



# Shabbat Table Talk Page

## Overview

- **Parashah: Vayigash (ויגַשׁ, "he drew near")**
- **Chapters: Genesis 44:18–47:27**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

## Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (Miketz) told how Joseph's unjust imprisonment finally came to an end after he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and advised him to prepare for seven years of coming famine. Greatly impressed by Joseph, Pharaoh immediately appointed him to be Viceroy over all of Egypt. The famine then spread throughout the region, and Jacob sent ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain (but kept Benjamin at home for fear of his safety). Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him, and accused them of being spies.

When his brothers protested their innocence and gave account of their origin, Joseph demanded that they confirm their story by bringing Benjamin to Egypt - and then imprisoned Simeon as a hostage. When they returned to Canaan, a distressed Jacob finally agreed to send his youngest son, but only upon the sworn promise of Judah for his welfare. When the brothers went back to Egypt the second time, Joseph received them with a feast and released Simeon; but when they left for home the following day, Joseph sent his steward to arrest Benjamin, who had been framed for stealing a planted divination goblet.

As Benjamin stood before Joseph accused of the theft of a chalice, Judah "drew near" (*vayigash*) and offered himself in exchange for his brother, pleading with Joseph to spare his father the loss of yet another son. Moreover, since he had personally pledged for his safe return from Egypt, Judah asked to remain in Egypt as Joseph's slave in Benjamin's place.

Upon hearing Judah's poignant plea, Joseph ordered everyone except his brothers out of the room and then wept aloud. After clearing the room, he began speaking in Hebrew and said, "I am Joseph, is my father still alive?" When the brothers drew back in dismay, Joseph said, "Draw near to me, please" (from the same verb *nagash*) and repeated that he was indeed their long lost brother, whom they sold into Egypt. He then comforted them, explaining that the famine was to last for five more years and God had providentially raised him up to preserve the family's life. Joseph then assured his brothers that "it was not you who sent me here, but God." He then urged them to return home and bring Jacob to Egypt, where they would live in the land of Goshen and be provided for by Joseph.



Pharaoh learned of the brothers' arrival and instructed Joseph to tell them to bring Jacob and all members of his household to Egypt, to live in the "fat of the land." The king even offered wagons to assist their journey to Egypt. Joseph gave them sets of clothing (Benjamin received five sets plus 300 shekels of silver), additional provisions, and 20 donkeys laden with the finest things of Egypt as a gift for his father Jacob. The brothers then left for the return trip to Canaan.

Upon returning to Canaan, the sons of Israel told him all that had happened, who, after seeing the gifts sent from Egypt finally exclaimed, "it is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die." After being reassured by God in a dream that it was safe to leave the Promised Land, Jacob (and all the members of his household) began the journey to Egypt. The portion then lists the names of the direct descendants of Jacob (not including his sons' wives), numbering 66 persons in all. Adding Jacob himself and Joseph with his two sons (Ephraim and Manasseh), we have a total of 70 who began the generation that lived in Egypt.

Jacob and his household arrived in Egypt where Joseph went out to meet him upon his chariot. Israel wept when Joseph embraced him after their 22 years of separation and said, "Now I can die, having seen for myself that you are still alive." Joseph then told his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they were shepherds so that they would be sent to the fertile land of Goshen (the region of Goshen is located in northeastern Egypt, in the delta of the Nile River, where it empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The Sinai Peninsula is just to the east).

The Torah portion ends as Joseph continued to amass a fortune (including cattle and land) for the grain held in Egypt's storehouses, which he conferred to Pharaoh. Indeed, he set up a tax system in which a fifth of the land's produce would become property of the state (only the priests were exempted from this tax). The Israelites lived in Goshen, where they acquired more property and were fruitful and multiplied in number.





