



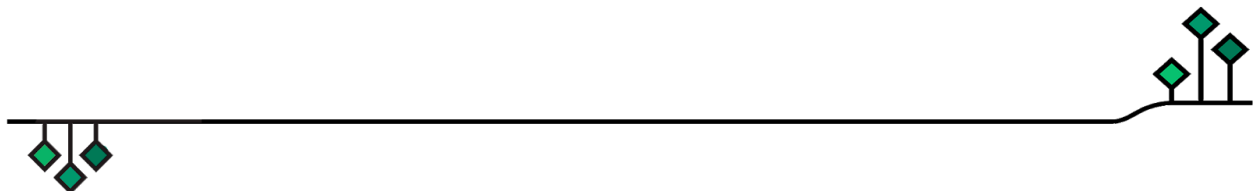
Can We Save the Unity of the Jewish People?

R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

Parashat VaYigash 5781

Parashat VaYigash stands in contrast to its *haftarah*, which contradicts the Torah's story. But I believe VaYigash and its *haftarah* have historical lessons for us, parallels so striking that we must urgently consider these two conflicting stories and the lessons they teach us: to prevent a split in world Jewry in our time.

First, our *parashah* recounts the crime that shattered Jacob's family. Joseph's brothers had seethed at Jacob's undisguised preference for his wife Rachel. They were hurt and infuriated by Jacob's manifest favoritism for Rachel's first-born. Their anger turns to hatred when Joseph boasts of recurring divine signals that he will rule over them in the future. Finally, when Joseph visits his brothers in the fields, they determine to kill him. Judah, Joseph's chief rival for leadership of the family, persuades them instead to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Joseph's disappearance devastates Jacob. The coverup of the crime locks the family into a prison of silence, guilt, and alienation from each other, as they watch their father's endless



grief and self-recrimination. Why had he sent Joseph out alone? They are helpless to comfort him and unable to tell the truth.

Joseph survives the shocking plunge from pampered, favorite child to the dregs of slavery under a foreign master. He draws upon inner resources to rise to important positions in his master's household, and to endure sexual harassment and betrayal by his master's wife. He is not broken by demotion and imprisonment. In jail, he makes himself so useful as to be repeatedly promoted. In a lightning turnaround, Joseph interprets the royal dreams, which Pharaoh's magicians and wise men failed to do, correctly diagnosing a coming famine, and comes up with a plan to prevent starvation. Taken from prison and appointed chief administrator, Joseph presides over a massive grain collection that sustains the Egyptian people and all the neighboring nations.

We marvel at Joseph's internal conviction that God has chosen him to be Egypt's savior, which enabled him to climb the pinnacle of power without losing his way or having his head turned (Genesis 45:5-8). In only one way is Joseph damaged: he rejects his family and walls off his past. He never even tries to contact his loving father during the seven years he is the vizier and second in command in Egypt, nor does he reach out to family in the initial years of a consuming famine.

Jacob's family is hopelessly fractured. When Joseph meets the brothers who have come to buy food for their hungry households, he feels no pity or longing for them. He toys with and torments them. Perhaps he really does want to see his only full brother, Benjamin, from whom he was violently separated years ago, but he has no plan to reconcile. His brothers are dead to him. As he said when he named his first son, Menasseh, "God has made me [i.e.



helped me] forget all my toil—and *all my father's house*" (Genesis 41:51). Joseph plans to see Benjamin and then let them all go out of his life forever. But Benjamin evokes a storm of emotion in him, leading him to improvise a plan to frame Benjamin and keep him in Egypt.

Now comes the unexpected denouement. Judah approaches Joseph directly and finds the one key that unlocks his hardened heart: he communicates Jacob's neverending heartbreak at his missing beloved son. Judah offers to become a slave in Benjamin's place. That is to say, far from reacting violently to Jacob's total possessive love for Rachel's youngest son, Judah will give up his own life in order not to break his father's heart again.

