

Vayiggash 11-12-2010

Vayiggash eilav Yehudah. “And Judah approached *menacingly*.” That is the import of that verb in this context. How otherwise did a lowly foreigner, under suspicion of sedition and (in respect of his young brother) theft of royal property, make so bold as to ‘step forward’ and address the Egyptian viceroy and his own prosecutor in such a confident and impudent a manner? Indeed, the Midrash (as quoted by Rashi), on the phrase *ki chamokh kefar’oh*, ‘For you are like Pharaoh’ (44:18), reveals its implication thus: ‘If you continue to provoke me, I will slay you and your master.’

But this Midrash is problematic, for, given Judah’s impossible situation as an unarmed individual, surrounded by Egyptian guards, how could he possibly have deigned to threaten Joseph in this way without appearing ridiculous and without incurring even further the latter’s ire? Judah was no fool. He must have appreciated the hopelessness of his situation and how adopting such an aggressive attitude would only serve to make matters worse!

Perhaps we can justify this Midrash by assuming that Judah, exactly like Joseph at that time, had suddenly developed a sixth sense that the portent of those long- passed but never-forgotten dreams that had so angered and haunted the family for so long - of Joseph achieving authority and of them all ‘coming’ (37:10) to bow before him - was about to be realised. They had indeed already come and bowed before this Viceroy who seemed to be taking an inordinate interest in them. Furthermore, incomprehensively, he had taken an even deeper interest in their father, to the extent that the very first question on their return to buy corn was, ‘How is your aged father, of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?’ (43:27). Knowing the bond between Joseph and his father, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the suspicion was now dawning on Judah regarding the identity of the Viceroy. This might well have emboldened him to test it on the latter, knowing that their safety had to be guaranteed if Joseph ever wanted his destiny to unravel.

This would explain why Judah begins his defence by referring to his aged father (v. 19) and his love for his youngest child (v. 20), the father’s expressed anguish at the loss of Joseph, his fear for Benjamin’s safety (vv.27-30) and his own trepidation at returning home to his father without Benjamin (v.34). Judah played ‘the aged vulnerable dad’ card; and it had the desired effect. Judah brilliantly unmasked the Egyptian viceroy.