



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 11 - Parshat VaYigash Tears and Kisses

Genesis 45

בראשית מה:א וְלֹא-אֵיכָל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק לְכָל הַנּוֹצְבִים עֲלָיו וַיִּקְרָא הוֹצִיאוּ כָל-אִישׁ מֵעַל יְלֵא-עֲמֵד אִישׁ אֹתוֹ בְּהִתְנוּדַע יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחִיו. ב וַיִּתֵּן אֶת-קֹלוֹ בְּכִי וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּשְׁמַע בֵּית פַּרְעֹה. ג וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחִיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי וְלֹא-אֵיכָלוּ אָחִיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו. ד וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אָחִיו גִּשׁוּ-נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אַחֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִם. ה וְעַתָּה אֶל-תַּעֲצְבוּ וְאֶל-יַחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי לְמַחִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלַי הִים לְפָנֵיכֶם. ו כִּי-זֶה שְׁנַתִּים הָרַעַב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ וְעוֹד חֲמֵשׁ שָׁנִים אֲשֶׁר אֵין-חֵרִישׁ וְקָצִיר. ז וַיִּשְׁלַחְנִי אֵלַי הִים לְפָנֵיכֶם לְשׁוֹם לָכֶם שְׂאֵרִית בְּאָרֶץ וְלַהֲחִיּוֹת לָכֶם לְפָלִיטָה גַּד לָהּ. ח וְעַתָּה לֹא-אַתֶּם שְׁלַחְתֶּם אֹתִי הִנֵּה כִּי הָאֵל הִים וַיִּשְׁמַנֵּי לָאֵב לְפָרְעֹה וְלֵאדוֹן לְכָל-בֵּיתוֹ וּמִשָּׁל בְּכָל-אָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. ט מִהֲרוּ וְעָלוּ אֶל-אָבִי וְאִמְרַתֶּם אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר בְּנֵךְ יוֹסֵף שְׁמַנֵּי אֵלַי הִים לְאֵדוֹן לְכָל-מִצְרַיִם רַדָּה אֵלַי אֶל-תַּעֲמֵד. י וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בְּאָרֶץ-גֹּשֶׁן וְהָיִיתָ קְרוֹב אֵלַי וּבְנֵיךְ וּבְנֵי בְנֵיךְ וְצִאֲנֶךָ וּבְקַרְךָ וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-לָךְ. יא וְכָלכֶלְתִּי אֶתְךָ שֵׁם כִּי-עוֹד חֲמֵשׁ שָׁנִים רַעַב פֶּן-תִּנְרַשׁ אֶתְּךָ וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-לָךְ. יב וְהִנֵּה עֵינֵיכֶם רְאוֹת וְעֵינַי אַחִי בְּנִימִין כִּי-פִי הַמְדַבֵּר אֵלֵיכֶם. יג וְהִגַּדְתֶּם לְאָבִי אֶת-כָּל-כְּבוֹדִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם וּמִהֲרַתֶּם וְהוֹרַדְתֶּם אֶת-אָבִי הִנֵּה. יד וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרֵי בְּנִימִן-אָחִיו וַיִּבֶךְ וּבְנִימִן בָּכָה עַל-צַוְאָרָיו. טו וַיִּנְשֹׁק לְכָל-אָחִיו וַיִּבֶךְ עֲלֵהֶם וְאַחֲרַי כֵּן דִּבְרוּ אָחִיו אֹתוֹ.

¹ Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still well?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come forward to me." And when they came forward, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. 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. ⁶ It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. ⁷ God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. ⁸ So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and S/He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt. ⁹ "Now, hurry back to my father and say to him: Thus says your son Joseph, 'God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me without delay. ¹⁰ You will dwell in the region of Goshen, where you will be near me — you and your children and your grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all that is yours. ¹¹ There I will provide for you — for there are yet five years of famine to come — that you and your household and all that is yours may not suffer want.' ¹² You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin for himself, that it is indeed I who am speaking to you. ¹³ And you must tell my father everything about my high station in Egypt and all that you have seen; and bring my father here with all speed." ¹⁴ With that he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. ¹⁵ He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him.



