



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Vayigash

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December 19, 2015

Vayigash

**Life Lessons From Camels**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## **ABSTRACT**

An Arabian insight: “Trust in Allah, but tie up your camel.”

An Iranian insight: “A camel does not drink with a spoon.”

A Jewish insight: “The camel, or *gamal*, hints at *gemilat chassadim*, helping others and perpetuating kindness.”

A cryptic passage from the Talmud states that dreaming of camels connotes a decree of death, but also the salvation from said decree.

Cryptic indeed.

The Talmud bases this statement on a verse from our Torah portion: “*I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will elevate you, also bring you up.*”

Don’t you know, this verse contains the answer to the world’s problems ... and it arrives on the symbolic back of the camel. For, as we shall see, these humpbacked creatures have something vital to teach us all.

## LIFE LESSONS FROM CAMELS

### 1. A Nod to the Camel (Joke 1)

Ahmed and Mahmud are bored, sipping muddy Turkish coffee at the door of their tent. Ahmed says to Mahmud, "See that camel over there? I'll bet you 1,000 dinars I can make him jump ten feet in the air."

Mahmud replies with skepticism: "Habibi! No way! But I'll take your bet."

Ahmed walks around to the back of the camel with brick in hand, cranks his arm backward like a medieval war machine and catapults his elbow so that he whacks into the camel's backside with the brick. The camel jumps ten feet in the air. Mahmud pays Ahmed 1,000 dinars.

A couple of days later, Ahmed says to Mahmud: "I bet you 100,000 dinars I can make that camel nod his head Yes."

Mahmud shakes his head, "You got me last time. But, as Allah is my witness, there's no way you can make that dumb hump-backed beast nod his head Yes."

Ahmed takes the same brick, walks around to the front of the camel, holds up the brick, and says, "Remember me?"

The camel nods Yes.

Mahmud pays Ahmed 100,000 dinars.

### 2. Camel Brilliance (Joke 2)

Which reminds me of two camel-centric proverbs:

An Arab proverb: "Trust in Allah, but tie up your camel."

An Iranian proverb: "A camel does not drink with a spoon."

And one well-known aphorism – attributed to many – that captures the seemingly unnecessarily complex structure of this beast of burdens:

“A camel is a horse designed by committee.”

### 3. Why Camels

Why, you may be wondering, is our esteemed rabbi talking about camels on this holy day of Shabbat?

Well, because once we uncover the camel’s secret, we may have the solution to all the world’s problems.

How can that be? you ask. We shall soon see. Come, let us together dig deep and find out.

First, the obvious question: What, if we may generalize, are all the world’s problems we wish to solve with our camel wisdom?

If, indeed, we may generalize for the sake of opening our eyes and educating our minds, all the world’s problems may be solved with one, albeit difficult, fix:

Living with the awareness of our divine purpose.

It may sound like an oversimplification, but if every single human being were in tune with God’s plan and vision, would not all hatred, war, animosity and darkness be rendered obsolete? If every single organism in existence were conscious of the heavenly ideal and divine dream would not the world be perfect?

Sure, even then one idiot could decide to rebel against that pure vision, but would the world stand idly by as a rogue element attempts to self-destruct and fight its own self? I would think not.

Thus, if we could but find our unique individual role in the cosmic symphony, logically we’d have solved all the world’s problems.

And that’s where the camel comes in.

## 4. Cryptic Talmudic Passage

It all begins with a particularly cryptic passage in the Talmud:

One who sees a camel in a dream, death is decreed upon him from heaven, but he is saved from it. Said Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina, “What is the scriptural proof? From this Torah verse: *I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will elevate you, also bring you up.*”<sup>1</sup>

The Talmud is often difficult to understand, but it is never impossible. The Talmud is after all an exercise in analytics. This passage from the Talmud, however, seems to transcend all logic. One who dreams of a camel faces death but is then saved from it? What can it possibly mean?

Additionally, the scriptural proof is brought for this statement: *I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will elevate you, also bring you up.* How does this Torah verse prove that if one dreams of a camel, death is decreed upon him and then he is saved from it?

