

The Anxiety of Approach • Parshat Vayigash

We all have moments on our way to a difficult encounter or conversation when all we want to do is withdraw, turn around, or run away. It's the walk into the doctor's office to get the results of a biopsy, or the agonizing moments before a break-up. It's the march into the boss's office to resign or request a raise or the quick inhale of breath before a tough conversation with a child, a spouse, or a friend. Feelings are high. Outcomes are unpredictable, and we fear the worst.

The name of our Torah reading is taken from its very first word: *vayigash* from the Hebrew root *nagash*, meaning 'to bring close' or 'to draw near.' The setting is high drama. Judah approached Joseph with trepidation after Joseph accused his brothers of theft: "Then Judah went up to him (*vayigash*) and said, 'Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh'" (Gen. 44:18). The simple translation of *vayigash* here fails to communicate the tension implied in the Hebrew. But a review of the root word as it appears throughout Genesis reveals that this verb is used very specifically to describe the beginning of potentially fraught encounters, what I call the anxiety of approach. *Nagash* is not merely 'to come close' but to do so when the situation is highly charged or emotional.

Abraham boldly approached God in defense of any pious person in Sodom: "Abraham came forward (*vayigash*) and said, 'Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?'" (18:23). The same

verb is used when Jacob deceptively approached his father disguised as Esau:

"So Jacob drew close (*vayigash*) to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered. "The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau" (27:22). The tremulousness conveyed by this word is used immediately before this verse (27:21) and repeated a few verses after it (27:25).

Later in the Jacob and Esau narrative, when the two brothers meet up years later, Jacob's family approach Esau hesitatingly, understanding the possible danger and vulnerability of their position. The verb appears twice in these verses: "Then the maids, with their children, came forward (*vatigashna*) and bowed low; next Leah, with her children, came forward (*vatigash*) and bowed low; and last, Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed low," (33:6-7). When Joseph's brothers were brought into his house and accused of theft, they protested to a member of his retinue: "So they went up (*vayigshu*) to Joseph's house steward and spoke to him at the entrance of the house" (43:19). Uncomfortable feelings can lead to poor choices, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes in *Not in God's Name*, "Religious people in the grip of strong emotions – fear, pain, anxiety, confusion, a sense of loss and humiliation – often dehumanise their opponents with devastating results."

My personal favorite example of this verb is the two times it appears immediately after Joseph reveals himself in Genesis 45, surely one of the most dramatic and traumatic of biblical moments:

“Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘Come forward (*g’shu na*) to me.’ And when they came forward (*vayigashu*), he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt’” (45:4). In our mind’s eye, we imagine Joseph dressed regally and sitting upon a throne towering over his poor brothers. He curls his index finger towards him as he says words that could only, in the brother’s hearing, signal a death threat. They inch forward as he says something they never, ever expected to hear. Joseph was alive. There would be a steep price to pay now. Yet Joseph embraces Benjamin instead and speaks with kindness to his shocked brothers.