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Context

Faced with the possible life-time imprisonment of his brother Binyamin, whose safety he had personally guaranteed to his father Yakov, Yehuda steps forward. With deep sincerity, Yehuda presents his view of the situation to Yosef. Yehuda demonstrates his willingness to bear full responsibility by offering to take Yosef's place and accept his punishment in order to save his father from the suffering that would come to him from losing Binyamin. Confronted by Yehuda's humility and honesty, Yosef is not able to restrain his emotions. He breaks out of his deception, reveals his identity to his brothers, and inquires about their father's wellbeing. Yosef shares his view about their shared past—the sale into bondage and his rise to power—in terms of a divine plan to save their lives and the Egyptians. With five years of famine still ahead, Yosef instructs his brothers to return to Canaan, share the news that he is alive, and of his position, and return with their father to the land of Goshen where he will provide for them.

God appears to Yakov on this journey to Yosef, and refreshes the promise to make a great nation of his seed. The names of the Israelites who go to Egypt are listed according to the sons of Yakov, totaling seventy. Yosef greets the entourage, and prepares them to meet Pharaoh, instructing them to say that they are shepherds—a profession that is loathed among Egyptians. Yakov reports to Pharaoh that he has had a short and bitter life. The extended family settles in Goshen.

As the famine wears on, Yosef turns the nation of Egyptians who are beholding to him for food, into Pharaoh's servants. Meanwhile, segregated from the Egyptians, Yakov's family flourishes and multiplies.

Explorations

The reunion between long-lost brothers, and their reconciliation with one another is the climax of an extended family narrative that begins with Avraham and Sarah, and concludes at the end of the book of Genesis. This narrative is punctuated by moments of extreme alienation and cruelty, and also by poignant closeness. There are some occasions when feelings combine in a confused outpouring.

When Yosef first encounters his brothers, they are hungry and fearful, defenseless and utterly subject to his power (Ber. 42:6-28). Exercising his position, he deceives, manipulates, and threatens them, protecting himself behind the masks of his stature; he is beyond suspicion and accountability. Perhaps his sense that a divine plan revealed in his dreams is coming to fruition boosts his confidence and will to proceed with the trial of his brothers (Gen. 42:9). In the previous parasha, when feelings well up in him to the point of exploding in his brothers' presence, he leaves the room and sobs in private. After washing his face of the signs of his intense feelings, he returns to his role as stranger-interrogator (Gen. 43:30-31). In our parasha, Yosef breaks down completely; he peels away the masks of his ruse, and his emotional composure. His previous self-constraint makes this moment even more powerful. When Yosef—the person of discipline, who resists temptation, who acts with control and deliberation—breaks down, it is a very great breaking down indeed. He empties the room of foreigners, and appeals to his brothers to approach him. The text uses the same word that describes Yehuda moving toward Yosef in his appeal for Binyamin's life and freedom, the word that names and is the substance of the parasha, *vaYigash*, he drew near.



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The process of drawing near unfolds in stages. Yehuda initiates the new candidness between them; he makes the first offering by bearing his vulnerability completely. He approaches Yosef as a supplicant in the manner that a person approaches the divine. Yosef reciprocates with unbridled feeling. But words are not sufficient to bridge the gap that treachery and deceit have wedged between them. They are aching, bitter, afraid, and alienated from each other. Then, Yosef falls on Binyamin and weeps, and kisses his neck. Only after he has cried and they have kissed are the brothers able to speak (Gen. 45:14-15).

Previous incidents in the narrative prepare for this moment. The first kiss in the Torah passes between Yitzchak and Yakov at the instant of blessing. Yitzchak asks Yakov to draw near and kisses him (Ber. 27:26-27). Crying follows later when Esav discovers that his father has given his blessing away to his brother (Ber. 27:38). Later, when Yakov falls in love with Rachel, he draws near, kisses her and cries (Ber. 29:10-11). On that verse, Rashi explains that Yakov foresees Rachel's premature death, and that she will not be buried with him. Yosef and Binyamin, Yakov and Rachel's children, continue the theme of kisses, tears, and foreshadowing.

