

Parshat Vayigash
Finding the Courage to See and the Strength to Heal
Yali Szulanski - Class of 2025

"בְּמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אָנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדְּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ." (משנה אבות ב:ה)

"In a place where there are no humans, try to be a human." (Pirkei Avot 2:5)

This proverb, nestled quietly inside Pirkei Avot, teaches an important lesson on how to occupy the spaces that we inhabit every day.

Wherever we go, we are in community.

As members of families, schools, workplaces, and religious spaces, we weave the tapestries of our lives in and out of different environments, very often all within the same day. We share relationships of varying degrees of closeness, of comfort, and of truth. We relate to people on whom we rely for our livelihood; we relate to people who may rely on us for support, comfort, or guidance. In all of these places, the way we show up—how we connect and what we say—shapes the spaces both within our bodies and within the communities that we are in.

We strive to approach every day with light in our thoughts and generosity in our spirit. Sometimes it is hard, though, to find that light amidst our own experience of darkness. The memories we carry—our struggles, our past failures, our illnesses, our less-than-stellar moments—live not just in our minds, but in our bodies as well.

In *The Body Keeps Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes, "We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present."¹ Trauma - which we tend to define in our own lives in a variety of ways - changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very ability to think at all. Trauma lives in our bodies as tension, aches, pains, sometimes physically manifesting in real challenge. In every room that we are in, there is someone in that room carrying such a burden. In every community space we are in, there is at least someone in darkness.

How do we know the way we are supposed to act in these spaces, in all spaces? How do we know the best way to hold our fellow humans, knowing what we can and cannot see? How do we honor our own light and that of others?

I pondered these questions while reading through this week's *parsha*, with the words of Pirkei Avot above reverberating in my ears.

¹ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015.

Yosef—sold into slavery by his brothers and separated from his family for twenty-two years—is now facing his brothers. They now need his mercy because a silver goblet has been found in his younger brother Binyamin’s bag. Yosef had demanded that Binyamin remain a slave in Egypt, while the brothers return to their father, Yaakov.

Vayigash zooms us into the moment where Yehudah, the very brother who suggested that Yosef be sold off to slavery, appeals to Yosef’s humanity by telling him that if he were to return without Binyamin, his father—who is their father—“shall die in sorrow and grief” (Bereishit 44:18-31).

Here, we have trauma facing trauma facing trauma. Yosef, who knows full well that these are his brothers, still carries with him the memory of being thrown into a pit, sold to slavery, and then imprisoned in Egypt. Yehudah, who suggested that his brother be sold, who has lied to his father about what happened to his son, and who may hold himself responsible for his family’s sorrow. Unseen, we have Yaakov, who has lost his most beloved wife, his favorite son, and now risks losing his youngest child as well, pulling the strings from far away.

Everyone in this situation has every right to act from their anger and their hurt, to be vindictive, and to create more pain. We have all been in situations where we want to speak from our wounds, to justify our flaring feelings, and to build armor around our vulnerable hearts.

Yosef, who holds all the cards, could choose, in this moment of inflection, to cast his brothers away, to indict his father to death by sorrow, and to destroy the fabric of his family of origin.

It takes tremendous courage to allow ourselves to remember, to access our pain. It takes tremendous courage for Yosef, in this moment, to remember and to face his brothers again. If we recall, the first time that Yosef faced his brothers, he made himself a stranger to them. He treated them harshly. (Bereishit 42:7). Here, Yosef remembers, and deeply feels the pain, the longing, and the grief—his own, his brothers’, and his father’s.

In a move that becomes a turning point for our history, Yosef, reveals his true identity and stuns his brothers into silence:

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי
וְלֹא-יָקְלוּ אֶחָיו לְעֵנֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפָּנָיו: (בראשית מה: ג)

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

(Genesis 45:3)

Rashi further explains to us that in this moment, where his brothers are “amazed at his presence” - it is out of shame, “מִפְּנֵי הַבוּשָׁה” (Rashi on Genesis 45:3)

We are invited to learn from this deeply intimate moment between brothers, to examine the interaction between their wounds and their healing. We are asked to get curious about their

decision to stitch together, rather than unspool. We are invited to learn from the strength they draw from their vulnerability to create light and healing, rather than continue the cycle of shadow and pain. Yosef, holding all the cards, chooses to forgive. His brothers, mired in shame, accept him with grace.

The essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable, and when that trauma is brought forth to the surface, it is the only thing we can see. It can be exhausting and frustrating to go through life constantly aware of our pain. That is why most of us choose to build armor around it, and to move through spaces wearing a breastplate and shield. The phrase “get through this” applies equally to challenging moments and to just a regular day. Confronting the uncomfortable scares us, angers us and puts us on the defensive.

So what happens now?

While it takes a tremendous amount of courage to remember, it also does so to heal. When the trauma emerges to the surface, we then need to find a way to heal it—to move through it, reorganize it within ourselves, and integrate it into our identities in a way that informs us, rather than ails us.

Here, Yosef teaches us all, his brothers included, that surfacing the pain allows it to access light, and to heal. This moment teaches us that doing the work to change, while often messy and uncomfortable, is necessary for healing.

Neuroscience research shows that the only way we can change painful feelings is by becoming aware of our inner experience of them, and learning to befriend what is going inside ourselves.

This research echoes the words of Rambam, who praised people who help others heal their souls - *rofe'i nefashot*. (Rambam, Shemoneh Perakim, ch. 3.)

While there are some who take this role professionally today, we all have the ability to do this for ourselves, and be examples to others.

Bravery in healing is in that moment where we encounter the pain and we say, “I am willing to see”. Courage comes when we choose to continue integrating what we see in ourselves, and how we enter communal spaces, knowing that everyone holds some struggle.

Through his own deep inner work in the years he spent as a prisoner in Egypt, Yosef faces his pain and understands his path. He understands that by being thrown into a world where he doesn't fit, he can access his strength and help create a new one.

The text invites us to peek at the healing that has gone on for Yosef when tells his brothers, “do not be distressed because you sold me - it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.” (Genesis 45:5)

Through the darkness - the years spent as prisoner, the trials he had to endure - Yosef connects with the path that God laid before him, and so too with his own purpose. He learns, through his interactions in Egypt, to treat himself with greater compassion, to consider the inner realities of those around him, and to choose words of light, even when the memory of darkness still echoes within him.

Yosef stands out as a powerful example of someone shining light into pockets of darkness, of being human where humanity is struggling. By revealing himself to his brothers, despite the pain that he holds, he allows a different narrative to unfold - one where his family can join him in Egypt, where his father can emerge from the depths of sorrow, and one where his brothers can be forgiven. By showing his brothers grace, he teaches them that they can hold themselves with compassion too. Yosef, by choosing to be an “*ish*” in a place where there are no “*anashim*,” allows for healing to occur.

Through Yosef, we also learn. We learn how to enter spaces with grace, knowing that the people in them struggle too. We learn to choose our words carefully- perhaps with grace, even when we feel anger. We learn to be brave, to see our own pain, feel it in our bodies, and integrate it into who we are. We learn to bring human healing into places where there is much human pain.



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