

Kol Rina  
An Independent Minyan  
Parashat Vayigash  
December 26, 2020 \*\*\* 11 Tevet, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We *welcome* all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Vayigash in a Nutshell

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/3224/jewish/Vayigash-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3224/jewish/Vayigash-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

Judah approaches Joseph to plead for the release of Benjamin, offering himself as a slave to the Egyptian ruler in Benjamin's stead. Upon witnessing his brothers' loyalty to one another, Joseph reveals his identity to them. "I am Joseph," he declares. "Is my father still alive?" The brothers are overcome by shame and remorse, but Joseph comforts them. "It was not you who sent me here," he says to them, "but G-d. It has all been ordained from Above to save us, and the entire region, from famine." The brothers rush back to Canaan with the news. Jacob comes to Egypt with his sons and their families—seventy souls in all—and is reunited with his beloved son after 22 years. On his way to Egypt he receives the divine promise: "Fear not to go down to Egypt; for I will there make of you a great nation. I will go down with you into Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again." Joseph gathers the wealth of Egypt by selling food and seed during the famine. Pharaoh gives Jacob's family the fertile county of Goshen to settle, and the children of Israel prosper in their Egyptian exile.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: [Ezekiel 37:15 - 37:28](#)

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/610065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/610065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This week's haftarah mentions the fusion of the kingdoms of Judah and Joseph during the Messianic Era, echoing the beginning of this week's Torah reading: "And Judah approached him [Joseph]." The prophet Ezekiel shares a prophecy he received, in which G-d instructs him to take two sticks and to write one on each, "For Judah and for the children of Israel his companions" and on the other, "For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions." After doing so he was told to put the two near each other, and G-d fused them into one stick. G-d explains to Ezekiel that these sticks are symbolic of the House of Israel, that was divided into two (often warring) kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom that was established by Jeroboam, a member of the Tribe of Ephraim, and the Southern Kingdom, that remained under the reign of the Davidic (Judean) Dynasty. The fusing of the two sticks represented the merging of the kingdoms that will transpire during the Messianic Era — with the Messiah, a descendant of David, at the helm of this unified empire. "So says the L-rd G-d: 'Behold I will take the children of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I

will gather them from every side, and I will bring them to their land. And I will make them into one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be to them all as a king..." The haftorah ends with G-d's assurance that "they shall dwell on the land that I have given to My servant, to Jacob, wherein your forefathers lived; and they shall dwell upon it, they and their children and their children's children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever."

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[The Unexpected Leader \(Vayigash 5781\) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://rabbisacks.org/vayigash-5781/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/vayigash-5781/>

I was once present when the great historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis, was asked to predict the course of events in the Middle East. He replied, "I'm a historian, so I only make predictions about the past. What is more, I am a retired historian, so even my past is passé." Predictions are impossible in the affairs of living, breathing human beings because we are free and there is no way of knowing in advance how an individual will react to the great challenges of their life.

If one thing has seemed clear throughout the last third of Genesis, it is that Joseph will emerge as the archetypal leader. He is the central character of the story, and his dreams and the shifting circumstances of his fate all point in that direction. Least likely as a candidate for leadership is Judah, the man who proposed selling Joseph as a slave (Gen. 37:26-27), whom we next see separated from his brothers, living among the Canaanites, intermarried with them, losing two of his sons because of sin, and having sexual relations with a woman he takes to be a prostitute. The chapter in which this is described begins with the phrase, "At that time Judah went down from among his brothers" (Gen. 38:1). The commentators take this to indicate Judah's moral decline. At this point in the story, we may have no doubt who will lead and who will follow.

Yet history turned out otherwise. Joseph's descendants, the tribes of Ephraim and Menashe, disappeared from the pages of history after the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE, while Judah's descendants, starting with David, became kings. The tribe of Judah survived the Babylonian conquest, and it is Judah whose name we bear as a people. We are Yehudim, "Jews." This week's parsha of Vayigash explains why.

