

Vayigash

ויגש

“He approached”

Genesis 44:18 – 47:27

Torah Together



In this week's *Torah* portion, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, who he believes have truly had a change of heart. Joseph sends his brothers back to his father, Jacob, with instructions to bring the entire family to live with him in Egypt until the famine is over. Joseph and his father are reunited after twenty plus years and the family takes up residence in Goshen, a fertile hill country well suited to raising livestock.

1. Judah's Offer of Sacrifice - 44:18-34

a) As you read Judah's plea to Joseph, what do you notice about it? What are Judah's reasons for offering to take Benjamin's place?

Judah makes a strong but respectful plea for Joseph's mercy. He indicates that if Benjamin fails to return to Jacob, he will die. Judah cannot bear to cause his father such grief. He would rather suffer Benjamin's punishment himself than to cause his father such pain.

b) How does Judah's offer indicate a change of heart for him? What has happened in Judah's life that may have caused this? Do you think Joseph saw Judah's change?

This is a much different attitude than he had when Joseph was sold some 22 years earlier. Judah has 1) matured, 2) lived with a guilty conscience, 3) seen the pain he caused Jacob, and 4) lost 2 sons of his own during this time. Joseph recognized a sincere change in Judah's heart.

c) Who else do we know that offered his life in exchange for a guilty person?

This is very similar to Yeshua's sacrifice for us.

Changes in Judah's Character

We begin to see a change in Judah's character when he was confronted with the pregnancy of his daughter-in-law, Tamar (**Genesis 38**). Now it appears that God has been working on his heart and Judah is willing to sacrifice himself to a life of slavery rather than break his father's heart (again) by returning home without Benjamin.

Scripture Link

It is certainly noble of Judah to offer to take Benjamin's place and remain as a slave in Egypt rather than deprive his father Jacob of his beloved son. **John 15:13** records another notable occurrence of this kind of sacrificial love. Who is the object of this love in each case?

Joseph's Forgiveness

Because of his brother's hatred of him, Joseph had spent many years suffering as a slave. Yet he truly harbored no resentment toward them. At the same time, his brothers had spent many years living with their sin and seeing the pain and suffering they had caused their father. They could not imagine that Joseph would not hate them and seek revenge. What do you think enabled Joseph to keep from hating his brothers?

Joseph's Position in Egypt

Notice that it was not an option for Joseph to join his father in Canaan. In spite of the fact that Joseph was the "Number 2 man" in Egypt, he still served at the pleasure of Pharaoh and, for all practical purposes, was a slave. However, because he was successful at his job of managing Egypt through the famine, Pharaoh was happy for Joseph and graciously invited his entire family to relocate to Egypt. Of course, this had been God's plan all along, as He told Abraham in **Genesis 15:12-16**.

2. Joseph makes himself Known - 45:1-20

a) Why do you think that Joseph could no longer control his emotions?

Joseph had been wanting to make himself known to his brothers ever since he first saw them, but would not until he was sure that they were truly sorry for what they had done and had had a change of heart. Judah's offer to take Benjamin's place provided him the proof that he needed.

b) Why do you think his brothers were terrified in his presence?

For his brothers to see this important government official begin to cry was a little startling. Then, as they began to realize that this was the same person that they had treated so poorly, they began to fear for what he could do to them.

c) As Joseph begins to hug and kiss his brothers, what does he say that helps relieve their anxiety? How was he able to say this? If you were in his place, could you have done the same?

He tells them not to worry because God had worked through the evil that they had done to him for the greater good of the entire family. Joseph clearly saw God's hand in the entire series of events and truly didn't harbor any resentment. Joseph was a very forgiving person.

d) What does Joseph ask that his brothers do? At this point in the story, there is a great deal of information that Joseph's brothers must absorb. Can you imagine the conversations that went on among themselves and with Joseph?

Joseph asks that his brothers return to Jacob and tell him to move the entire family to Egypt so that Joseph can be near them and provide for them.

e) What was Pharaoh's reaction to the news that Joseph's brothers had come to Egypt? What did he order Joseph to do?