Joseph's blocking wall crumbles. He is flooded with yearning for the father who loved him more than life. In a moment of clarity, he also sees that his brothers' cruel action made possible his growing up to become a great leader. Surviving the rejection moved him from a self-centered narcissist to a person who is fulfilled by being an instrument of God's plan to rescue Egypt from famine—and save his family from extinction. Joseph, moved to the core, reaches out to his father and family. He brings them down to Egypt and nurtures them lovingly through the famine and its aftermath. This is the inspiring story of the near-miraculous reuniting of Jacob's broken family and the restoration of its wholeness.

The story is almost too good to be true. In fact, the *haftarah*, this week's prophetic reading, relates the sad reality that there was not a happy ending: the competition continued below the surface.¹

¹ As evidenced by Jacob's mixed blessings and curses on the different sons, and the brothers' concern after Jacob's death that Joseph would now take revenge (Genesis 49, 50:15-26).



When the children of Israel took possession of Canaan, tribal rivalries returned.² In particular, the tribes of Ephraim (son of Joseph) and Judah dueled for supremacy. King David and his son Solomon, descended from the tribe of Judah, managed to keep the Kingdom united, despite the alienation of the tribe of Ephraim and its allies.³ But Solomon's son Rehoboam was a weak ruler, and under him the nation split into two: the Kingdom of Israel (comprising most of the Ten Tribes) and the Kingdom of Judah (mostly Judah, Benjamin, and part of the Levi tribe). The Kingdoms competed religiously, including Israel's creation of two worship centers in Beit El and Dan to keep the Israelites from going to Jerusalem for their communal religious worship. Sadly, there were neither rulers great enough nor prophets successful enough to reunite the two kingdoms.

While the Kingdom of Israel suffered many coups, archeology shows it was the larger and dominant power in the area, with Judah as its satellite. This came to a crashing end when Assyria invaded and conquered Israel, sending the people into exile and replacing them with other ethnic groups.

Over a century later, the new imperial power of Babylonia conquered Judah and exiled many of its people. In the interim, however, Judah had undergone repeated religious renewals, including an especially powerful response to the destruction of Israel and the arrival of a large group of Israel's most religious citizens as refugees to the Kingdom of Judah. Prophetic activity and religious reform had increased the Judeans' inner strength. When Babylonia was soon overthrown in turn, the Judeans returned to their homeland, having successfully maintained their religious identity. In contrast, the general Israelite population, lacking

² See the book of Judges.

³ See the two books of Samuel and I Kings.



religious interaction with Judah over the centuries, were left weaker in religion and covenantal identity. Tragically, the ten Israelite tribes assimilated and were lost to Jewish history.⁴

The *haftarah* of VaYigash is a vision of Ezekiel, prophesying in Babylon more than a century after the Kingdom of Israel's disappearance.⁵ He is instructed to take one stick and write on it "for Judah and the tribe's companions." On another stick, he writes "for Ephraim and the tribes of Israel." The Lord promises to unite the sticks into one, representing the reunited and restored people of Israel. The *haftarah* is heartbreaking, because you realize the yearning behind the Rabbinic pairing of this prophetic portion. Unlike Judah in VaYigash, no political leader or prophet over the centuries approached the two kingdoms to speak the unifying words of faith and reconciliation that could have saved Israel, or at least assured the survival in exile of its people. By Ezekiel's time, the ten tribes were hopelessly lost. The prophet articulates the longing for reunion and profound regret at all the missed opportunities to unite the two main Israelite centers, which might have saved both.

This is the message for our time of VaYigash and its *haftarah*. Again there are two major centers of Jewry in the world, in Israel and the Diaspora. Again, after a century of solidarity and mutual aid, political differences, geographic distance, and religious and cultural divergence have had a splintering effect on the relationship. Many are complacent, saying sociological and cultural trends will run their course and there is nothing we can do. This week's *parashah* and *haftarah*, however, constitute a warning not to repeat the errors of the

⁴ See II Kings 17.

