

# Parashat Vayigash

## Joseph's Wagons

Let us set the scene. Yoseph has revealed his true identity to his brothers. The family is reunited. Joseph sends his brothers back to Canaan to bring the good tidings to their father:

"And they told him, 'Joseph is still alive, and he is ruler over the whole land of Egypt.' His heart went numb, for he did not believe them. But when they recounted all the Joseph had said to them, and he saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to transport him, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. Israel said, 'So much! My son Joseph is still alive! I will go and see him before I die.'" (45:26-27)

Yaakov takes some time to react to the shocking news. At the beginning, it all seems too much to be believed. Joseph is alive? And how could he be the ruler of all Egypt? Yaakov didn't believe the news. And I wonder how many people would believe such an incredulous story. It is something out of the world of fairy tales to imagine that a son presumed dead is in fact the head of state of a superpower republic. The truth sinks in slowly. The passuk here records two stages in Yaakov's acceptance of Yoseph's current situation. First: "...they recounted all the Joseph had said to them." And second: "Yaakov saw the wagons that Yoseph had sent in order to transport the family to Egypt."

The first factor is clear. Obviously, as the brothers recount the story, and the meeting with Joseph, as they add facts and experiences, Yaakov begins to see the impossible as possible and then he begins to accept the strange truth of the story. But the second factor that tips the balance for Yaakov is when he sees the carriages sent by Yoseph. What was special about these carriages, these wagons? How did these vehicles convince Yaakov?

I believe that the answer is pretty evident in the pesukim themselves. The text described the sending of the wagons a few lines earlier:

"The news reached Pharaoh's palace: 'Joseph's brothers have come.' ...And Pharaoh said to Joseph ...'Take your father and his household and come to me; I will give you the best of the land of Egypt and you shall live off the fat of the land. You have your command, do the following: **Take from the land of Egypt wagons** for your children and your wives, and bring your father here. And never mind your belongings, for the best of the land of Egypt shall be yours. The sons of Israel did so; Joseph gave them wagons as Pharaoh had commanded, and he supplied them with provisions for the journey..." (45:16-20)

These are not simple wagons. These wagons belong to the Egyptian government. (- "Take **from the Land of Egypt!**") When Yaakov sees the transportation emblazoned with Pharaoh's royal insignia, he understands that vehicles of this sort cannot be dispatched in the absence of a royal command.

No one could export a carriage from Egypt without Pharaoh's command. (Rashbam)

The sight of these royal wagons proves the veracity the entire story. Only a royal Egyptian personality could be behind this. Yaakov is convinced

### THE MIDRASHIC PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

I would like to quote a famous Midrash that has been popularized by the commentary of Rashi<sup>2</sup>:

"R. Levi said in the name of R. Yochanan bar Shaul. He (Joseph) said to them (his brothers): If he (my father) believes you, then all is good. If he fails to believe you, then tell him that at the moment when I departed from him, was I not discussing the *Parsha* of *Egla Arufa*? Hence it says: 'He saw the wagons (*agalot*) that Yoseph had sent... and Yaakov's spirit was revived.'" (Bereshit Rabba 94:3)

Now quite clearly, this Midrash is based upon a word-play. The Hebrew word, *Agala* – a wagon, sounds like *Eglah* – a heifer and hence the connection<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, there is an additional textual nuance that prompts the Midrash. The Torah says that Yaakov saw the wagons "that Yoseph had sent." But in fact Yoseph had not sent these wagons; they were the royal property of Pharaoh and it was Pharaoh who had instructed Yoseph to send them<sup>4</sup>. Why would the text now depict them as

<sup>1</sup> For your convenience, here are the full texts in Hebrew:

