

SEIZE THE MOMENT

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The emotional climax of the Joseph-cycle (Gen. 37-50) comes when Joseph reveals himself to his astounded brothers: *Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph'* (45:3). This revelation follows directly on Judah's powerful speech, which begins the 11th traditional Torah section *Parashat Vayiggash* (44:18-47:27). Judah's words were persuasive, and undoubtedly courageous, and merit a great deal of notice in traditional sources (e.g., *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 93:1-7; *Midrash Tanhuma Genesis*, 11:1-8). Sir Walter Scott calls them "the most complete pattern of genuine natural eloquence." The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism's *Etz Hayim* commentary describes this as "one of the great scenes in all of literature. It is preceded by a deeply moving speech."

The attention given to Judah's words, however, obscures the fact that it is Joseph who carefully and deliberately chooses his words of reconciliation. Their very formulation helps to heal the breach between the siblings.

Joseph and his brothers had good reason to be estranged. When, in this dramatic encounter, they meet again, tensions are running high. There does not seem to be a way out of the impasse. Suddenly and unexpectedly, however, Judah presents Joseph with an opening, one that could begin to breach the gap between them. The opening line of the Torah section begins with the words: *Vayiggash elav Yehuda* [Then Judah **approached** him]. Judah does not know that this regal Viceroy of Egypt is, in fact, his younger brother Joseph. All he knows is that this is the one person who can resolve Judah's immediate family problem, how to get Benjamin safely back to their father Jacob. Judah forcefully makes his case, showing leadership and compassion. Joseph, in turn, is overwhelmed with emotion and almost misses the opportunity to reconcile with his brothers. Instead of reaching out to Judah on a comparable level, he thinks of his own needs, and not those of Judah and his brothers.

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Joseph reveals to them his own identity; he then asks about father Jacob. *'I am Joseph. Is my father still well?'* (44:3). The biblical text describes the brothers as confused and dumbfounded [*nivhalu*]. They do not seem to be able to take in what he has said.

To his credit, Joseph quickly recovers. He instantly realizes that he needs to take a step back. He has to reach out to Judah and to his brothers on their level, where they are literally as well as figuratively. Consequently, Joseph consciously uses the exact same verb that describes Judah's initial move. Joseph says, *'G'shu-na elai* [Please **approach** me].' Joseph understands that to achieve his goal of reconciliation, he has to meet his brothers where they are. He has, so to say, to cross over the street to stand with them. The divide is still too great for them to act meaningfully. The brothers are "confused/dumbfounded." By telling his brothers to approach him physically, Joseph opens the way for he himself to "go to them" emotionally.

Joseph has to reach out to his brothers and say, in effect, I am opening up my heart to you. I am making myself vulnerable to you. Joseph stresses his defenselessness when he invites them to come to me [*elai*]. In this very specific formulation, Joseph not only reflects the description of Judah's initial "approach" but also that Judah literally had approached him – *Vayiggash elav Yehudah* [Then Judah approached him]. Joseph says, *'Approach me.'* His plan works – *Vayiggashu* [They approached] him (44:4).

When there is strife and contention, when there is estrangement, whether in the workplace, or in family life, occasionally opportunities to find reconciliation suddenly and unexpectedly present themselves. To maximize these moments we need to act, but it has to be thoughtfully and strategically. Often by literally using the right words, and meeting the other where she/he is at that moment, we can achieve our goal. It likewise means that we have to take a chance, and to make ourselves approachable and vulnerable.

Midrashic tradition says that when Judah spoke, even though he may not have realized it consciously, he persisted until he was able to speak to Joseph's heart: *lo zaz Yehuda meishiv l'Yosef davar al davar ad she-amad al libo* ["Judah did not cease from answering Joseph word for word until he penetrated his very heart"] (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 93.4). Joseph, to his credit, was open to this moment, and took advantage of it. Initially, he made a misstep, but then he met his brothers where they were. He took a chance.

He made himself approachable. He invites his brothers to approach the outer man and likewise invites them to approach the vulnerable inner man.



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