

Vayigash. Tears of Reunion



Do you get emotional? Do you ever cry? What situations make you cry?

Our discussion this week will probe the emotional finale of the Joseph story, after all the hatred, the intrigue, manipulation, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and Joseph and his beloved father Jacob are reunited in tears.

Bereshit describes the scene in which they meet in the following way:

“Joseph prepared his chariot and went up to meet Israel his father in Goshen. He appeared before him and fell on his neck and wept on his neck a good while.”

כַּט וַיֵּאָסֶר יוֹסֵף מִרְכָּבָתוֹ, וַיַּעַל לִקְרַאת-אָבִיו גֹּשֶׁן; וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו, וַיִּפֹּל עַל-צַוְאָרְיוֹ, וַיִּבֶךְ עַל-צַוְאָרְיוֹ, עוֹד.

The text is written in the singular: “He wept”, in other words, only one person cried! Who was it? Jacob or Joseph? In other family reunions in Bereshit, we find that BOTH parties cry: Yaakov and Esav (23:4), Joseph and Benjamin (45:14), but in this scene, curiously, only one person cried.

So you might want to discuss:

- Who cried in this scene? Was it Yaakov or Yoseph?
- Why did the other party remain tearless, emotionless?
- Why do we cry in emotional situations? What is it that brings on the tears? Are tears a sign of joy, frustration, hurt, nostalgia, sorrow?

Maybe the insight of our commentaries will enrich the discussion:

1. Rashi:

Jacob, however, neither fell on Joseph’s neck nor kissed him. Our Sages said that he was reciting the “Shema”.

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

2. Ramban:

His father fell on [Joseph’s] neck and cried at length as he has cried [ever since Joseph’s disappearance] until this very day... whose tears are more likely; an elderly father who discovers his son is living after his despair and mourning, or a firstborn son in a position of royalty?

3. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Joseph wept, Jacob did not weep. Joseph could still weep, Jacob was finished with weeping, he had wept enough in his life. Joseph was still weeping (טוּן) even after Jacob had already spoken to him- in such small details, deep truths are expressed. In the period since Joseph’s disappearance, Jacob had lived a lonely life, had not ceased weeping, his whole being was consumed in grief and mourning for Joseph. In the meantime, Joseph has lived a life filled with changes, he had no time to give himself to the pain of separation. But his concern, felt periodically, lingered in his inner consciousness. Now as he fell around his father’s neck, in an instance the memories of twenty years of separation, and all the suppressed emotions burst forth. Jacob had become Israel. Joseph was still in crying.

Short Analysis

Both Rashi and Hirsch suggest that Joseph cries, that Yaakov is emotionless. Hirsch suggests that Yaakov has already processed his emotions, but that Joseph has barely begun to grapple with his complicated relationships with his family. Joseph’s tears unleash all the pain and relief of Joseph’s personal story. When he sees his father, the emotion begins to flow.

Rashi has another interpretation. Jacob is not crying because he is reciting “Shema”. Is he thanking God, dedicating the moment of reunion with his long-lost son to appreciate God for this astounding and unexpected blessing? Is he proclaiming God’s one-ness because he understands that the pain of life is also controlled by God? It is interesting to speculate what this Rabbinic statement may be intimating about Yaakov’s religious emotions.

Ramban suggests that Yaakov cries and that Joseph remains stoic, unmoved. He relies on an assessment of human nature. An elderly parent will cry more readily than a young ruler, a confident politician in the prime of his life, who is more prone to self-control.

And yet, all these interpretations seem to ignore a wider context. Joseph cries with great frequency in this story. He cries when he first meets his brothers and hears them discussing how they sold him (42:24), He cries when he meets Benjamin (43:30) and has to run into a side-room to wash his face so that his tears are undetected. Joseph cries when he reveals his identity to his brothers (45:2) and he cries when his father dies (50:1). In short, Joseph is highly emotional. Why do we find Joseph crying so frequently in his serial encounters with his family?

- Is it the guilt of the lost years, twenty-two years in which his father mourned for him?
- Is it Joseph’s painful realization that though he really loves his family, he will always remain somehow apart and distant.

Maybe your Shabbat guests can offer some further insights.

Shabbat Shalom!