

Torah Portion for Vayigash

Shabbat beginning December 30, 2022

The writers of Vayigash (“he approached”, i.e., Judah approached brother Joseph) inspired many interpretations across the ages and cultures of Judaism. To his brothers Joseph is an unknown Egyptian high official. Judah, who years earlier mistreated his daughter-in-law Tamar then atoned for it, now pleads righteously to become a hostage in place of his youngest brother, Benjamin. Joseph reveals himself as their brother and invites the clan to Egypt. A genealogy of the next few generations exists in mid-portion. Joseph uses his administrative acumen to enrich Pharaoh, who rewards him by benefiting his clan. The Israelites become fruitful and multiply greatly.

Scholars date the writing to at least a half millennium after the events and find multiple themes in the story. The dreams that young Joseph used to taunt his brothers later earned him Pharaoh’s trust and his administrative acumen earned him all of Egypt’s gratitude. Judah’s atonement turned to mercy for his father and his youngest brother. Both show how God may create surprising benefits from past misdeeds. The genealogy establishes the origins of the Israelites. Another theme is the value of using one’s capabilities to enrich those in power. Altogether, the writers inspire the community’s survival.