"Pharaoh and his officials were pleased" at the news of Joseph's brothers arrival. He ordered Joseph to send wagons to Canaan to bring his family to Egypt. He told them to forget their belongings as "the best of Egypt will be theirs."

3. Joseph's Brothers return Home - 45:21-46:5

a) What does Joseph admonish his brothers about in verse 24? Why do you think he may have said this?

Joseph tells his brothers not to quarrel on the way home. He knew their nature and that they might argue about what to tell Jacob. He only wanted them to be truthful and bring his father back to Egypt.

b) When his brothers returned to Jacob, they informed him that Joseph was not only alive, but the ruler of all Egypt. Do you think they told Jacob what they had done to Joseph long ago? How do you think Jacob felt about this and how would you have responded?

It must have been even more difficult for Jacob to receive the news that Joseph was alive and ruler of Egypt than for the brothers. It's difficult to imagine that they could have told Jacob anything but the truth. He must have been more pleased with the news that Joseph was alive than he was angry about what the brothers had done. It seems strange that nothing further is mentioned about the brothers' hateful acts toward their brother Joseph.

c) What do you think it means in verse 27 when it says, "the spirit of their father Jacob revived"?

We learned before that Jacob had refused to be comforted after the loss of Joseph. It could be that the news that he was alive brought him out of his long period of mourning and depression.

d) On the way to Egypt, Jacob stops at Beer Sheba and offers a sacrifice to God. There God speaks to Jacob in a vision. What does God say to Jacob and how did this encourage him?

God tells Jacob not to be afraid to go down to Egypt, that He would be with him. Jacob had wanted very badly (and had worked very hard) to get back to Canaan during his time with Laban. He knew that he and his descendants were to eventually have the land, so he might have been afraid that going to Egypt was not the right thing to do. God thus reassured him and also told him that he would bring him back to the land and that he would be with his beloved son Joseph when he died.

4. Israel & his Descendants journey to Egypt - 46:5-47:12

a) Verses 5 - 25 list all the male descendants of Jacob who went to Egypt. How many were there by each wife? Including Jacob, a total of how many went to Egypt? After adding Joseph and his two sons, how many male descendants were in Egypt?

If one counts sons, grandsons, and great grandsons, then the sons of Leah = 32, the sons of Zilpah = 16, the sons of Rachel = 14, and the sons of Bilhah = 7 for a total of 69 plus Jacob = 70. (Note: There seems to be a miscount in Leah's offspring. Given that Judah's two sons, Er and Onan, had died, Leah's male offspring number 31. However, if Leah's daughter, Dinah, is included, the total is 32. This discrepancy is the source of some interesting discussions.)

What to tell Jacob

We are not told whether his brothers explained to Jacob how Joseph ended up in Egypt. It's difficult to imagine how they could have said anything other than the truth, especially since Jacob would be reunited with Joseph and he would tell him the whole story. In any case, it appears that the joy of finding that Joseph was alive and that they would be reunited was enough to overshadow any anger or resentment that Jacob might have felt.

Jacob and Deception

The key event in Jacob's life was his deception of his father Isaac to gain his blessing (**Genesis 27**). It appears, however, that he was doubly repaid for this deception. First, he was deceived by Laban into taking Leah as his wife instead of Rachel (**Genesis 29:15-30**). Second, his sons deceived him into believing that his beloved son Joseph was dead, allowing him to mourn bitterly for over 20 years. Certainly deception played a big role in Jacob's life.

Life according to Jacob

Genesis 47:7-10 records a conversation between Jacob and Pharaoh just after Jacob's arrival in Egypt. One can imagine that Jacob must have looked very old because Pharaoh asks him, "How old are you?" Notice his answer: "The years of my pilgrimage are one hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers." Jacob's assessment of his life? "My life has been short and hard."