Already in last week's parsha we began to see Judah's leadership qualities. The family had reached deadlock. They desperately needed food, but they knew that the Egyptian viceroy had insisted that they bring their brother Benjamin with them, and Jacob refused to let this happen. His beloved wife Rachel's first son (Joseph) was already lost to him, and he was not about to let the other, Benjamin, be taken on a hazardous journey. Reuben, in keeping with his unstable character, made an absurd suggestion: "Kill my two sons if I do not bring Benjamin back safely." (Gen. 42:37) In the end it was Judah, with his quiet authority – "I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him" (Gen. 43:9) – who persuaded Jacob to let Benjamin go with them.

Now, as the brothers attempt to leave Egypt, and return home, the nightmare scenario has unfolded. Benjamin has been found with the viceroy's silver cup in his possession. The official delivers his verdict. Benjamin is to be held as a slave. The other brothers can go free. This is the moment when Judah steps forward and makes a speech that changes history. He speaks eloquently about their father's grief at the loss of one of Rachel's sons. If he loses the other, he will die of grief. I, says Judah, personally guaranteed his safe return. He concludes:

“Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that it would bring my father.” (Gen. 44:33-34)

No sooner has he said these words than Joseph, overcome with emotion, reveals his identity and the whole elaborate drama reaches closure. What is happening here and how does it have a bearing on leadership?

The Sages articulated a principle: “Where penitents stand even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.” (Brachot 34b) The Talmud brings a proof-text from Isaiah: “Peace, peace, to those far and near” (Is. 57:19) placing the far (the penitent sinner) before the near (the perfectly righteous). However, almost certainly the real source is here in the story of Joseph and Judah. Joseph is known to tradition as ha-tzaddik, the righteous one. [1] Judah, as we will see, is a penitent. Joseph became “second to the king.” Judah, however, became the ancestor of kings. Hence, where penitents stand even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.

Judah is the first person in the Torah to achieve perfect repentance (teshuvah gemurah), defined by the Sages as when you find yourself in a situation where it is likely you will be tempted to repeat an earlier sin, but you are able to resist because you are now a changed person.[2]

Many years before Judah was responsible for Joseph being sold as a slave:

Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. (Gen. 37:26-27)

Now, faced with the similar prospect of leaving Benjamin as a slave, he has a very different response. He says, “Let me stay as a slave and let my brother go free.” (Gen. 44:33) That is perfect repentance, and it is what prompts Joseph to reveal his identity and forgive his brothers.

The Torah had already hinted at the change in Judah’s character in an earlier chapter. Having accused his daughter-in-law Tamar of becoming pregnant by a forbidden sexual relationship, he is confronted by her with evidence that he himself is the father of the child, and his response is to immediately declare: “She is more righteous than I” (Gen. 38:26). This is the first time in the Torah we see a character admit that he is wrong. If Judah was the first penitent, it was Tamar – mother of Perez from whom King David was descended – who was ultimately responsible.

Perhaps Judah’s future was already implicit in his name, for though the verb le-hodot from which it is derived means “to thank” (Leah called her fourth son Judah saying, “This time I will thank the Lord,” Gen. 29:35), it is also related to the verb le-hitvadot, which means “to admit or “to confess” – and confession is, according to the Rambam, the core of the command to repent.

Leaders make mistakes. That is an occupational hazard of the role. Managers follow the rules, but leaders find themselves in situations for which there are no rules. Do you declare a war in which people will die, or do you refrain from doing so at the risk of letting your enemy grow stronger with the result that more will die later? That was the dilemma faced by Chamberlain in 1939, and it was only some time later that it became clear that he was wrong and Churchill right.

But leaders are also human, and their mistakes often have nothing to do with leadership and everything to do with human weakness and temptation. The sexual misconduct of John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton and many other leaders has undoubtedly been less than perfect. Does this affect our judgment of them as leaders or not?

