

THREE STEPS FORWARD BEFORE PRAYING – THREE EXAMPLES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Vayigash

Three Steps Forward Before Praying - Three Examples

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 706, Z'man K'rias Shema. Good Shabbos!

There is an interesting Rokeach (1176 - 1238) that is connected with our parsha. The Rokeach says the source of the Jewish custom to take three steps forward prior to reciting the Shmoneh Esrei prayer is the fact that there are 3 times in the Torah - in connection with prayer - where we find the word "vaYigash" [and he drew closer]. The first place is when Avraham pleaded with G-d that he should not destroy Sodom, as it is written: "And Avraham drew near and said 'Will You even obliterate righteous with wicked?'" [Bereishis 18:23]. The second time is in our parsha when Yehudah stepped toward Yosef before delivering his appeal [Bereishis 44:18]. The third time is in the book of Kings, regarding Eliyahu on Har HaCarmel [Melachim I 18:36]: "And it was at the time of the Mincha offering, Eliyahu the prophet drew near and said, "Hashem, G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yisrael, today it will become known that You are G-d in Israel and I am Your servant, and that it is by Your word that I have done all these things."

Thus, says the Rokeach, the source for the Jewish custom (minhag Yisrael) to take 3 steps forward before beginning our prayers is the 3 times that the word VaYigash (he came near) is used in connection with prayer and petitioning. The question, however, is obvious. While it is true that the context of the word VaYigash by Avraham and by Eliyahu was drawing near to G-d before offering a petition to Him, that does not seem to be the case with Yehudah, who drew closer to Yosef before making his plea. This is not an example of prayer so how can it be used to establish the criteria for the number of steps to take forward before reciting the Amidah prayer. What does the Rokeach mean?

There is another troublesome issue in this parsha. If we read over Yehudah's speech, we see that there is nothing new that has not been said in the previous Chumash narrative. He adds absolutely nothing to the details that unfolded in Parshas Miketz. Yosef was aware of everything in Yehudah's plea before he offered it and yet for some reason it is only now that Yosef breaks down crying and

reveals himself to his brothers.

Perhaps it is possible to say that one question answers the other. Even though Yehudah may physically have been in the same room as Yosef and he may have been approaching Yosef and ostensibly petitioning him, however the Being that Yehudah is really petitioning is the Master of the Universe. What is on Yehudah's mind is not the Egyptian Viceroy but the Ribono shel Olam. All else has failed. We are in the eleventh hour. Binyomin is held captive and the brothers are looking at the specter of having to return to their father without him. They know this will kill their father. Yehudah is desperate. He may be speaking to Yosef, approaching him and looking at him, but the petition is primarily to Him with a capital "H".

Therefore, indeed the Rokeach is correct. "Vayigash elav Yehudah" is a petition to the Ribono shel Olam and can count as one of the 3 places where the word vaYigash (he drew near) is used prior to prayer. True, it is the same information that Yehudah already told Yosef. He is adding no new information in his communication with the Viceroy of Egypt, but now it is directed primarily to someone else - to the Almighty.

The Vilna Gaon uses a similar concept to explain a Gemara [Megilla 16a]. In the dramatic 3 way meeting between Achashverosh, Esther, and Haman, Esther pleads with the king and tells him that someone is trying to kill her and her people. Achashverosh asks her to identify the culprit and she says "A wicked adversary - this evil Haman" [Esther 7:6]. The Gemara said that Esther was actually about to point her finger at the king himself until an Angel came and pushed it in the direction of Haman.

One does not have to be schooled in the art of diplomacy to know that when asking the king for a favor one does not say: "It is you, you evil, rotten, lousy king who is the cause of all this trouble." What was Esther thinking? This is her crucial moment. How did she almost blow it like that? It may be true that Achashverosh himself was part of the problem, but one cannot talk like that to a king! What does the Gemara mean?

The Vilna Gaon says that Esther may have been in the palace and she may have been looking at Achashverosh and giving him this whole speech, but she was really talking to the Almighty. Her plea for intercession to save the Jewish people from destruction was not to the King of Persia but to the King of Kings! She was so caught up in her preoccupation that she was really talking to G-d, that she did not stop to worry about diplomatic niceties vis a vis the message that Achashveorsh would be hearing. Miraculously, an Angel came and pushed her hand towards Haman to bring her back to the "real world" of where she was and who was listening to her plea in the palace.

This then is another example of a Biblical character seemingly talking to another human being, but on a deeper level, talking to the Ribono shel Olam. This too is the approach we must use to properly interpret the nature of Yehudah's speech in the presence of Yosef.

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