## Parashah Questions



1. What does *vayigash* (וַיִּגַּשׁ) mean? (Gen. 44:18) <sup>1</sup>
2. Who “drew near” to intercede on behalf of the family, and why? <sup>2</sup>
3. What did Judah say would happen to his father Jacob if Benjamin did not return home with the brothers? (44:30-31) <sup>3</sup>
4. What did Judah propose regarding the charges against his brother? (44:30-34)<sup>4</sup>
5. Why did Joseph clear the room of the Egyptians? (45:1) <sup>5</sup>
6. How did Joseph reveal his identity to his brothers? (45:1-2) <sup>6</sup>
7. How did the brothers respond to Joseph’s revelation? (45:3) <sup>7</sup>
8. How did Joseph respond to his brothers’ shock? (45:4-13) <sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The verb *vayigash* (וַיִּגַּשׁ) means “and he drew near,” from the verb *nagash* (נָגַשׁ), “to approach, draw near, to join.” The scribes who first translated the Torah into Greek consistently used the verb *engidzo* (i.e., ἐγγίζω) for the verb *nagash*, which generally means to come close enough to touch someone or something. The idea here is that Judah drew very close to Joseph and threw himself at Joseph’s feet, to beg for the release of Benjamin.

<sup>2</sup> Judah drew near to intercede, because he had promised his father to protect Benjamin (43:9).

<sup>3</sup> Judah said his father would die of grief...

<sup>4</sup> Judah offered to bear the guilt in exchange for Benjamin and to become a slave in his place. The midrash states that Joseph replied, “I am a compassionate man and will show mercy to your father. You told me you had a missing brother who was brought to Egypt. If you look hard enough, you should be able to find him. Since he is already a slave, I will take him in exchange for Benjamin...” Upon saying this, Joseph could no longer restrain his emotions and began to weep...

<sup>5</sup> The Egyptians were asking Joseph to have mercy on Benjamin after they heard Judah explain that his father was likely to die of grief if he was not released, and some even fell at his feet, beseeching Joseph to do so. Joseph cleared the room so that he could disclose his identity to his brothers without embarrassing them.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph cleared the room of everyone but the brothers and said to them, “You told me that Benjamin’s brother is dead. Is that certain or not?” “Yes, your excellency, we are sure. He is dead.” Joseph then spoke in Hebrew: “How can you lie like that? You sold him as a slave. How can you know that he is dead? Indeed, I purchased him as a slave and can call him right now. With that, Joseph began calling out, “Joseph! Joseph! Joseph son of Jacob, come here immediately! Come and speak to your brothers.” The brothers eyes widened as they looked around to see if Joseph was in fact coming. When Joseph saw this, he then said, “What are you looking for? I am Joseph – is my father alive?” (Gen. 45:3). Note that the Torah text itself just says that Joseph wept and then said, *ani Yosef, ha’od avi chai*, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?”

<sup>7</sup> They were so startled they were dumbstruck and could not answer him a word, and they began to grovel at his feet. A midrash says that the brothers literally died and God had to resurrect them to stand before Joseph.

<sup>8</sup> He told them to all come near and *reassured* them that God sent him before them as a source of life for the family (the midrash says that Joseph declared that he was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day to validate his claim that he was Jacob’s son). He explained the famine would continue but God raised him up in Egypt for their deliverance. He told them to hurry and bring their father to settle in the land of Goshen. (A midrash states that he promised the brothers not to tell their father that they had sold him as a slave, and another midrash states that when Joseph said, “I am Joseph, whom you sold as a slave,” he spoke quietly so that Benjamin could not hear these words...).



9. Why did Joseph say, “I am Joseph *your brother* whom you sold in Egypt”? Why did he add the expression “your brother” here? (45:4) <sup>9</sup>
10. Why didn’t Joseph simply send grain back to Canaan? Why did he want the family to relocate to Egypt? <sup>10</sup>
11. Why did Joseph fall on his brother Benjamin’s neck and weep? (45:14) <sup>11</sup>
12. After Joseph embraced his brothers and wept, what did they do? (45:15) <sup>12</sup>
13. What was the reaction of Pharaoh and his servants when they heard that Joseph’s brothers had come? (45:16) <sup>13</sup>
14. Why did Pharaoh command Joseph to bring his family to Egypt? (45:17-20) <sup>14</sup>
15. Why did Joseph give each of his brothers a fresh suit of clothes? (45:22) <sup>15</sup>



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<sup>9</sup> When the brothers sold Joseph, they took the “dread oath” that no one could ever reveal that he was still alive on the pain of death. For this reason, Joseph refrained from sending a message back home, since that might jeopardize the lives of his brothers as well as shame them before his father. In this case, however, he revealed the truth by affirming his identity before the brothers...

