

Parashat Vayigash 5777, 2017:

*Joseph: Righteousness, Truth and Justice*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Torah contains countless dramatic moments. One of the most powerful ones appears in this week's *parasha*, when Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers:

Now Joseph could not bear (*l'hitapake*) all those standing beside him, and he called out, "Take everyone away from me!" So no one stood with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept out loud, so the Egyptians heard, and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" but his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence. (*Sefer Bereishit* 45:1-3, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The introductory phrase, "Now Joseph could not bear all those standing beside him," has captured the attention of many classical Torah *meforshim* (commentators). Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the Midrash, interprets *l'hitapake* as "to bear" ("*lisbol*"), and suggests the following explanation: "He [Joseph] could not bear that Egyptians would stand beside him and hear his brothers being embarrassed when he would make himself known to them."

Onkelos, the First Century CE Aramaic translator/interpreter of the Torah, understands *l'hitapake* in a different fashion. In his view, our term is the equivalent of "*l'itchasana*" (Aramaic) or "*l'hitchazake*" (Hebrew, to strengthen one's self). Onkelos, therefore, would

translate our opening phrase as; “Now Joseph could not strengthen himself in the midst of all those standing beside him.”

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) builds upon Onkelos’ interpretation and thereby reveals the “story behind the story”:

In my estimation, the correct interpretation is that there were numerous individuals present at that moment from the House of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. At this time, he [Joseph] began to feel remorse regarding Benjamin, since feelings of pity were bestirred within him as a result of Judah’s supplications. Hence, Joseph was unable to strengthen himself to control his emotions before all of them [the courtiers and the Egyptians]. Therefore, he called to his servants, “Remove all non-Jews (“*ish nachri*”) from before me, for I wish to speak with those who remain (i.e. his brothers). The members of the House of Pharaoh and the Egyptians went out from before him, and when they left, Joseph raised his voice and cried aloud. The Egyptians and the courtiers who departed heard Joseph – for they remained in the outer courtyard. (Translation and underlining my own)

According to the Ramban, and in notable contrast to Rashi, Joseph’s point of focus was not the potential embarrassment of his brothers, but rather, himself. In my estimation, an emotional outburst, such as the one that was forming in Joseph’s mind, would have been abhorrent in the eyes of the Egyptians, as it would have been interpreted as a sign of weakness and lack of authentic aristocratic bearing – two potentially powerful strikes against the sitting Viceroy of Egypt. Therefore, if the courtiers had witnessed such an act, it would have called into question Joseph’s continued ability to effectively lead the famine-racked nation. In order to forestall any such interpretation of his behavior, Joseph had all of the Egyptians removed from his presence before revealing his true identity to his brothers.

In our own time, Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch *shlita* expands upon Rashi’s interpretation of our narrative. In so doing, he adds to our understanding of Joseph’s righteousness and his singular dedication to truth and justice. He begins by explaining why it was initially necessary for Joseph to cause his brothers such significant anxiety: “In accordance with the *halacha*, and until this

point, his brothers were obligated to undergo pain and emotional discomfort in order to rectify their sin [of having sold Joseph]. Therefore, Joseph acted in a just and legally defensible manner when he caused them anguish.”

At this juncture, Rav Sternbuch emphasizes Joseph’s singular orientation toward the twin values of truth and justice:

When, however, they had been sufficiently punished, and the time had arrived to reveal himself to them as [their long-lost brother,] Joseph, even at this moment, did not repudiate the ethical characteristic of pursuing the truth. This was the case even though [the brother’s actions] led him to be brought by force to Egypt and to be imprisoned for 12 years. Nonetheless we do not find that Joseph had any interest whatsoever in seeking revenge against them, instead, he acted toward them in a just and forthright manner – as he had done before [they had sold him].

Rav Sternbuch concludes his presentation by providing a clear rationale as to exactly why Joseph had the Egyptian courtiers removed prior to revealing his identity to his brothers: “... he sought to remove all of the Egyptians from before him so that his brothers would not be embarrassed and suffer distress beyond that which the *din* (law) had mandated.” (*Sefer Ta’am v’ Da’at al Chamisha Chumshei Torah*, Parashat Vayigash, page 236, translation and brackets my own)

As our Sages teach us, *Yosef Hatzadik* (Joseph the Righteous) was one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish people. As such, we have much to learn from him regarding the ethical values and practices that should inform our daily behaviors. Like Joseph, we must strive to be righteous, seek justice and ever pursue the truth. By internalizing Joseph’s values and emulating his actions, we will be well on our way to fulfilling King David’s immortal words: “Kindness and truth have met; righteousness and peace have encountered one another. Truth will sprout from the earth, and righteousness will look down from heaven.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 85:11-12, with my emendations)

May this be so, soon and in our days, *v’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther*, may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.