

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Sermon for Parashat Vayiggash  
December 11, 2010 – 4 Tevet 5771

A story. It once happened that while Rabbi Yehudah the Prince was delivering a lecture, he noticed a smell of garlic. Thereupon he said: "Let him who has eaten garlic go out." Rabbi Hiyya arose and left; then all the other disciples rose in turn and went out. In the morning Rabbi Shimon, the son of Rabbi Yehuda the Prince, met Rabbi Hiyya and asked him, "Was it you who caused annoyance (garlic) to my father yesterday?" "Heaven forbid that such a thing should happen in Israel," answered Rabbi Hiyya (Sanhedrin 11a), meaning that heaven forbid a person should be humiliated in public. Rabbi Hiyya got up so that no other individual would be embarrassed.

One of the things I am learning about as a rabbi is the power of words. Like any person, but especially as a rabbi, I have the opportunity to praise, and bless, or embarrass and shame. Not only do a rabbi's words sometimes have a particular power, but rabbis are also frequently in the position of speaking in public—we have many opportunities to bless or, if we are not careful, embarrass.

Recently, I embarrassed someone publicly, by not being careful with the way I said something. We've talked about it, and we are still on good terms. Needless to say, the importance of carefully weighing our words has been on my mind the last couple of weeks.

I want to look at *this topic* through the lens of two episodes in this week's parasha, Parashat Vayiggash.

Vayiggash is the climax of the Joseph narrative. Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, Jacob learns his son Joseph is still alive, and Jacob brings his family down to Egypt from Canaan.

The first episode I want to examine is Joseph's revealing his identity to his brothers. Judah, Joseph's brother, makes an impassioned plea to be imprisoned in place of youngest brother Benjamin, who has been framed for stealing Joseph's cup. Joseph can no longer control himself before all his attendants, and cries out asking for everyone but his brothers to leave the room.

The question is, why exactly did Joseph want to be left alone with his brothers? Why did he want no Egyptians there? Was he simply embarrassed, and did not want his servants to see him crying? Rashi has a different explanation. Rashi suggests that Joseph could not bear that the Egyptians standing by him would hear his brothers' humiliation when Joseph would reveal himself to them. Joseph did not want to embarrass his brothers in front of the Egyptians by making it known that these brothers had sold him into slavery.

Joseph, even in this most intense, emotional moment of revelation and reconciliation, is thinking of the feelings of others, of how what he and his brothers will say will be perceived by the Egyptians.

Joseph models for us a way to act. Even in the heat of the moment, we must still be careful and sensitive of the feelings of others, and must not say things in ways that will cause pain, no matter how unintentionally.

This is not easy to do, of course. But the text itself offers perhaps a hint of assistance. We are told that Joseph could not control himself. לא יכול יוסף להתאפק. The fact that the Torah tells us this suggests to me that Joseph was aware he was losing control, and before he completely lost his composure he took steps to protect his brothers from embarrassment. He was incredibly self-aware at this moment. We all lose our composure sometimes, even Joseph! The question is what do we do when we feel it happening—do we let it control us, or do we control it? For us to be able to speak carefully and appropriately under duress, we must be aware of the duress. Simply having in mind that this is a difficult moment can focus us on our words, and help us avoid saying something we will later regret.

If in the heat of the moment we should guard our tongues, all the more so when we have time to deliberate over how to have a difficult conversation. We all know the feeling—there's something we have to say to someone that we wish we could avoid bringing up, but we cannot. We search for the gentlest words. We delay and procrastinate. We pass the buck and try to get someone else to do it.

After the revelation that Joseph is alive, his brothers must return home to their father Jacob, tell him the news, and confess their crime. According to a midrash, a legend, the brothers were afraid to tell their father because they thought either he would not believe them, or he would be dangerously startled.

They decide to have Serach, the daughter of Asher, break the news. She is the only granddaughter of Jacob mentioned in the Torah, and she was known to be beautiful, wise, and skilled in playing the harp. They had her play the harp for Jacob, and sing, "Joseph, my uncle, lives. He rules over all of Egypt. He is not dead!" She repeated those words several times, and Jacob grew more and more happy, until the holy spirit was awakened in him, and he knew her words were true. Jacob, according to the legend, then blesses Serach, saying, "My daughter, may death never have power over you, for you revived my spirit." And so it was: Serach did not die; she entered Paradise alive."

In this situation, the brothers did find someone else to deliver the news, but only because they knew Serach could do it better than they could. Again, characters in the Torah are sensitive to the way particular words will be received.

Joseph tries to use privacy to protect his brothers' feelings. His brothers, through their niece Serach, use music and gentleness. Sometimes humor is helpful, if we are laughing with someone, and not at them.

Our tradition teaches that love unaccompanied by criticism is not love. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin adds that criticism unaccompanied by love will not help.

We all know how it feels to be given some bad news in an insensitive way, or to be corrected embarrassingly—we have all been the one who ate too much garlic. We all know what we would want someone to say to us, and how we would want it said. One way of loving others is to treat others the way we would want to be treated.

Let us have the self-control of Joseph to prevent ourselves from speaking in a way that embarrasses another person.

Let us have the sensitivity of the brothers to say the hard things that must be said, in ways that can be heard.

Let us have the courage of Rabbi Hiyya to prevent another's embarrassment by standing up and saying, "I ate the garlic."