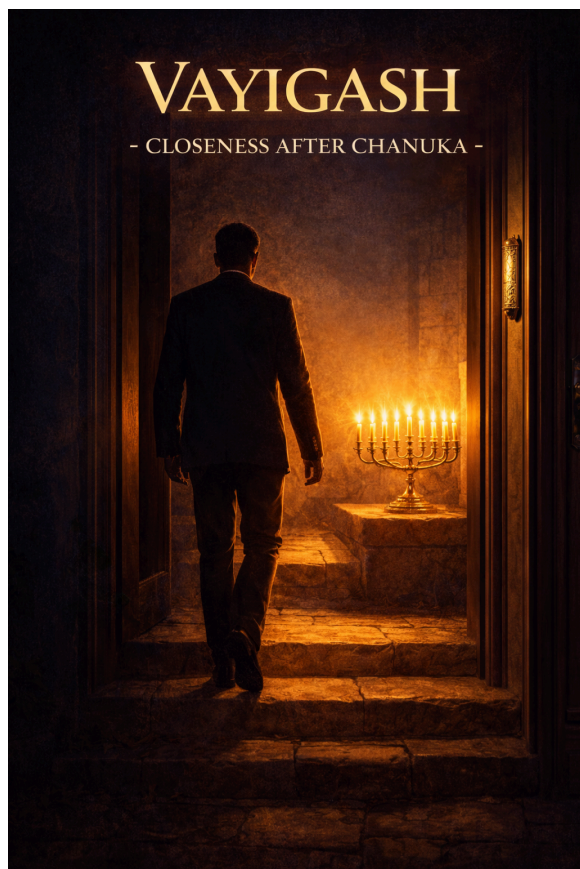


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SPREADING LIGHT AND  
TORAH TO OUR AMAZING  
BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN  
AM YISRAEL



## Vayigash: When Approaching Is the Achievement

*Based on the teachings of Rabbi Shlomo Farhi*

### “And Yehudah Stepped Forward”

“Good morning, good morning, Rabotai.”

We begin this shiur, as always, grounded in gratitude and dedication — honoring the souls, the causes, the moments, and the people who give Torah life in this world. On Zot Chanukah, the final echo of the menorah still lingering in our consciousness, we turn to a single word that quietly carries the weight of an entire worldview:

**וַיֵּאָוֶז — Vayigash.**

*And he stepped forward.*

The pasuk tells us:

“And Yehudah stepped forward to Yosef.”

At first glance, this moment seems dramatic — charged with tension, emotion, and danger. Yehudah approaches the most powerful man in Egypt, ready, we assume, to fight if necessary. But when we look closely at the text, something surprising happens.

**Yehudah doesn't actually do anything new.**

He doesn't threaten Yosef.  
He doesn't issue ultimatums.  
He doesn't declare war.

Instead, he simply **repeats the story** — patiently, deliberately, almost painfully — from the beginning. Everything he says has already been said. Every argument has already been made.

So we are forced to ask the first great question of this shiur:

**What does “Vayigash” actually mean?**  
What was accomplished by Yehudah

stepping forward if nothing changed on the surface?

To answer this, we must step far beyond the story of Yosef — and into the inner architecture of tefillah itself.

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## Three Steps Forward — Why We Approach in Prayer

The **Sefer HaRokeach**, in his teachings on prayer, asks a seemingly technical question with massive spiritual consequences:

Why do we take **three steps backward**, and then **three steps forward**, before beginning the Amidah?

If Hashem fills the entire world — if “His glory fills heaven and earth” — then where exactly are we going?

Were we further from God three steps ago? Are we now closer?

The Rokeach answers with a breathtaking insight:

Those three steps forward correspond to **three moments in Tanach** where a human being stepped forward — **Vayigash** — and changed the spiritual reality of the world.

### The Three Vayigash Moments

#### 1. Avraham Avinu

When Hashem declares His intent to destroy Sodom, the Torah says: “And Avraham stepped forward.” Avraham does not run. He does not

accept.

He approaches — and pleads.

#### 2. Yehudah

Standing before Yosef, with Binyamin’s fate on the line: “And Yehudah stepped forward.”

#### 3. Eliyahu HaNavi on Mount Carmel

As the Jewish people waver between Hashem and Baal: “And Eliyahu stepped forward.” He challenges falsehood, prays, and calls fire down from Heaven.

The Rokeach teaches:

**Every time we take three steps forward in tefillah, we are reenacting these three moments of approach.**

But this raises two enormous questions.

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## Two Crushing Questions

### Question #1

Hashem is everywhere.

So what does “approaching” even mean?

You didn’t get physically closer to God. You didn’t change His location.

