



Leaning In—With Reckless Compassion

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What is the tone of Yehudah's approach to Yosef? *Midrash* (Bereishit Rabbah 93:6) offers three different angles: an approach for war, an approach for appeasement, or an approach for supplication. While these may seem very different from each other—and indeed, they are first presented by the *midrash* as a three-way disagreement—we then see a harmonistic opinion that Yehudah was ready for all of them—for whatever the moment demanded: “If for war—I come; if for appeasement—I come; if for prayer—I come.”¹

The idea that Yehudah approached “for war” is the most surprising of these three, especially since the Torah's intended tone seems to be supplicatory rather than violent.² Yet, some of our earliest biblical interpretations dramatically expand on this theme of Yehudah stepping up to fight, taking *vayigash* (ויגש) as an indication of aggression. In one early Targum, Yehudah becomes “mighty like a lion” and opens his mouth like a “lion roaring.”³ In a *midrash*

¹ Bereishit Rabbah 93:6: “ויגש אליו יהודה, רבי יהודה רבי נחמיה ורבנן, רבי יהודה אומר הגשה למלחמה, היך מה דאת? (יהושע יד, ו): אומר (שמואל ב' י'): ויגש יואב והעם אשר עמו למלחמה, רבי נחמיה אומר הגשה לפיוס, היך מה דאת אומר (יהושע יד, ו): ויגשו בני יהודה אל יהושע לפיוס. רבנן אמרי הגשה לתפלה (מלכים א' יח, לו): ויגש אליהו הנביא ויאמר ה' אלהי וגו'. רבי אלעזר אומר פשט להון אם למלחמה אני בא, אם לפיוס אני בא, אם לתפלה אני בא.”

² See Yehudah's repeated uses of the words עבד (Genesis 44:18-34) and נא, אדון.

³ The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (<http://cal.huc.edu/index.html>) is an amazing resource for Aramaic targum traditions. This tradition is found in Targum Neofiti (1st-4th century Aramaic translation and interpretation of Torah from the Land of Israel) to Genesis 44:18: “וקרב לוותיה יהודה זעף במלין ומדכך בלישנא נהם.”



that picks up on this early tradition, the phrase that encapsulates Yehudah's respect and submissiveness—"for you [Yosef] are like Pharaoh" (Genesis 44:18)—becomes a derogatory insult.⁴ What it means to be like Pharaoh is to issue a decree that won't be fulfilled; Pharaoh decreed that all Israelite boys would die, but they did not. Similarly, Yosef decrees that he will keep Binyamin as a slave; but Yehudah asserts he will not be able to. Further, like Yosef is second in command to Pharaoh, Yehudah presents himself as second in command to his father, the "ruler" of the land of Canaan. He essentially presents his opening stance for war between Canaan and Egypt, ready to draw his sword and kill everyone in Egypt—including Yosef and Pharaoh—to get his brother back.⁵ In response to Yehudah's threat of violence, Yosef calls to his son Menashe. One stomp of his foot makes the whole palace tremble. Suddenly, supplication looks like a more appealing tactic, and Yehudah shifts course.⁶ In these early traditions, Yehudah's initial approach is definitively a fighting stance. Only afterwards does he back down into a supplicatory mode.

It might seem that Yehudah's violent stance is at odds with the two other approaches we see in *midrash*—appeasement and prayer—but, counterintuitively, these tactics may actually align. When Bereishit Rabbah relates Yehudah's initial stance of aggression, it closes by pointing out how Yehudah's words were meant to appease Yosef, his brothers, and Binyamin all at once.⁷ Not only his supplication, but perhaps also Yehudah's anger and passion—and his

אמר. "תקיף ומתגבר כאריא." In a fragment of this targum from the Cairo Genizah, it reads instead: "גור אריה יהודה." This reference to a lion is likely based on Ya'akov's blessing to Yehudah in Genesis 49:9: "גור אריה יהודה."

