

PARASHAS VAYIGASH

An Escort for Life

This week's *parashah* opens with the dramatic confrontation between Judah and the inflexible Egyptian viceroy. The tension builds to a fever pitch, and reaches its stunning climax with the revelation that the viceroy is none other than the long-lost Joseph. An emotional reunion follows, but Joseph's immediate concern is to send a personal message to his father Jacob. This important message has to prove that he, the Egyptian viceroy, is indeed Joseph. Concurrently, it must also alleviate Jacob's inevitable concerns about Joseph's spiritual condition after having lived apart from his family for so many years in the Egyptian den of corruption and immorality. So what message did Joseph choose to send?

He chose to remind his father that during their last meeting they had discussed the Torah laws regarding the ritual of the *eglah arufah*, which is performed when a wayfarer is found murdered on the open road and the assailant is unknown. The Torah (Devarim 21) commands that the elders of the city nearest to the scene of the crime come out and declare, "Our hands did not spill this blood!"

Joseph's knowledge of this private conversation was certainly clear proof of Joseph's identity, but how did it reassure Jacob that his son had maintained his high spiritual levels?

Let us take a closer look at the remarkable statement the elders when they visit the scene of the tragic crime. "Our hands did not spill this blood!" Are the elders really suspects in this unsolved murder case? Of course not, says the Talmud (Sotah 45b). The elders were declaring that the wayfarer had not been turned away from their city without being offered food and a proper sendoff on his journey.

But is the failure to offer a wayfarer food and a warm sendoff such a terrible thing? Why does the Torah value extending hospitality so highly that the failure to do so is considered "spilling blood"?

The commentaries explain that hospitality is not only meant to satisfy a person's physical needs. It also nourishes his very heart and soul. A wayfarer, separated from the support system of his home and family, inevitably feels forlorn and demoralized. But when he is welcomed into a home with warmth and affection, he once again feels connected and secure. And when he is given a warm sendoff, he is filled with renewed confidence and self-esteem. He holds his head a little higher, his shoulders are squared back, and there is a buoyant

spring in his step. Such a person is an unlikely target for the predators that roam the highways. It is the beaten-down traveler who feels isolated and lost that is most vulnerable to attack. The restorative gifts of hospitality can fortify and sustain a person for the long road ahead to an immeasurable degree, and therefore, withholding these gifts is tantamount to “spilling his blood.”

Joseph was addressing this concept between the lines of his message to his father. *Do not be concerned that I have lost my spiritual bearings, that I have become an immoral Egyptian, he was saying. The spiritual gifts I received in your house during the years of my youth were my suit of armor all these years. They gave me the strength and courage to resist the corruption of Egypt and kept me on the exalted level of a future tribal patriarch of the Jewish people. Remember our discussions about the eglah arufah. Just as the wayfarer is fortified for his journey by a few hours of hospitality, I, too, was fortified for my whole life by my youth in your home. You need not worry. I am the same Joseph you once knew, only a little older.*

This is a lesson of critical importance to all of us. We sometimes do not appreciate how profoundly the things we do and say can affect others. Certainly, our children deserve that we bring them up with warmth, sensitivity and strong values. If we do, they will always hold their heads a little higher, because we will have given them the confidence and self-esteem that will nourish them for the rest of their lives. But even in our myriad daily contacts with other people, we can do so much with a helping hand, a kind word, a simple smile. The smallest gesture of warmth and sincere compassion can sometimes penetrate the heart of a lonely wayfarer on the road of life and give him the restorative gifts that will enable him to reach his destination safely.