

**Parshat Vayigash:  
On Family**  
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*Class of 2015*

Our parsha, like the previous ones, deals with a family that gave birth to our nation, that gave birth to our religious worldview, our collective memory.

Let us examine the power structure of this immediate family, the family of Yaakov, and the implications of this family's particular dynamics.

The story in our Parsha leaves us with several essential questions:

- Why didn't Yosef send a message to Yaakov all those years to inform him that he was alive? Why did Yosef leave Yaakov in such an emotional turmoil for 22 long years?
- Why did Yosef hide his identity from his brothers? Why didn't he immediately reveal his identity?
- Finally, in the end, why did Yosef's plan fall apart? Why did Yosef break down in tears?

Here is how the מקור ברוך *Mekur Baruch*<sup>1</sup> answers these questions:

It was well known that Yaakov very much loved Yosef. He alone was given the *Ketonet Pasim*, the special coat of many colors. We also know that Yosef was a dreamer of dreams, and that after his second dream, where he saw his Father and mother bowing down to him, Yaakov reprimanded him, ...and his father rebuked him (Bereishit 37:10) ...וַיִּגְעַר-בּוֹ אָבִיו (בראשית לז, י)

Immediately after this rebuke, that we were informed of last week, we were told that Yaakov sent Yosef to his Brothers to check into their welfare.

Let us attempt to understand Yosef's emotional state as he goes off on his way to visit his brothers, by command of his father:

His Brothers don't quite love him, to say the least. They are jealous of him

And his brothers envied him. (37:11) וַיִּקְנְאוּ-בּוֹ, אֶחָיו (לז, יא).

Yosef must have been scared or at the very least concerned to visit his brothers, even though he was fulfilling his Father's command: " Here I am." he replies to his father while being told of his Father's charge. Rashi explains that means he went with alacrity to fulfill his father's command even though he knew his brothers hated him.

Yosef was not only concerned about his brothers hatred, he was also concerned with his father's reaction to his dream. He felt that his Father was still angry with him.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Baruch Freidenberg, Bialistockk-Jerusalem, 1845-1921.

When the Brothers throw Yosef into the pit, from Yosef's perspective, it was done via his Father's command! The reality of ancient family dynamics, and its power structure, was such that a father could indeed command such an act.

The father had absolute power and control over his children: A father could sell his son, and even kill him. Indeed, there are several examples of such patriarchal authority in Bereshit: Noach decreed that one of his children and their progeny would be slaves, Reuven offered his son's life as surety, Lot sent out his daughters into the proverbial lion's den, the cruel and lusty mob that had gathered at his door.

Yosef accepted his father's decree with humility.

When his brothers came to Egypt, Yosef devised a plan to check whether his father was still angry at him and whether Yaakov was satisfied that he had been sold into slavery. However, Yosef couldn't simply ask his brothers, the very same brothers that threw him into the pit. He devised a deception that forced his brothers to bring Benyamin, his brother from the same mother, down to Egypt. Significantly, Benyamin was the only one not involved in slinging Yosef into the pit. Yosef could trust Benyamin, and according to his plan, ask him his questions concerning their father.

This is Yosef's deception: he accused his brothers of being spies forcing them to bring back Benyamin as a proof that they are not lying.

Once Benyamin arrived, Yosef attempts to have Benyamin stay in Egypt by placing his goblet in Benyamin's sack and accusing him of stealing. Thus, allowing him time to ask his questions.

At this point the pivotal, defining moment arrives. Yehudah tells Yosef the story of what really occurred with his family's tragic past: How Benyamin is the brother of another child that was in the family. When that child died, their Father, Yaakov was entirely and utterly inconsolable.

This sudden and dramatic revelation from Yehudah informs Yosef that all of his imagined theories and explanations that he had concerning his being sold - were not true at all. His father was not in any way involved in the brothers' plan. Furthermore, Yehuda's revelation exposes the lie that the brothers told their father about Yosef being torn apart by wild animals.

Now Yosef understood what had transpired

Then Joseph could not refrain himself...

וְלֹא-יָכַל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק...

And he wept aloud...

וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-קִלְוֹ בְּרַגְלָיו...

His plan changed. He tells his brothers that he is their brother Yosef.

Royal wagons were sent to bring Yaakov and his entire family to Egypt. When Yaakov saw the Agalot, the wagons, and heard the story concerning his beloved son, Yosef, he too began to ask similar questions that Yosef had asked 22 years earlier about the situation, and similar questions

that we asked: Why didn't Yosef inform Yaakov that he was a ruler in Egypt, why did Yosef allow him to grieve for so long? However, upon seeing the Agalot, he immediately understood: The Agalot, according to the *Midrash Rabbah*, symbolize and convey a specific message from Yosef, one that only the two of them could understand.

Agalot, wagon is phonetically close to the word (egla) עגלה, a calf.

עגלה ערופה, *Egla Arupah*, the ceremony of the broken neck calf, is a ceremony of absolution for a city where a murder had occurred and the murderer had not been discovered, and the elders of the city represent the city and declare: our hands have not shed this blood.

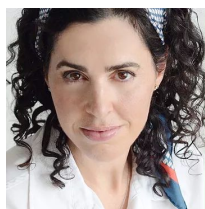
The Midrash's message according to *Mekor Baruch* is that Yaakov might also have felt great concern that Yosef would think that he- Yaakov, ordered his death or sale. The vision of the Agalot allowed Yaakov to reevaluate what had taken place. The Agalot allowed him to find some peace, sit down and find "*Yishuv hadaat*": for he could truly say Yosef knows that his father was not involved in the sequence of things:

My hands have not shed this blood, ידינו לא שפכו את הדם הזה

The hierarchy of authority within family dynamics can empower or can weaken members of the family.

The notion and conception of family can have many different types of definitions and models. Each one of us belongs to a family with its own models, its own dynamics. Even a community, is conceptualized as a family. Or *Mishpacha*, one big family.

Defining community as a family has many implications. One of them is that a healthy family carefully considers and balances its dynamics and appreciates its power structures. If done properly, every member of the family, should feel safe and secure- and has a voice that feels listened to, and capable of contributing - where each individual impacts and is responsible for the whole. These are the effects of understanding our own and the other basic human dignity, in a family and in a community - small or large.



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