

## Va-yigash: Genesis 44:18 – 47:27

Peter Jacobs

Jan 4 2025

Shabbat shalom!

Imagine the pitch for a prestige Netflix mini-series: big family; lovable but crusty patriarch plays favorites; sibling rivalry; talented but annoying prodigy sold to travellers; eventually makes good; saves family; brothers reconcile. It's got everything: family conflict, high fashion, exotic locations, wardrobe malfunction, jealousy, seduction, comedy, revenge, and a happy ending...for now. And great potential for future seasons and spin-offs.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is epic, spanning Genesis chapters 37 to 50 and taking four Shabbatot to tell. It's an extraordinary narrative, with characters jumping off the page, and with multiple interwoven themes.

It is of course a family drama, which I will come back to.

Dreams and magical realism play a central role – bowing sheaves of wheat, scrawny cows eating fat cows, premonitions of famine.

It's a soap opera: early on, Judah has an ill-advised affair with his daughter-in-law Tamar, which ends badly. Later we learn (Gen 39:6): "Now Joseph was well built and handsome." Potiphar's wife checks him out; he turns her down; she lies about it; he goes to jail. It ends happily.

There's comedy – the levirate marriage story about Judah's sons inspired Dorothy Parker to coin one of the world's great off-color jokes...which I will not tell.

And a not-so-bright Pharaoh is angry - for unspecified reasons - at his cup-bearer and baker. Given the importance of grain and bread in the story you might think that a baker had some valuable skills. He ends badly, but the cup-bearer does fine.

As the story progresses, it gets darker. Joseph predicts a famine, which does indeed descend. The famine forces his brothers to travel to Egypt in search of food – not once but twice. And of course it is the famine that brings Joseph and his brothers together again.

Joseph's character is complex – not a nice person. As a teenager he was an insufferable busybody and a show-off. His brothers despised him - they actually sold him to a travelling caravan, which takes some doing. After the extraordinary events that bring them together again in Egypt, he torments his brothers emotionally – it's disturbing to read, no matter how well justified. In last week's parasha Joseph schemed to have his goblet planted in Benjamin's bag of grain, so that Benjamin inadvertently became Joseph's cup-bearer. Joseph threatens to jail Benjamin and send the rest of his brothers back to Jacob - a cruel twist that echoes his own treatment at the hands of his brothers.

Joseph is disturbed and not at peace. Despite all his worldly success, his soul is in turmoil.

Which sets the stage for this week's parasha, Va-Yigash, which is the climax of the Joseph story. The text changes from a running narrative of events, describing Joseph's emotional manipulation and posturing for advantage, to a tone of deep, Shakespearean pathos. Joseph is suffering – the situation is too much for him, and it all comes crashing down.

It's beautifully evocative. It is both a foundational narrative of the Jewish people, and a deeply moving literary masterpiece.

The parasha opens with a striking passage, 16 verses long, in which Judah relates to Joseph his conversation with Jacob, who instructed his sons to go to Egypt to procure food, saying that if Benjamin does not return he will die from sorrow. Joseph holds all the power in this conversation, and Judah is the supplicant. The text expresses this dynamic with beautiful economy: Judah refers to Joseph as "adoni" (my lord), to himself in the third person as "avde-cha" (your servant), and to Jacob their father as "avde-cha avi" (your servant my father). Judah is utterly desperate, begging Joseph to exhibit pity and humanity to save his family.

The focus here is as much on Judah as it is on Joseph. Judah is a deeply flawed person – he instigated the brothers' plot against Joseph, and he was far from an ideal father...or father-in-law. Judah himself has been hurt by his father, Jacob, who favored Joseph and Benjamin. But Judah nevertheless shows deep love and devotion for Jacob. He will do literally anything to avoid making the same mistake twice, by abandoning Benjamin, which would kill his father out

of sorrow. During the course of these chapters Judah's character has changed - from jealous and manipulative, to noble.

Judah's eloquent pleading convinces Joseph that the brothers are truly sorry and contrite, and Joseph breaks down and reveals himself to them. They all have a good cry.

But Joseph never actually forgives his brothers. Joseph says (Gen 45:5) "Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me here; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you."

In addition to the theological significance of this passage, I find it to be deeply moving in human terms. While Joseph does not forgive his brothers, he also does not lash out at them, giving them a way to preserve their dignity and to enable the family to live together once again. The past cannot be erased – deep hurt cannot simply be set aside. But we can choose to look forward, building our lives for the future, rather than focusing on retribution for what happened in the past.

Joseph did not have act this way – he could easily have taken his revenge. But then history itself would have taken an entirely different turn. The foundational narrative of the Jewish people depends crucially on this act of measured compassion by Joseph.

After these dramatic events, the text relates (Gen 46:6-7): “Thus Jacob and all his offspring with him came to Egypt: he brought with him to Egypt his sons and grandsons, his daughters and granddaughters – all his offspring.” What is this describing? It’s describing immigrants moving their entire families to a new land in search of a better life - in remarkable resonance with our world today.

Let’s now take a step back from the family drama. What was going on around them? Were Joseph’s brothers the only ones making the arduous journey to obtain food? The text has the answer (Gen 42:5): “Thus the sons of Israel were **among those** who came to procure rations, for the famine extended to the land of Canaan.” Then Gen 47:13-17 says: “Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine...all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said ‘Give us bread, lest we die before your very eyes.’ “

Egyptians were first forced to give up their livestock in exchange for bread. The next year they were forced to give up their land for bread. These are acts of desperation. This is a story about societal upheaval due to a climate disaster – likewise in remarkable resonance with our world today.

The last verse of today’s parasha says (Gen 47:27): “Thus Israel (Jacob) settled in the country of Egypt, in the region of Goshen; they acquired holdings in it, and were fertile and increased greatly.” This is the Exodus in reverse – going down to Egypt from Canaan and settling. We know

what happens in future seasons. This is an eloquent, even spooky, foreshadowing of millenia of the Jewish experience of migration and exile. The story of Joseph is our story.

Shabbat Shalom!