Offering kisses and tears, these men express intense emotions between parent and children, to a beloved, and to siblings. The uninhibited outpouring accompanies drawing close, one to another. The kiss is a consummation of closeness, touching without any in-between space, a form of union. A confusion of emotions accompanies union—the joy of love brings vulnerability and fear of loss and pain. Caring passionately for another person opens one's heart and exposes it. Deep human connection entails awareness of inevitable mortality and ultimate loss. From the position of intimacy, invested in closeness, it is possible to apprehend an enlarged perspective on life. About Yosef and Binyamin's moment, Rashi compiles together the following comments,

ויפול על צוארי בנימין אחיו ויבך: על שני מקדשות שעתידין להיות בחלקו של בנימין
וסופו ליחרב: ובנימין בכה על צואריו: על משכן שילה שעתיד להיות בחלקו של יוסף
וסופו ליחרב:

And he fell on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept: for the two sanctuaries which were destined to be in Benjamin's territory and would ultimately be destroyed [from Megilla 16b].

and Benjamin wept on his neck: for the Tabernacle of Shiloh, which was destined to be in Joseph's territory yet would ultimately be destroyed [from Megilla 16b, Ber. Rabbah 93:12].

These commentaries conjoin the reunion between brothers with the future destruction of the yet-unbuilt sanctuary and Temples. They conceive Yosef and Binyamin in terms of their distant offspring and the areas that they will be allotted when the tribes enter the Promised Land. In the domain of each, there will be sanctuaries built and destroyed. Breaking down the walls that had separated brothers from love and closeness occasions a vision about the breaking of the sacred Temples; the reunion sparks a cosmic insight. Openness to fully enter the realm of one another entails fragility and the possibility of losing precious love. In the commentary, each brother experiences the other's pain. The loss pertains both to another human and to the connection with the divine. Similarly to relationships that facilitate closeness between people, the sanctuary functions to enable the possibility of drawing near, offering, atoning, and reconciling with God. These kisses in the Torah, bathed in tears, express uninhibited closeness, sharing beyond the limits of self that extends into national and historic dimensions. Love mixes with fear and awe, kisses and tears.



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Questions for Discussion

1. How do you understand the trials that Yosef imposes on his brothers? Do you regard them as justified—why or why not? Is the process successful, and in what terms? What are the costs?
2. Our societies tend to repress or censor the kind of emotional intensity depicted in this parasha, particularly among men. Evaluate the significance, concerns, and benefits that you see in this expressiveness. How do you see gender as a factor here?
3. Dinah's name is absent from the family lists subsequent to the rape in VaYishlach, except a mention of her name among Leah's offspring in our parasha, “Those were the children whom Leah bore to Yakov in Paddan Aram and Dinah his daughter, in all thirty three people, his sons and daughters” (Ber. 46:15). How do you interpret the complete lack of expression of feelings in relation to her absence? What would such emotional brothers feel about a reunion with their sister, and the fact that there is none?
4. How do you interpret the frequency with which tears accompany deep joy?
5. To what extent do you connect human closeness with closeness to God? Explore how and why.

Study Links

Some early sources suggest that Dinah married Job. See [James Kugel's entry on Dinah](#). This Jewish Women's Archive Encyclopedia of Jewish Women [entry](#) discusses Job's spouse.

Read and evaluate [this proposal](#) that males have a different style for communicating emotional closeness and compare with [this](#) research that undermines cultural assumptions about gender differences in emotions. The latter paper suggests how women's and men's positions and roles as well as cultural beliefs and norms shape affective experience and behavior.

The exhibit, [“Tears of Eros” at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza](#) in Madrid explores how connections between Eros and Thanatos (death) make sense within the context of the sacred. The exhibit is based on Georges Bataille's book-essay of the same name.

Summary of Issues

Beyond words, the extraordinary reunion between Yosef and Binyamin expresses profound human connection through tears and kisses. Commentators associate closeness between people with vulnerability in our relationship with the divine.

Methods & Observations

A technique used by hasidic masters is to interpret the meaning of a concept in its first biblical occurrence, and to build its significance by tracing the thread of subsequent occurrences. The kiss, thereby becomes imbued with spiritual meaning. I am grateful to Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach for demonstrating this principle in relation to the kiss and many other concepts.

Contact

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