<sup>10</sup> Apparently Joseph understood that the Covenant Between the Parts (Gen. 15:13-14) - when Abraham was told that the Jewish people would become sojourners in a foreign land for 400 years – was to be fulfilled through his help. God told Abraham that Israel would be enslaved but afterward they would leave with great wealth. When Joseph arrived in Egypt, however, it was a very poor country and therefore God decreed that a worldwide famine would arise so that Egypt would acquire the wealth of the nations by selling its stored grains. Of course, Joseph was responsible for Egypt’s wealth – and well as for the survival of the Egyptians – and during the Exodus, the debt owed from Egypt was “collected” by God. In addition, Joseph could not simply send back food to the land of Canaan due to laws regarding selling grain from the royal storehouses.

<sup>11</sup> The obvious reason is that he was overwhelmed with emotion over being able to embrace his full-blooded brother without any pretence or disguise...The midrash states that his joy was so great he could have died from ecstasy. To temper the emotions, God gave a vision of the Temple (similar to the breaking of the glass when the seven blessings are recited at a wedding today). Prophetically, Joseph fell on the “necks” (plural) of Benjamin, alluding to the destruction of the two Temples that were later to be built in Benjamin’s tribal inheritance.

<sup>12</sup> They finally began to speak to him... Previous to this, they were dumbstruck and ashamed to utter a word. Joseph rose up and kissed them, “weeping out of joy and love.”

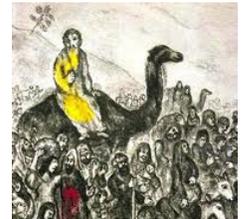
<sup>13</sup> They were pleased, especially since they realized that Joseph was not really a slave but descended from Abraham, whose fame had spread all over the world, and indeed was known in Egypt. They were pleased, in other words, that such a great dignitary as Joseph came from a noble family.

<sup>14</sup> The king was concerned Joseph might leave Egypt and return home, so he offered Joseph’s family the best Egypt had to offer – the fat of the land, great possessions, and so on (this was actually prophetic of what happened after the great Exodus). He commissioned royal wagons and chariots – permitted only to kings during times of war – to be used to bring up Joseph’s father his family members (ironically, the chariots would later be swallowed up by the Sea of Reeds after the time of Israel’s exile was complete).

<sup>15</sup> Joseph did this because they had stripped him bare when they threw him into the pit, and he gave them all new suits to demonstrate that he bore them no grudge. Another reason is that Joseph did this because the brothers had torn their clothes in grief after Benjamin was found with the missing chalice (44:13).



16. Why did Joseph give his brother Benjamin 300 pieces of silver and five fresh suits of clothes? (45:22) <sup>16</sup>
17. What did Joseph send to his father from Egypt? (45:23) <sup>17</sup>
18. How did Jacob take the news that Joseph was alive and the ruler over all the land of Egypt? (45:26-28) <sup>18</sup>
19. When Jacob began the journey to Egypt, he made a special stop at Beersheba. What was so special about Beersheba (בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע)? (46:1) <sup>19</sup>
20. What did God say to Jacob at Beersheba? (46:2-5) <sup>20</sup>
21. What were the names of Levi's three sons? (46:11) <sup>21</sup>
22. Why is Judah's son Perez (from Tamar) so important? (46:12) <sup>22</sup>
23. Who were the sons of Leah and how many of Jacob's family were descended from her? (46:15) <sup>23</sup>



