

## Self-Compassion as a Parent: Yosef's Message to Yaakov

### Rabbi Maury Grebenau

Parshat Vayigash contains some of the greatest drama in the entire Torah. The exciting climax of Yosef's revelation to his brothers makes for an exciting parsha. Part of the aftermath of this development is when the brothers return to Yaakov with this news. The Torah's description (Bereshit 45:25-28) is as follows:

<p>So they went up from Egypt, and they came to the land of Canaan, to their father, Jacob.</p> <p>And they told him, saying, "Joseph is still alive," and [they told him] that he ruled over the entire land of Egypt, and his heart changed, for he did not believe them.</p> <p>And they told him all of Joseph's words that he had said to them, and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to carry him, and the spirit of their father Jacob was revived.</p> <p>And Israel said, "Enough! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die."</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">וַיַּעֲלוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֶל-יַעֲקֹב אָבִיהֶם: וַיִּגְדּוּ לוֹ לֵאמֹר עוֹד יוֹסֵף חַי וְכִי-הוּא מִשָּׁל בְּכָל-אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיִּפַּג לְבֹו כִי לֹא- הָאֵמִין לָהֶם: וַיַּדְּבְרוּ אֵלָיו אֶת כָּל-דִּבְרֵי יוֹסֵף אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵהֶם וַיֵּרָא אֶת-הָעֲגֹלוֹת אֲשֶׁר-שָׁלַח יוֹסֵף לְשֵׂאת אֹתוֹ וַתְּחִי רוּחַ יַעֲקֹב אָבִיהֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב עוֹד-יוֹסֵף בְּנִי חַי אֵלַי וְאָרְאֵנּוּ בְּטֶרֶם אָמוּת:</p>
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Yaakov goes from complete disbelief in what the brothers are saying to a revival of his spirit which quickly becomes a decision to take the trip to Egypt. What is behind this monumental shift in Yaakov's attitude? Rashi (27) quotes the Midrash that highlights the fact that Yaakov's noticing of the wagons is inserted between Yaakov's disbelief and his full acceptance of the news, implying that the wagons somehow contribute to this shift. The Midrash explains that the wagons (*agalot*) hints to the last part of the Torah that Yaakov and Yosef learned together, the parsha of *Eglah Arufa*. Rashi does not fully explain why this hint was so transformational for Yaakov.

When I was younger heard the explanation that Yaakov's concern was that Yosef as viceroy may not be the Yosef he wished for. Perhaps Yaakov was worried that Yosef was now an assimilated Egyptian and Yosef was messaging that he still held fast to what Yaakov has taught him. This makes sense<sup>1</sup> but it seems clear that Chazal picked *Eglah Arufa* as the medium to express this for a reason. It seems there must be more to the story than Yosef and Yaakov happened to be learning *Eglah Arufa*. What is the significance of the fact that this parsha specifically is what Yosef was messaging<sup>2</sup>?

If we understand a little more about *Eglah Arufah* I think we can see a message to Yaakov that can account for his abrupt change in attitude. The *Eglah Arufah* is brought by the Beit Din of the closest city when a murder victim is found. They declare that the murder is not their fault, "our hands did not shed this blood!" The Mishna (Sotah 45b) explains that this means the

<sup>1</sup> This approach fits well with Rashi's (Bereshit 47:31) explanation recording Yaakov's relief and thankfulness that his legacy would be carried on by all his children – *mitaso shleima*. Rambam (Hil Kriat Shema 1:4) says that our custom to say Baruch Shem Kevod... in Shema captures Yaakov's deathbed utterance upon hearing that all of his children were united in following his legacy.

<sup>2</sup> See Sifsei Chachamim who addresses this question

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community did their best when this person left their city – they escorted this person from the city in a safe way and provided them with food for the way<sup>3</sup>. Eglah Arufa is both about recognizing that we have real responsibility for those around us, even on a communal level, and also is a ceremony that absolves us of the guilt felt by matters that are out of our control. We should feel a true sense of responsibility for those around us and act on it but we also must forgive ourselves when tragedy is out of our control.

As a parent with children in the house who are rapidly reaching the age when they will no longer be in the house, I often look at my children and wonder if I could be doing more to help them forge relationships with one another and avoid some of the behavior I currently see. Will they fight like cats and dogs when they are adults? Ignore each other? Say cruel things and be jealous? Be too busy to share their lives with each other? As a parent, the sense of responsibility is the easier part and the ability to forgive ourselves if despite our best efforts things do not work out as we had envisioned is much more challenging.

The Ramban (Bereshit 45:27) says that Yaakov never knew the truth that the brothers sold Yosef<sup>4</sup>. Not everyone agrees with this assertion<sup>5</sup> but whether Yaakov knew the whole story or not, perhaps over the years Yaakov considered his own role in the “death” of Yosef. He had a lot of time to mourn over, not just Yosef, but also the broken relationship between the brothers that he no doubt noticed. Perhaps he wondered if the brothers did not do everything they could to save Yosef from the wild animal that was said to have devoured him. Perhaps Yaakov even suspected on some level that the story of a wild animal devouring Yosef was not as simple as portrayed. Maybe Yosef's message to Yaakov in reminding him of the lessons of Aglah Arufah was that Yaakov “did not spill this blood” and was not responsible for the fractured relationship that developed among the brothers.

Perhaps this is what Yaakov heard in Yosef's message that helped to shift his attitude. When he heard that Yosef was alive, he may have been flooded with these concerns and doubt, blaming himself for everything that transpired. When he saw Yosef's message of forgiveness he was able to embrace it and decided quickly that he needed to make the trip to Egypt to enjoy, finally, the sight of his children and grandchildren all together as a united family.

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<sup>3</sup> This statement is attributed to Rav Yehoshua ben Levi (Sotah 38b), he prefaces it by saying that Eglah Arufa is about miserliness.

<sup>4</sup> See the Daat Z'kaynim Bereshit 48:1 that Yosef avoided having excessive time with Yaakov once he came to Egypt to avoid his asking hard questions about what actually happened to Yosef. The Ohr HaChayim (Bereshit 45:26) also uses this idea to explain, in part, why Yosef never contacted Yaakov while he was in Egypt to let him know he was still alive, since this would implicate and embarrass the brothers.

<sup>5</sup> Rashi may be in this group. See Nachlat Yaakov quoted by Sifsei Chachamim (Bereshit 45:25)