⁵ Ezekiel 37:15-28.



past. We need to mount a major effort to link Israel and Diaspora Jews in a new consciousness of deeper unity and learning with and from each other.

I want to mention and praise here Our Common Destiny (<https://ourcommondestiny.org>), a project launched in 2019, dedicated to bringing Jewish communities together by focusing on our common values. The guiding text of the project is the Declaration of Our Common Destiny, an eloquent document setting forth core principles that have connected the Jewish people for millennia. Our Common Destiny crowdsourced the completion of the Declaration, a global effort in which more than 130,000 Jews from all over the world participated. We must build on the Declaration and add permanent communal structures to link Israel and the Diaspora, ensuring that Israel's governments have a strong connection to Diaspora Jewry and an effective channel to hear its needs.

I believe that North American Jews must expand and invest in programs bringing Diaspora Jews into direct contact with Israelis. These programs build a reservoir of Jews who have encountered Israel firsthand, from the thousands who have traveled on Taglit-Birthright Israel's free ten-day trips, to the many gap year and post-college programs for those who study, work or intern in businesses, or volunteer in Israeli institutions and communities. Diaspora participants in these programs develop relationships with Israelis and attachment to Israel so they can process divergence and conflict, yet remain deeply attached. The number of programs bringing Israelis to meet and understand North American Jews has also increased and must increase further, helping to engage Israelis more with the diversity of Jews outside the state of Israel, and to raise Jewish peoplehood's salience in Israeli education. These programs represent the commitment of "Ephraim" (Diaspora Jews) to stay in one people with the State of Israel.



By the same token, as political winds shift in both Israel and the United States, I hope Israel will take the opportunity to undo some of the mistakes made in recent years that offend Diaspora Jewry, such as excluding liberal religious movements, denying recognition to their converts or marriages, and repudiating the compromise permitting non-Orthodox services at the Western Wall. These resulted from giving the haredi parties the primary voice in government religious policies in order to gain their political support for ruling coalitions. Resolving the problem of wrongfully granting monopoly will take another generation, requiring liberal religious denominations and independent religious groups in Israel to grow, increasing their electoral clout. The liberal wing of Open Orthodoxy must also grow and become more independent. It needs to assert itself by challenging exclusionary halakhic rulings and *poskim* (decisors), helping open the door to pluralist government policies. But even while we undertake those long-term changes, we must begin right now to reduce policies that fracture the Jewish people.

Some, especially in Israel, justify giving haredim a monopoly on Israel's religious affairs, claiming it will preserve the unity of the Jewish people to have one officially recognized standard. But there can be no unity of the Jewish people without Israeli recognition of the pluralism and diversity that is dominant in Diaspora Jewry. Similarly, some people argue that Israel should privilege the Orthodox and write off liberal groups because they believe that only the Orthodox will survive the wave of assimilation and will stand by Israel. This is false prophecy, meant to justify discriminatory policies that alienate liberal Diaspora Jews. If the prediction came true, it would be a tragedy for Israel. The correct response to this threat is for the Government, acting jointly with Diaspora communities, to make major investments in education, and religious and cultural renewal.



This is the time to invest in each other. Neither right nor left, neither Orthodox nor liberal should be our primary beneficiary. We need to uphold and be upheld by the widest spectrum of Jews. In American politics, too, and those of other Diaspora countries, the Israeli Government must recognize that no one view or party represents the whole Jewish people. Israel must make a strong effort to keep support for the Jewish state on a solid nonpartisan foundation. The time has come to reduce practices driven too strongly by internal Israeli politics and to put Jewish unity first.

The famous dictum is that those who do not learn from history are condemned to relive it. We need to make a massive effort to interconnect Israel and Diaspora Jewry, lest we end up losing one Jewish center, which would profoundly weaken the other. We need our Judah and Ephraim leaderships to speak the right words and focus on the right projects to keep Jewry—in both its centers—one people, bound by fate and by choice, and sustaining each other.

