

Haftarot Unrolled: VaYigash

Oseh Shalom BiMeromav

The Haftarah of VaYigash begins with the reconciliation of Yehudah and Yosef:

טז) ואתה בן אדם קח לך עץ אחד וכתב עליו ליהודה ולבני ישראל חבריו,
ולקח עץ אחד וכתוב עליו ליוסף עץ אפרים וכל בית ישראל חבריו:
יז) וקרב אתם אחד אל אחד לך לעץ אחד והיו לאחדים בידך:

16) You, son of man, take one branch, and write on it “For Yehudah, and for the children of Israel, his partners” and take one branch, and write on it “For Yosef, the branch of Ephraim, and for all the children of Israel, his partners.”

17) Bring them together into one branch, and they will become one in your hand. (Yehezkel 37)

Yehezkel describes the reunification of the two political entities of the Jewish People during the time of the First Temple: the northern kingdom, Israel, also known as Ephraim or Yosef, and the southern kingdom, called Yehudah. According to the Haftarah, this reunification will be one of the first steps of Redemption; ultimately, the Jewish People will all be one nation with one country. While this might sound obvious, in truth, it is far from trivial.

The Haftarah is not just talking about uniting two different countries called "Yosef" and "Yehudah"; but rather, uniting two different fundamental prototypes within the Jewish People, represented by the terms "Yosef" and "Yehudah".

Near the end of Parshat VaYigash, Yaakov sends Yehudah to Egypt to prepare for the family's migration. The Midrash states the following:

ואת יהודה שלח לפניו זש"ה המשל ופחד עמו עושה שלום במרומיו (איוב כה) ...א"ר שמעון כל הרקיע של מים והמלאכים של אש ומשרתיו אש לווהט ואין המים מכבין את האש ולא האש שורף את המים יהודה ויוסף זה ארי וזה שור אתמול מתנגחין זה עם זה ועכשיו הוא משלחו אצלו שנאמר ואת יהודה שלח לפניו הוי עושה שלום במרומיו.

And Yehudah he sent before him: It says, "Oseh Shalom Bimromav - He makes peace in His Heavens" (Job 25)... R' Shimon said: the sky is made of water and the angels are made of fire, but the water does not put out the fire, and the fire does not burn up the water. Yehudah and Yosef: one is a lion, the other is an ox. Yesterday, they were attacking each other, and now Yaakov sends one to the other, as it says, "And Yehudah he sent"?! Thus: "He makes peace in His Heavens." (Midrash Tanhuma VaYigash 6)

According to this Midrash, Yehudah and Yosef are polar opposites; getting them to cooperate is so difficult, it is comparable to the peace that G-d makes in the Heavens between fire and water.

Not only are Yosef and Yehudah opposites, they are even hostile, "attacking each other." According to another Midrash, at the beginning of this Parsha, when Yehudah approached Yosef, he was prepared to use violence to achieve his goal of rescuing Binyamin:

ד"א ויגש אליו יהודה...ר' יהודה אומר הגשה למלחמה, היך מד"א (שמואל ב י) ויגש יואב והעם אשר עמו למלחמה

Yehudah approached him: ...R' Yehudah says, "approach" is for war, as it says, "Yoav and his army approached for war". (Breishit Rabbah VaYigash 93)

What makes Yehudah and Yosef so different, why is it so difficult to get them together, and why does the Haftarah list their unification as the very first step in the stages of Redemption?

Yosef is driven, from the very beginning, to provide for others. He excels at making the most of all possible resources at his disposal. He speaks all languages, can participate in any culture, can function at the highest levels in government, in economics, and in the sciences. His goal is the betterment of the Jewish People, and of mankind as a whole.

Yehudah, in contrast, represents the inward-facing aspect of the Jewish People. For him, family comes first, and he will do anything to protect them. In his zeal to do so, he sometimes makes mistakes (erring on who is considered "family" and who is not), but he acknowledges these mistakes, takes responsibility and learns from them. King David, Yehudah's most illustrious descendant, is the ultimate expression of this trait - his definition of "family" included all of Israel, and his life's goal was to gather them all under his protection. Yehudah has a strong spiritual side: it was King David who composed Tehillim (Psalms), which reflect our unique and personal connection with G-d.

Yosef, then, represents our ability to participate in the world at large; Yehudah represents our unique spiritual contribution as the Jewish People.

These two very different mindsets have been competing within the Jewish People throughout our history. When we work toward the betterment of humanity, as Jews are driven to do, should our contributions be material, or spiritual? Are we a nation like others, or are we a family that needs to protect itself from outside forces? Do we face outward, like Yosef, or inward, like Yehudah? There are practical ramifications to these questions, and over the centuries, it has caused actual conflict. The two sides fight like an ox and a lion, and get along like fire and water.

The Haftarah tells us that in order to bring about Redemption, Yosef and Yehudah need to come together and become one. We need Yosef's talents and abilities, and we also need Yehudah's emphasis on our uniqueness. We need to be cosmopolitan and universal, contributing to the world, and we also need to be insular and inward-facing, devoting ourselves to our own connection with G-d.

May G-d, who makes peace in the Heavens between fire and water, also make peace between the different attributes and strengths within the Jewish People, so that we can all flourish and "become one in His hand."

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל