

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Limmud UK: Bringing the Branch of America to the Branch of Britain

Rabbi Asher Lopatin



In this week's *parasha* we find the denouement of the story of Joseph and his brothers. As exciting as their reunion is, the *haftara* holds the key to the

reunification of the People of Israel and Judah many years later in Yechezkel's powerful merging of two actual branches with the names Yehudah and Yosef written upon them (Yechezkel, 37:15–20). As a metaphor, this symbolic merging is relevant for all ages: Our work as committed, passionate Jews is to create unity through our tradition, bringing all Jews together so that we can rebuild this shattered world in unison with the strength of Yaakov, the angel fighter.

As a Yeshiva, YCT is a natural center of leadership for the Jewish community, so it is important that we think big about our place in this process. There are Jews all over the world that we strive to connect to, learning with and from them. We have to follow Yechezkel's model, and bring the different branches of our people together. Members of YCT's faculty and I have visited Israel to connect with different *yeshivot* and other institutions of learning. We have spoken at Beit Hillel, ITIM, and other organizations and communities (including Kehillat Be'erot in Be'er Sheva!) that are dedicated to connecting with a broad segment of the Israeli population. Several Israeli students currently attend YCT as a result of our efforts to be part of the Israel Torah environment.

Over the years we have attracted several students from England, and we are eager to continue this trend. Anglo-Jewry has been an important center of *Torah im Derech Eretz* (Torah in the way of the world) for many decades, and it is crucial for YCT to maintain a strong British connection in our mission to rejuvenate and reinvigorate Modern Orthodoxy. Earlier this year I presented at a London conference, organized by the enterprising David Chait, called Judaism – Learn Behind

the Labels. It is our intention to join other organizations in co-sponsoring this event in 2015. In the meantime, Rav Nati Helfgot and I will participate in Limmud UK this coming week. I look forward to leading sessions with topics ranging from an examination of sunrise and sunset (Nothing is Obvious in Our Tradition) to Jewish medical ethics (Brain Dead vs. Heart Dead). I look equally forward to sitting on two panels, one of which is, "Does Modern Orthodoxy Have a Future?" (My answer will clearly be, "Yes!") As an American, I am travelling to the University of Warwick in Coventry, England, to learn, share, and get inspiration from the 2,000 people who will descend upon the granddaddy of all Limmuds, but I also go there to spread the YCT message of a Modern Orthodoxy that is open and eager to connect to the entire world.

As we have celebrated the holiday of the *menorah*, with its branches reaching out to touch the world around us, spreading the light of Torah, and as we stand inspired by Yosef and Yechezkel, who understood that bringing disparate branches together is the Godly work that we are commanded to do, I am excited that YCT can be an important part of this effort. With Hashem's help Modern Orthodoxy will continue in the tradition of our *parasha* and *haftara*, showing that the more connected the Jewish people are the stronger we become, wherever in God's world we might live.

FROM THE ROSH HaYESHIVA

The Sounds of Silence Rabbi Dov Linzer



Silence is the last word one would think to use to characterize the climax of the story of Yosef and his brothers. Indeed, our *parasha* opens with Yehudah's heartfelt and impassioned plea to Yosef to free Binyamin. These words are so powerful in conveying Yehudah's unflinching loyalty to Binyamin and the anguish of his father, Yaakov, that Yosef can no longer contain himself, his emotions burst forth, and he reveals himself to his brothers. And if Yehudah's words can stir powerful, positive emotions, Yosef's words have the power to calm turbulent, potentially destructive ones: "Now, do not be anguished, and do not reproach yourselves that you have sold me here, for it is to be a source of life that God has sent me ahead of you" (Breishit, 45:4).

Even as the story reaches its *dénouement* there is much talking: talking of how to report back to Yaakov about what has happened, talking about how the land of Egypt is open to Yaakov and his family and how they should arrange their emigration from Canaan, talking to Yaakov about what has happened, Yaakov's exclamation of wonderment at the news of Yosef, God's talking to Yaakov before he leaves Canaan, Yosef's talking to his brothers to prepare them for their meeting with Pharaoh, Pharaoh's talking to the brothers, Pharaoh's talking to Yaakov, and finally Yaakov's blessing of Pharaoh. There is indeed much talking in this *parasha*. But in the midst of all this talking and the beehive of activity that surrounds it, there is a profound, poignant moment of silence:

And Yisrael said to Yosef, "I can now die, after that I have seen your face, that you are still alive."

And Yosef said to his brothers and to his father's household, "I will go up and report to Pharaoh, and I will tell him, 'My brothers and my father's household from the Land of Canaan have come to me'" (46:30-31).

