

## Bringing meaning to life

*Parsha with Rabbi Benji Levy*

BERESHIT

NOACH

LECH LECHA

VAYERA

CHAYEI SARA

TOLDOT

VAYETZEI

VAYISHLACH

VAYESHEV

MIKETZ

VAYIGASH

VAYECHI

# VAYIGASH

## THE REALITY OF PERCEPTION

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**Siblings** often claim to have an intrinsic connection. Although they had been apart from each other for many years, 'Joseph recognised his brothers, but they did not recognise him.'<sup>1</sup> This seems plausible since their last memory of Joseph was of a beardless youth and at this stage he has matured and grown a beard.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore he uses a translator to speak to them,<sup>3</sup> hiding his knowledge of Hebrew, he dresses in different materials and jewellery and Pharaoh has changed his name from Joseph to Tzafnat Paneach.<sup>4</sup> However, surely his beard, language, clothing and name are all superficial indicators?

**Could it really be that these wise heads of tribes were unable to perceive their brother behind these mere externalities?**

**There** are numerous hints that the viceroy of Egypt treats his brothers differently to others whom he would ordinarily encounter in the same setting. He accuses them of being spies, simply because they enter the city from different gates.<sup>5</sup> He sends them home out of concern for their families, he 'gives them provisions for the journey'<sup>6</sup>, and he hosts them in his house for a private meal. Surely, if they were suspected of espionage, one would not expect for them to be wined and dined in the home of the viceroy of Egypt. There are a number of other incidents that are strange to say the least. One stark example is Joseph's hinting of his intimate knowledge of their upbringing that no outsider could have known.<sup>7</sup> And yet with all these clues, the brothers do not, even for a moment, entertain the notion that perhaps the viceroy is not who he seems to be.

When Joseph finally reveals his identity, the brothers still do not seem to understand until he proves it to them.<sup>8</sup> What is so difficult for them to understand? Why is it so difficult for the brothers to recognise Joseph?

**Perhaps** the answer relates to simple psychology. The brothers cannot recognise Joseph as the viceroy of Egypt because the brothers do not want to recognise Joseph as the viceroy of Egypt.

**Long** before Joseph made a name for himself, 'his brothers were jealous of him.'<sup>9</sup> They ridicule his dreams and desire his demise.<sup>10</sup> Rashi explains that they lose their sense of brotherhood with respect to him.<sup>11</sup> From the moment they throw him into a pit as an insignificant slave, that is what he becomes in their minds.

## For years after their separation from Joseph, he remains a worthless dreamer in their minds.

It is through this lens that they continue to perceive him. Thus, upon their eventual reunion, the Joseph before their eyes does not match their preconceived notions of him. This cognitive dissonance prevents the brothers from understanding who Joseph is despite the many hints, his physical presence, the proof and his explicit declaration.

**When** one believes something strongly enough and desires it to be fact, one can constantly reiterate that belief to the point that it indeed becomes fact in one's mind. There have been criminals who were proven guilty but who desire their innocence so much so that they come to truly believe in it.

## The mind is so strong that it can even fool itself.

There are countless examples throughout history whereby a supposition can be so powerful that it defies and replaces logic. Personal perception can become personal reality and no matter how much this seems to contradict fact; it can be rationalised to almost become actuality. This finds expression in subtler everyday scenarios as well, particularly with regard to how we view and treat ourselves and people around us.



The Talmud explains the term ‘foolishness’ in the proverb, ‘the foolishness of man corrupts his ways’<sup>12</sup> as referring to Joseph’s brothers.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this is teaching a lesson for life. There is a danger in basing one’s actions purely on one’s own subjective worldview. Rather, one should continuously review one’s beliefs, analyse, check and recheck them, to ensure they are truthful. In contrast to Joseph’s brothers, it is incumbent upon us to search for truth, to be ready to admit a mistake and to accept sincerity rather than being blinded by bias and conviction alone. Through this approach, rather than being trapped by a perception of falsehood and prejudice, we may succeed in opening ourselves to a reality of truth.

### Notes

1 Genesis 42:8.

2 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketubot 27b; Tractate Yevamot 88a; Genesis Rabba 91:7.

3 Genesis 42:23.

4 Genesis 41:42-45.

5 Genesis 42:9.

6 Genesis 42:25.

7 Genesis Rabba 91:10.

8 Genesis Rabba 93:8.

9 Genesis 37:11.

10 Genesis 37:20.

11 Rashi on Genesis 37:17.

12 Proverbs 19:3.

13 Babylonian Talmud,

Tractate Taanit 9a.

**Parasha Fact:** Vayechi meaning ‘and he lived’, is one of the three main parshiyot that contains a main protagonist dying as a significant feature. The title of all three of these parshiyot (the other two being Chayei Sarah and V’Zot Habracha) focus on life, suggesting importance of celebrating life rather than focusing on death.

### Next Week in Vayechi

*We often automatically assume that the purpose of a commandment is either to strengthen our relationship with God or for the benefit of the subject of our good deed. Less focus is given to the common thread underlying all the commandments – that of the indelible imprint that every good deed, leaves on the soul of the one performing it. This reflexive impact of the commandments is alluded to by Joseph in his final encounter with his elderly father, to whom he lowers his head in respect despite the fact that his father’s eyes have failed him and he therefore cannot see Joseph’s final act of respect towards him.*