**בראשית רבה פרשה צד:ג** ויעלו ממצרים ויגידו לו לאמר עוד יוסף חי ויפג לבו, תני ר' חייא מה טיבו של בדאי הזה אפילו אומר דברים של אמת אין מאמינים אותו, וירא את העגלות, אותן עגלות ששלח פרעה לשאת אותו היתה עבודת כוכבים חקוקה עליהם עמד יהודה ושרפן, למד הוא השבט להיות שורף עבודת כוכבים, ר' לוי בשם ר' יוחנן בר שאול אמר להם אם יאמין לכם הרי מוטב ואם לאו אתם אומרים לו בשעה שפרשתי ממך לא בפרשת עגלה ערופה הייתי עוסק, הה"ד וירא את העגלות ותחי רוח, ויאמר ישראל רב, רב כחו של יוסף בני שכמה צרות הגיעוהו ועדיין הוא עומד בצדקו הרבה ממני שחטאתי שאמרתי (ישעיה מ) נסתרה דרכי מה, ובטוח אני שיש לי במה רב טובך.

**בראשית רבה פרשה צה:ד** ואת יהודה שלח לפניו, ר' חנינא בריה דרבי אחא ורבי חנינא, חד אמר להתקין לו בית דירה, וחד אמר להתקין לו בית ועד שיהא מורה בו דברי תורה ושיהיו השבטים לומדים בו, תדע לך שהוא כן, כיון שהלך לו יוסף מאצלו היה יודע באיזה פרק פירש ממנו שהיה משנה אותו, כיון שבאו אחי יוסף אצלו ואמרו לו עוד יוסף חי ויפג לבו מזכר באיזה פרק פירש הימנו, ואמר בלבו יודע אני שבפרק עגלה ערופה פירש ממני יוסף, אמר להם אם אתם יודעים באיזה פרק פירש ממני אני מאמין לכם, אף יוסף היה יודע באיזה פרק פירש הימנו, מה עשה יוסף נתן להם עגלות שנא' (בראשית מה) ויתן להם יוסף עגלות על פי פרעה, ללמדך שבכל מקום שהיה יעקב יושב היה עוסק בתורה כשם שהיו אבותיו

<sup>2</sup> Rashi to 45:27

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the commentary of the RaDa"l (Rav David Luria) on *Midrash Rabba* points out that wagons are pulled by *Eglot* – Oxen in the *Parsha* of the *Nesiim* – *Bamidbar* 7:3 and hence the wagons might have been pulled by an *Eglah* as well!

<sup>4</sup> Later in the story as well, they are called Pharaoh's wagons. See 46:5.

the wagons that Yoseph had sent<sup>5</sup>? Apparently, the text is informing us that Yoseph had done something in order to express his "ownership" of these wagons, to subtly transform this journey into his own personal mission.

Furthermore, the verse notes that the sight of these wagons engendered the change in Yaakov, such that that they "revived Jacob's spirit." How did they have so dramatic an effect? But as the Midrash informs us, these wagons bear an encrypted message from Yoseph to Yaakov. In contrast to the Peshat<sup>6</sup>, the Midrash implies that wagons sent by Pharaoh would have failed to impress Yaakov. Yaakov sought a personal (spiritual) signal from his son, Yoseph. The wagons were this "secret code" that made the difference.

## THE PERSISTENCE OF TORAH

Midrash is a rich text and if we probe a little deeper we shall discover that Chazal are trying to tell us something regarding the content of the message that Yoseph was sending. Was Joseph merely trying to communicate by informing his father regarding the Torah he had learned all those years back – their last chevruta? Was it just a foolproof identification method<sup>7</sup>, or was there something more?

The continuation of the Midrashic section quoted above gives a specific "spin" that relates to the place of Torah in the family of Yaakov, and to the righteousness of Yoseph. Here is the continuation of the Midrash that we quoted earlier:

"Israel said, 'So much (*rav*)! My son Joseph is still alive! Great (*rav*) is the power of my son Yoseph, for so many tribulations befell him, **and yet he still retains his righteousness.**"

Another Midrash expresses a variation on this theme:

"He (Yaakov) sent Yehuda ahead of him to Joseph, to point the way for him to Goshen (46:28): R' Hanina the son of Rav Acha and R' Chanina (argued about this verse.) One said – he sent him to organize living accommodation. The other said – **he sent him to establish a House of Study** in which he could teach Torah and where the tribes (sons of Jacob) could learn. This is indeed the case for when Joseph left (Yaakov) **he knew with which chapter (of Torah) he separated from him, and he**

