. But what does it mean to judge a person "as he is"?

Perhaps we may answer based on a comment by Rav Yechezkel Abramsky z"l regarding the Tehillim we read in Kabbalat Shabbat. Two of them, Tehillim 96 and 98, have striking similarities – and key differences.

- Tehillim 96:13 describes the world rejoicing "before Hashem, for He has come, for He has come to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the nations according to their beliefs." The next verse, 97:1, begins, "Hashem reigns! Let the earth rejoice."

He emphasized that even if a person has failed and sinned, he should remain joyful and in good spirits, remembering that he also has many virtues, and much goodness within him. It is the *yetzer ha'ra*, Rav Nachman explained, that tries to convince us to feel despondent and worthless after acting wrongly. Alongside our sincere regret for our wrongdoing, we must recognize our redeeming qualities, and all the good that we do. And we must confidently believe that despite our mistakes, Hashem is always approachable. His door is always open. He wants us to come to Him often to ask for what we need.

The first step toward meaningful *tefila* is ויגש אליו יהודה, to recognize that regardless of what we've done, Hashem invites us to approach Him, at all times.

- Tehillim 98:9 describes the world rejoicing "before Hashem, for He has come to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples according to their righteousness." The next verse, 99:1, begins, "Hashem reigns; let the nations tremble."

Rav Abramsky asks: why is it that when Hashem judges the nations of the world "according to their beliefs" the earth rejoices, whereas when He judges the world according to their righteousness they tremble?

Rav Abramsky explains that when Hashem judges a person according to his beliefs, that person has a valid argument to justify himself: "This is what my faith dictates." "This is the ruling according to my spiritual leader." "This was my religious duty." Throughout history we have witnessed people doing terrible things in the name of a deity, thinking this was their religious obligation. The nations of the world will characterize their actions as obedience to their spiritual authority.

However, Tehillim 98:9 says that Hashem will judge people according to their righteousness. Meaning, Hashem will ask, "Are you a good person? You may have reason to make mistakes because of the time and place and community in which you live, but are you a mensch?" People may do terrible things in the name of a deity, but if you are a righteous person then even with all of the religious justification – a mensch doesn't do these things. That's why when Hashem will judge the world according to

people's righteousness, they will start to tremble.

This may explain why the brothers were rebuked “as they were.” In terms of their actions, they had reason to believe that Halachah would approve of their path. Many commentators explain that they sold Yosef because they considered him a rodef pursuing them to harm them, or because he was a rebel against the monarchy of Yehudah. They had their spiritual reasons to believe they were doing the right thing. But if they were going to be judged “as they

were” – as human beings selling their own brother into slavery – then they would have no answer.

We often want to do things that are obviously wrong, and sometimes we allow ourselves to do so because we think we have found halachic support – reasons to say lashon hara, reasons to avoid davening in a minyan, reasons to avoid paying taxes. It could be that our actions might have some halachic approval, but we should ask: what kind of people will we become in the process?

The Triumph of Jewish Identity

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In a very real sense, according to several commentators, the story of Joseph, as depicted in parashat Vayigash, is the story of Joseph's internal battle with his own “Jewish identity.” Like Noah in the time of the Flood, the Torah narrative seems ambivalent about both Joseph's personality and spiritual identity.

Invoking a bit of poetic license, we may assume that Joseph grew up in the Patriarch Jacob's “committed” Jewish home. But, after he was sold by his brothers to be a slave in Egypt, Joseph developed some real issues concerning his relationship with his “Jewish” family. As for his father, Joseph probably had issues with him as well, since he felt that Jacob had played a big part getting him into the mess that he was now in.

If we are sensitive to the implications found in the texts in parashiot Miketz and Vayigash, it seems rather obvious that Joseph was a committed assimilationist. Pharaoh dreams his dreams, the butler informs Pharaoh that there is a Jewish lad in prison who interprets dreams, and Joseph is rushed from the dungeon to Pharaoh's palace. Genesis 41:14, describes the scene: וַיְגַלֵּחַ וַיַּחֲלֵף שְׂמֹלֹתָיו, *And Joseph shaved and changed his clothes*, וַיָּבֵא אֶל פַּרְעֹה, *and he came to Pharaoh*.

Surely, Joseph realizes that in order to impress Pharaoh he can't enter the palace looking like a disheveled Jewish slave boy. So, Joseph shaves off any vestiges of his Jewish identity, and rids himself of his “Jewish” garb. It is, however, important to note that even though Joseph plays down his Jewish identity, he still is thoroughly committed and faithful to G-d and to monotheism. Time and again, Joseph attributes his powers to interpret dreams not to his own talents, but to G-d. In Genesis 41:16, Joseph announces to Pharaoh's court, בְּלִעָדִי, “It is not in my hands, only G-d

can interpret dreams. It is beyond me. G-d will respond to Pharaoh's welfare.”

Joseph successfully interprets Pharaoh's dreams, and his career is now on an incredible upward trajectory. The little Jewish slave boy is appointed second in command of the great Egyptian empire. Pharaoh removes his royal ring and places it on Joseph's hand. Joseph is dressed in garments of fine linen, and has a gold chain placed around his neck. He looks and acts like Egyptian royalty. As he is driven around in the royal limousine, the entire nation bows down to him.

Without much effort, Joseph adjusts to his new, affluent, and thoroughly Egyptian lifestyle—growing increasingly comfortable in the royal palace, the stretch limousines, and unlimited material pleasures. To clinch the transformation, Pharaoh gives Joseph not only an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-Paneach, but also a new wife, Osnat, the daughter of Poti-phaera, the High Priest of On. How's that for a quick makeover?

Is Joseph homesick for his father or his for brothers who are back in Canaan? No way! He never calls, never sends a messenger, never even an e-mail! He's having the time of his life in Egypt, and seems to have no interest in his former, very dysfunctional, family back in Canaan!

Two sons are born to Joseph and Osnat. Their names confirm Joseph's disdainful attitude toward his early years. In Genesis 41:51, we learn of the birth of the royal couple's first child. Joseph calls him Menashe, explaining: כִּי נִשְׁכַּח אֶת כָּל בֵּית אָבִי לְקִיָּם אֶת כָּל עֲמָלִי, וְאֶת כָּל בֵּית אָבִי, *G-d has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's household*. When their second son, Ephraim, is born, Joseph announces, Genesis 41:52: כִּי עָנִי אֶלְקִים בְּאֶרֶץ עֲנִי, הִפְרִנִּי אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם, *G-d has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction*. You thought Egypt would be bad for me? It's turned out to be an incredible blessing.

After being separated from his family for 20 years, Joseph finally encounters his brothers, who come to Egypt to buy food for their hungry families. Joseph is filled with anger and appears bent on vengeance. He, subsequently, accuses his brothers of spying. To prove their innocence, Joseph demands that the brothers not return to Egypt without their youngest brother, Benjamin. After a long delay, the brothers and Benjamin come to Egypt. Rather than introduce himself to his long-lost brother Benjamin, Joseph instead asks first about the welfare of the boys' father, Jacob. In Genesis 43:27, Joseph asks: הַשְּׁלוֹם אֲבִיכֶם הֲיֵשֶׁב הָעוֹדְנֵנוּ הִיא הַזְּקֵן, אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתֶּם, הֲעוֹדְנֵנוּ הִיא "Is your elderly father of whom you spoke, well? Is he still alive?" The brothers reply that Jacob is fine, and that he still lives.

The plot thickens, Benjamin is accused of stealing Joseph's chalice, and a momentous confrontation takes place between Joseph and Judah. Joseph can no longer contain himself, and dramatically reveals himself to his brothers. Joseph says, Genesis 45:3: הֲעוֹד אֲבִי הִיא, אֲנִי יוֹסֵף "I am Joseph, is my father yet alive?"

Of course, Jacob is alive! What is Joseph asking? Hadn't the brothers informed Joseph upon arriving in Egypt that Jacob was alive?! Perhaps, Joseph is declaring as well as asking: I am Joseph—the assimilationist, I am Zaphenath-Paneach, the Viceroy of Pharaoh, married to the daughter

of the High Priest of On, whose children are named in honor of forgetting my past, הֲעוֹד אֲבִי הִיא, Does my father still live in me?!

At that moment, confronted with this existential choice, Joseph declares, אֲנִי יוֹסֵף, I am not the noble Egyptian Zaphenath-Paneach, I am Joseph the Jew! As much as I thought I preferred life as an Egyptian, I realize that being Jewish is an inescapable part of me and my destiny. My father surely lives—in me!

Joseph then embraces his brothers and his Jewish identity, reconnects with his family, and reaffirms his connection with the Abrahamic promise of Jewish posterity.

The re-embracing of his identity represents the triumph of Joseph's inner spirit, what we call in Yiddish דָּאָס פֿײַנטע־לעֶבֶל—the spark of Jewishness that is in every Jewish soul, no matter how distanced or alienated.

It is this spiritual triumph that we hope will take place in the hearts of all the Jews around the world, wherever they may be, who are distant from their beautiful Jewish heritage. As committed Jews, we must encourage our beloved brothers and sisters to ask that most vital question, הֲעוֹד אֲבִי הִיא "Is my father still alive in me?" With G-d's help, may the answer be a resounding, "Yes!"