Perhaps all of the above will be clarified when we properly understand the scriptural proof. And for this we look to the great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, who explains:

“Also bring you up” in Hebrew is *gam oloi* – *gam* meaning “also” and *oloi* meaning “bring you up.” When *gam oloi* is read together quickly in succession as one word, *gamoloi*, it sounds like *gamlā* or *gamal*, Hebrew for “camel.” Thus, going down to Egypt is akin to a decree of death, but being brought back up is akin to being saved from it. And it is connected to the camel through *gam oloi*.

So far so good, but I’d say this requires still further elucidation.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 46:4.

## 5. Parshat Vayigash

The Torah verse that the Talmud quotes as scriptural proof for its camel dream statement comes from this week's reading, Parshat Vayigash. And this is what it says:

*And God said to Israel [referring to Jacob] in visions of the night, and He said, "Jacob, Jacob!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will elevate you, also bring you up [gam oloi]..."<sup>2</sup>*

Due to the famine in Israel, Jacob had to send his sons to Egypt to procure sustenance. There, as described earlier in our portion, Egypt's viceroy and CEO revealed himself to Jacob's sons as their long-lost brother, Joseph, whom the brothers had sold into slavery.

Now, following his sons, Jacob is about to descend from the Land of Israel to Egypt. The Master of the Universe recognizes that Jacob is concerned: this isn't a mere geographical relocation; this is leaving the holy purity of the Promised Land for the idolatry and profanity of Egypt. Jacob is not concerned merely for himself; Jacob is concerned for the Jewish legacy – for all the generations to come. How in the pits of Egypt could his progeny become a nation of holy priests and fulfill their divine purpose?

God revealed Himself to Jacob and answered his concerns: *I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. And I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will elevate you, also bring you up [gam oloi].*

In so many words: "Don't be afraid, Jacob, for I, God, will go with you down to Egypt. I will be there with you in the darkest pits of hell, even as Pharaoh will bathe in the blood of Jewish children, even as that Egyptian Hitler will try to perpetrate a holocaust, even then and there will I be with you. And after I go down with you, *I will elevate you, also bring you up [gam oloi].*"

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 46:2-4..

## 6. Puzzling Wording

You might still be puzzled by the wording the Torah uses.

- To begin with, the word *Anochi* meaning “I” is used twice, *I will go down...I will elevate*. Why didn't the verse just say *I will go down with you to Egypt and elevate*, instead of using “I” twice? And why the redundancy? Why *I will elevate you, and also bring you up*?
- Secondly, what does it mean that God will go down with the Jewish people into the hell of Egyptian slavery? Does God not transcend such darkness?
- Thirdly, if the Jews are ultimately going to rise back up, why must they go down in the first place?

By further explaining the verse, which the Talmud uses as its proof that dreaming of a camel foretells a decree of death but also salvation from it, we shall come to understand it all.

And, most importantly, we will learn an invaluable lesson for our lives – how to solve our own and the world's problems.

## 7. The Mystical Camel

The mystics<sup>3</sup> teach that the camel, *gamal*, has two diametric elements. On one hand *gamal* represents death.<sup>4</sup> But on the other hand, *gamal* is related to *gemilat chassadim*, kindness and giving,<sup>5</sup> and hints at growth and maturity.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ohr Hatorah, Bereishit V, p. 989ff; Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Noach 3; Noam Elimelech end of Vayeishev

<sup>4</sup> See Zohar, Pukudei p. 236a; Toldot Yaakov Yosef and Noam Elimelech ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Gamal is very similar to the third letter in the Aleph Bet, gimel. The Talmud (Shabbat 104a) states that gimel and the next letter dalid represent Gmol Dalim, giving to the needy, *gemilat chassadim*. See Jeremiah 51:56 for scriptural example.

<sup>6</sup> I.e. Numbers 17:23.

This, say the mystics, is what the Talmud is teaching us with its cryptic words.

Going down to Egypt, to slavery, is akin to death. There are times in life when it seems as if death is decreed and the hopelessness of slavery is upon us. There are times when we are going down, way down, into the pits and abysses of life. This is the death side of the camel.