Judaism suggests it should. The prophet Nathan was unsparing of King David for consorting with another man’s wife. But Judaism also takes note of what happens next. What matters, suggests the Torah, is that you repent – you recognise and admit your

wrongdoings, and you change as a result. As Rav Soloveitchik pointed out, both Saul and David, Israel's first two kings, sinned. Both were reprimanded by a Prophet. Both said chattati, "I have sinned".[3] But their fates were radically different. Saul lost the throne, David did not. The reason, said the Rav, was that David confessed immediately. Saul prevaricated and made excuses before admitting his sin.[4]

The stories of Judah, and of his descendant David, tell us that what marks a leader is not necessarily perfect righteousness. It is the ability to admit mistakes, to learn from them and grow from them. The Judah we see at the beginning of the story is not the man we see at the end, just as the Moses we see at the Burning Bush – stammering, hesitant – is not the mighty hero we see at the end, "his sight undimmed, his natural energy unabated."

A leader is one who, though they may stumble and fall, arises more honest, humble and courageous than they were before. [1] See Tanchuma (Buber), Noach, 4, s.v. eleh, on the basis of Amos 2:6, "They sold the righteous for silver." [2] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1. [3] I Sam. 15:24 and II Sam. 12:13. [4] Joseph Soloveitchik, Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen – My Beloved Knocks (Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav, 2006), 26.

[A Song of Hope by Burton L. Visotzky](http://www.jtsa.edu/a-song-of-hope)  
<http://www.jtsa.edu/a-song-of-hope>

In a curious foreshadowing of the book of Exodus, in this week's Torah reading (Gen. 46:8) we read, "*Ve'eleh shemot*—These are the names of the children of Israel who came into Egypt . . ." This is verbatim the same report as the opening verse of the book of Exodus. But there, the names are limited only to Jacob's actual sons, and the full enumeration of their own offspring is absent.

Here, however, we get the list of Jacob's sons, and his grandsons, as well. Curiouser, there is even mention of great-grandsons: Judah's son Perez's boys Hetzron and Hamul are listed (Gen. 46:12), as are some others. Curiouser and curiouser, in addition to the matriarchs who were Jacob/Israel's wives, we learn the name of Jacob's daughter Dinah (Gen. 46:15). And then, although unnamed, we find out in that same verse that Jacob had sons and daughters (note the plural)! The only one of Jacob's daughters we know by name is Dinah; and we only know about her thanks to her sad misadventure and likely rape at the hands of Shekhem, the local prince, and the violent rampage by her brothers that followed (Gen. 34).

But look carefully, for most curious of all is the mention of Jacob's son Asher, and Asher's daughter, Serah. Serah bat Asher is Jacob's granddaughter. She is mentioned again briefly in another genealogy list in Numbers 26:46, and finally in 1 Chronicles 7:30. Serah bat Asher is mentioned three times in the Bible; and unlike her aunt Dinah, she seems to have merited mention without extreme suffering and violence.

Her repeated appearance is one of those occasions in Scripture that scream for Midrash to fill in the gaps. Within the Torah, her chief virtue seems to be that she was among the Israelite clan who went down to Egypt during the famine to live off the largesse of her long-lost uncle Joseph. But it's hard to see what separates her from her unnamed (and unnumbered) sisters who also made the journey. Yet through Midrash, like Alice through the looking glass, in Serah bat Asher, our Sages of blessed memory have given us a heroine for our times!

Early in the third century CE, the Rabbis imagine Serah is still alive in Egypt after centuries, when the Israelites are on the cusp of Exodus. Before they can leave Egypt, the children of Israel must fulfill a vow that their ancestor Joseph had placed upon them. In the very final verses of Genesis, which we will read next week, he adjures them, “Carry up my bones from here” ([Gen. 50:25](#)).

But at that point in the Exodus story, centuries have passed since the Israelites entered Egypt. Who even remembered the vow that Joseph made them take? Why Moses, of course! In the midst of the tumult of the Exodus we are quietly informed, “And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him . . .” ([Exod. 13:19](#)). How did faithful Moses know where Joseph’s bones were buried? The [Tosefta Sotah \(4:3\)](#) teaches that our heroine, long-lived Serah bat Asher, informed him, “In the River Nile are Joseph’s bones!” Many centuries after the Exodus, long after the Land of Israel has been conquered, a certain no-goodnik named Sheba ben Bichri rebelled against King David ([2 Sam. 20](#)). Sheba sought refuge in a town that David’s general Yoav then besieged. Yoav threatened to destroy that town if they did not surrender Sheba. Scripture teaches that a “wise-woman” counseled them to give up the rebel and save the town. Who was that unnamed wise woman, the Rabbis ask a millennium later ([Eccl. Rabbah 9:18:12](#))? Why she was Serah bat Asher; who else?