⁴ Continuation of Bereishit Rabbah 93:6: "מה: כי כמוך כפרעה מה פרעה גוזר ואינו מקיים אף את גוזר ואין את מקיים, מה: פרעה להוט אחר זכרים אף את להוט אחר זכרים, מה פרעה מלך ואת שיני לו כך אבא מלך בארץ כנען ואני שיני לו."

⁵ See the Targum Neofiti's formulation: "דילמא לא אתאמר לך או דילמא לא אשתמע לך מה דעבדו שמעון ולוי תרין אחיי: בכרכה דשכמ דעלו בגוה וקטלו בה כל דכורא מן בגלל דסאיבו בגוה ית דינה... כל דכן בגלל בנימין אחון דהוא ממניין שבטייא ואית ליה חולק ואחסנא בפילוג ארעא ואנא חילי תקיף מן חילהון דשמעון ולוי בשבועתא אם אשלוף סייפי מן תייקא לא אתיבנא לגוה עד זמן דקטיל אנה כל מצראי מינך אנה משרי ובפרעה רבך אנה מסיים."

⁶ Continuation of Bereishit Rabbah 93:6: "אמ' ווי דין רפיש מן דבית אבא, כיון דחמא מילייא כן, שרי משתעי מילין רכיכין:"

⁷ Bereishit Rabbah 93:9: "אמ' ר' חייא בר בא כל הדברים שאת קורא שדבר יהודה ליוסף בפני אחיו עד שאת מגיע ולא יכל:" יוסף להתאפק (בראשית מה א) היה בהם פיוס ליוסף ופיוס לאחיו ופיוס לבינימן, פיוס ליוסף, ראו היאך נותן נפשו על בניה שלרצל, פיוס לאחיו, אמ' ראו היאך הוא נותן נפשו על אחיו, פיוס לבינימן, אמ' לו כשם שנתתי נפשי על אחיך כך אני נותן נפשי עליך."

willingness to defend Binyamin even by force—may be exactly what Yosef needs to hear to be reassured of a change of heart. In this entirely irrational fantasy of Yehudah going to war with all of Egypt to save his brother, Yosef might hear echoes of a different unarticulated fantasy: Yehudah wishing he could do whatever it would take to get his other brother, Yosef, back.

We find the same word *vayigash*—and the same three-fold midrashic interpretation—when Avraham approaches God to argue on behalf of Sedom.⁸ On the one hand, this makes sense linguistically: both Yehudah and Avraham are speaking up to power with a specific request. But it is not totally coherent to compare Yehudah “approaching” another person with Avraham “approaching” God. In particular, what would it mean for Avraham to approach God “for war”? Was Avraham really ready to fight God? What form would that battle take, with what weapons, and towards what ends?⁹

Taking the lessons from the reading of Yehudah’s approach, perhaps it means that Avraham, too, was articulating that he was ready to do whatever it would take to defend Sedom, even if that meant taking up arms against God. And, perhaps, this is exactly what God wanted to hear—the depth of Avraham’s compassion, even to the point of irrational recklessness. Yehudah musters this reckless compassion for his brother, *qua brother*, as someone who is “one of the tribes and has a share in the inheritance.”¹⁰ The extent to which he is ready to fight

⁸ Bereishit Rabbah 49:8: “[ויגש אברהם] וגו' ר' יודה ור' נחמיה ורבנין ר' יודה אמר הגשה למלחמה היך דאת אמר ויגש) “יואב והעם אשר עמו למלחמה וגו' (שמואל ב' יג), ר' נחמיה אמר הגשה לפיוס היך דאת אמר ויגשו בני יהודה אל יהושע (יהושע יד ו) לפיוסו, רבנין אמ' הגשה לתפילה היך דאת אמר ויהי כעלות המנחה ויגש אליהו וגו' (מלכים א' יח לו), אמר ר' לעזר פשט ליה אם למלחמה אני בא אם לפיוס אני בא אם לתפילה אני בא.”

⁹ The early Targum traditions on Yehudah’s readiness to fight suggests that the concept of *hagashah* is more original to the Yehudah story. I am assuming this interpretive tradition originates with Yehudah and is then transposed and applied to Avraham in *midrash*. For more exploration of these themes between Avraham and Yehudah and the meaning of *hagashah* in prayer, see Rabbi Elie Kaunfer’s essay for Parashat VaYigash 5781, “The Meanings of Approach,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/meanings-approach>.

