



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayigash

January 7, 2017

Vayigash

Who are You?



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

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ABSTRACT

We often define ourselves by other people. I know who you are, but who am I?

The Kotzker Rebbe famously said: “If I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then you are not you and I am not I. If, however, I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you.”

Beginning with the homes we grew up in, parental attitudes, then the ideas we picked up in our formative school years, followed by the social mores of our times – all types of forces contribute to shaping our identities, thus making it more difficult to know who you would have been without those influences.

Especially today, with the ubiquity of social media, defining who we are becomes more and more difficult. Seeing others’ photos, posts, tweets, personal lives on display, it becomes harder to recognize our own lives for what they are, without comparing them to someone else’s.

Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that with the unprecedented affluence, with which we are gifted today, comes also unprecedented anxiety, depression, and lack of purpose. Today, when we have more things than ever before, we also find it most challenging to know who we are.

As Jews, whenever we are faced with such a fundamental question – who are we, as people, as Jews, as individuals – the one place we turn to naturally is the Torah. Who we are is defined by the One Who made us who we are. And, thankfully, the One shared with us exactly what that is, and how to define it.

The Torah's answer – aided by the Midrash – shows us how to define our true self. And it is further illustrated by a story about an *agunah* and the Vilna Gaon.

WHO ARE YOU? OR, HOW TO KNOW WHO SOMEONE TRULY IS?

1. Light House (Joke)

One day a gorilla escaped from the zoo, prompting a huge search of the district and appeals on radio, television and in the newspapers.

He was finally discovered a few days later in the city library where zoo officials found him sitting in the reading room deep in concentration with two books spread out in front of him.

One book was the Bible; the other was *On the Origin of the Species* by Charles Darwin.

The zookeepers asked the gorilla what he was doing. The gorilla replied: "I'm trying to figure out whether I am my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."¹

2. Who are We?

Who are we – sophisticated bacteria, brothers to primates, or divine beings created in the divine image and gifted with divine souls?

¹ <http://www.aish.com/j/j/202470081.html>.

All too often, life seems to pull us in conflicting directions: one moment we believe we are sublime creatures with a meaningful higher purpose, while the next, we feel as if we are primitive inconsequential nothings, devoid of purpose or meaning.

This, of course, creates existential crises in our psyches and beings: How to know who, at the core, we truly are? And how to live up to that core essence of our truest selves?

3. Chelm Story

This reminds me of a Chelm story I once heard:

Herschel, the baker, lived in the village of Chelm, and like all his fellow townspeople, he was more than he appeared to be. Herschel was a wonderful baker, and also a philosopher. He often asked, “Who am I?” It was a philosophical question the men often discussed, especially when they gathered at the public bath.

Herschel knew one thing above all else: He loved to bake. He loved the heavenly aroma of his challah breads, the sweet scent of sugary cookies and rich almond cakes. On holidays, he beamed as his customers ordered flaky pastries. He would clap his floury hands upon his apron and proclaim, “There is nothing finer than being Herschel, the baker.” Bending his knees, he lifted fresh mandelbrot from a tray and gave these away to the children. “Have another,” he would offer happily, for nothing gave him more pleasure than filling the stomachs of the villagers with delicious baked goods.

One Friday, as the men gathered at the *mikvah* prior to Shabbat, one of them said, “I’ve long wondered what it is that makes us who we are.”

Moshe nodded solemnly. “All men are created alike, or so it is written in the Torah,” he said.

“Yes,” said Abraham, “and so, perhaps, it is only our clothing that sets us apart from each other.”

Herschel looked around the room. Each man wore only a simple white towel around his waist. Silently, Herschel the baker began to worry. He feared he might become lost in the bath. He might, without his floury apron, be mistaken for the shoemaker. If that happened, he would have to spend the rest of his days at a cobbler's bench.

Or worse, what if someone thought he was the water carrier? He would have to spend the rest of his days carrying heavy buckets of water through the cold streets. Oh heavens, what if someone thought he was the roofer? Herschel shuddered to think of spending his days beneath a hot sun fixing village roofs. Oh no. Herschel wanted to spend the rest of his days in his sweet-smelling bakery. He wanted never to lose the right to his delicious almond cakes.

After a while, he became so afraid of the possibility of losing his identity that he decided he must find some way to avoid it. To make clear who he was, Herschel tied a red string around his right ankle. "This is proof that I am Herschel the baker," he said, and his heart swelled with joy. Now, even in the bath, he would remain Herschel the baker. Every time he went to the bath, he quickly tied a string around his ankle before he took off his clothes. "There's my proof," he would think, smiling at the bright red string.

One day a stranger moved to Chelm. The stranger wanted to behave properly, and so he paid careful attention to the customs of the villagers. That first day he happened to stop at the bath, and when he entered, he saw Herschel the baker, a towel around his waist, a bright red string tied around his ankle.

The stranger rubbed his chin and thought, "This is a strange custom, but it seems this is what the people of Chelm do in the bath."

