



Effective Communication • Parshat Vayigash

At the end of *Parshat Mikketz*, Joseph frames Benjamin and threatens to detain him. In a pivotal moment at the beginning of *Parshat Vayigash*, Judah delivers an impassioned plea to the viceroy, entreating for Benjamin to be spared. Judah's oration is a masterful model of persuasion, providing invaluable lessons for effective communication.

The opening word "*vayigash*" means to approach or to come near. One implication of the phrase is that Judah is courageously stepping forward, taking responsibility. *Vayigash* also denotes a decrease in physical distance between Judah and Joseph. As two prominent psychotherapists note, Judah's physical move has psychological implications. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin writes that by moving closer to Joseph, Judah nonverbally communicates sincerity and authenticity. Similarly, Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski contends that *vayigash* also implies that Judah speaks softly. Gentleness of tone enables his message to be heard by Joseph.

Vayigash does not only figuratively connote responsibility or literal physical proximity but can also indicate an approach to the mind or heart. A Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 93:3) links this Biblical scene to the verse in Proverbs, "Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out" (20:5). The Midrash provides a metaphor of "a deep well full of cold and excellent water, yet none could drink of it. Then came one who tied cord to cord and thread

to thread, drew up its water and drank." Joseph's heart was difficult to penetrate and even harder to sway. It took Judah, a man of understanding, to apprehend and influence Joseph. Elaborating on the Midrash, Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg eloquently frames Judah's skill as a "pragmatic power to communicate, to influence, to shape the public articulations of private desire and perception."

Without relating to this Midrash, Rabbi Nissan Alpert, a past Rosh Yeshiva at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, similarly writes that Judah needed to prepare mentally by "approaching" Joseph's psyche. To reach Joseph's innermost self, Judah thought "What type of person is he? What makes him tick? What moves him? How will I penetrate his feelings and make my appeal successful?" Judah, having actively listened to Joseph during their previous encounters, noticed that Joseph repeatedly inquired about their father Jacob. Judah therefore strategizes that to influence Joseph, he should invoke Joseph's pity for Jacob.

Professor Nehama Leibowitz similarly notes that Judah resorts "to every psychological and rhetorical device to stir the feelings of the Egyptian." He purposefully repeats the word "father" fourteen times in his speech. His goal, in Dr. Zornberg's reading, is to influence Joseph "by means of rhetoric, by emotional word-painting, to change a just verdict into one inspired by compassion" for a bereaved father.

Vayigash intimates the ability to understand the mind of the other and connect through empathetic communication. Judah's courage to step forward

sets the stage for the relational repair and reconciliation seen subsequently between Joseph and the rest of the brothers.

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Character Challenge: Choose a relationship that you want to improve. Think deeply about the other person and how you can better understand him or her. With that knowledge, plan a conversation that could help improve the relationship.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "If you seek to change anyone's behaviour, you have to enter into their mindset, and then say the word or do the deed that speaks to their emotions, not yours." ("The Power of Empathy," *Covenant and Conversation*).