

Stepping Forward: A D'var Torah on Va'yigash

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Judah's statement at the opening of Va'yigash has always stirred my emotions. Together with his brothers, he listens as the Egyptian overlord condemns Benjamin for the theft of his magical silver chalice, and consigns him to lifelong servitude. Then Judah alone "steps forward" (va'yigash) and says "take me, not him".

It is of course true that Judah had earlier accepted responsibility for Benjamin. His father Jacob had been unwilling to let Benjamin travel to Egypt with his brothers, for Benjamin and Joseph were his favorites, sons of his favorite wife, and he feared that Benjamin would vanish, as had happened to Joseph. But there was a famine, and the family needed food, and the Egyptian had told the brothers that they shouldn't come to Egypt again without bringing their younger brother. Jacob repeatedly refused to let Benjamin go, only relenting when the famine continued and when Judah promised that he would be personally responsible for Benjamin.

But how far does this personal responsibility extend? Judah could have pleaded eloquently that the Egyptian grant mercy to his brother, he could have reasoned with him about the improbability of his brother having stolen the chalice, he could have tried to bribe the Egyptian, and, when nothing else worked, he could have played on the Egyptian's emotions about his old father -- reminding him, as he did, that "nafsho keshura be'nafsho", that his father's life, his well-being, his very existence, was bound up with that of his son Benjamin. "Certainly," he could have told the Egyptian, "you wouldn't want to kill my father."

Then, when his pleas fell on deaf ears, Judah could have gone back to Jacob and said that he had done everything humanly possible. "I'm sorry Dad, I did everything I could, but the Egyptian just wouldn't listen. I feel terrible. I wish I could have done better. I know that you will never forgive me. But I don't know what else I could have done." Who would have faulted him? Wouldn't each of us have done the same?

Judah goes beyond this -- he literally puts his life on the line. He is willing to substitute himself for Benjamin. "Let me remain as your slave instead of my brother, and let my brother return to his father. How could I possibly return to my father without him? How could I bear to witness the evil that will overtake my father?"

[Interestingly, Esther uses the same phrase with Ahasuerus -- "How could I bear to witness the evil that will overtake my people?"]

Va'yigash eilav Yehudah -- "and Judah stepped forward to him [Joseph]". The ability and willingness to step forward, to step right up to the holder of power, to speak fearlessly even if you're shaking in your boots, to say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done in spite of the consequences, is what social activism is all about. Speaking truth to power was, as I recall, one of the phrases in Martin Luther King's lexicon, perhaps it was Gandhi's, but it meant a lot to me in the 60s. And Judah was for me a model in our own tradition of speaking truth to power. Here was a Jew who put aside personal considerations, who accepted a great measure of risk, but who said what needed to be said, who did what needed to be done.

My daughter recently asked me to help her review her seventh-grade social studies lessons. It was refreshing to be reminded about "civic virtue", and about how the founders of our country built on the classical ideal of citizens' putting the common welfare above their personal welfare. It reminded me of "who more than self their country loved" in "America the Beautiful" and the pledge of "our lives, our possessions and our sacred honor" in the Declaration of Independence that, despite its flaws, I read each year on the 4th of July. It made me nostalgic for the civic virtue with which some of us demonstrated against the war in Vietnam, and with which others have fought for this country in many wars.

Of course, we wouldn't want to elevate this self-sacrifice to too high a level. That's what armies do with young recruits who are sent off to die, for the honor of gods and countries. But Judah was not a youngster; by this time, he was a grandfather. By this time, he should have been retired, should have been able to enjoy the fruits of a lifetime of labor. And yet he stepped forward, as did his great-grandfather in leaving his ancestral home at the age of 70.

The opening of this parshah can be contrasted with parshat VaYeshev two weeks ago; it begins "va'yeshev Ya'akov" -- "and Jacob settled in". I recall a classical commentary that notes that every time the word "va'yeshev" occurs, it is a harbinger of trouble. It means that a person has found a place, has settled into a routine, has become too comfortable.

"And what is wrong with that?", you might ask, "Isn't that what we all strive for?" Yes, but When we become too settled, we lose our social consciousness, we lose our ability and our desire to change, we live in our cocoons and lose concern for those outside. We lose our edge. And in the end, according to the commentator, we lose our comforts as well.

We are all inclined to live "va'yeshev" lives. This parsha reminds us that life is also about "va'yigash".