

DECEMBER 18, 2017

Parashat Vayigash

The Power of Closeness

Then Judah came near to him (Genesis 44:18)

ויגש אליו יהודה (בראשי מד:יח)

Last month Asaf Ron, the Jewish CEO of Haifa-based [Beit HaGefen Center](#) and Israeli-born Palestinian Ulfat Haider, program director of Beit HaGefen, delivered a series of talks in San Francisco about the importance and benefits of face-to-face dialogue. Established in 1963, Beit HaGefen conducts workshops in which Jews and Arabs engage in positive face-to-face dialogue. Ron told the [Jewish News of Northern California](#), “Jews and Arabs know each other, but we don’t meet each other, and this is a problem when you have a conflict. People must understand each other and care for each other. We have to be able to listen to the person and hear their narrative. Then we can argue. We can have different perspectives ... [and] even if we don’t know about borders or a future resolution to the greater conflict, we can still live together in peace.” This model of face-to-face dialogue, which breaks down stereotypes, encourages mutual understanding and promotes coexistence, is also utilized by Judah in his discussion with Joseph at the opening of *Parashat Vayigash*.

Judah faces a daunting challenge. Benjamin, the youngest of his brothers, has been caught red-handed with Joseph’s goblet and faces a lifetime of servitude in Egypt. Judah has no choice but to plead for his brother’s life. Yet, before he does so we read that, “Judah came near to him” (verse 18). He physically approaches Joseph, whom he does not recognize as his brother, before beginning his talk. Why does he do this? More importantly, why is this seemingly irrelevant detail related in the biblical text? Some commentators (See *Ba’al Haturim*) explain that Judah approaches in a threatening manner in order to demonstrate that he is not afraid of Joseph. The Sages in the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 93:8) take the exact opposite tact. They explain that Judah comes close to Joseph as an expression of peace. “The language of ‘and he came near’ can only be a language of peace, as it is written, ‘and when David came near to the people, he asked about their wellbeing (literally, ‘he asked about their peace’ – *Samuel I* 30:21)” According to another version of the same Midrash, the language of “coming near” refers to “examination.” In other words, Judah felt best able to ascertain Joseph’s motivations and seriousness not from a distance, but instead through a close, intimate discussion.

We know this to be true in our daily lives. If we really want to assess someone’s intentions, there’s no better means than a personal, face-to-face discussion. Conversely, there’s no better way to demonstrate your unwillingness to live together and your desire not to coexist, than by avoiding face-to-face discussion, seemingly at any cost—regrettably, the very tactic currently employed by the leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

After his recent proclamation recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, U.S. President Donald Trump [noted that](#), “Vice President Pence will travel to the region in the coming days to reaffirm our commitment to work with partners throughout the Middle East to defeat radicalism that threatens the hopes and dreams of future generations.” Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas responded by refusing to meet with Pence when during his visit. According to the [JTA](#), Jibril Rajoub, a senior Fatah politician, said last week that Pence during his two-day trip originally scheduled to start on Dec. 17 wanted to schedule a meeting with Abbas in Bethlehem, but, “such a meeting will not take place. In the name of Fatah, I say that we will not welcome Trump’s deputy in the Palestinian territories.” The PA’s decision not to meet with the Vice President is disappointing, but sadly not surprising. Far too often, rather than engaging in face-to-face conversations, the Palestinian leadership has chosen instead to pressure

Israel by turning to international bodies such as the United Nations or other international forums.

When Judah finally came close to his brother Joseph and broke the barrier of pain between them, Joseph relented and the brothers reunited in peace. The United States must continue to insist that only through this same approach of face-to-face interaction can Israel and the Palestinians truly understand one-another and reach a permanent peace agreement. ■

Tracing the Roots of Destruction – *Asarah B'Tevet*

In the tenth month in the tenth of the month (Kings II 25:1)(מלכים ב כה:א) בחדש העשירי בעשור לחודש

On Thursday of this coming week, many Jews will observe the fast of *Asarah B'tevet* (the tenth of Tevet) which commemorates the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylonia in 588 BCE (see *Kings II* chapter 25), which ultimately culminated in the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem and the conquest of the Kingdom of Judah. More than 2,500 years later, in September 1950 the Chief Rabbinate of Israel issued a proclamation also designating the Tenth of Tevet as *Yom Hakadish Haklali*—"The Day of the General Recitation of the Kaddish." Thousands of Jews who had lost loved ones during the Holocaust simply did not have any information about the exact date of death. They had no yartzeit on which to say Kaddish for their departed relatives. For this reason, the rabbinate designated the Tenth of Tevet as the day on which we would light a candle, study the Mishnah, and recite the Kaddish on behalf of those whose date of death was not known.

In a powerful essay, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein wonders how these two seemingly unrelated events came to be linked historically. While the beginning of the siege on Jerusalem in ancient times was certainly important, it would be many months before the Babylonian armies sacked the Holy City and destroyed the Temple. On the other hand, the Holocaust represents the single greatest tragedy in Jewish (and human) history. How then do we approach the combination of these two different events into a single day? [Rabbi Lichtenstein asked](#): "Why do we mark the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem and not just the breaching of the walls or the destruction of the Temple? The message of this commemoration is that after the destruction, we must trace its sources and mark its stages; we must look backwards to events that are not earth-shattering and perceive how the seeds of the destruction on the Ninth of Av were planted on the Tenth of Tevet. The more we study history, the more we learn that we should not concentrate only on the final act, the cataclysmic event itself, but also on all the stages that led up to it. The moral message that arises from this is the importance of sharpening our consciousness of the unfolding of the past, seeing how the branches sprout forth from the roots. This has great significance with relation to the Holocaust—not so much the Holocaust itself, but rather its roots: how did such a phenomenon ever come to be?...With hindsight, we have to look back at what came before, what the roots of the Holocaust were, and what moral lessons may be learned from them."

With the passing of most of the survivors of the Shoah, many synagogues no longer recite Kaddish communally on the Tenth of Tevet. Commenting on this phenomenon, former Chief Rabbi of Ramat Gan Rabbi Yaakov Ariel writes (see *Shut Ahalah shel Torah* vol. 5 OC 15), "It seems in my humble opinion, that the need for this declaration grows with time, as the community of survivors dwindles, and our forgetfulness grows...we must impress, and continue to impress upon the public not to forget that which Amalek did to our generation and to encourage the entire public to recite the Kaddish."

Here in America, we must continue to recite the Kaddish for those victims of the Shoah who no longer have loved-ones alive to recite it on their behalf. But, we must also do our part to combat the very real anti-Semitism that continues to plague the Jewish people in the forms of boycotts and campaigns that focus specifically and disproportionately on Israel for the simple reason that it is the Jewish state. In addition to reciting the Kaddish, we can also use this day to call our elected representatives and encourage them to support legislation that rejects and combats boycotts aimed at harming the Jewish state. In this way, we will not only trace the roots of our history, but take a small step to ensure that history does not repeat itself. ■

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