



Three Paths to Closeness

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The word “*vayigash*” (“he approached”) opens one of the most dramatic scenes in the Torah: a climactic moment in the tense encounter between Yehudah, the brothers and Yosef, a moment in which the fate of the entire family rests on the words and actions of a single person. “And Yehudah approached him and said...” (Genesis 44:18).

Our Sages pause at this first verb, *vayigash*, seeing in it more than a description of physical movement through space. In Bereishit Rabbah, they map out the range of meanings contained in this word:

בראשית רבה צג:

רבי יהודה אומר: הגשה למלחמה... רבי נחמיה אומר: הגשה לפיוס... רבן אמרי: הגשה לתפלה.

Bereishit Rabbah 93:6

R. Yehudah says: an approach for battle.... R. Nehemiah says: an approach for reconciliation.... The Rabbis say: an approach for prayer.



These three paths—battle, reconciliation, and prayer—offer three possible expressions of the fundamental act of drawing near.

***Vayigash*: For battle or for reconciliation**

R. Yehudah understands his biblical namesake as preparing for battle. He approaches Yosef with the mindset that he is facing an adversary—a force one must stand against and guard oneself from, a force that might even attack. To approach for battle is to enter a space of confrontation with a readiness to fight if necessary. Battle is not merely a quarrel; it is an encounter in which opposing sides see before them only two possibilities: victory or surrender.

The encounter is filled with emotions. An earlier *midrash* in the same section of Bereishit Rabbah describes Yehudah and Yosef as both filled with anger on the verge of eruption: “This one was filled with wrath toward that one, and that one was filled with wrath toward this one.” (93:2). Anger is perhaps one of the core emotions behind an encounter of battle—alongside guilt and fear, which surely accompanied this charged meeting between brothers.

In contrast, R. Neḥemiah suggests that what characterizes the approach—the drawing close—is reconciliation. In this reading, Yehudah approaches Yosef in a way that invites appeasement. His movement toward Yosef aims to prevent conflict, to soothe anger, to bring a rapidly escalating situation back to peace and harmony. Reconciliation is not merely the resolution of a quarrel; it is a process in which adversaries stop thinking in terms of winning and losing and begin thinking in terms of partnership—coexistence, perhaps even shared purpose. At its core, the movement toward reconciliation contains hope for change and trust that such change is possible.



As he draws near, Yehudah tells Yosef that he is responsible for his brother Binyamin: “Now your servant has pledged himself for the boy” (Genesis 44:32). He explains that he pledged to their father: “If I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.” Yehudah not only promises to bring Binyamin back—he attaches to that promise a deep personal responsibility: a pledge to his father, an expression of accountability and loyalty. As if to say: this is not just Binyamin’s story; it is really a shared story—ours.

***Vayigash*: Toward prayer**

In addition to battle and reconciliation, “the Rabbis” offer a third possibility, that *vayigash* signifies a step toward prayer.

How can this interpretation be understood in the context of Yehudah’s encounter with the Egyptian ruler—or with his brother Yosef? It feels somewhat puzzling to speak of prayer when the scene centers on the relationship between two people.¹

A possible explanation can be found based on where these three meanings of *vayigash* also appear, relating to a different instance of approach. “And Avraham approached and said: ‘Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?’” (Genesis 18:23), just before the destruction of Sodom. There, too, the *midrash* teaches:

בראשית רבה מט:ח

רבי יהודה אומר: הגשה למלחמה... רבי נחמיה אומר: הגשה לפיוס... רבנן אמרי: הגשה לתפלה.

¹ See also my colleague R. Elie Kaunfer’s essay on Parashat VaYigash, analyzing this connection between approach and prayer, “Prayer is About Coming Closer,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/prayer-about-coming-closer>.



Bereishit Rabbah 49:8

R. Yehudah says: an approach for battle.... R. Neḥemiah says: an approach for reconciliation.... The Rabbis say: an approach for prayer.

In that setting, the *midrash* suggests that Avraham approaches God while challenging God's decision to destroy Sodom—and that this approach may be understood in several ways, as possible orientations or types of approach. Perhaps Avraham approaches with a mindset of battle, anticipating confrontation and preparing to exert opposing force—and were it not written, one could hardly say it—that Avraham, as it were, approaches God ready to fight. Or perhaps he approaches with a desire for reconciliation, seeking to appease God so that God might show mercy. Or perhaps he approaches God as one approaches the Ultimate Power, in prayer—like a human standing before the One Who spoke and the world came into being.

By adding prayer as a core possibility for the meaning of *vayigash*, the *midrash* creates a space in which human meaning and theological meaning meet—and perhaps hints that the act of approaching is always an approach toward the other, even when that other does not feel assured. The movement of *vayigash*, just like prayer, may be a movement undertaken without clarity of what the encounter means or what character it holds for the addressee, the one we are approaching.

War, reconciliation, and prayer

What unites these three interpretations? In all three, there is a shared essence, namely the movement itself: to step forward. The person does not remain in place, does not stay passive, does not freeze, but instead draws near. A person willing to approach is a person willing to encounter—whether they approach ready to struggle, hopeful for change, or pleading from



the depths of their heart. One who takes a step forward, who moves toward meeting another, is someone who takes responsibility: “your servant has pledged himself” (Genesis 44:32).

It seems, then, that **approaching** is the language of those who care. Both Avraham and Yehudah refuse to stand by—physically or emotionally. They step forward. Avraham does not give up on the people of Sodom; Yehudah does not surrender to the looming tragedy threatening Binyamin and their father. Avraham does not give up on God as a just God, and Yehudah—without yet knowing it—does not give up on Yosef. Both approach. Yehudah follows in the footsteps of his great-grandfather Avraham: both are described as stepping alone into an unsafe space to protect others.

The verb *vayigash* carries risk. It is a movement that requires courage. One who approaches must leave behind a protected space. Whether it is Avraham approaching God, Yehudah approaching the Egyptian ruler, or any person approaching another in the midst of potential conflict—each case is charged. Physical closeness is almost always emotional closeness as well (even if the form of closeness is anger), and both involve exposure, or an intensification of vulnerability. And perhaps every act of approaching—every *vayigash*—is some combination of war, reconciliation, and prayer. Every approach contains elements of force and defense, hope for change, and recognition of human limitation. When Yehudah approaches, he carries more than himself. He approaches on behalf of Reuven, on behalf of Ya’akov, on behalf of Binyamin. He approaches on behalf of the person he himself had not been—or had not dared to be—during the sale of Yosef, and perhaps also to atone for what he set in motion.

The verb *vayigash* teaches that true closeness begins with bravery. Whether in battle, in reconciliation, or in prayer, one must take at least one step forward toward another—leaving behind the fear of alienation or failure. A step that refuses paralyzing despair and instead



expresses hope through action. Every act of approaching requires vulnerability: entering a space where one may be hurt, but also the only space where understanding, forgiveness, or deliverance can be born.

“And Yehudah approached him” is thus not only the opening to a dramatic biblical scene, but also an ongoing moral and theological call: to approach—even when it is difficult, discouraging, or frightening. To approach—even when the other feels distant, threatening, or exalted. For only one who approaches can truly hope to encounter.