<sup>5</sup> The Midrash raises another fascinating suggestion to this problem. The Midrash says that Pharaoh's wagons were burnt by Yehuda. And hence Yoseph had to send new ones. Hence, these were, in fact, Yoseph's wagons. *אותן עגלות ששלח פרעה*, *אותן עגלות ששלח פרעה*. This of course is not concordant with the peshat – see footnote 4 – but I believe it contains a fascinating philosophical difference between Yehuda and Yoseph. In the Midrash Yehuda is depicted as burning the wagons because they have images of Avoda Zara engraved upon them. The Midrash depicts Yehuda as absolutely intolerant of and militant towards Egyptian culture. This, of course is in direct contrast to Yoseph who has learned to tolerate even the Egyptian idolatry and to somehow live alongside it. This classic contrast is well expressed in Rav Kook's "hesped" for Herzl: Hamisped BiYerushalayim.

<sup>6</sup> The Rashbam (45:27) has to stretch things here as he adds in "The wagon's that Joseph sent": **by order of Pharaoh**. But of course it could have written "the wagons that Pharaoh sent!" were the emphasis to have been the royal commission of these carriages.

<sup>7</sup> The Midrash BR 94:3 reads: "...He (Joseph) said to them (his brothers): **If he (my father) believes you**, ... **If he fails to believe you**" in other words, it was directed solely as a proof.

**reviewed it.** When Joseph's brothers came to (Yaakov) ... he said to himself: I know that at the chapter of *eglah arufa* I left Yoseph...What did Yoseph do? He gave them wagons (*agalot*) ... to teach you that wherever Yaakov was, he would sit and study Torah."

Admittedly, this text seems to focus more upon Jacob than on Joseph, but in the Midrashic mindset here, the vital thrust of the story demonstrates the centrality of Torah in a Jewish identity. Yaakov studied Torah at all times. He would converse in Torah matters with his children. Both Yaakov and Yoseph always remembered their last Torah conversation. Yoseph wished to assure his father that he had not survived merely physically but that he "still retained his righteousness." He therefore informed his father that his Torah study was still fresh in his mind. He was still committed to it. Maybe we can explain the phrase: "And Yaakov's spirit was revived." In the view of these Midrashim, Yaakov could rejoin with Yoseph in person, and yet that was not sufficient. The question that irked Yaakov concerned Yoseph's spirit. Physically, Yoseph is intact. Was he spiritually intact? The wagons informed his father quite clearly that Yoseph had retained his spiritual orientation. He has persisted against all odds in his commitment to Torah. Now Yaakov's spirit, in particular, could be revived!

The Talmud states: "A person should always depart from a friend with words of Halakha, because through them he will remember him."<sup>8</sup> Torah is the basis of human relationships, the basis of the lives of the Avot. Despite years of exile and estrangement, nothing could bind Yaakov and Yoseph more than Torah learning!.

## EGLAH ARUFA

Reading the section above, we feel that this approach is heavily homiletic in nature. It seems to impose a new layer upon the Biblical storyline: the ideology of a life based in Torah here. Where is the indication in the text that the Yaakov-Yoseph link was based upon Torah-study? But beyond this problem, the Midrashic conclusion ignores half the story. We never understand why *Eglah Arufa* is singled out in particular. What made that parsha poignant to the moment in which Joseph said goodbye to his father?

Let us look at the parsha in the Torah, and things might become self-evident. The parsha of Eglah Arufa may be found in Devarim ch.21:1-9. It describes a situation in which a corpse is found,

"a slain person ... lying in the field; it is not known who has killed him."