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- <sup>16</sup> Joseph gave him 300 shekels of silver as remuneration for the torment he caused him by falsely accusing him of theft of his divination chalice, and he gave him five sets of clothes, perhaps to allude to the “coat of many colors” that Jacob had given Joseph when he was young man. Joseph was testing his brothers to see whether they would be jealous over some preferential treatment shown to Benjamin...
- <sup>17</sup> Joseph sent him tokens of wealth from Egypt, such as only the governor of the land could provide. In particular, he sent donkeys loaded with fruits, grains, and other goods from the land.
- <sup>18</sup> Jacob's heart “became numb” because he could not believe them. Twenty-two years had passed and Jacob had never fully grieved over his son because of fear that the prophecies of the 12 tribes would not be fulfilled. After Jacob heard the report and saw the wagons sent from Egypt, his spirit “began to revive” and he sensed the Divine Presence was in all of this... Then he said, “It's too much! My son Joseph is alive. I must go see him before I die.”
- <sup>19</sup> Beersheba (“well of oath” or “well of seven”) was a sacred shrine located at the northern edge of the Negev desert: “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and called there on the name of YHVH, the Everlasting God” Gen (21:33). Various theophanies occurred there, first to Hagar (21:17), then to Isaac (26:24), and now to Jacob (46:2). Apparently Jacob went there to ask God for permission to leave the Promised Land (the midrash states Jacob also went there to cut down some cedar trees that later would be used for the Tabernacle).
- <sup>20</sup> God told Jacob, “I am the Omnipotent God of your father (אֲנִי הָאֵל אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ). Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation.” God said he would go with the Jewish nation and bring them back up again. As for Jacob, he would finally see his long lost son who would “place his hands on his eyes” and bury him back in the Promised Land.
- <sup>21</sup> Gershon, Kohath, and Merari. Moses and Aaron were sons of Kohath. The priests of Israel (kohanim) were direct descendants of Aaron (and were therefore a subset of the Kohathite clan). Gershon, Kohath, and Merari were later assigned specific duties for worship at the Mishkan (Tabernacle).
- <sup>22</sup> He was a direct ancestor of King David and the Messiah Yeshua.
- <sup>23</sup> The sons of Leah were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, who (along with their children) accounted for 33 of the 70 who went to Egypt.



24. Who were Zilpah's sons and how many of the family descended from her? (46:18) <sup>24</sup>
25. Who were the sons of Rachel and how many of Jacob's family were descended from her? (46:19-22) <sup>25</sup>
26. How old do you think Benjamin was at this time? (46:21) <sup>26</sup>
27. Who were Bilhah's sons and how many descended from her (46:23-25) <sup>27</sup>
28. Were the wives of Jacob's sons counted in this census? (46:26) <sup>28</sup>
29. How many souls came to Egypt with Jacob? (46:26-27) <sup>29</sup>
30. Who sent Judah ahead to give notice to the Egyptians that Jacob's family was approaching the land of Goshen? (46:28) <sup>30</sup>
31. Where did Jacob and Joseph finally reunite? (46:29) <sup>31</sup>
32. Why did Jacob say, "Now I can die.. for you are still alive"? (46:30) <sup>32</sup>
33. Why were shepherds regarded as "abhorrent" to the Egyptians? <sup>33</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Zilpah was Leah's handmaiden who bore two sons, Gad and Asher, who (along with their children) accounted for 16 of the 70 people who went to Egypt.

<sup>25</sup> The sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin, who (along with their children – including Ephraim and Manasseh in Egypt) accounted for 14 of the 70 who went to Egypt. Note that the Torah calls Rachel (alone) as "Jacob's wife," indicating that she was the matriarch of Israel, the mistress of his household.

<sup>26</sup> In the list of names of those who came to Egypt with Jacob, the Torah names ten sons, and therefore he was not a young man. Jewish tradition says he was 31 years old.

<sup>27</sup> The sons of Bilhah were Dan and Naphtali, who, along with their sons, totaled 7 of the 70 who came to Egypt.

<sup>28</sup> No.

<sup>29</sup> The numbers are a bit confusing. From Leah (33), Zilpah (16), Rachel (14), and Bilhah (7) we have 70. Since Joseph, Ephraim, and Manasseh were in Egypt at the time, we have 67. Two of Judah's sons had died, however, so we have 65, but if we add Jacob and God (Gen. 46:4) to the roster, we have a total 67 that traveled to Egypt... Adding Joseph and his two sons, we then have a total of 70 who settled in Egypt (see Deut. 10:22).

<sup>30</sup> Jacob sent Judah ahead to secure a place for them to camp and make other arrangements.

<sup>31</sup> They met in the land of Goshen, the fertile land near the eastern delta of the Nile River. According to midrash, all of the high officials of Egypt accompanied Joseph, and Pharaoh gave Joseph his own crown to wear as a symbol of his regal power and authority. When Jacob first saw this grand parade of people surrounding Joseph, Jacob prostrated himself before his son, in fulfillment of the earlier prophetic dreams. The sages say that because of this, Joseph's life was shortened. Notice that Joseph wept when he embraced his father, but there is no report of emotion regarding Jacob, which has led some of the rabbis to say he was reciting the Shema at the time! Oy.

