

Vayigash 2015 – Butch Pemstein

The posse had their guns out and was shooting after the supposed bad guys, who were actually the heroes. They were about to be massacred by the posse, and then: and then? Wait 'til next week! This was not the Red Sox wait till next year; this was John Wayne about to be murdered by the bad guys. For those of us who follow the parsha reasonably closely, we left last week on that cliffhanger.

What happened last week: Judah and the brothers had come to Egypt, after their father had agonized with them about becoming dependent upon the Egyptians for food, and had been interrogated by the vizier, who they did not realize was their brother. They went back to Jacob, to see if they could take Benjamin with them, as Joseph had demanded. They described their need, that they “could not see Joseph’s face again” if Benjamin were not with them. Jacob acceded, but only after Reuben offered to slay his own two sons if Benjamin did not come back, which offer was rejected, but Judah’s offer to be surety for Benjamin was accepted. They arrived in Egypt, Joseph recognized them but they knew not him. Joseph’s delegate inquired of Judah what would be the punishment if they took something to which they were not entitled: response, assuming that of course there was nothing untoward about the situation: the one bad guy should be put to death and the others would become slaves to the vizier. The vizier's delegate said that that was too draconian; the bad guy would become a slave and the others free. Joseph set up Benjamin as the fall guy and of course it was discovered. The goblet, hidden in Benjamin’s luggage. They came back to Joseph’s house where Joseph castigated them severely. And Joseph said, the man, that is, Benjamin, in whose hands the goblet was found, he shall become my slave, and the rest of you, “go up in peace to your father”. The final turn of the screw: are you going to let Benjamin become enslaved as you let Benjamin’s older brother be enslaved? And “in Peace” or “wholly” but without your brother!

So we spent the week wondering: what will happen to Jacob if Benjamin doesn’t return? What will happen to Joseph if in fact he enslaves his brother? What was Joseph’s plan? How will the brothers get out of this dilemma? How will Joseph get out of his dilemma? Will Reuben restate his offer, that two of his sons can be traded for Benjamin? How will Judah handle his own surety obligations? Does Joseph intend to put them to the test, what if they fail the test and Joseph becomes responsible for a family schism? Does he care?

Let’s talk a moment or so about Judah. Do we remember his part in the initial kidnapping and sale of Joseph? The brothers conspired to kill him, but Reuben convinced them to throw him into the pit, intending – he says - to rescue him later on. When they saw a caravan, Judah convinced the remaining brothers that selling him to the Ishmaelites would be better than killing him.

Was Judah the ultimate kidnapper? Did he do a good thing by saving Joseph's life, or was he afraid that Joseph would rat on the brothers when he got home? He was, in fact, the one who prevented Joseph from getting home to his father. He was the last of the brothers who had an opportunity to save Joseph. Some time later, Judah married, had three sons. Long story short, he had relations with Tamar, his deceased son's wife, thinking she was a prostitute. When she proved to him that he was the father of her unborn child, he said: "She is more in the right than I. . . ." Perhaps Judah may be becoming a more thoughtful, moral person. Maybe.

I'm going to read the speech, in English, using the Robert Alter translation. There are four distinct parts: [I didn't; I had congregants read it, from the Etz Hayyim.]

A) I am going to talk to you; I want a hearing; I want to speak with you. Do not be impatient with me, just because you have all the powers of Pharaoh. A little buttering up, or perhaps an acknowledgment that the vizier has the powers of Pharaoh.

B) This is what happened. A full description of the interrogation of the brothers by the vizier, and a full description of the talks between the brothers and Jacob. Joseph could verify himself the first part, why then did Judah repeat it? Joseph could not verify the part with Jacob, which was the important part. Why did Joseph believe it?

C) A statement of what would happen if Benjamin, the one in whose bag the goblet was found, became enslaved. Essentially, that Jacob would die.

D) A proposal for a solution.

And Judah approached him - "Vayigash", "approached", is too peaceful, almost namby pamby. It's more like "stepped up" as if to the plate because it was his duty. Perhaps like David Ortiz rubbing his hands together and looking at the pitcher as if to say, give it your best shot, fella, I'm here! - and said, "Please, my lord, let your servant speak a word in my lord's hearing and let your wrath not flare against your servant, for you are like Pharaoh.

My lord had asked his servants, saying, 'Do you have a father or brother?'

And we said to my lord, 'We have an aging father and a young child of his old age, and his brother being dead, he alone is left of his mother, and his father loves him.'

And you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.'

The actual statement was: "that your words may be confirmed and you need not die" would he have actually slain the brothers had they shown up without Benjamin?

And we said to my lord, the lad cannot leave his father. Should he leave his father, he would die.' [Does "he" refer to Benjamin or to Jacob?]

And you said to your servants, 'If your youngest brother does not come down with you, you shall not see my face again.'

And it happened when we went up to your servant, my father, that we told him the words of my lord.
And our father said, 'Go back, buy us some food.'

And we said, 'We cannot go down. If our youngest brother is with us, we shall go down. For we cannot see the face of the man if our youngest brother is not with us.'

And your servant, our father, said to us, you know that two did my wife bear me. And one went out from me and I thought, O, he's been torn to shreds, and I have not seen him since.

This item is difficult to believe: How could Jacob have referred to the sons of Rachel as the two "my wife "did bear? He was talking to the sons of Leah, of Zilpah, of Bilhah?! If Judah is reporting accurately, Jacob still has not learned that his favoritism has caused the loss of one child. It could also mean that Judah has accepted his father's favoritism, even as he pleads for Benjamin by stating the loss that his father would incur. Perhaps Jacob never said these words, but Judah is reporting how he, Judah, thinks his father is feeling.

And should you take this one too, from my presence, and harm befall him, you would bring down my gray head to Sheol.' And so, Judah continued, should I come to your servant, my father, and the lad not be with us, for his life is bound to the lad's, when he saw the lad was not with us, he would die, [in Hebrew, one word vamet] and your servants would bring down the gray head of your servant, our father, in sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became pledge for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him to you, I will bear the blame to my father for all time.' Vamet, he will die. One word that brings home the cruelty suggested by the vizier that sets up the dire consequences of Joseph's plan, if in fact there is a plan.

And so let your servant, pray, stay instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. Judah offers himself as a slave, after having sold Joseph into slavery. Shouldn't this be the last item< why was the next line added? For how shall I go up to my father, if the lad not be with us? Let me see not the evil that would find out my father."

Compare Judah's compassion for his father at this point to his utter thoughtlessness, to his watching his father writhe in anguish, when he sold his brother to his cousins, the Ishmaelites.

What was omitted from the rhetoric? There was no mention of Joseph's accusation that they were spying, attempting to see the land bereft of vegetation, (42.7) There was no mention of the method of Joseph's kidnapping, that is, the story of how Benjamin's older brother was lost; there was no threat to use force, which is interesting only because there are several pages in Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews describing some very belligerent action on the part of Judah and the brothers, nor was there an attempt to

deny of the act of stealing the goblet or the money, or to blame some third person. It is based entirely upon emotion. Why did Judah think that the vizier would be swayed by an emotional appeal? Did Judah have an inkling that the vizier was not simply a viceroy?

Of course we know that Joseph was overwhelmed by the rhetoric, by the appeal to his human-ness in the speech, and he collapsed, he embraced his brothers and fell on Judah's neck.

Shabbat shalom