

Parashat Vayigash, 5774, 2013:

*Drawing Near to Bring Redemption*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The first word of our *parasha*, “*vayigash*,” (“and he approached” or “and he drew near”) appears four times in *Sefer Bereishit*. It is found in 18:23, 27:22, 29:10, and 44:18. All of these *pasukim* (verses) signal a major shift in the narrative that is being presented. In addition, each of these instances is filled with drama and excitement, and portends a fundamental change in the paradigm that had existed until that moment. Let us now examine our verses.

Our first *pasuk* appears within the context of Hashem's plan to eradicate S'dom:

And the L-rd said, “Since the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah has become great, and since their sin has become very grave, I will descend now and see, whether according to her cry, which has come to Me, they have done; [I will wreak] destruction [upon them]; and if not, I will know.” And the men turned from there and went to Sodom, and Abraham was still standing before the L-rd. (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:20-22, this, and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At this point and for the first time in the annals of human history, an individual, in the personage of *Avraham Avinu* (our Father Abraham), encountered G-d in a challenging manner. His response on behalf of the depraved and profligate inhabitants of S'dom speaks volumes regarding the universal quality of justice (*mishpat*). In Avraham's view, even G-d must uphold the standards of justice that He has established for mankind. Thus, upon becoming aware of Hashem's imminent plan to destroy S'dom, Avraham bravely

and unhesitatingly responded in the following manner:

And Abraham approached and said, “Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men who are in its midst? Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?” (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:23-25, underlining my own)

This example of “*vayigash*” suggests a fundamental shift in the dialogical encounter between man and G-d. For the first time, man, ceased to be a passive partner or a mere subordinate in the I-Thou relationship. Instead, Avraham approached G-d, in fear and trembling to be sure, but simultaneously with an ultimate sense of confidence that his plea on behalf of S’dom would be heard. He understood that both man and Hashem are subject to the same Divine metaphysical elements of justice. The Man-G-d existential encounter would never be the same again. Avraham's brave approach, as presaged by the word “*vayigash*,” changed history for evermore.

The second instance of our expression is found within the spiritual battle for the future of the Jewish people that was quietly fought in the privacy of two desert tents. This was a nearly silent domestic dispute between *Yitzhak Avinu* (our Father Yitzhak) and *Rivka Imenu* (our Mother Rivka). The Torah characterizes their disagreement in the most understated of all terms: “And Isaac loved Esau... but Rebecca loved Jacob.”(*Sefer Bereishit* 25:28) As we know, Rivka actively ensured that the *bracha* (blessing) that Yitzhak wanted to bestow upon Esav would go, instead, to Yaakov:

And Rebecca said to Jacob her son, saying, “Behold I have heard your father speaking to Esau your brother, saying, ‘Bring me game and make me tasty foods, and I will eat, and I will bless you before the L-rd before my death.’ And now my son, hearken to my voice (“*sh’ma b’koli*”), to what I am commanding you.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 27:6-8)

Why did Rivka guide Yaakov in the usurpation of the *bracha*? In my view, she knew full well that this blessing would change Jewish history for all time. She, therefore, trained innocent Yaakov (*ish taam yosheiv ohelim*) to beguile his father, in order that he would be the recipient of this G-d-inspired benediction. To achieve this goal, she invoked the phrase “*sh’ma b’koli*,” (“listen to my voice”), knowing that this was precisely what Yaakov would do. When Yaakov received the blessing from Yitzhak, Rivka effectively guaranteed his spiritual future for all generations to come. Once again, the implementation of this historically charged transformative moment was ushered in by the use of the word “*vayigash*.” “So Jacob drew near to Isaac his father, and he felt him, and he said, ‘The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 27:22, underlining my own) Clearly, the power and significance of “*vayigash*” could not be more manifest.

The third instance of our term appears within the context of Yaakov’s initial encounter with Rachel. It is a dramatic moment that serves as the focal point for all future Jewish history, since all Jews are ultimately descended from Yaakov, Rachel, and Leah: “And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob drew near and rolled the rock off the mouth of the well, and he watered the sheep of Laban his mother's brother.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 29:10, underlining my own) Following this, Yaakov went to Lavan’s home, married Rachel and Leah, and eventually fathered the 12 Tribes of Israel, the *shivtei kah*. In addition, it is Yaakov who learned how to survive the trials of the Diaspora (*Galut*) and served as the role model for all generations to come. In a very real and pragmatic way, he taught us how to live in *Galut*. My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B.

Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), described Yaakov's unique historical role and concomitant burden in the following fashion:

Jacob was taken away from his parental home and went through a long night of darkness, misery, and distress. His assignment was to live in exile...The first to live in exile was Jacob. He was burdened with the mission of living in exile, of proving to the world that the covenantal community is capable of practicing Abraham's unique moral code, of being close to the Almighty, of employing a lifestyle of saintliness, not only in the Promised Land, but in exile, far from the hills and valleys of Hebron and Shechem...He had not assimilated; he had not integrated himself into Laban's society and community; he had not accepted their morals, their code of ethics, their lifestyle. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Chanukah*, p. 162)

Once again, all of these events were introduced via the seminal term “*vayigash*.”

The final use of our term is found at the onset of our *parasha*. Herein, in the opening words of Yehudah's harshly stated plea (see Rashi's comment) to Pharaoh's second-in-command, i.e. Yosef, we find: “Then Judah approached him and said, ‘Please, my lord, let now your servant speak something into my lord's ears, and let not your wrath be kindled against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 44:18, underlining my own) These well-known words are a crucial link in the great chain of events that eventuated in Yaakov coming to Egypt, our ancestors' subsequent survival during the worldwide famine, the 210 years of Egyptian servitude, the Exodus from Egypt, the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, and all Jewish history until our present moment. Once again, the verbal fulcrum for all of these history-changing events was the deceptively simple word “*vayigash*.”

Rabbi Nissan Alpert *zatzal* (1927-1986), one of the great *roshei yeshivah* of Yeshivat Rabbi Yitzhak Elchanan, suggests that all instances of “*vayigash*” refer to a sense of *hitkarvut* - of becoming both physically and psychologically close to another person. (*Limudei Nissan, Sefer Bereishit* 46:28) He proves this by suggesting that Yosef revealed

himself to his brothers only once they had physically, emotionally, and intellectually drawn close to him (“*rak ka’asher nagshoo aluv b’kiruv da’at v’lav*”) Rav Alpert continues and states that “... it was at that time that it was revealed before them how much they all truly loved one another and that any separation between them should vanish and be replaced by deep and abiding love for one another.” He notes, as well, that: “When all of the Jewish people will dwell together in deep affection and draw close to one another on the profoundest level – and reject division - as a result of this closeness we will bring the Redemption (*Geulah*).”

May we, too, join Avraham, Yaakov, and Yehudah in drawing near to one another and to the entire Jewish people. Then, as Rav Alpert so beautifully stated, we will help bring the Final Redemption and peace to all mankind. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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