

# Repentance, Forgiveness and Reconciliation

## A D'var Torah on *Parashat Vayigash* (Gen. 44:18 – 47:27)

By Alan I. Friedman

*"Vayigash eilav Yehudah vayomer bi adoni y'daber-na avdecha davar...."*  
*"Then Judah approached him and said, 'Please, my lord, let your servant speak....'"*

Earlier, Joseph's brothers, furious at young Joseph's arrogance and haughtiness, sell Joseph into slavery and tell their father, Jacob, that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. In last week's *parashah*, ten of Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt, seeking food to help their family cope with the famine in Canaan. Joseph, who has become vizier over Egypt, second in command only to Pharaoh, recognizes them, but the brothers do not recognize Joseph.

In this week's *parashah* Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and forgives them for selling him into slavery. Although Egypt also rages with famine, Pharaoh invites Joseph's family to "live off the fat of the land." Jacob learns that Joseph is still alive and, with God's blessing, goes to Egypt. Pharaoh permits Joseph's family to settle in Goshen, and the Israelites thrive there.

Let's take a look at the process of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. Joseph set the stage for reconciliation through the charade of the stolen goblet, but it was up to Judah to "step up" (*vayigash*) and initiate the process. Exhausted by years of guilt, and fed up with his own failure of leadership two decades before, Judah had truly repented. Therefore he stepped forward and offered himself as a slave so that their youngest brother, Benjamin, could return to their doting father, Jacob. In that act of love, Judah showed that he would stop at nothing to end the cycle of hatred and recrimination.

The power of that unequivocal gesture shattered Joseph's defenses. "I am Joseph, your brother. Is my father still well?" Joseph cried. But his brothers could not answer, so dumbfounded were they at the revelation.<sup>1</sup>

Judah's admission of the brothers' mistreatment of Joseph, and his repentance for the crime, evoked Joseph's response of letting go of decades of pent-up injury, humiliation, frustration, and anger. "Do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me into this place. It was not you who sent me here. It was God," Joseph tells his brothers forgivingly. "God

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<sup>1</sup> A commentary by Rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno says that when Jacob's brothers were too dumbfounded to speak, Joseph reassured them of his identity by quoting their discussion among themselves, in Hebrew, when they sold him to the slave merchants. – *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 1993; p. 255.

has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth.” And in tears, the brothers were reconciled with each other.<sup>2</sup>

The story teaches that repentance and forgiveness are essential to reconciliation. But the key to convincing the other side that reconciliation is possible is to give an unequivocal sign of turning one's back on the past.<sup>3</sup>

The reconciliation between the brothers opened the way for Jacob's family to resettle in Egypt, an event that would have dramatic consequences for the Israelites many years later. Joseph realized that his descent into Egypt was a prelude to the enslavement of the Jewish people there. He understood that his divinely ordained mission was to pave the way for the Israelites by giving them the tools they would need to survive years of bondage in a hostile and decadent environment.

We, too, can be like Joseph. Whether at the pinnacle of greatness or in the depths of persecution, we must remain faithful to God, to Torah, and to the Jewish people.

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<sup>2</sup> When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, he had cried tears of joy. Now, says a midrash by Rabbi Elie Munk, he wept in sadness and foreboding because he foresaw that the exile into which he was now summoning his family would not be their last. – *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Remorse (*charatah*) a feeling of regret, of failure to maintain one's moral standards, is a prerequisite to repentance (*t'shuvah*). There are two kinds of forgiveness. In the first, *m'chilah*, if the offender is sincerely repentant, the offended party can forgive the “debt” of the offender. *M'chila* is like a pardon granted to a criminal by the modern state; the crime remains; only the debt is forgiven. The second kind of forgiveness, *s'lichah*, is an act of the heart. It is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner. It is achieving empathy for the distress or affliction of the other. – “Repentance and Forgiveness,” by Rabbi David R. Blumenthal, Professor of Judaic Studies, Emory University; *Crosscurrents*; spring, 1998.