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ויגש

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Finding אחדות in Times of Crisis: ויגש Until Today

By Roe Weglein

In light of the ongoing challenges facing עם ישראל, פרשת ויגש emerges as a guiding light, illuminating the path towards the unity of the Jewish people. The narrative of יוסף's reconciliation with his brothers provides valuable insights into the importance of אחדות (brotherhood) within the Jewish community, offering lessons for ourselves during harder times.

The drama unfolds in ויגש as יהודה steps forward to plead with יוסף on behalf of his brother בנימין, the oldest son of יעקב. Filled with remorse and humility, יהודה recounts the brother's sins and acknowledges the horrible crime they committed against their very own brother. It is this moment of vulnerability and אחדות that sets the stage for one of the most emotionally charged reunions in the entire תורה.

רב שמשון רפאל הירש, a well-known 19th-century German commentator, notes the incredible power of תשובה displayed by the brothers. He notes that יהודה's willingness to take responsibility for the fate of בנימין reflects a large-scale shift in his and his brothers' character – a crucial step toward אחדות and תשובה. In times of crisis, עם ישראל must draw inspiration from the brothers' example, recognizing the potential for positive change and the importance of acknowledging past mistakes.

The רב נפתלי צבי יהודה ברלין, נצי"ב, adds another layer to the story by highlighting the role of יוסף in fostering the reconciliation between the brothers. When יוסף reveals his true identity, he reassures his brothers, saying, "וְעַתָּה אֵל-תַּעֲצְבוּ וְאֵל-יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מִכְרַתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִי לְמַחְיָה שָׁלַחֲנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם:" (בראשית 45:20). The נצי"ב points out that יוסף's perspective goes beyond personal grievances, emphasizing the seemingly divine purpose behind their fated reunion. In times of war and crisis, עם ישראל must recognize the broader context of our community/communities, seeking common ground and understanding to foster achdut.

Drawing on the teachings of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the late Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, we can find yet another layer of insight from the story. Rabbi Sacks often spoke about the "dignity of difference," emphasizing the importance of recognizing and celebrating diversity within the Jewish community. Applying this concept to the reunion of יוסף and his brothers, we learn that unity does not erase individual identities, but rather, empowers them. In our current tumultuous times, עם ישראל can and must find strength in embracing diversity while also nurturing a common commitment to foster אחדות within the Jewish community.

פרשת ויגש teaches us that unity requires humility, תשובה, and a recognition of something greater than ourselves. By recognizing these lessons, עם ישראל can navigate the challenges of war and crisis with a spirit of unity, ensuring that the light of our Yiddishkeit shines brightly even in the darkest moments. May we, like יוסף and his brothers, emerge stronger through our commitment to אחדות, creating an ever-strong community that reflects the resilience and unity of ישראל כולל.

Sheep and Integration

By Avi Berlove

In פרשת ויגש, we read about the Jews migration to Egypt. There, the children of יעקב have to undergo the awkward task of a Jew in exile: reconciling Judaism's counter-cultural aspect with the values of contemporary society. In ויגש, the Jews are shepherds who are trying to integrate into a society that worships sheep and view shepherds as disgusting for “abusing” those sheep. There are two views taken by the commentators with regards to the question of how the Children of יעקב were supposed to respond to this question that asked them to reconcile Jewish values with those of surrounding society. The כלי יקר demonstrates the needs of compromise while living in a diverse society, yet רבינו בחיי argues that the best path is exiting society

The כלי יקר demonstrates the need to be aware while living in a society with differing beliefs. In the speech that יוסף says he will give פרעה, he says that his brothers are, “רְעֵי צֹאן כִּי-אֲנֹכִי מִקְנֶה הָיוּ.” “Shepherds of sheep because they were men of flocks.” Noting the extraneous phrase “because they were men of flocks,” the כלי יקר asks why יוסף included it. He explains that the Egyptians revered sheep, and thus the Egyptians treated the sheep they owned with great care. To preempt Egyptian resentment towards the Children of יעקב, יוסף explains here that his family are not shepherds out of a desire to spite those who worship sheep. Rather, they are only shepherds because they are men of flocks. Sheep and goats were the Children of יעקב’s main possession, and that reality is why they chose shepherding as their career. The כלי יקר notes the importance of meekness with regards to challenging the standards of society.