The following Friday afternoon, Herschel prepared for his Sabbath bath. He carefully tied a string around his ankle and walked to the baths. He enjoyed his bath tremendously and stayed for a long time, letting the steam warm and comfort him. When he was finished, he walked into the dressing room, feeling clean and good. He pinched himself, just to make sure it was he, Herschel the baker, who was feeling so wonderful, and then he looked down to check for his string. It was gone!

Herschel began to worry, his heart pounding. Worse, when he looked up, he saw a stranger wearing a towel around his waist and a bright red string around his ankle.

Sweat poured from Herschel's head and he thought he might faint. "If that man is me," he thought, "then who am I?" Shaking with panic, he stepped toward the stranger. "Friend," he said, "I have never seen you before, but I know who you are. You are me, or you are who I thought I was. You are Herschel the baker, for only Herschel the baker wears a bright red string around his ankle when he goes to the bath. But tell me, if you would, good sir, if you are Herschel the baker, who am I? Please tell me, for I must know what it is I will be doing for the rest of my life!"²

4. Personality Crisis

We often define ourselves by other people. I know who you are, but who am I?

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² <http://www.uexpress.com/tell-me-a-story/1998/9/27/the-bakers-string-a-jewish-tale>.

Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that with the unprecedented affluence, with which we are gifted today, comes also unprecedented anxiety, depression, and lack of purpose. Today, when we *have* more things than ever before, we also find it most challenging to know who we *are*.

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5. Parshat Vayigash

Two weeks ago, we read how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Last week, we read how Joseph rose to become the second in command of all Egypt and the world's foremost economist. We also read how his brothers, who had no idea that the viceroy of Egypt was their brother Joseph, came down from Canaan during the famine to procure provisions for their father Jacob and their families.

In this week's Torah reading, we learn what happened when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers.

Having done so, Joseph sent his brothers back to their father, so they could bring Jacob to Egypt, where they and he would live out the rest of their days.

Jacob, after twenty-two years of thinking that Joseph was dead, had difficulty believing that this person was truly his long-lost son. As the verse states:

So they [the brothers] went up from Egypt, and they came to the land of Canaan, to their father, Jacob. And they told him that "Joseph is still alive," and that he rules over the entire land of Egypt. And his heart stood still, for he did not believe them.³

³Genesis 45:25-26.

But, then, when he saw the wagons that Joseph sent, Jacob suddenly believed that it was indeed Joseph:

And they told him all of Joseph's words that he had said to them, and he saw the wagons (ha'agalot) that Joseph had sent to carry him, and the spirit of their father Jacob was revived.⁴

Why is it that when he saw the wagons, the *agalot*, Jacob suddenly believed the brothers that Joseph was alive and well, the viceroy of Egypt?

6. The Midrash

The Midrash,⁵ cited by Rashi, shares the back-story.

Joseph, wise and sagacious, was well aware that his father Jacob would be suspicious that his long-lost son has suddenly reappeared, seemingly resurrected from the dead, twenty-two years later. Joseph therefore sent his father a sign.

The sign was the wagons, or *agalot* in Hebrew.

The Midrash discovers this in the nuances of the verse. Why does the verse state that Joseph, not Pharaoh, sent the wagons? Indeed, just a few verses earlier, the Torah states:

And the sons of Israel did so, and Joseph gave them wagons by Pharaoh's orders, and he gave them provisions for the way.⁶

If the wagon were sent by *Pharaoh's orders*, why does the verse say *the wagons that Joseph had sent*?

The Midrash fills in the blanks:

⁴ Genesis 45:27.

⁵ Genesis Rabba 94:3.

⁶ Genesis 45:21.

Joseph said to his brothers, “Tell our father that when I was separated from him, was it not the subject of *Egla Arufah* that I was studying? This is what it is written, *And he saw the wagons (agalot)... and his spirit was revived.*

Twenty-two years prior, when Joseph was a young innocent man studying in his father’s house, right before his brothers sold him into slavery, Joseph was studying Torah with his father, Jacob.⁷

The subject they were studying was *Egla Arufah* – the intricate laws of the “axed calf.” In the Book of Deuteronomy,⁸ the Torah describes what to do if a slain person is found in no-man’s land, between two towns. Every town is responsible for the people living and traveling through their town. Thus if someone is found slain, even if it’s outside of the city, the city closest to where the body was found needs atonement for not living up to their responsibility to that person. *Egla Arufah* is a calf, an *egel*, which was brought as that atonement offering.

By sending “wagons” – *agalot* in Hebrew – Joseph was sending his father a sign that he is truly Joseph – the same Joseph that studied with his father the subject of *Egla Arufah*, which is play on the same word as *agalot* (wagons). *Agala* means “wagon.” *Egel*, spelled with the same Hebrew letters (*ayon, gimel, lamed*) also means “calf.”

As the commentaries on the Midrash explain, in effect, Joseph’s message to his father had a double purpose: to demonstrate that he was indeed the same physical Joseph, Jacob’s biological son, and – perhaps more to the point and more to Jacob’s true concern – to demonstrate that, over the past twenty-two years, even while surrounded by the impurity of idolatrous Egypt, he was still the same studious young man of twenty-two years ago, studying the holy nuances of *Egla Arufah*.

When Jacob understood the message that Joseph sent him *his spirit was revived.*

⁷ See Yoma 28b: Our forefathers and foremothers kept the entire Torah before it was given.

⁸ Deuteronomy 21:1-9.

7. The Deeper Meaning of the Eglá Arufah

A question arises:

As I mentioned, Jacob's initial reaction upon hearing his sons' report that Joseph was still alive and was a ruler in Egypt was one of disbelief. However, when they added that the person they met had mentioned the last Torah subject that Jacob and Joseph studied together, Jacob became convinced that he was legitimate.

But if Jacob initially suspected that the person was an impostor, what proof did this additional knowledge constitute to the contrary, as the suspected con artist could easily have discovered this fact through thorough research?

The answer is that the subject of *Eglá Arufah* was not simply a technical detail that anyone (even an impostor) could have found out; it reflected the spiritual connection that Joseph has with his father – a connection that was expressed in their studying Torah together.

Moreover, this particular subject of *Eglá Arufah* actually contained a deeper spiritual message – which only the true Joseph could have known; a message which reflected the story of his life.

That message was that despite the fact that Joseph was separated from his father and spiritual roots for twenty two years (!), and one may have suspected that Joseph may have lost his spiritual connection, especially living in the depravity of Egypt (*ervaas ha'aretz*), nevertheless Joseph completely maintained his spiritual integrity without any compromise.

Eglá Arufah captures this message: The *Eglá Arufah* is an atonement offering for the city closest to where a slain person is found. Joseph was left almost for dead by his brothers. Then he ended up in captivity, in prison, in the depraved land of Egypt. Anyone would have thought that Joseph was spiritually dead.

Yet, he lived. And maintained his complete connection to his father and the Torah they had studied together. Like the *Eglá Arufah*, which atones for the wrongful death, and recognizes the responsibility of this death,

Joseph's sending the wagons, the *agalot*, demonstrated that he was as spiritually alive as he was when left his father, and that all was atoned for.

As Joseph told his brothers: "Do not be sad, and let it not trouble you that you sold me here, for it was to preserve life that G-d sent me before you... to make for you a remnant in the land, and to preserve [it] for you for a great deliverance. And now, you did not send me here, but G-d, and He made me a father to Pharaoh, a lord over all his household, and a ruler over the entire land of Egypt."⁹

So by sending the wagons (*the agalot*), hinting to the *Egla Arufah*, Joseph was demonstrating to his father his true spiritual personality.

And that is how we ultimately truly recognize each other – not so much by our physical characteristics, but by our spiritual ones.

8. The Agunah and the Vilna Gaon (Story)

Here is a story that underlines and magnifies this idea as told by Rabbi Yaakov Neimann, the author of *Darchei Mussar*.

In the times of the 18th century sage, the Vilna Gaon, there was a tragic case of an *agunah* in Vilna – a woman whose husband disappeared shortly after their wedding, leaving her without a divorce document and therefore forbidden to remarry. After more than ten years had passed, a man – whom the wife did not recognize – appeared one day in Vilna claiming to be her long-lost husband.

The woman and her family were skeptical, suspecting that he was a swindler in pursuit of the family's wealth. To the surprise of all, he answered every question they posed about facts that presumably only the real husband would have known. He even took the wife aside and reminded her of private matters to which nobody else could possibly be privy.

⁹Genesis 44:5-8.

Still unsure, the family consulted the Vilna Gaon, who instructed them to do nothing until the coming Shabbos. That Friday night, the Gaon escorted them to the synagogue. Upon entering, he asked the man to identify the family's regular seats. Unable to do so, his pretense was up and he immediately fled.

The amazed family asked the Vilna Gaon for an explanation of his brilliant detective work. He explained that it was clear that this had been either the real husband or somebody who encountered him and paid him to reveal his detailed knowledge about the family, so that he could pass as him and make off with the family's fortune. As it would never occur to an impostor to ask the real husband about spiritual matters, asking the man to point out the family's seats in the synagogue was the perfect litmus test, which he failed.

Similarly, Jacob was skeptical about the identity of the purported Joseph whom the brothers had met in Egypt. After all, they had had extensive interactions with him until now and not one of them had recognized him as their long-lost brother. Perhaps the man had extracted from Joseph details about his family which he could use for his own ulterior motives. Only when he proved that he remembered the last Torah topic that they had studied together – a spiritual matter – was Jacob convinced that this was the true Joseph.

9. Practically Speaking: Ask Yourself

So who are you, really?

You may try to answer the question with references to biology. But then you will be defining yourself with biology, with your body. To define your soul, you have to ask soulful questions.

If you ask yourself what color is my hair, my eyes, how tall am I, how short, how old, how skinny, how fat, then you will get those answers, and you will indeed define yourself, but your superficial, external self.

If you want the real answer, you have to ask yourself not physical questions, but spiritual questions, which will help you define your spiritual characteristics.

Ask yourself: Where do I stand when I pray?

Ask yourself: How do I study?

Ask yourself: What was the last mitzvah I did?

What sublime topic am I steeped in?

Even when you may find yourself in challenging situations, do you remember the Torah you learned?

Do this and you will know your true self.

Shabbat Shalom!