



Gaining perspective:
Torah Reflections on *Parashat Vayigash* (Genesis 44:18 – 47:27)
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At the beginning of *Parashat Vayigash*, the land of Canaan is in the midst of a famine, and Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to get food for their family. They do not know that Joseph, their brother whom they sold into slavery years ago, is the man giving them their rations. Joseph recognizes his brothers and, after ensuring that he is alone with them, tearfully reveals himself to them. He asks if his father is still alive and then simply says, "But now do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that God sent me before you." (Genesis 45:5). As soon as the brothers have had a chance to process this shocking revelation, Joseph instructs them to bring their father, their children, and all of their possessions to the land of Goshen.

At first, as we might expect, the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers is quite emotional. The brothers come close to one another and weep upon each other's necks. After this initial moment, though, Joseph is all business. He focuses only on what needs to be done to bring the family to Egypt before Jacob dies. There is no discussion of the brothers' past betrayal, and in fact Joseph insists that the brothers not worry about their past actions toward him. The brothers, too, don't show any of their old hard feelings toward Joseph. Instead, they all concentrate on the big picture: bringing the family together and securing the future of their descendants.

When we or our loved ones suffer hard times, when families are torn by conflict or divorce, or when a loved one becomes ill or passes away, it is natural for us to feel despair or to give up hope. In these times we also tend to focus our energy on the details of the situation. We try to figure out who is at fault for an argument or an accident, or worry about whether the doctors are making the right choices, or how we should bury a loved one. These details are important, but sometimes they can lead us astray.

Vayigash teaches us to focus on the big picture of our lives in order to put our misfortunes in perspective. When Joseph and his brothers are young, they are so intent on trying to be "the best" that they neglect the importance of family. In *Vayigash*, they learn to let go of their differences and work together for the sake of their descendants. Similarly, when we face crises in our lives, we have opportunities to put our egos and grudges aside and focus on what is important in the long run: friendship, love, and strengthening the next generation. *Vayigash* literally means "to come close," and so the *parashah* challenges us to reach out and come closer to our loved ones during hard times. Spending time with family and friends, praying, meditating, or just taking a few deep breaths are all things we can do to appreciate the big picture in our lives. Studying Torah, too, allows us to be inspired by the history of our people.

Vayigash is also a very optimistic *parashah*. It shows us that even when we want to give up all hope, there may still be a chance to mend a broken family or friendship. Even if we are dealing with a loved one's illness or death, we can still make peace with the challenge by looking at the big picture. Just as Joseph tells us that his becoming a slave was necessary in order to preserve life, so sometimes we need to experience challenges in order to reach our full potential. May the

Holy One help us to follow Joseph's example, to forgive those who have wronged us and to be more mindful of the spiritual "big picture" as we struggle to turn our misfortunes into opportunities for growth.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Arielle Silverman, a member of Temple Chai in Phoenix and a senior at Arizona State University's Barrett Honors College. Arielle is majoring in biology and psychology and is active in her local Hillel. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging, in collaboration with the Center for Life Enrichment of Jewish Family and Children's Service of Phoenix, AZ and the Deutsch Family Shalom Center, Temple Chai of Phoenix, AZ.



3330 Geary Boulevard
3rd Floor West
San Francisco, CA 94118
415-750-4197
www.jewishhealingcenter.org



4645 E. Marilyn Rd.
Phoenix, AZ 85032
602-971-1234
shalomcenter@templechai.com



13951 N. Scottsdale Rd #110
Scottsdale, AZ, 85254
480-596-3821
602-361-2251
Rafael.Goldstein@JFCSArizona.com