How long did Serah live? One midrash ([Pesikta Derav Kahana 11:13](#)) reports that the third-century CE Sage Rabbi Yohanan claimed that when the Red Sea parted, the walls of water that formed were like an impervious net. Serah bat Asher showed up to correct him, saying, “I was there! The walls of water had transparent windows!” It is tempting to add to Serah’s adventures. Perhaps we could suggest that she was in another besieged city, Jerusalem, when the King of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar, surrounded it on the 10th of Tevet, which this year coincidentally falls on December 25th. Or maybe Serah was there to save us on so many other December 25ths during pogroms in the Pale of Settlement.

Does Serah dwell among us yet today?

A late Midrash, probably from around the year 1300 CE, called *Sefer Hayashar*, commenting on this week’s Torah reading, tells us why Serah merited to live forever: When the sons of Jacob went down to Egypt during the famine and were met there by their long-lost brother Joseph—he who forgave them, fed them, and helped them survive—they realized they would have to inform their father, who was still anxiously awaiting their return to the Land of Canaan. It would be difficult to let their father know of the cruel deception they had perpetrated upon him, allowing him, for all those years, to believe his beloved Joseph was dead, and watching Jacob mourn him without cease. Who could they send to break this terrible, yet exhilaratingly revivifying, news to him?

The brothers sent Serah bat Asher. She took her lyre and sang to the elderly Jacob, “*Od Yosef hai*—Joseph still lives” ([Gen. 45:26](#)). When he heard her song, his heart grew faint; for through all his years of despair, he yet held hope. *Od Yosef hai*, she sang—the

very words that Jacob longed to hear. With tears streaming down his cheeks, Jacob rewarded his granddaughter for being the bearer of such good tidings. He blessed her and rewarded her with the promise that she might live forever.

May that song always be our hope: "*Od Yosef hai.*" For so long as Joseph still lives—and through us forgives and nourishes his family, which is our family—Serah and the Jewish people live forever. (Burton L. Visotzky is the Nathan and Janet Appleman Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies)

### Perasha Vayigash- rav Fischel Schacter shilita

The rabbi began his talk this week by explaining that there are times in our lives where we feel we are being restricted, we feel that we are being held back from something that we think is the best thing for us and all that we can see is that we are not moving forward in life . Says the the rabbi restrictions are a source of beracha , its a key to help us move forward . The rabbi told over how there was a plan to build a big wedding hall on his block in boro park . All the neighbors scheduled a meeting to try to stop this project .Their concern was that the block was already so congested and parking as it is was very difficult . At the meeting one old man got up and said that he didn't survive the concentration camps to come to this country to stop weddings . The rabbi then said that they eventually did build this wedding hall and the funny thing was that after the weddings took place at night at about 11 pm there were more parking spots available then before the hall was built as the people at the hall leave at that time . In life says the rabbi things that we think are the most negative, turns out many times to be the most positive things we can imagine .

The rabbi told over a story about this man that was in a hospital in Israel . His wife gave birth to a baby prematurely. The babies weight was of great concern. This new father was sitting in the waiting room when suddenly a doctor appears . He tells the father, things just got worse , we found a hole in the babies heart . The doctor then tells the father , don't expect this baby to survive you had better say your goodbye now to the baby . The father sat in his seat as if he was in a trance and he began to sing a song . He sang the words to a song by Boruch Levine called " zakeni". The song is about how a father sings that he should merit to have children in life that will become great . Children that will serve HASHEM on the highest level . He kept singing this song over and over. The nurses came over to him and they heard him singing and began to cry . One of the verses on the song is that the children will light up the world . One nurse came over to the father and said I never lit Shabbat candles in my life . For the merit of your son I will take it upon myself now to begin to light Shabbat candles . Today says the rabbi , the baby is Baruch HASHEM doing fine . What was it that made this happen. Was it the fathers emuna in HASHEM , was it the feeling that he had when he sang about having a child that will grow up to serve HASHEM . Or maybe it was the nurse that promised to begin to Light Shabbat candles .Says the rabbi we will never know for sure what it was but the courage that this father had during a time of crisis

was his defining moment .