In contrast, רבינו בחיי argues that to avoid a moral compromise, one must exit society. רבינו בחיי notes that many protagonists in תנ”ך are shepherds, for example, משה, שמואל, and דוד. He explains this phenomenon by saying that in addition to the financial benefits of shepherding, there are spiritual ones as well. He clarifies that shepherding brings the shepherd away from the temptations of society, and that in the wilderness, “אִין אָדָם רֹאֶה שֶׁם דָּבָר שִׁטְרִיד מִחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ מִן הַמַּחֲשָׁבָה בַּהֲשִׁי” “A person does not see anything there that removes his thoughts from those of ה’, may he be blessed.” רבינו בחיי argues that society is a negative influence on people, and that by becoming a shepherd, one is able to avoid that influence. One is able to be alone with the wonders of ה’s creation and reflect on ה’s greatness. Rather than seeing a need to subdue ourselves to fit in with society, רבינו בחיי argues it is better to leave it.

The dispute between these commentators raises important questions. Do we bow to the realities of contemporary society? Or, do we leave it because of the the accompanying evil? Are we silent when our co-workers organize that “Stop the Genocide in Gaza” event, as the כלי יקר might argue, or do we leave the company as רבינו בחיי would advocate? In the everyday world, we need a fusion of these two positions. On the one hand, we should avoid unnecessary conflict with society. Yet, we should never compromise on our values. The כלי יקר only advises us to not put them front and center in every situation. So, in the extreme circumstances where we either must give in on our values or leave society, even he would agree that it is better to leave. Every situation calls for analysis, consultation, and a tailored response, but it is helpful to know that our commentators give us tools to guide our response to conflicts between societal and Jewish values.

תורה The Importance of Learning

By Mordy Feder

After יוסף reveals himself to his brothers, he sends them back to ארץ כנען with a lot of food, animals, and other things. He also told them to ask יעקב and the family to move to Egypt so that he can take better care of them. The Brothers try to tell יעקב that he is alive but יעקב does not believe them.

When the Brothers tell יעקב what יוסף said and when יעקב saw the WAGONS with all the things יוסף sent – he finally believes that יוסף is alive! And celebrates! Many of the מפרשים wonder what it was exactly that convinced יעקב that יוסף was finally alive, when he didn't believe it at first?

רש"י quotes the well-known מדרש that יעקב was ultimately convinced by a special sign that יוסף had sent to his father- specifically the wagons (עגלות), יוסף was signaling to יעקב about the last topic that they two of them had learned together, --the topic of, עגלה ערופה, (a complex case where someone is found dead outside in the wilderness, and the תורה demands that the heads of the closest city show some responsibility for the death by participating in this special ceremony).

יוסף and יעקב had such a great relationship- that involved so many different things- יוסף could have hinted with so many different things?! - Why did he specifically use their תורה learning? Why not refer to another symbol of their great relationship – maybe even the כתונת פסים, a the special coat that יעקב had given to יוסף and that was probably the biggest symbol of their very close relationship?

יוסף could have even sent a symbol associated with his mother, רחל, who was a big reason יעקב and יוסף has such a special relationship! The memories of his wife רחל would surely have made יעקב realize יוסף was still alive.

SO?! . Why does יוסף use their Torah learning as the sign he sends to יעקב?

Perhaps it can be suggested that the מדרש is highlighting an important point regarding יוסף's view of his relationship with his father. Out of all the various aspects of their special relationship יוסף valued the opportunity, more than anything else, to learn תורה with his father. More than the special coat, more than any other gifts or privileges that יעקב had given to יוסף as a result of their special relationship, יוסף cherished most those moments of learning תורה together with his father.

While we don't know the specifics of all that they learned, as it was all before the תורה was given, what is clear is that the תורה learning they did together had a profound effect on יוסף, and shaped the way he viewed his relationship with his father. When deciding the best way to prove to יעקב his existence, he used the aspect of their relationship that affected him most profoundly- their shared learning of תורה.

This surely presents a message that it is important for all parents to make the time to learn with their children, but even more so it shows us how important the role of our teachers is. At the end of the day it's the תורה we learn and the מידות that we gain along the way, that make us the best Jews that we can be.

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