But then *gamal* also represents something else – *gamal* as *gemilat chassadim*. By helping others, we are saved and protected from the decree of death. And then God responds: *And I will elevate you, also bring you up* [gam-oloi] – even the worst of times, God, the essence of existence, is with us promising to save us.

This belief leads us to interpret *gamal* not as death but as *gemilat chassadim*.

## 8. Additional Explanation (Optional)

To put it another way:

As Jacob gets ready to descend down into the darkness of Egypt, concerned for the Jewish people, God reveals to him the secret of fixing all the world's problems and fortifying the Jewish legacy, thus guaranteeing that the world would never affect them negatively but that they would always affect it positively.

*Says God: I, Anochi, am with you when you go down and, when you remember this fact, I, Anochi, will elevate you and bring you up.*

The darkest element and scariest possibility of slavery would be to think or believe that God, the essence of the existence, the light and goodness and hope, is not there. For if that would be the case, what then would be the purpose of living?

But God thus tells Jacob: "I, the world's candle, the cosmic menorah, am there with you in the darkness."



Now, instead of succumbing to Egypt (to the death side of *gamal*) and being confined by it, you will turn it on its head. You will turn the *gamal* into *gemilat chassadim* – you will turn the darkness to light, you will turn the dog-eat-dog mentality of slavery into the man-feed-man reality of freedom.

Knowing that the light of *Anochi* is with us when we are down ensures that the light of *Anochi* will elevate us out of that darkness. But then there is another level: *and I Anochi will elevate you, also bring you up.*

When you go through the hell of Egypt, Babylon, Rome, Crusades, Nazis, or radical Islamists, you will outlive all those murderous realities of exile, always believing in the light and essence of God – no matter what, when, where, or why. Because you know that *I, Anochi, will elevate you, also bring you up.*

God will take us up to a level that transcends all levels, to a place where all evil is forever abolished and razed. God told this to Jacob and His message continues to resound today.

## 9. Camels, What They Mean For Us

How can the camel teach us to solve our and the world's problems?

1. Hydrate Well: Camels do not use a spoon to drink. Camels can drink 20 gallons of water in one go – that's approximately 75 one-liter bottles! Camels are notorious for their drinking ability, traversing the arid desert with bellies full of water. For us, Torah is our water, our hydration. We must drink copious amounts of it to remain hydrated and fresh as we traverse the arid deserts of life. We must drink, drink, drink from the living waters of Torah. Start drinking (i.e. learning) and never stop.

2. Travel in a Caravan: The only way to travel through the dangerous desert is to travel together. One camel may be able to journey across the desert dunes, but maybe not. A caravan of camels exponentially increases the odds of success and reaching our destination. *Gemilat chassadim* is how we build caravans, helping one another, sharing the load and strengthening the weak.

3. Make the Most of the Desert: Camels travel, most famously, through deserts. The desert is the opposite of civilization. The desert is no man's land. When the Jews left Egypt they traveled for 40 years in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. We know that our destination is the Promised Land. Often in life, in order to get to our destination, we first must travel in the desert for a period of time, in order to find civilization and create a home for the Divine in the Promised Land. We first must experience uncivil and uncivilized realities. There is only one way to get through the uncivilized desert's perils. With *gamal*, with *gemilat chassadim* – good deeds and helping others. This is how we turn the uncivil desert into the civilization of the Promised Land.

## 10. Tenth of Tevet (Conclusion)

This coming Tuesday is *Asara b'Tevet*, the fast day of the tenth of Tevet, when we remember that on this day the Babylonians began their asphyxiating siege of Jerusalem, which led to the destruction of the first Temple. Soon after, we were exiled not to return for two thousand years.<sup>7</sup>

But the purpose of going down into exile is so that we may rise up infinitely stronger.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Likkutei Sichot XXV, p. 267.

<sup>8</sup> See Likkutei Sichot III, p. 823.

As we traverse the desert of life, let's not forget the divine purpose of it all. It is contained in the lesson of the camel, *gamal, gemilat chassadim*. This is the camel's secret which he imparts to us, helping us to finally leave the hell of exile and arriving at our destination – the Final Redemption.

Shabbat Shalom!

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