When HASHEM gives us challenges we must have the courage to say , HASHEM I believe in you and I'm with you now and always , I will go where you send me.

The rabbi spoke about how when he first started to teach in Yeshiva he came across many challenges . However his first day was really something else . It seems he had a very challenging 8th grade class , the first day of the year his students locked the rabbi out of his own classroom . After he finally made his way back into his classroom the students were at it again this time they locked the rabbi inside his classroom . He was having a very challenging first day on the job . Things eventually got a bit easier and as the rabbi says he stayed at that Yeshiva for 30 years . Says the rabbi - we have to know that HASHEM sometimes in our lives , locks us out and other times he locks us in .

Whatever the circumstances are we have to know that HASHEM is doing everything for our best .Our job in life is to believe , he is our loving father that knows best .

The rabbi told over another story about this couple that just gave birth to quintuplets . They were very overwhelmed to say the least . One lady heard about them and pledged to give them whatever they need . She supplied them with furniture and everything else . The couple wanted to invite her to see the babies . She came to their apartment and saw the babies and all the furniture and supplies that she gave them. This lady saw a picture on a table of another lady and asked who is this picture . The mother of the babies told her that it's her mother . The lady then fainted .

When she was revived she told over how that person in the picture was the person that saved her life along with four of her friends in a concentration camp in Bergen - Belson . It seems the grandmother of the babies risked her own life to save the lives of the five others .The mother of the baby told the lady that the night before she gave birth she was very nervous . She didn't know how she will be able to handle everything . Her mother came to her in a dream and said "five for five over and over" . As if she was saying I was able to save five people from the concentration camp - one of the ones that were saved is coming to help out my family right now .Says the rabbi , do we see what's going on , HASHEM doesn't forget anything . Anything that we do in our life is remembered and when we need it most HASHEM will send it to us .

In the Parasha we see how Yehuda comes in front of Yosef He begins to give him a speech on what had just transpired . How the brothers were accused of stealing the goblet . It was found in the sack of Binyamin and that now Yehuda wants to give himself up as a sacrifice for his brother Binyamin . Says the Sefat Emet that Yehuda as this Parasha begins is not telling Yosef anything new . He already said the same exact words at the end of last week's Parasha .

What was he now telling Yosef . Answers the Sefat Emet that Yehuda wasn't talking to Yosef , he was talking to himself .Yehuda had a lot on the line . He was saying - It's not about you Yosef , you are not giving me the problem . This is coming straight from HASHEM .

He is in charge and he is sending me this problem . HASHEM wants something from

me , I'm trying to figure out what it is .

When we feel that we are being challenged we have to know who is behind it all. Who is pulling the strings . HASHEM gives us the gift of life each and every day, what we have to do is to take these days and fill it up to do the most that we can . When he puts us in a situation that we feel is so tight we have to know , this is where my beracha will come from .

Shabbat shalom

### Counting Our Blessings and Sharing the Light by Rabbi Michael Dolgin

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/counting-our-blessings-and-sharing-light>

The story of Joseph is familiar to many who have never opened the Tanach. It has been written and rewritten; set to music and presented on screens. However, a very moving scene found in this week's Torah portion, Parashat Vayigash, is rarely included in these adaptations.

When Joseph finally is reunited with his father Jacob in Egypt, he introduces Jacob to Pharaoh. This lesser-known, brief, and intense encounter reads as follows:

"Joseph then brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh; and Jacob greeted Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked Jacob, "How many are the years of your life?" And Jacob answered Pharaoh, "The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life-spans of my fathers during their sojourns." Then Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell, and left Pharaoh's presence" (Genesis 47: 7-10).

Our commentators, hoping we will come to a full understanding of this moment, ask some key questions: What does it mean that Jacob greeted and bade farewell to Pharaoh? Why did Pharaoh ask Jacob his age? What was Jacob telling us about the quantity and quality of the days of his life?