What just happened here? Yaakov and Yosef meet after a twenty-two-year separation, Yaakov having believed Yosef to be dead but perhaps not so sure, perhaps suspecting that the brothers had something to do with the whole thing. And Yosef wondering who knows

what... Perhaps thinking that his father didn't care that he was gone, perhaps suspecting that his father was unconcerned with the dangers that had befallen him, or perhaps even believing that his father had conspired by sending him to his brothers when they were shepherding, knowing how much they hated him. But even if these troubling thoughts were not kept at bay, after hearing Yehudah's passionate speech Yosef certainly knew how bereaved his father now felt and how his absence had taken such a serious toll on Yaakov.

And now, after these long twenty-two years, they finally reconcile, and Yaakov lets forth an exclamation of joy, joy tinged with his past suffering, but joy nevertheless. And then what? Silence. Yosef does not respond. He says not one word to his father. Or rather, not silence, but a lot of irrelevant talking. Talking to the wrong people: to his brothers and his father's household but not to his father. And talking about the wrong things: "Oh, let's go tell Pharaoh that you are here." The abrupt transition in these two verses is the conversational equivalent of, "Great to see you, Dad. Oh, look at the time. Gotta go." A lot of talking and a lot of business that hold a profound silence. No one is talking about what needs to be talked about. Not just, "I missed you so much. I can't believe we are together again," but also, "What really happened that day, twenty-two years ago?" "Why did you send me to check on my brothers, knowing how much they hated me?" What is instead being said is: "No, we'll talk about that later. There is too much to do now, too much other talking that needs to take place."

Simon and Garfunkel said it best:

People talking without speaking...

And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence.

"Fools" said I, "You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows."

The impassioned, heart-wrenching communication at the beginning of the *parasha* is replaced by a lot of pragmatic, businesslike talking at the end. The unspoken words continue to hover in the background. The silence grows like a cancer, eating away at Yosef and Yaakov from the inside, continuing to fester, preventing them from bringing these difficult issues to the surface so that they can be dealt with and resolved.

YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

And the silence also grows like a wall to divide Yaakov and Yosef. It prevents them from ever truly connecting again on a deep, personal level. Yosef is too busy to talk to his father when he arrives and remains too busy to talk to his father throughout the rest of his life. So much so that when Yaakov finally speaks to Yosef again, it is at the end of Yaakov's life, on his deathbed, and it is for the very practical purpose of arranging for his own burial. During the exchange we find out that they have communicated so little that Yaakov does not even know his own grandchildren. He knows about them, but he does not recognize them: "And Yisrael saw the sons of Yosef, and he said, 'Who are these?' And Yosef said to his father, 'They are my sons'" (48:8-9). Because Yaakov and Yosef are not able to talk about what needs to be talked about, they wind up talking about very little, or at least very little that really matters.

There is, finally, one moment when the silence is broken. But by then it is too late. For when Yaakov dies, Yosef's brothers grow fearful about how Yosef will now treat them: "And the brothers of Yosef saw that their father had died, and they said, 'Perhaps Yosef will now nurse his hatred against us, and return to us all the evil that we have done to him'" (50:15). So what did they do? They invented a conversation that never happened:

And they commanded that Yosef be told, "Your father commanded, before his death, saying: 'So shall you say to Yosef: Please forgive the iniquity of your brothers, and their trespass, for they have committed evil against you.' So now, please forgive the sin of the servants of your father's God."

And Yosef wept when they spoke to him (50:16-17).

Why did Yosef weep? Perhaps because they thought ill of him or suspected that he could still be harboring resentment and ill will about what had happened oh so many years ago, or perhaps because it pained him to see his brothers so anguished. But I believe he wept for a different reason. He wept because he realized that his father never said – never could have said – such a thing. His father had never and would never break the implicit pact of silence around these matters. He wept because what was said after his father's death – what had needed to be said for so long – was never said in his father's life.

He wept for Yaakov, for Yaakov died having never had a chance to talk about what was eating away at him – his suspicions about Yosef's brothers and what they might have done – and he went to his grave with this

cancer inside him. And he wept for himself, for never having been able to bring himself to talk about his own suspicions, his own doubts, to his father. For never having been able to bring up all the messiness so that it could be expelled and a true relationship reestablished.

And he wept for his brothers. For his brothers who could not talk to him about these things before. For his brothers who even now could not talk to him about their case directly, having to send someone to present it in their stead. For his brothers who still could not talk about these things in their own voice, having to attribute them to their father Yaakov.

And perhaps he wept for his own silencing of his brothers. For the fact that he was so quick to forgive them when he first revealed himself to them, that he did not give them a chance to talk about their guilt, about their remorse. Here was a time when he needed to be silent so that others could be heard. To be forgiven before asking for forgiveness is a blessing, but it is also a curse. It silences voices that need to be heard. It prevents true healing from taking place.

We know well the power of speech. We know how words can kill and how words can heal. We also must know the power of silence. Silence can kill – kill a relationship, kill a friendship, kill a marriage. But silence can also heal. A healing silence is one that is there not to cover up, avoid, or distract, but to make space, to listen, to open up, to allow another in, to allow another to speak. That is a silence that can give life. That is a silence that is a blessing to the soul: "There is a time to be silent, and a time to talk" (Kohelet, 3:7). Let us always know which is which so that both our talking and our silence bring with them life and healing to ourselves and to others.

GUEST D'VAR TORAH

On Parashat Vayigash

Andrew Scheer (YCT '15)



What does it mean to be alive? Can someone be physically awake and breathing but not living? Alternatively, can someone be long passed but alive in our memories? We often feel as if we're going through the motions, letting life pass us by, killing time. At those times we are most certainly among the living, but we are not alive in the fullest sense of the word. Queen Elizabeth I expressed a similar idea with her last words in 1603: "All of my possessions for a moment of time." We know how valuable time is, but we have a hard time quantifying it until external factors alert us that our time here on earth is limited and precious.

Three times in Parashat Vayigash, we read the word *chai* – alive. We read Yosef's question, "Is my father still alive?" We read Yaakov's incredulous response to his sons, "Yosef is alive!" The Kli Yakar, the Rabbi of Prague for much of the sixteenth century, asked a question on 45:3: "Why does Yosef ask, 'Is my father still alive?'" Yehuda had just finished his plea to release Binyamin so that their father should not die from the hurt losing Binyamin would cause Yaakov. Yosef must have known his father was still alive!" The Kli Yakar answers, "Yosef's choice of words, asking not 'is our father still alive' but 'is my father still alive,' was very deliberate." Yosef was pointing out the contradiction of the brothers caring about their father now but not when they threw Yosef into the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites. Yosef is asking the brothers, "Where was your compassion then for our father then? You showed Yaakov no compassion, no care, when you threw me into that pit and sold me to the Ishmaelites. You cared not that he would mourn me all the days of his life, and therefore I ask, is my father still alive? Because the father you've been living with since my departure is not the same person as before."

We see the proof of Yaakov's morose existence in 47:7–9. Yosef takes his father to meet Pharaoh. Pharaoh asks, "How many are the days and years of your life?" Yaakov answers, "I am 130 years old. Short and bitter have been the days of my life." Even at this time in the Torah, living to 130 was considered a long, full life. So why does Yaakov answer so negatively? Ramban answers that Yaakov never had a youth. Old

age was thrust upon him when his mother Rivka forced him to deceive Yitzchak and take Esav's blessing. This led Yaakov to run away to Laban, where he toiled for fourteen years. And then finally, when he was *vayeshev*, when he had settled with his family, his most cherished son, Yosef, was taken away and presumed dead. Yaakov is telling Pharaoh, "You asked me about the number of the years of my life. The quantity is irrelevant. It is not the years in life that matter; it is the life in your years."

Two verses later we read, "Yosef settled his father and his brothers into the best part of the land of Egypt." He reassures his father, "We're never going to be apart again. We can finally live as one family and try to reclaim as much of the time we lost as possible. Hopefully we can live free from the purposeless squabbling and jealousy that has robbed so much life from our years."

When we read these stories and think of our own lives, are the struggles and challenges really all that different now than they were in the time of Yaakov and his sons? We see a family consumed by infighting, all the sons competing for the attention of their father. One might say that, today, kids don't call their parents enough, but at the end of the day we all want that same thing, to love and to be loved. It is this that gives us life.

So much of this can be accomplished just by being there for one another. I can still remember my father, a very busy doctor in private practice on Long Island, finding a way to show up at one of my high school hockey games with very little notice. We didn't get a chance to speak before or after the game, but I can't describe how happy his presence made me feel when I looked up and saw him sitting in the stands next to my mother. Before I went to Rikers Island Correctional Facility to lead High Holiday services for the inmates there, I struggled with what to say in that context. After the services, none of the prisoners thanked me for my words. They thanked me for just being there, for my presence. When Yaakov sees Yosef again, they don't exchange any words at first. Yosef runs to Yaakov, they embrace, weep, and cry. No words needed to be said. The opportunity to be together, to spend time together, is what they were rejoicing over. If we want to bring life to our years, there is no better place to start than by spending quality time with loved ones and friends, by learning how to transcend petty jealousies and fights so that we can truly be present for others and so that others can be present for us.