In such a case, the Torah prescribes a powerful ceremony. The elders of the city, which is the closest to the crime scene, take a young heifer to a barren valley. There, they break the animal's neck. Then,

"...All the elders of the city nearest to the scene of the crime shall wash their hands over the beheaded heifer...and shall say, 'Our hands have not shed this blood, nor have our eyes seen it. Forgive O Lord, your people Israel who you have redeemed and do not let innocent blood to remain in the midst of your people, Israel."

<sup>8</sup> Berachot 31a

Rashi there<sup>9</sup> says that the elders are culpable because they failed to properly care for a visitor to their town. The Mitzva of accompaniment - that a person should be escorted as they leave - is singled out for particular attention. The elders are obviously not implicated in murderous act, and yet they are in some manner implicated because they allowed a situation in which strangers felt abandoned. Unaccompanied by the locals, everyone understood that a random traveler would feel and be viewed as more vulnerable.

Now, the Rabbis frequently saw a subtext beneath the "revealed" text and they expressed these textual undercurrents in the genre of Midrash. When did Yaakov and Yoseph apparently study this topic? Just before they said goodbye, before Yoseph was sold to slavery! Let us remember the scene:

"And he sent him from the valley of Hevron and he set off for Sh'chem." (Bereshit 37:14)

It would appear that Yaakov accompanied Yoseph outside the city limits<sup>10</sup>. When challenged by Yoseph about this, he responded that a person should always be accompanied out of the town to ensure their safety etc. How ironic then, that Joseph finds himself assailed and almost killed on this particular mission. The engagement in the discussion of safe journeys and the potential murder as one wanders the countryside is a precise reflection of what happened to Yoseph.

Of course, Yoseph is not murdered, and yet, Yoseph's biography is the biography of the *Egla Arufa*!

#### THE MESSAGE. TWO OPTIONS.

The Midrash says that as Yoseph contacts his father for the first time in 22 years, he is sending him a message that relates to *Egla Arufa*. What could this message be?

One approach would be a mood of accusation, expressive of years of pent-up anger:

"When Joseph tells his brothers to mention to Jacob that they were "learning" the laws of *egla arufa* at the time of Joseph's disappearance, we may surmise that he is rebuking his father and justifying his silence (of 22 years, not initiating contact with his family.) Didn't you send me to the brothers knowing the dangers involved? Weren't you aware of the hatred between us? ...And when I disappeared in the rough field, did you do anything? Did you investigate? Did you ask forgiveness for letting me go without escort?" (Prof. Michael Rosenak. Tree of Life, Tree of Knowledge pg. 278)

Now, of course, Yoseph did not say these things to his father. The Rabbis of the Midrash are saying these things for him! But we do wonder whether Yoseph ever raised the questions of culpability. Furthermore, even if Joseph never raised the issue, the Rabbis on this midrash feel obligated to probe the ethical implications of this near-murder in the covenantal family. How

was such a heinous act possible in Yaakov's family? What moral lapse gave rise to the twisted thought of murdering Yoseph?

But a second, and reverse option is also a possibility. After all, the *Egla Arufa* ceremony asks God to forgive the people, for in truth, they **do not bear the guilt** of what has happened to the victim.

This is precisely Yoseph's message from the moment he re-meets his brothers:

"Do not be upset... for God sent me before you." (44:5)

"You did not send me here; it was God." (44:8)

**The brothers are not guilty.** Yoseph expresses this time and time again. But how will he tell his father that nobody is guilty for the strange events that lead to his disappearance? He transmits a message to his father through a subtle means. By invoking *Egla Arufa*, he says to his father, I do not wish to divulge the circumstances in which I went missing. Let us simply say that nobody bears the guilt. God has atoned for it all, because, after all, it is all part of His plan.

Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>9</sup> 21:7 "Would anyone expect that the elders are guilty of murder? But rather they declare that we did not see him - we did not knowingly allow him to leave without food and without an escort."

<sup>10</sup> Rashi there talks about the fact that Hebron is on a hill, whereas Yaakov left him in the valley. The obvious conclusion is that Yaakov accompanied him some way out of the town, into the valley. See Rav Yaakov Medan's creative article: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha65/09-65vayeshev.htm>