While the translation says that Jacob greeted Pharaoh and then said farewell, the Hebrew is identical in both verses. Vay'varech Ya'akov et Par'oh: Jacob blessed Pharaoh. What kind of blessing could he have offered? Rashi leads one school of commentators who see it as a pro forma greeting and farewell, and the Jewish Publication Society translation follows that interpretation. While these words are taken as a form of polite conversation, Ramban suggests that Jacob offered Pharaoh a real blessing.

That might seem surprising if we see Pharaoh as powerful royalty and Jacob as a visiting, aged pauper. However, earlier in this week's portion (Genesis 45:4), Joseph tells his brothers that he has been placed in the role of father to Pharaoh. As pointed out by the Tz'ror HaMor (Rabbi Avraham Sabba, who was exiled from Spain in 1492), this would make Jacob like a grandfather to Pharaoh. Regardless of titles and possessions, we all need to be blessed. When we are leaders and carry greater

responsibility, that need only increases. Whose blessing would enrich your life? What blessing can you offer to others to lift their soul or brighten their days?

In regard to Pharaoh asking Jacob his age, many commentators suggest that Jacob must have seemed to be of very advanced age. While 130 may seem impossibly old in our world, this number is smaller in the context of the book of Genesis; Abraham lived to the age of 175 and Isaac to 180. However, the hardships he experienced were profound, including loss and exile, strife, and sexual violence against his daughter Dinah. He buried his beloved wife Rachel and thought his favourite son Joseph had been gone for decades. While these painful experiences belong primarily to those directly affected, they must have weighed heavily on Jacob, as well.

Stress, after all, is not only an internal experience. It writes itself on our faces and in the set of our shoulders and our entire physical self. The current pandemic, for instance, affects each of us differently. We should be on the lookout, making the effort to see all of those around us as clearly as we can. If we see others being worn down by this reality, we must be present in their lives and bless them through our solidarity and acts of compassion.

Despite being 130 years old, Jacob says that his years have been few and difficult. Powerfully, he also asserts that his life has not measured up to those of his ancestors. Importantly, he makes these statements in the past tense, as if his life is already over. While some commentators suggest that he knew that he did not have many years remaining, he lived 17 more years, reflecting the first 17 years of Joseph's life, during which he and his father lived together, and which Jacob enjoyed.

However, the blessing of his beginning and ending may not have been enough to enable him to overcome the strife and trouble of the intervening years, and that seems fair. It is not ours to judge the experience or suffering of another. Still, most of us do not know the difficulties that our ancestor Jacob and his family faced. Too often, instead of reflecting on our blessings, we allow our perceived challenges to overwhelm us.

Let us not judge our own lives too harshly. Jacob left behind a legacy arguably greater than that of the other patriarchs. May we spend this dark time of year reflecting on the seeds of light we have sewn and shared with others, and may we be inspired to continue this in seasons to come.

[Can You Find the Good in Catastrophe? By Rabbi Dan Moskovitz](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/can-you-find-good-catastrophe)

<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/can-you-find-good-catastrophe>

As we begin [Parashat Vayigash](#), Joseph is seated as second in line to the pharaoh in Egypt. His brothers had come down to Egypt seeking food as there was a famine in the land of Canaan. Joseph concealed his identity from his brothers, and in last week's portion, [Mikeitz](#), he framed them for stealing and held his brother Simeon for ransom

until they return with Benjamin.

Vayigash presents the third act in Joseph's unfolding tale. His brothers return to Egypt, Benjamin in tow, and seek Joseph's forgiveness for an offense they didn't know they committed. Joseph now holds Benjamin, his youngest brother, hostage. Judah pleads with Joseph to release Benjamin lest their father Jacob die from the shock of losing yet another son (in addition to Joseph), as Benjamin is "a young boy of his old age" (Gen. 44:20).