### Question #2

Avraham and Eliyahu approached **Hashem**. But Yehudah approached **Yosef**.

What does approaching a human being have to do with prayer?

To answer these questions, we need to understand a truth so deep it reframes all spiritual effort.

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# Closeness Is Not About Distance — It's About Awareness

Rav Leib Steinman explains:

When you step forward in prayer, you are not closer to Hashem *objectively* — you are closer to Hashem **subjectively**.

Hashem was already there.  
Hashem is here, above, below, right, left.

But **you** are different.

In your **mind**, you are approaching.  
In your **heart**, you are drawing near.

And in spirituality, **perceived closeness becomes real closeness**.

The **Kuzari** writes that when a person looks upward during prayer, it is not because God is “up there.”

It is because **your imagination and intention create attachment**.

And attachment is reality.

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## Clinging to Life

The Torah describes connection to Hashem in visceral language:

- “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it.”
- “And you who cleave to Hashem are alive today.”

This is not poetic exaggeration.

It is survival language.

Like someone falling off a cliff, grabbing a branch with everything they have — not because the branch is strong, but because **holding on is life itself**.

That is what Vayigash means.

Not moving feet.  
Not closing distance.

But **reaching with everything you are**.

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## The Morning After Chanukah

We wake up the day after Zot Chanukah.

No Hallel.  
No added paragraphs.  
No candles.

The tefillah feels... bare.

Beit Hillel taught us to climb — one candle, two candles, three — until we reach eight.  
And then suddenly, nothing.

From maximum light to darkness overnight.

People ask about customs:

- Writing prayers on Zot Chanukah
- Placing notes by the menorah
- Holding onto that final flame

Where's the source?  
What's the halacha?

But here is the truth:

**Mockery has no place near yearning.**

Chanukah was instituted as a holiday of **praise and prayer**.

The more light — the more prayer.

So on the night of eight candles, when a person pours their heart out, writes their hopes, clings to that closeness — they are doing exactly what Chanukah asks.

Writing is not superstition.

It is memory.

It is commitment.

It is Vayigash.

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## Approach Is Not Foolish — It Is Everything

Did Avraham change God's mind?

Did Yehudah overpower Yosef?

Did Eliyahu control the fire?

No.

But they **approached**.

And that approach reshaped reality.

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## THE WEIGHT OF APPROACH: WHEN TRYING ALREADY COUNTS

We now return to that single word that seems so simple, yet carries the entire shiur on its shoulders:

**וַיִּגַּשׁ — Vayigash.**

*And he stepped forward.*

If nothing visibly changed when Yehudah stepped forward — if he didn't overpower Yosef, didn't present new evidence, didn't alter the facts — then why does the Torah elevate this moment and give it its own parashah?

The answer is that **Judaism measures success differently than the world does.**

The world measures outcomes.

The Torah measures **approach**.

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## When Effort Itself Is the Achievement

There is a concept that runs quietly through Torah, halacha, and aggadah:

**Hashem does not ask for results.**

**He asks for sincerity of effort.**

This idea is so counterintuitive that most people miss it.

We assume that if something didn't "work," then it didn't matter.

But the Torah tells us the opposite:

**If it was real effort — it already worked.**

Yehudah stepping forward was not about changing Yosef.

It was about **revealing who Yehudah was willing to become.**

He was prepared to lose everything.

Prepared to sacrifice his future.

Prepared to stand fully exposed.

That inner posture — that readiness — is what the Torah calls *Vayigash*.

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## The Hidden Numbers of Closeness

There is a quiet numerical structure here that deepens everything.

The word **Vayigash** appears in three defining moments:

- Avraham approaching Hashem
- Yehudah approaching Yosef
- Eliyahu approaching the people and Hashem

Each represents a different arena:

- Heaven
- Humanity
- Public truth

Together, they form a triangle of existence.

But there is another layer.

The act of stepping forward in prayer — the **three steps** — corresponds to **18** inches per step according to halachic measurement.

Three steps forward =  **$18 \times 3 = 54$  inches**.

Why does this matter?

Because **18 is “chai” — life**.

Stepping forward is not symbolic.  
It is existential.

You are stepping into life.

And when you step forward again and again — day after day, prayer after prayer — you

accumulate something far greater than motion.

You accumulate **presence**.

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## Chanukah and the Mathematics of Attempt

Chanukah is built on this principle.

We don't light all eight candles at once.

We light:

- One — and stop.
- Then two — and stop.
- Then three — and stop.

Every night, the light is **insufficient**.

And yet, every night, the mitzvah is complete.

Why?

Because Chanukah does not celebrate completion.  
It celebrates **addition**.

One more than yesterday.  
One step further than before.

That's why Beit Hillel wins the halachic debate.

