"*Vayyigash*: Joseph's self-imposed estrangement"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M. Cohen

A reading of Genesis 47:28 - 50:26 leads to the inescapable conclusion that, throughout the seventeen years of Jacob's sojourn in Goshen (Gen. 47:28), under Joseph's patronage (Gen. 47:12), that beloved *son of Jacob's old age* (Gen. 37:3) did not once visit the family home until the closing stage of his father's life when he was summoned on two occasions to his father's bedside (Gen. 47:29; 48:1). Jacob himself makes that situation abundantly clear when, on Joseph's second visit, accompanied by his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, he says to Joseph: *I never expected to see you again, and here God has let me see your children as well* (Gen. 48:11).

Thus, notwithstanding that Jacob's sight had deteriorated in his old age (Gen. 48:10), we must take at face value his query, *who are these?* with reference to the two young people accompanying Joseph (Gen. 48:8). After all, even a blind person recognises the presence of beloved grandchildren in the room. Jacob, however, did not. He had clearly never met them before, which would not have been surprising in a situation where Joseph's single previous visit had been on his own. That this second summons, to the bedside of a father who sensed that his days were

numbered (Gen. 47:29), followed on shortly after the previous visit, is implicit in the words, *Some time afterwards, Joseph was told*… (Gen. 48:1).

Joseph's absence may, of course, be explained on the grounds of his total preoccupation with affairs of state, and the overwhelming challenge of distributing grain nationwide, during the years of the famine. Notwithstanding the vast investment of time and energy involved, it is still difficult to imagine that he appeared neither willing nor able to find a little time, over all those years, to pay more than two visits to an aged father who lived in fairly close proximity! (See Gen. 45:10).

The most plausible explanation for Joseph's absence was that he had chosen the lesser of two evils: To have remained estranged was to prolong his father's sorrow; but to have visited would have brought about a revelation of how he had originally been brought to Egypt.

Jacob would not have forgotten that fateful day when they had all brought to him Joseph's torn and bloodied robe, claiming they had found it abandoned in order to convince him that Joseph had been torn in pieces by a wild animal (Gen. 37:33). Joseph's grand and physically-impressive appearance at their reunion would have instinctively called into question the veracity of their account, since there was no way he could have emerged unscathed after such a violent attack.

Jacob would also have vividly recalled how all the sons had heard his agonising cry, *My son's tunic! A savage beast devoured him! Joseph was torn by a beast!* (Genesis 37:33), and yet callously stood by, watching him descend into grief, rend his robe, and perform other tokens and rituals of mourning, knowing full-well that there wasn't a shred of evidence in their minds to substantiate Joseph's death?

Joseph was aware that any visit to the family home at Canaan would inevitably have caused all the ugly truth to pour forth into the open. He knew his own temperament. He was not one to suppress his emotions. What was on his mind was on his tongue, a fact exemplified by his disclosure of his dreams to his father and brothers notwithstanding the jealousy it would inevitably engender.

He would have known full-well the consequences of any disclosure that his brothers had been implicated in his kidnapping, namely the blighting of any relationship between father Jacob and his other sons. He, himself, was too preoccupied with affairs of state to keep a watchful eye on his father. He needed to leave behind in Goshen a relationship of love and trust within the family so that his father received all the support and care that he needed in his old age, as well as a tranquil home environment. Knowledge of how callously his sons had behaved towards Joseph, and how inconsiderate they had been toward his own feelings, would have totally soured Jacob's relationship with them. Joseph could not have allowed such a situation to develop; and hence – we suggest – he decided never to

visit the family as long as they remained in Canaan. He also knew that the shame and fear that was ever-present in the minds of his brothers from the moment of reunion would only be exacerbated by any visit he made to them – a fact fully articulated by the Midrash (See Midrash *Pesiqta Rabbati* on Gen. 48:1).

It may be objected, however, that, following his two meetings with his father, the Torah specifically describes Joseph as personally having settled his family into Goshen and provided for their food and needs (47:11-12). This would surely have involved several tense face-to-face contacts between the parties, with the guilt of the brothers inevitably surfacing on those occasions, something that Jacob would inevitably have picked up on. However, a close reading of the text reveals that the latter two verses are linked seamlessly to the subsequent lengthy description of Joseph's manifold activities on behalf of Pharaoh to bring all the Egyptians' property under state ownership in return for the provision of food during the years of famine, and to effect a forced transfer of the rural population and the nationalization of all land.