Seeing his brother's love for Benjamin and their father, Joseph is deeply moved. He reveals himself to his brothers and bestows all manner of favors upon his family. Jacob travels down to Egypt to see his long-lost son. Pharaoh, out of respect for Joseph, greets the family with open arms and open store houses of goods and land. There are many important moments in the series of events that unfold in this story, but perhaps the most poignant is when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and says to them:

**"I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold to Egypt; and now, don't be troubled, don't be chagrined because you sold me here, for it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you." (Gen. 45: 4-5)**

This is a Jewish response to suffering. It's the biblical version of "everything happens for a reason." But it is more complex than that. The Jewish response is that something good can come from, or be made from, every challenge or disappointment or heartache life throws at us. It's making lemonade out of lemons.

The Joseph his brothers encounter in this dramatic moment is not the young sibling who foolishly taunts his brothers with his egocentric dreams. This Joseph is wise and experienced; he has learned from life and takes the long view of things. Experience is his guide and faith his support in moments of despair.

Retrospectively, cataclysms can be seen as fortunate; the gains outweigh the losses. Hanukkah yields the rededication of the sanctuary and the Jewish people. The sin of the apple in the Garden of Eden brings about knowledge of the human condition. The flood in Noah's day serves as a reset for humanity and a reset for God's relationship with us: we are told that never again will God bring a flood. Even the sin of the Golden Calf and the breaking of the first set of Ten Commandments tablets is met, according to legend, with God essentially saying to Moses, "Yashar koach! [Congratulations!] You broke them" (see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*). In the long view, the second set of tablets and the dynamic in which they are created is more useful and meaningful to the Jewish people, psychologically and spiritually, than the first set.

These examples reveal more than just making do with unfortunate circumstances. They each show a recasting of the situation to find a greater meaning and message. Joseph speaks to his brothers with wisdom and comfort. He tells them that the past is the past, beyond their control, but that they can endeavor to shape the future. He finds meaning in the trauma that changed the arc and trajectory of his life.

This was the great insight and contribution of Viktor E. Frankl (1905–1997) a Jewish psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor. With this experience, Frankl wrote one of the most important books of the 20th century, *Man's Search for Meaning*. The book is more than a description of the horrors of life in the concentration camp; it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a meditation on the nature of human beings, and our eternal search for meaning.

Frankl states that most people in the concentration camp believed that the real opportunities in life had passed, even though they in fact had been offered a new opportunity — and a challenge:

**“One could make a victory of these experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate, as did a majority of the prisoners.” (Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1963], p. 71)**

German philosopher and writer Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) framed it this way: One must transform every “it was” into an “I willed it thus!,” that is, to take hold of the situation, accept one's fate, and strive toward a goal worth pursuing. This is not “everything happens for a reason,” but “there can be meaning in everything that happens.”

Frankl believed Nietzsche's dictum that “he who has a ‘why’ to live for can bear with almost any how” (quoted in *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 71). Frankl writes that this could have been the guiding motto for all psychotherapeutic efforts concerning the prisoners in Auschwitz. But its value transcends that horrific extreme example of the Shoah.

Joseph sees in his brothers' treachery the origin of things that place him in the improbable but essential position to save his family and his people during a time of extreme famine. He finds meaning in his suffering.

As we prepare to enter the year 2020 with all of its symbolism of clarity of vision, we would be forgiven for looking back on the first two decades of the 21st century and focusing only on the great suffering, destruction, and discord human beings have waged against each other and our planet. Upon reflection, even our attempts to make lemonade of it all may appear to leave the glass half empty. And yet, the Jewish view is to say, “What can we learn from this?” The experiences of our past can shape and inform our future if we find meaning in them. That is the eternal challenge and also the opportunity presented to us in how to see the life of Joseph. Perhaps his brothers meant what they did for bad, but Joseph, through his faith in God, found meaning in all that had befallen him — and he found the good. (*Rabbi Dan Moskovitz is senior rabbi at Temple Sholom in Vancouver, BC, and author of “The Men's Seder” (MRJ Publishing). Rabbi Moskovitz is also chair of the Reform Rabbis of Canada. His writings and perspectives on Judaism appear in major print and digital media internationally.*)

## Yahrtzeits

Melita Peckman remembers her husband Albert Abram Peckman (Avram Ben Moshe) on Saturday December 16th (Tevet 11)

Cornelia and Francesca Peckman remember their father Albert Abram Peckman (Avram Ben Moshe) on Saturday December 16th (Tevet 11)