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Parshat Vayigash: Long Lost Family, Long Lost Nation, Long Lost Redemption **Rabbi Marianne Novak** *Class of 2019*

One of the more intriguing reality show television offerings of late is TLC's, *Long Lost Family*. The program, as per its website, 'follows the stories of people who have, for one reason or another, experienced long term separation from members of their family and are seeking to be reunited with them...' The show is, admittedly, addictive, drawing you in, first with its mystery (will the long lost relative be found?) and then with the actual reunions themselves (will the family members unite and find happiness and closure?) When all goes well with finding the relative and the reunion, there is a sense of immediate satisfaction and relief. However, when the meeting does not go well, there is an emotional letdown and unease.

The story in parashat *Vayigash* is essentially the original episode *Long Lost Family*. After twenty-two years apart and a very complicated series of events, at last father *Yaakov* and son *Yosef* are reunited. But like many of the reunions on the show, bringing this family together was not so simple. When *Yaakov* is finally told, '*Yosef* is still alive, עוד יוסף חי' (Genesis 45:26), his heart stops, יזיפג לבי. *Yaakov*, who all this time, believed his son was dead, is in shock and physically cannot respond. The sons continue with what *Yosef* had told them to say to his father. *Yaakov* upon hearing their words and seeing the characteristically Egyptian wagons that *Yosef* sent, exclaims, 'Enough! *Yosef* my son is still alive. Let me go see him before I die.' (Genesis 45:28).

In the next chapter, curiously, we do not see *Yaakov* going immediately to see his long lost son. *Yaakov* first makes a stop in *Be'ersheva* where his father *Yitzchak* and his grandfather *Avraham* offered sacrifices to God. Here God says, '*Yaakov, Yaakov*, and he said, 'Here I am.' (Genesis 46:2) God then goes on to restate the covenant he made with *Yitzchak* and *Avraham* by telling *Yaakov* that He is the God of his forefathers. As He initially described in the The Covenant Between the Pieces, *Brit bein HaBitarim* to *Avraham*, God now tells *Yaakov* that he and his family will be going down to Egypt for an extended period of time. God reassures *Yaakov* and tells him not to fear his time in Egypt. God will make *Yaakov* a great nation there and eventually will redeem him and his family from Egypt. With this encounter over, *Yaakov* resumes his journey but not without the narrative first giving us a detailed genealogy of all his family now coming to live in Egypt.

Why does our story take this literal and figurative detour? Where is the dramatic father and son reunion we have been so desperately wanting since *Yosef's* brothers threw him into the pit? It is no coincidence that *Yaakov's* encounter with God foreshadows, almost word for word, *Moshe's* encounter at the burning bush where God says, '*Moshe, Moshe*, and he said, 'Here I am.' (Exodus 3:4). God mentions nothing about *Yosef* but rather reaffirms the covenant He made with *Yaakov's* forefathers, highlighting God bringing *Yaakov* and his family to Egypt. The narrative's focus is clearly on the future story of the Jews enslavement in and eventual redemption from Egypt. And perhaps, that is precisely the point. This really isn't a story about a long, lost family after all. The entire *Yosef* narrative, therefore, is the true starting point of the essential narrative of the Jewish people, the Exodus from Egypt.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate Pesachim, 68b, the Rabbis discuss the reasons for the four cups of wine at the Passover seder. The Rabbis first cite the traditional understanding that the four cups are to

represent the four promises God gave to the Jewish people in the Exodus story, '*hotzati, hitzalti, ga'alti, v'lakakhti*- And I will bring you out, and I will rescue you, and I will save you, And I will take you.'

The Gemara then gives a second explanation for the four cups.

'Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, 'About the four cups of Pharaoh: "And the **cup** of Pharaoh was in my hand and I squeezed them (the grapes) into the **cup** of Pharaoh and I placed the **cup** in the hand of Pharaoh... and you will place the **cup** of Pharaoh, etc." (Genesis 40:11-13).' The story of cups here is the content of the cupbearer's dream that he tells *Yosef* while both are in prison. This explanation moves the starting point of the Exodus story from the *Moshe* story to the beginning of *Yosef's* time in Egypt. The Rabbis here also do not conceptualize the *Yosef* saga as a dramatic family narrative but rather as the important stepping stone of the ultimate sacred narrative, *y'tziat mirzrayim*.

With the *Be'ersheva* experience and its focus on the future of not a Jewish family but rather a Jewish nation in hand, *Yaakov's* reaction when seeing *Yosef* makes a bit more sense. When the scene finally occurs, *Yosef* greets *Yaakov* and weeps on his neck. *Yaakov* does not return such physical demonstrations of emotion and quite strikingly says: 'Now let me die, since I have seen your face, because you are still alive.' (Genesis 46:30) The *Long Lost Family* episode falls flat with *Yaakov* basically saying, 'Great *Yosef*. You are alive. Now I can die.'

However, from the perspective of God's appearance in *Be'ersheva*, *Yaakov's* reaction or lack thereof, is understandable. This anticlimactic homecoming is exactly that, a complete disappointment, but necessary in order to concentrate on the more important story Exodus. *Yaakov's* detour helps to move the patriarchal and matriarchal soap opera to the epic tale of the emerging Jewish nation. The long list of names of everyone in *Yaakov's* family is a further clue as to what the entire Genesis story really is all about, i.e. preparation for Jewish nationhood.

From the beginning of the *Yosef* story, we have been waiting for the grand moment where father finally sees his son and his pain and grief is lifted. While the actual meeting is unsatisfying, the disappointment helps prepare *Yaakov*, *Yosef*, the entire family, and us, the readers, for the larger story and the more encompassing redemption. Parashat *Vayigash* moves us from the small, intimate family story and reassures *Yaakov*, his family and us, that God has promised us a greater redemption when the Jewish nation and ultimately the entire world will find their *Long Lost Family*. May we all merit the ultimate episode of *Long Lost Family* and experience the complete redemption.



Rabbi Marianne Novak received her BA in Political Science from Barnard College and her JD from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. She has served as the Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and also helped start the Women's Tefillah Group at Bais Abraham. Marianne then moved to Skokie, Illinois, became a Gabbait for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group, and taught Bat Mitzvah students. Marianne is an instructor and curriculum developer for the Florence Melton Adult School of Jewish Learning and taught Tanakh at Rochelle Zelle Jewish High School. She has lectured for many Jewish organizations and synagogues, and writes a blog for the Times of Israel. Marianne lives in Skokie with her husband Noam Stadlan and family.