Now, while the Torah describes every stage of the latter enterprise as having been undertaken by Joseph personally, it is indisputable that the construction of the local granaries and the arrangements for an orderly distribution could not have been implemented without a vast network of state officials and superintendents, including police and security personnel to hold in check a disgruntled and fractious

population witnessing their estates being seized. It is clear, therefore, that, while the provision of the family's food and other needs is attributed directly to Joseph (47:12), it was in fact organised by his representatives, enabling him to keep his distance from the family from the very outset of their arrival in Goshen. It is pertinent therefore that there is no reference to any subsequent verbal exchange between Joseph and his family until years later when he is summoned to his dying father's bedside! At that time he would have reasoned that, by describing to his father the many and miraculous ways in which God had guided his life and career, he could convince him that what the brothers had done to him had all been part of that divine plan, as first revealed through his teenage dreams, and that no blame should therefore attach to them.

The brothers' self-imposed absence from the family home during Joseph's two visits would also account for why Jacob felt no inhibition in telling Joseph that he was reducing his bequest to his other sons by making Joseph's two sons, his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menasseh, equal beneficiaries as future tribes of Israel, allocating to them tribal inheritances in Canaan (Gen. 48:5-6), and bequeathing to Joseph an extra parcel of land that he had seized from the Amorites (Gen. 48: 22). Jacob went even further and instituted a formula of blessing for his posterity to bestow on their children, invoking the names of Joseph's two sons - *May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh* (Gen. 48:20). Having once

fomented intense jealousy of Joseph by merely giving him a coat of many colours, it would have been inconceivable for Jacob to have bestowed on Joseph and his family such an infinitely more precious gift in the presence or earshot of the other brothers at this time life. It could only have been gifted in a situation wherein, out of fear, the brothers had absented themselves from their home during both of Joseph's visits.

That Joseph finally did disclose to his father what the brothers had perpetrated explains Jacob's reference to it in his death-bed blessing of his children. Addressing Joseph, he obliquely refers to the other brothers as 'archers who had bitterly assailed him, shot at him and harried him' (Gen. 49:23).

Hearing that, the brothers would have realised that it was during one of those two private meetings with his father that Joseph had disclosed what had transpired. They would not have known, however, whether or not Joseph had whole-heartedly excused them, or whether their father had accepted that they were mere agents of a divinely-ordained plan, and exonerated them accordingly. In the light of that uncertainty, and their father's impending death, their fear of Joseph's reprisals would have inevitably intensified.

Perhaps it was those private meetings that gave them the idea to concoct a meeting between themselves and their father, at which he allegedly 'commanded them' (Gen. 50:16) to seek Joseph's forgiveness, with the implicit directive to him

to accept their plea. The intense fear that gripped them at that time explains why, true to form, they couldn't muster the courage to petition Joseph personally, but sent an intermediary to intercede with him: *And they sent a message to Joseph, saying*… (Gen. 50:16).

This total lack of communication with the family also explains why, in the account of Jacob's death and the subsequent description of the weeping and mourning for him, only Joseph's grief is referred to, with no mention of it having been shared, by his brothers. Understandably, he was the one who took charge of all the arrangements for the father's embalming, but, curiously, while we are told that the Egyptians wept for Jacob seventy days, nowhere is the brothers' participations in the mourning described (See Gen. 50:1-4a). Furthermore, in the description of the seven days of mourning, it is only Joseph's observance that is referred to, with no mention of the participation of the brothers (v.10). Only when it comes to the actual burial are the brothers included (v.13).

Joseph lived for one hundred and ten years (Gen. 50:22), pre-deceasing his brothers (Gen. 50:24-25). Given the tone of Genesis 50: 24-26, wherein the brothers give a solemn undertaking to Joseph on his death-bed to take his remains with them to be buried in Canaan on the day God fulfils his promise of redemption, we may assume that their fear of their brother totally dissipated over the ensuing fifty-one years following their father's death. Under the new Pharaoh, *who did not*

know Joseph (Exodus 1:8), we may assume that he lived out his long retirement in close proximity to his family, all of whom put the past well and truly behind them.

Shabbat shalom,
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