<sup>32</sup> Jacob was relieved that the prophecy regarding his 12 sons would be fulfilled and therefore he could die in peace.

<sup>33</sup> The sheep was an Egyptian god (Aries - Amun) and the Egyptians pastured sheep in sacred fields and never struck them. They were offended that shepherds from other nations treated sheep harshly and therefore detested them (this is similar to Hindus and their ideas of "sacred cows"). When Joseph explained to Pharaoh that his family were traditional shepherds, he was helping keep them separate from the paganism and idolatry of ancient Egyptian Ra worship.



34. Pharaoh asked Jacob his age. What did Jacob reply? (47:7) <sup>34</sup>
35. According to Jewish tradition, what blessing did Jacob give Pharaoh? <sup>35</sup>
36. What did Joseph do with the money he got from the sale of grain during the famine years? (47:13-14) <sup>36</sup>
37. After the Egyptians had spent all the money they had, Joseph sold them bread in exchange for what? (47:15-17) <sup>37</sup>
38. After the Egyptians had sold all their herds, what did Joseph take next and what did he give in exchange? (47:18-21) <sup>38</sup>
39. Who was given an exemption from the forced relocation program and political serfdom imposed by Joseph? (47:23-24) <sup>39</sup>
40. What happened to Jacob's family during this time? (47:27) <sup>40</sup>



<sup>34</sup> Jacob said, “My life of wandering has lasted 130 years. Those years have been few and bitter. All my life I lived without rest. When I was young, I had to flee my brother Esau. For many years I lived in hiding in a strange land. Now that I am old, I have again been uprooted to come here.”

<sup>35</sup> The sages teach that Jacob's blessing was that the famine should end and the Nile River would rise and irrigate the land once again.

<sup>36</sup> He created various treasuries in Egypt.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph took the people's cattle and herds.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph took their land in exchange for seeds to plant. Plus they were required to pay to Pharaoh 20% of all they produced. In other words, the people became serfs (slaves) to Pharaoh in exchange for seeds (note: this is a bit mysterious since there were still five years of famine to go; how could the people plant seed during a severe drought?) Joseph furthermore transferred the people off of their farms to live in the cities, from one end of Egypt's borders to the other, so that they would not regard the Israelites as foreigners. Those who worked the farms, however, were required to give a 20% tax on the yield to Pharaoh (47:23-25).

<sup>39</sup> The Egyptian priests were given an exemption because they shared in Pharaoh's allotment.

<sup>40</sup> They gained possessions in Goshen (i.e., the land of Rameses), became fruitful and greatly multiplied.



## Discussion Topics:

1. It was Judah's idea to sell Joseph into slavery, but later he was willing to become a slave in exchange for Benjamin's freedom. How did his speech to Joseph reveal that his heart had changed, especially in relation to his father's love for Rachel and her children?
2. Joseph forgave his brothers, but not without first *testing* them. Jewish tradition states that we are under no obligation to forgive another person until the person recognizes their fault. Do you think Joseph was justified testing (i.e., deceiving) his brothers?
3. Jewish tradition says that the brothers never told Jacob that they had sold Joseph into slavery, and that Jacob simply thought Joseph had gotten lost and then captured by the Ishmaelites. Are there times when it is better to keep silent about a wrongdoing? Why didn't the brothers confess their sin to Jacob?
4. Jewish tradition also states that Joseph never told Jacob what his brothers did to him. What is *lashon hara* and why is it considered such a terrible sin?
5. Discuss the consequences of embarrassing someone in public. Why do the sages regard this as a form of "soul murder"?
6. Since the Egyptians worshipped animals (including sheep), Joseph identified his family as shepherds and settled them in the land of Goshen (in northeast Egypt), away from Egyptian culture and its influences. How important is the idea of "separation" from worldly culture to you in your relationship with God?
7. How is Joseph a picture of Yeshua the Messiah?

## For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Vayechi** (i.e., Genesis 47:28-50:26)
- Read the Haftarah (1 Kings 2:1-2:12)
- Read the New Testament (Heb. 11:21-22; 1 Peter 1:3-9)