Because Judaism believes that **direction matters more than distance**.

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## The Day After Zot Chanukah

This is why the day after Zot Chanukah feels the way it does.

No candles.  
No crescendo.  
No ritual climax.

Just... ordinary life.

And many people feel the letdown.

But the Torah is teaching something profound:

The candles were never the point.  
The movement toward light was.

Chanukah doesn't disappear when the flames go out.

It moves **inside**.

The real question becomes:

- Will you keep stepping forward when there's no glow?
- Will you still approach when nothing dramatic happens?

That's Vayigash.

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## Why Yehudah Had to Repeat Himself

Yehudah repeats the entire story to Yosef — word for word.

Why?

Because repetition is not redundancy when it comes from depth.

Every time Yehudah retells the story, he is saying:

"I am still here."  
"I am still responsible."  
"I am still willing."

That constancy — that refusal to retreat — is what ultimately cracks Yosef open.

Not logic.  
Not rhetoric.

**Presence.**

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## Prayer Is Not Persuasion

This reframes tefillah completely.

Prayer is not about convincing God.

Hashem does not need convincing.

Prayer is about **forming the person who can receive the answer**.

When you take three steps forward, you are saying:

"I am here.  
I am engaged.  
I am not turning away."

That stance alone changes who you are.

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## Why Heaven Waits for Humans to Step Forward

Hashem could have revealed Yosef at any moment.

He could have ended the story instantly.

But He waited for Yehudah to approach.

Because Heaven responds not to power —  
but to **commitment**.

And commitment is revealed only when  
someone steps forward without guarantees.

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## WHEN APPROACHING A PERSON IS ALSO A PRAYER

We now arrive at the most difficult — and  
most human — part of this entire teaching.

Avraham approached **Hashem**.  
Eliyahu approached **Hashem**.

But Yehudah?

Yehudah approached **a man**.

A ruler.  
A tyrant.  
Someone with absolute power over his  
family's fate.

So why does the Rokeach place **Yehudah's  
approach to Yosef** in the same category as  
prayer?

Why does this moment earn a place  
alongside Avraham standing before God  
Himself?

The answer reshapes how we understand  
spiritual courage.

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## Not All Prayer Is Vertical

Most people think prayer is vertical.

Human → God  
Earth → Heaven

But the Torah teaches us that there is  
another kind of prayer:

### Horizontal prayer.

Approaching another human being —  
when it requires humility, vulnerability,  
restraint, and moral clarity —  
can be just as sacred as standing before  
Hashem.

Why?

Because Hashem's presence often hides  
itself inside human encounters.

Especially the difficult ones.

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## Yehudah's Risk Was Greater Than Avraham's

Avraham argued with God.

That's terrifying — but also safe.

Hashem is just.  
Hashem is merciful.  
Hashem does not act out of ego.

Yosef?

Yosef holds absolute power.  
He can imprison.  
He can execute.  
He can erase an entire family with a word.

Approaching Yosef carried **real-world consequences**.

And yet Yehudah steps forward anyway.

This is what makes his *Vayigash* so extraordinary.

He doesn't hide behind prayer.  
He doesn't retreat into spirituality.

He walks directly into danger —  
with dignity, clarity, and responsibility.

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## The Courage to Stay Present

Most people confuse humility with withdrawal.

"I'll stay quiet."  
"I won't get involved."  
"I'll let it go."

Sometimes that's wisdom.

But sometimes — it's fear dressed up as piety.

Yehudah teaches us a harder truth:

There are moments when  
stepping forward is the only  
moral option.

Not yelling.  
Not threatening.  
Not overpowering.

But **remaining present when disappearing would be easier**.

That is prayer in its most demanding form.

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## Why Chanukah Is About the Street, Not the Sanctuary

This is why the mitzvah of Chanukah is not performed in shul.

It's performed **at the doorway**.

Facing outward.  
Toward the street.  
Toward the world.

The miracle didn't happen in Heaven.

It happened in public space.

And the response to darkness was not retreat into holiness —  
but **placing light exactly where resistance exists**.

That is Yehudah's legacy.

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## Approach Without Violence

Yehudah comes prepared to sacrifice himself —  
but not to destroy.

He offers himself as a servant.  
He appeals to memory, family, and responsibility.

This is crucial.

The Torah is not praising aggression.



It is praising **moral presence under pressure**.

Strength without brutality.  
Courage without cruelty.  
Conviction without ego.

That combination is rare.

That combination is holy.

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## The Silent Danger of Retreat

There is a danger we don't speak about enough.

When people withdraw long enough, they begin to believe that disengagement is righteousness.

But the Torah says otherwise.

Sometimes, holiness requires stepping into the discomfort.