¹⁰ See Targum Neofiti. This phrasing also appears in other targumim.



for Binyamin is exactly what indicates to Yosef *he is treating Binyamin like a brother*.

Strikingly, Avraham holds this same reckless compassion for total strangers.¹¹

The richness of these moments are not merely meant as dramatic scenes in the extended narrative of Sefer Bereishit. We are supposed to learn from Yehudah and Avraham's three-fold posture of "approaching" every time we step forward in prayer.¹² When we take three steps forward, approaching God before the Amidah, we can tap into the same urgency and sense of high stakes as Yehudah preparing to wield his sword.¹³ Or, as the Talmud describes Hannah, we have to be ready to sling our words at God like "arrows" coming out of the "bow" that is our lips.¹⁴ In this fighting stance, we step into a role of caring passionately about the world around us, and being on the alert for unfairness and injustice as inheritors of Avraham's covenant of "*tzedakah umishpat*" (Genesis 18:19).

We might ask: who am I to go to battle for all of this every single day? According to the Hassidic master, the Sefat Emet, Avraham was plagued by the same question. He points out that we rarely see Avraham praying to God, because mostly he was too "humble" to pray.¹⁵ The Sefat Emet teaches that, when Avraham heard of the impending destruction of Sedom, he had to "approach for war" *against himself*, not sure if it was worth opening his mouth in prayer because of a sense of his own inadequacy and smallness.¹⁶ He triumphed over his

¹¹ To be sure, Avraham is likely motivated in part by wanting to rescue Lot, for whom he literally has already gone to war (in Genesis 14). The relationship between courage to act on compassion towards others versus family is also complex for Avraham, as he does not put up a fight at all about sacrificing his own son (in Genesis 22).

¹² Bereishit Rabbah 49:23 evokes Avraham's "approach for war" as a mode for all prayer leaders: "ויגש אברהם וגו'... ר' פינחס ור' לוי ור' יוחנן משי' מנחם דגליא זה שעובר לפני התיבה אין א' לו בוא ועשה אלא בוא וקרוב בוא ועשה מלחמתינו בוא ועשה קרבן שלציבור."

¹³ The three steps before the Amidah are connected by the Sefer ha-Rokeia'h (Hilkhot Tefillah #322) to the three places the Tanakh uses the word ויגש: Avraham (Genesis 18:23), Yehudah (44:18), and when Eliyahu confronts the prophets of Ba'al (1 Kings 18:36).

¹⁴ See Berakhot 31b on Hannah's prayer as "slinging words at God."

¹⁵ See my comments on Sarai—not Avram—being the first to pray in Parashat Lekh Lekha, "Unlikely Origins of Prayer," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/unlikely-origins-prayer>.

¹⁶ Parashat VaYera (1878): "ועם מי נלחם בכאן... נלחם עם עצמו אם להתפלל" / Who did he fight here?... he fought with himself whether to pray..."

inner instinct to keep quiet because he was overcome by his sense of compassion. Yehudah, as well, may have been racked by guilt and a sense of inadequacy when defending Binyamin, because he knew that he failed as a brother before. But this does not stop him when he has to act out of necessity. Avraham and Yehudah both represent stepping up with whatever it takes, not out of self-confidence, but from a sense of responsibility to do what the moment calls for, even when we personally don't feel up to the task.

We learn from the use of the word *vayigash* that our posture towards others and towards God inform each other. Perhaps daily prayer is about cultivating the stance of “leaning in” (*hagashah*) to the claims our lives and our world make on us. We might feel too small or too flawed, or that the problem is too large. We might feel like daring to express love and investment is a reckless risk doomed for failure and disappointment. Even so, we take three steps forward. May our readiness to put up our best fight yield unexpected receptivity and graciousness. And even if it doesn't, encoding the stance of *vayigash* into our daily lives teaches us that the only thing to do each day is to step up yet again.

