

Parshat Vayigash: “And Judah Approached,” The Courage to Step Forward

Rabbi Tali Aronsky, Class of 2025

Parashat Vayigash opens with three simple words: “Vayigash elav Yehudah,” “And Judah approached him” (Bereishit 44:18). After chapters of tension, silence, guilt, and distance, Judah steps forward.

Judah steps forward to confront the powerful Egyptian viceroy, not yet knowing that this ruler is his own brother Joseph. The stakes could not be higher: Benjamin’s freedom, his father’s life, and the future of the family itself.

But the Torah does not say, “And Judah spoke,” or “And Judah pleaded.” It says, very simply, “Judah approached.” He came near. That small act—drawing close—is often the difference between despair and possibility.

Judah has every reason to stay silent. The man before him is untouchable, the second most powerful figure in the strongest empire of its time. The situation seems hopeless and Joseph is unmovable, distant, even cruel. Judah could easily have resigned himself to the inevitable: This is how it ends. This is what God wants. What can we possibly do? And yet he approaches.

This is not the first time we see Judah choosing action when all seems lost. Earlier, when the brothers want to kill Joseph, Judah pushes for another option: “Let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites”—not ideal, not perfect, but a creative attempt to keep the story—and his brother—alive. In a moment of fear and uncertainty, Judah leans toward life, toward connection, toward the possibility that something might yet change.

In Vayigash, Judah again rejects fatalism. He takes a deep breath and does the hardest thing: he comes close. He engages. He takes a risk. This single act of approaching is what cracks open Joseph’s heart. It is what leads to Joseph’s self-disclosure, to reconciliation, to healing, and ultimately to the formation of the Jewish people in Egypt.

Sometimes the turning point in a relationship, a crisis, or a conflict is not brilliance or strategy. Sometimes it is simply the willingness to approach.

And here is a subtle, beautiful layer of the story: my suspicion is that Joseph himself secretly wants his brothers to approach. After all, these are the same brothers who rejected him, hated him, tried to kill him, and sold him into slavery. Often, we turn away from people who have hurt us in the past because we fear being hurt again and so Joseph cannot initiate the approach himself. He needs Judah to step forward, to cross the divide. And Judah’s courage unlocked the possibility that Joseph had longed for.

We know how tempting the opposite can be. When someone feels distant, when a relationship is strained, when a situation seems impossible, we retreat. We avoid. We text instead of call. We email instead of talk. We fester quietly in our own assumptions. We double down on our version of the story,

building walls instead of bridges. We tell ourselves, *It's not worth it. They won't listen. Nothing will change.*

But Vayigash teaches that the moment we “approach”—with humility, courage, and heart—we open up a channel through which change may be possible.

Approaching doesn't mean agreeing. It doesn't mean surrendering. It means refusing to give up on the possibility of connection. And Judah is the one who shows us that sometimes salvation begins not with a solution but with a step:

- A step toward a difficult conversation.
- A step toward someone we fear has grown distant.
- A step toward a relationship we're not sure can be healed.

And often, that vulnerable, brave step is the thing that makes the impossible possible.

In our own lives, we can ask:

- Where am I avoiding a conversation because the situation feels too charged or too hopeless?
- Where have I convinced myself that the other person won't listen, without ever truly approaching them?
- Where might one phone call do what ten WhatsApps never could?

“Approaching” can look like a gentle word, an invitation to talk, a willingness to say, *“Can we try again?”* It can also be the decision to stop imagining the worst and instead make contact—real, human contact.

May we all have the courage of Judah to step forward even when afraid, to open doors even when we assume they are locked, and to approach with compassion those who feel far away. In doing so, may we unlock healing, connection, and the unexpected blessings that come when we draw close.

Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Tali Aronsky is the gabbait of Ve'ani Tefilla in Nachlaot, Jerusalem, where she fosters an inclusive ezrat nashim and engaging prayer and learning experiences. She advises on complex personal matters, including domestic abuse, agunot, mental health, and life transitions. Originally from Brooklyn, she graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and studied at Drisha and Hadar. She has led diverse learning communities making Jewish texts and Israeli culture accessible to learners of all backgrounds. Rabbi Tali also has extensive professional experience in journalism and public relations, including senior roles at CBS News, and as spokesperson for Mayor Bloomberg and the Jewish Agency for Israel.