Into the conversation.  
Into the tension.  
Into the risk of being misunderstood.

Yehudah does not run from complexity.

He enters it.

That is Vayigash.

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## Why Yosef Breaks

Yosef doesn't reveal himself because Yehudah argues well.

He reveals himself because Yehudah **shows up fully**.

No manipulation.  
No shortcuts.

Just responsibility.

That level of presence is unbearable for false distance.

Truth collapses barriers simply by standing there.

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## From Yosef's Palace to Your Life

Most of us will never face a tyrant in a palace.

But we face moments every day where we are tempted to withdraw:

- From a difficult conversation
- From moral responsibility
- From standing visibly Jewish
- From doing the right thing when it costs us socially or financially

Chanukah trains us for those moments.

Not to conquer.  
But to **approach**.

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## STEPPING FORWARD WITHOUT BECOMING WHAT YOU FACE

We now reach the final layer of this teaching — the layer that transforms *Vayigash* from a historical moment into a lifelong discipline.

Because approaching is not the same as **absorbing**.

And stepping forward does not mean losing yourself in the process.

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## The Mud Problem

There is a piece of advice that every generation eventually learns the hard way:

**Never get into the mud with someone else.**

At first glance, this sounds like strategic wisdom.

But with time, something more frightening reveals itself.

It's not only that the other person is willing to do things you are not.

It's that **the longer you stay in the mud, the more your standards begin to erode.**

You start justifying things you once rejected.  
You start speaking in tones you once avoided.

You start crossing lines you swore you never would.

And then one day, you wake up and realize:

You didn't just fight darkness.  
You became shaped by it.

That is the danger Yehudah avoided.

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## Approach Without Contamination

Yehudah stepped forward —  
but he did not adopt Yosef's posture.

He did not threaten.  
He did not deceive.  
He did not dominate.

He approached **as himself**.

And this is the crucial distinction:

**The Torah does not ask us to win by becoming stronger than evil.  
It asks us to remain truer than evil.**

That is much harder.

And much rarer.

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## Why Torah “Weakens” a Person

Chazal say something that sounds strange at first:

**Torah mateshet kocho shel adam**  
“Torah weakens a person's strength.”

Why would Torah weaken someone?

Because Torah removes options.

It takes shortcuts off the table.  
It restricts manipulation.

It limits what you are willing to do — even when it would be effective.

And that creates a terrifying vulnerability.

You could win... but you won't.  
You could exploit... but you refuse.  
You could strike first... but you hold back.

This is not weakness.

This is **moral gravity**.

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## Why the Jewish Soldier Fights With One Hand

This is why Jewish history is filled with impossible victories.

Not because Jews are stronger.

But because Torah ties one hand behind their back —  
and then asks them to walk forward anyway.

When a Jewish soldier prays before battle,  
when a businessperson refuses to lie,  
when a family remains principled under pressure —

they are stepping forward **weaker**, not stronger.

And yet, somehow, the world bends.

That is not coincidence.

That is *Vayigash*.

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## The Menorah on the Left Side

There is a strange halacha:

The Menorah is placed on the **left** side of the doorway.

Chazal say it is so that a person is “surrounded by mitzvot” —  
mezuzah on the right, Menorah on the left.

But this is not about symmetry.

The right side represents strength.  
The left represents restraint.

By placing the Menorah on the left, we are declaring:

War, power, confrontation —  
they stay outside.

Inside the home?  
Light.  
Identity.  
Holiness.

We do not invite battle into our inner world.

We face outward — without letting darkness move in.

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## Chanukah's Final Lesson

Chanukah is not about defeating the Greeks.

It is about refusing to become Greek in order to defeat them.

The Chashmonaim did not win because they were brutal.

They won because they were faithful.

They stepped forward —  
but they did not surrender their soul to the fight.

That is why their victory endured.

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## TAKEAWAY

- Approaching is not about outcomes — it's about integrity.
  - Effort counts even when results are unseen.
  - Moral restraint is not weakness; it is the source of lasting power.
  - Light does not conquer darkness by imitating it.
  - Chanukah teaches us to step forward **without stepping down**.
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1. Where in your life are you tempted to withdraw when stepping forward is required?
  2. Have you ever avoided a conversation because it felt “spiritual” to stay silent — when it was actually fear?
  3. What boundaries are non-negotiable for you, even if crossing them would bring success?
  4. How can you “approach” challenges this week without absorbing their negativity?
  5. What does *Vayigash* look like in your home, your work, or your community?
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## FINAL BLESSING

May we have the courage to step forward —  
not louder,  
not harsher,  
not stronger —

but **truer**.

And may the light we place at the doorway  
protect what lives inside.

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## SHABBAT TABLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS