Standing Tall: Thoughts on Parashat Vayiggash

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayiggash

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This week's Torah portion includes an enigmatic little episode. "And Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh. And Jacob blessed Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said unto Jacob: How many are the days of the years of your life? And Jacob said unto Pharaoh: The days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojournings. And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from the presence of Pharaoh."

Why did Jacob bless Pharaoh at the beginning and then a second time at the end of this passage? Why did Pharaoh ask how old Jacob was? Why did Jacob say his years were few when he was 130 years old? Why did he complain that his years were evil? Why did he mention the lives of his fathers? Why did Pharaoh remain silent after Jacob's comments?

Let us look more carefully at this passage. When Joseph brought Jacob to Pharaoh, the Torah uses the phrase "vaya-amideihu lifnei Pharaoh," and he set (stood) him before Pharaoh. The commentary, R. Ovadia Seforno, notes that Jacob did not bow before Pharaoh, as was the custom of those who came before the monarch. By standing tall, Jacob indicated that he was not subservient to Pharaoh. Moreover, Jacob blessed Pharaoh, an indication that he was of such a rank that he could confer blessings on the ruler. Pharaoh must have been surprised by this behavior, so he asked Jacob how old he was. He wanted to know not merely Jacob's age, but what it was about his life that made him stand so confidently before Pharaoh. After all, Jacob was only a shepherd from a foreign land, who could not even feed his own family without coming to Egypt for help. How dare he stand upright before Pharaoh? How dare he think Pharaoh needed his blessing?

Jacob replied: my years are few; not few in number since I'm 130 years old, but few in seeming accomplishments. You, Pharaoh, see me as a helpless old man. My years are "evil" i.e. I've suffered much. I appear to you as a failure. But I am the patriarch of the people of Israel. My fathers were prophets who have brought dramatic change to the world. Long after the Egyptian empire will disappear, my people will still be flourishing. I haven't achieved yet what my fathers have achieved; but I have deep roots, and a grand destiny.

Pharaoh hears this and remains silent. Then Jacob blesses him again, a reminder that Jacob is not a subservient failure, but a link in the chain of a great nation, the people of Israel.

This passage, then, conveys a vital message for the family of Jacob. The people of Israel may appear to be small, dependent, powerless. Great empires may persecute us. But the people of Israel stands tall, and does not bow before any human being, however powerful. We are part of an eternal nation that has outlived all its enemies and that will outlive all the empires and powers of our time as well. We have faced adversity, and have prevailed. We are strong, courageous, resilient. We remember our ancestors, the prophets and teachers of humanity. We glory in their legacy and know that we have much more to do to fulfill their aspirations and dreams.

We offer blessings to all--even to those who wish us ill. We pray that their souls be healed of their hatred and violence; we pray that their minds will be cleared of ignorance and superstitions. Jacob's meeting with Pharaoh, then, is a very significant event, with a powerful message for us and for the world.

Angel for Shabbat