



## Vayigash 2023

### Don't be Afraid

2 minute read | Straightforward

After Yosef revealed himself to his brothers, he invited their entire family to relocate from the famine-plagued Canaan to Egypt's fertile and prosperous land under Yosef's protection and influence. When Yakov discovered his long-lost son was alive and well, he was overwhelmed at the prospect of reuniting the family before he died. But he had reservations, and God had to reassure him:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב – And He said, “I am God, the God of your father. Don't be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation”. (46:3)

Undoubtedly, God was speaking to some nerves or anguish Yakov was experiencing at the idea of leaving the land of his fathers. Yakov was afraid of the unknown, leaving the safety, security, and comfort of the land his family had grown up in. But fear makes us withdraw, which may be the point God was addressing.

And God's reassurance contains a powerful notion that reverberates through the ages. Difficulties don't have to diminish – they can be the making of us. Strength and growth come with pain and sacrifice.

Of 3,000 or so years of Jewish history, perhaps 400 at best were sovereign and secure, with the rest in one exile or another. Yet, the trajectory has only been upwards. There is no greater freedom than knowing we can thrive in exile.

It's ultimately true of life itself – we build through overcoming adversity with self-sacrifice. So counterintuitively, outstanding achievements are not despite adversity; they are a product of it. Leaning into the challenge will be the making of you – כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימָךְ שָׁם – that's the only place it can happen.

When everything is easy, it's hard to be our best, and Yakov's life embodied this. His family could only be reunited in a foreign land, paving the way to slavery and eventual redemption. His life was truth and greatness, but always with pain and on the run.

R' Yitzchak Berkowitz teaches that this theme is recursive – time and again, the resistance is not the obstacle – it's the catalyst. The obstacle is the way. It's the story of the matza on Pesach; it's the story of Purim and Chanuka. Overcoming the challenge is what lets us become great.



That's not to diminish in any way the severity of the different ordeals life hurls our way – the struggle is real.

But we don't have to be shackled by our shackles; the challenges can give us a siege mentality. The key to unlocking this superpower is God's message to humans.

Don't be afraid.

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## Dying Of Embarrassment

2 minute read | Straightforward

Yosef planted stolen property on Binyamin and imprisoned him to determine if his brothers had changed over the years.

Yehuda stepped forward to persuade their captor with a heart-rending plea on behalf of their elderly father; to return home without his youngest boy would be the death of him. Out of mercy for their elderly father, Yehuda begged Yosef to release Binyamin.

Seeing them stick up for each other, Yosef knew that they had changed, and this was the moment to reveal his identity:

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי הִי וְלֹא יָכֹלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי גִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנֵי  
Yosef. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer because they were so shocked.

While the reveal stuns them into silence, Yosef's question is a little strange. Yehuda has just been talking about their elderly father and his frail health as to why Yosef should let Binyamin go. Yosef already knows that Yakov is alive!

So why would he ask if his father was still alive?

The Beis Halevi explains that Yosef's rhetoric isolates their concern for their father. They love their father. They worry for him and don't want to trouble him. But, Yosef asks, what of my father, the father you put through years of inconsolable anguish and grief? Is he only alive to you now that you are the victims?

They were shocked into silence. Not just because of the surprise of Yosef's reveal, but because he is transparently correct that they are hypocrites! The Midrash teaches that when our souls arrive in Heaven, we are put on trial to account for how we spent our lives, likening the experience to the



mortifying and humiliating moment Yosef revealed himself to his brothers. It's not about surprise; it's about the ad hoc justifications and hypocrisy we regularly indulge in.

Yet what happens next shows the caliber of these great heroes. Having said his piece, and without a hint of malice, he simply embraces them.

It is worth noting that until he revealed himself, Yosef was a threat to them, but his brothers were dangerous too. Yehuda was known for his decisive albeit arguably rash actions, and Shimon and Levi were infamous and feared killers. But rather than humiliate his brothers in front of an audience, Yosef commands his guards and staff to leave, endangering himself and risking his life.

The story is a paradigm for how to mend a broken relationship. Yosef's reproof is concise but comprehensive on delivery and accepted without dispute when received.

We all have relationship struggles over far less.

Which ones can you mend with a few well-chosen words?

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## **Resurgence Redux**

4 minute read | Straightforward

Some things are elastic, which means that when one variable changes, another one does too. In our everyday life, we recognize that when people want more or less of a product or service, the price will correspondingly flex, an example of economic elasticity.

In physics, when you coil a spring from its resting position, it exerts an opposing force approximately proportional to its change in length; the greater the force compressing the spring, the stronger the corresponding tension that will be released. Children quickly learn this when playing with rubber bands; the release of built-up energy is extremely powerful, not to mention painful.

There is also a certain elasticity in the world of spirit.

In stories, life, and all things, there is a moment of failure, a catastrophic fall from grace, the abyss.

It is inevitable; we live in a dynamic world, a fluid environment where failure is possible. On one reading of the Creation story, placing clueless people in a world of stumbling blocks all but guarantees failure. We try to do all sorts of great things and fall short. We fail. Whether to a greater or less extent, we fail and live in a world of failure.



Some failures are particularly acute.

The last chapters of the stories of Genesis revolve around failure. Yehuda has a catastrophic fall from grace, going from being the respected leader of his brothers to an exile, leaving his family, marrying a heathen, and losing his way entirely. Joseph has a corresponding fall from grace, being forced out of his family, trafficked into slavery, and finding himself in a prison dungeon. Something thematically similar happens in the Chanuka story, where the Greek empire occupied Israel and successfully suppressed Jewish practice to the extent that pigs were openly slaughtered as sacrifices to Zeus in the Beis Hamikdash.

But then something magical happens that follows these failures; transformation.

The Proverbs describe how righteous people stumble seven times and rise, and wicked people stumble on their evil just once and are done for – *כִּי שֶׁבַע יִפּוֹל צַדִּיק וְקָם וְרָשָׁע יִכָּשֵׁל וְכָרַע* –

The Metzudas David notes that in this conception, the definition of righteousness is in the rising, the wicked in staying down. The Kedushas Levi points out that the proverb still calls a person who falls righteous because it says the person rises after they fall – *יִפּוֹל / צַדִּיק / וְקָם*.

R' Yehoshua Hartman suggests that part of what makes a comeback inevitable is the emptiness in the fall; the bland and hollow present contains the potential for a different future, the building blocks the future can be built out of.

As the Chozeh of Lublin teaches, it is the awareness and recognition of downfall that triggers the possibility of redemption – *אֲתָרֵי נִמְכָּר גְּאֻלָּה תִּהְיֶה־לּוֹ*.

The power of transformation is magical, but it's entirely within our reach. Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh observes that failures are not an obstacle to growth but the source of it. In other words, every fall is a spring containing the energy of a comeback, a second wind, a resurgence, or an upturn. It often comes after exhaustion and complete deconstruction.

From rock bottom, the heart of darkness, Yehuda and Joseph rises from the abyss and climb higher than the rest in both the physical and spiritual worlds, even paving the way for the aspect of Mashiach they embody. Yehuda makes amends and rises to rule as king, and Joseph forgives his brother and rises to reunite and sustain them all. The Maccabees improvise with what little they have to re-establish Judaism permanently.

Nested here is a template for all change, reconceptualizing disorder as a catalyst for transformation and overcoming challenges.

Our sages affirm the power of a comeback; repentant people can get to places that no one else can – *מִקּוֹם שֶׁבַעֲלֵי תְּשׁוּבָה עוֹמְדִים*, אין צדיקים גמורים יכולים לעמוד



Yakov made the unusual comment of needing to see Yosef before he died because the place Yosef would go after surviving his ordeals was far beyond the place Yakov would be.

Intuitively, the potential precedes all forms of the actual; our sages teach that Teshuva predates Creation. Our sages describe the integrated coexistence of God's greatness within smallness, which perhaps we can perceive in the force to bounce back already existing in the moment of failure; the potential for greatness is present, even if not yet manifest.

We typically recognize a passive transition from darkness to light – מאפלה לאורה. R' Yitzchak Hutner challenges us to realize within ourselves the transformative ability to actively create light from the very darkness itself – מאפלה לאורה. In R' Hutner's formulation, only fools believe that the rise is in spite of the fall; the truth is that the rise is because of the fall. Science bears this out; the force that makes the sun set is the same as the same one that will make it rise.

Change isn't an external thing that happens passively, not some irresistible force. You are not a leaf blowing in the wind; what comes before is not the final form. You must surrender to the challenge, giving yourself wholly to it, annihilating the self that comes before, to return in the higher form that has risen to the occasion, death and rebirth.

The heights you can reach are directly linked to the contours of your failure.

You will fall; you can be sure of it.

You may even lose your spark.

But you will rise like the sun.

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## **His Brother's Keeper**

5 minute read | Straightforward

After a famine struck Canaan and the surrounding region, Egypt was the only place that could adequately sustain refugees. Yakov sent his sons down to Egypt to obtain provisions, where Yosef noticed them, and Yosef imprisoned Shimon for an extended period of time to make sure they brought Benjamin back with them. After releasing Shimon, Yosef had his goblet planted in Benjamin's sack and claimed the right to enslave the framed thief. Believing their innocence, the brothers agreed, only to be crestfallen when the missing goblet was discovered in Benjamin's personal articles, and Yehuda stepped forward with an impassioned plea, the turning point in the family's story:



וַיֵּגֶשׁ אֵלָיו יְהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי יְדַבְרֶנָּה עֲבָדְךָ דָּבַר בְּאָזְנֵי אֲדֹנָי וְאֶל־יְחִיר אֶפְדֶּה בְּעַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְמוֹךָ כִּפְרָעָה... כִּי עֲבָדְךָ עָרַב אֶת־הַנְּעָר מֵעַם אָבִי לְאֹמֶר אִם־לֹא אָבִיאֲנֹו אֵלָיְךָ וְחִטָּאתִי לְאָבִי כָל־הַיָּמִים. וְעַתָּה יֵשְׁב־נָא עֲבָדְךָ תַּחַת הַנְּעָר עֶבֶד לְאֲדֹנָי וְהַנְּעָר יַעַל עִם־אָחִיו. כִּי־אִיךָ אֲעֲלֶה: Then Yehuda went up to him and said, “Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh... Now your servant has pledged himself for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.’ Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would consume my father!” (44:1,32-34)

Rashi highlights that Yehuda is not simply begging; he makes a fervent and forceful appeal to save Binyamin. The Gemara suggests that Yehuda was willing to draw swords over this, meaning Yehuda was willing to sacrifice not only his liberty for his brother; but his very life. The Tosefta recognizes this moment as the singular deed that seals Yehuda’s eventual right to the crown.

Where once upon a time, Yehuda had advocated for the rejection of a sibling, he would not and could not tolerate the notion for even a moment, taking absolute responsibility for a planted goblet, something so completely beyond his control. With this bold step, Yehuda showed that he and his brothers had changed, and Yosef’s charade was no longer necessary, and it would be safe for Yosef to reveal his true identity.

Before proceeding, we should recognize that what Yehuda did was highly unusual.

There’s a common law doctrine called frustration. When an unforeseen event renders an agreed contractual obligation impossible, the contract or agreement has been frustrated and is set aside – אִי־אֵיבָר. Any normal person would be well within their rights to disclaim any responsibility for the planted goblet – who could have foreseen it? There is no universe where it’s in any way Yehuda’s fault! Yehuda could so easily go home empty-handed to their father, broken-hearted and dejected, because what more could he have done to save Benjamin? Knowing that this nightmare scenario is theatrical because the goblet was planted, we know that the answer to what he could have done or better is nothing at all; it was nobody’s fault. Yet Yehuda rejected this tantalizing prompt to escape responsibility, choosing instead to endanger himself to save his brother.

Given the deep significance of this moment in the story, as accentuated by our Sage’s comments, what was the fuel that drove Yehuda to such an extreme extent?

R’ Jonathan Sacks suggests that Yehuda’s behavior is characteristic of being a leader. Making mistakes is an occupational hazard of leadership, but it’s a feature of being in a role with no rules navigating uncharted territory. Yehuda had made his mistakes, advocating for getting rid of Yosef, and then with his judgment in the story with Tamar. But he had admitted his mistakes and taken responsibility, learning and growing from them to face another day. He was not debilitated by his past failures and would not fail again; the stuff kings should be made of.



R' Yitzchok Berkovits suggests that Yehuda understood that taking responsibility meant he could stop at nothing and could not allow for failure. Yehuda actually says as much to Yosef! One of the most fundamental premises of Judaism is that we have a duty to each other of mutual responsibility to look out for each other – כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה. The Hebrew expression goes quite a bit further than the notion of responsibility, articulating the legal concept of personal guarantee. There is just no such thing as a good person who minds their own business and leaves community and society to their own devices. That's just not what a good person looks like! We are all fully responsible for living the Torah's laws and ideals ourselves, but we are just as responsible for our fellow man and their responsibilities. The Torah teaches us that we don't just owe God; we owe each other.

Yehuda's example, and the example of any great leader, is that being responsible means stopping at nothing. If something goes wrong, leaders find another way, and there is no such thing as getting too discouraged.

It's hard to overstate how monumental this moment is. Yehuda had rehabilitated himself fully, and it is what allows Yakov's family to peacefully reunite, relocate, and reintegrate together after decades of hurt.

Cycle after cycle, generation after generation, families fought and went their separate ways. Cain killed his brother Abel. Lot had to separate from his uncle Avraham. Yishmael had to be separated from his brother Yitzchak. Esau had to be separated from his twin brother Yakov. In the book of Genesis, the stories of where we come from, families drifting apart is the natural course of events until this very moment – מעשה אבות סימן לבנים.

If the book opened with the haunting and existential question of “Am I my brother's keeper?;” then the Torah's answer is categorically and unequivocally that yes, you absolutely are!

Yehuda really is his brother's keeper. With this essential lesson, the cycle has been broken, setting the scene for the epilogue of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus and the Jewish People.

The Gemara suggests that Yosef cried when he embraced Binyamin for the first time, not only for their emotional and tearful reunion after a lifetime apart; but because Yosef was crying for the two Batei HaMikdash in Binyamin's territory that would be destroyed because of societies rife with internal hatred and animosity.

Perhaps the Gemara is communicating how hard it is for us not to hate our brother. Yosef and Binyamin had only just learned the lesson but knew that their descendants were doomed to repeat the same mistakes. Friction is part of what it is to be human – but we can be better than that. The stories of our history are about how hard it is to get along. It's the story of our present. It's the story of our future.



## TorahRedux

The Torah talks to us – it is written knowing exactly who we are, our shortcomings, and what we struggle with. And just the same, it calls on us to be our brother's keeper, to take responsibility for one another, even, or perhaps especially, the ones it's hard to get along with. It can heal a family, and it can alter the course of history.

We might fail, it might be hard, and the odds might be against us. But there is no avoiding it. It's hard, but it can be done, and it's the stuff greatness is made of.

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.*

*If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

Neli

**PS** - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.