



The Anxiety of Approach • Parshat Vayigash

We all have moments on our way to a difficult encounter or conversation when all we want to do is withdraw, turn around, or run away. It's the walk into the doctor's office to get the results of a biopsy, or the agonizing moments before a break-up. It's the march into the boss's office to resign or request a raise or the quick inhale of breath before a tough conversation with a child, a spouse, or a friend. Feelings are high. Outcomes are unpredictable, and we fear the worst.

The name of our Torah reading is taken from its very first word: *vayigash* from the Hebrew root *nagash*, meaning 'to bring close' or 'to draw near.' The setting is high drama. Judah approached Joseph with trepidation after Joseph accused his brothers of theft: "Then Judah went up to him (*vayigash*) and said, 'Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh'" (Gen. 44:18). The simple translation of *vayigash* here fails to communicate the tension implied in the Hebrew. But a review of the root word as it appears throughout Genesis reveals that this verb is used very specifically to describe the beginning of potentially fraught encounters, what I call the anxiety of approach. *Nagash* is not merely 'to come close' but to do so when the situation is highly charged or emotional.

Abraham boldly approached God in defense of any pious person in Sodom: "Abraham came forward (*vayigash*) and said, 'Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?'" (18:23). The same

verb is used when Jacob deceptively approached his father disguised as Esau:

"So Jacob drew close (*vayigash*) to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau'" (27:22). The tremulousness conveyed by this word is used immediately before this verse (27:21) and repeated a few verses after it (27:25).

Later in the Jacob and Esau narrative, when the two brothers meet up years later, Jacob's family approach Esau hesitatingly, understanding the possible danger and vulnerability of their position. The verb appears twice in these verses: "Then the maids, with their children, came forward (*vatigashna*) and bowed low; next Leah, with her children, came forward (*vatigash*) and bowed low; and last, Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed low;" (33:6-7). When Joseph's brothers were brought into his house and accused of theft, they protested to a member of his retinue: "So they went up (*vayigashu*) to Joseph's house steward and spoke to him at the entrance of the house" (43:19). Uncomfortable feelings can lead to poor choices, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes in *Not in God's Name*, "Religious people in the grip of strong emotions – fear, pain, anxiety, confusion, a sense of loss and humiliation – often dehumanise their opponents with devastating results."

My personal favorite example of this verb is the two times it appears immediately after Joseph reveals himself in Genesis 45, surely one of the most dramatic and traumatic of biblical moments:

“Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come forward (*g’shu na*) to me.’ And when they came forward (*vayigashu*), he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt’” (45:4). In our mind’s eye, we imagine Joseph dressed regally and sitting upon a throne towering over his poor brothers. He curls his index finger towards him as he says words that could only, in the brother’s hearing, signal a death threat. They inch forward as he says something they never, ever expected to hear. Joseph was alive. There would be a steep price to pay now. Yet Joseph embraces Benjamin instead and speaks with kindness to his shocked brothers. Joseph saw divine intervention in his strange and difficult path and opened an unexpected portal to reproachment.

What we find in example after biblical example is that even though each confrontation was potentially treacherous and even explosive, the risky encounter took place and often yielded unanticipated positive results. That’s because these individuals were extraordinary leaders who understood what was required of them in the moment.

One behavior that distinguishes leaders from followers is the willingness to take an uncomfortable risk to achieve a new state of relationship or negotiation, a risk others would rather not take even if it resulted in a larger platform of influence, a better, more honest relationship or a larger salary.

Susan Scott, in her important book, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time*, writes, ““Never be afraid of the conversations you are having. Be afraid of the conversations you are not having.” She is concerned that we entertain high levels of denial about problems that prevent us from discussing them with authenticity and integrity. She challenges us to look in the mirror and ask: “When was the last time I said what I really thought and felt? What are the leaders in my organization pretending not to know? What are members of

my family pretending not to know? What am I pretending not to know?”

She uses a creative and extreme example to illustrate the point with organizational life. A friend of hers who is a high-level executive told Scott that a brave employee came into his office with a large bucket of sand and poured it on the rug. The executive couldn’t believe it and asked what prompted this outrageous behavior. The employee replied: “I just figured I’d make it easier for you to bury your head in the sand on the topic I keep bringing up and you keep avoiding.” Rather than fire him, the executive admired his courage and promoted him.

Scott is not suggesting that you try the bucket trick with your boss, but she is suggesting that fierce conversations are unavoidable and usually necessary. To that end, she offers some helpful tips and a seven-step formula for navigating them with less emotion and more control to achieve better outcomes. Most importantly, she cajoles her readers to become truth tellers: “Everyone wants one person in the world to whom they can tell the truth and from whom they will hear the truth. Become that person.” This isn’t because it’s easy. It’s because, as she writes, “There is something within us that responds deeply to people who level with us.”

Can you describe your own “vayigash” moment? Is there a difficult conversation you need to have that you’re avoiding? Who do you trust to tell you the truth?