Joseph continues to deal with the Famine

There are archeological records that support the fact that the Lower Nile Valley did indeed suffer a severe famine sometime during the 19th century bce. There is also evidence that the rulers of the land were able to take ownership of much of the agricultural land at about this same time. While the evidence for these 4000-year old events are subject to debate among scholars, there is no reason to dismiss the story of Joseph as a mere fable or myth.

b) Why do you think Jacob chose Judah to go ahead of them to Goshen? How long had it been since Jacob had seen Joseph? Can you imagine what this reunion was like?

Judah had proven himself by taking responsibility for Benjamin, so Jacob felt confident in sending him ahead to represent the family. Note that this indicates Judah's leadership role. It had been ~22 years since Jacob had last seen Joseph. (Joseph sold at age 17, becomes ruler of Egypt at 30, plus 7 years of plenty and at least 2 years of famine => 13+7+2=22.)

c) The family first settled in Goshen. What do you know about Goshen that would make it an ideal place for Jacob's family to settle? What did Joseph do to assure that his family would be allowed to settle there?

Goshen was east of the Nile river delta. The land is fertile with plenty of foraging growth but far enough away to be unsuitable for irrigation. Thus it was perfect for raising livestock. The Egyptians disdained shepherds (perhaps for religious reasons) and were happy to have them live separate from them. By stressing to Pharaoh that they were shepherds, Joseph assured that the family would be located in Goshen.

d) The fact that Jacob's family were shepherds may have worked to their advantage in several ways. What were some of them?

Being shepherds helped assure that they would not be assimilated into Egyptian culture. Further, by living simply off livestock, they would be less likely to become dependent on the Egyptian agrarian economy.

"Now the Israelites settled in Egypt"

Genesis 47:27

5. The Famine Continues - 47:13-27

a) As the famine continued, the economy suffered. Trace the stages that the people went through as they tried to survive the famine. Who gained what in this process?

First the people spent all of their money on grain and food. Then they were forced to sell their livestock for food. Finally they were forced to sell their land and themselves as laborers. Thus Pharaoh gained ownership of most of the land and instituted a "share cropping" system where the people had to give Pharaoh 20% of the produce of the land just to farm it.

b) Why do you think that the Israelites were able to survive and "increase greatly in number" during this period?

While the irrigated crops along the Nile were suffering during the draught, Goshen probably had enough natural vegetation to support Jacob's flocks. Since they lived simply off the flocks, they were probably able to survive better than their farming neighbors.

Digging deeper

1. How does **Romans 8:28** apply to the life of Joseph?

Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to his purpose." Joseph realized that although his brothers meant to mistreat him and although it was unpleasant, God worked in the events of his life to bring about good for him, his family, and the entire world. Joseph's only part was to be obedient. What we can learn from Joseph's story is to believe that God is in control of our lives even when things seem to be going terribly wrong.

2. Does it seem fair to you that Joseph's brothers were not punished for their cruelty to him? What do you think about this?

Although we do not have a complete record of the events of the brothers lives, it appears that they didn't suffer any direct consequences because of their sinful actions toward Joseph. However, it could be argued that once they told their lie to Jacob, they had to watch his grief, which they caused, and live with it every day thereafter. It seems likely that they had a constant, daily reminder of their guilt just by remaining at home. In some ways, this in itself was a punishment.

3. This is the end of Joseph's story. Summarize and analyze it. What guiding principles can you get from it? Examine the following passages for ideas: **Psalm 105:16-23, Acts 7:9-14**

Read and discuss passages. Others may also be relevant.

Working out God's Will

The way that God worked in the life of Joseph to bring about the salvation of his entire family is worthy of some consideration. While we may not have the role of saving an entire nation, it is clear that God is able to work in our lives in like manner, using our suffering and misfortune to bring about His will in the lives of others. So what attitude should we have as we go through life? How should we respond when we are facing unpleasant circumstances and God seems nowhere to be found? Trusting in God, that His will for our life is better than anything we might imagine for ourselves is the essence of faith.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Ezekiel 37:15-28

Brit Hadashah : Acts 7:9-16

Jacob's Extended Family Tree (Genesis 46:8-25)

