

Thank you to my teachers and mentors, to my family, friends, and JTS cohort—it means so much to have you here today.

When a band goes on tour, they usually play the same set of songs, in a similar order, at each performance. Even though artists mostly stick to their setlist, sometimes they add a special song or dedication, one that's specific to the city, or the audience, or something going on in the world or their own lives.

A few weeks ago, I was at a concert where one of the artists was from Asheville, North Carolina. In the middle of his set, he spoke about the impact of Hurricane Milton on his hometown. He invited us to donate to a trusted relief organization, and he dedicated his next song to his neighbors who were still suffering without electricity and water.

Now, we can go to a concert and have an amazing time, even when the band sticks to their regular setlist. But when the artist builds on the scaffolding of their setlist, and adds a song or dedication that's unique to the moment, that's when the experience really comes alive. That is when we feel a deeper connection to the artist, to the music, and to others in the audience.

Often, when we pray—when we have an audience with God, or, the godliness within *ourselves*—it can feel like we're following a setlist. We sing the same songs and say the same words, over and over. It may be comforting to rely on the structure of the siddur. It gives us a break from worrying about emails and meetings, or the bad news that is constantly on our feeds.

But simply following our liturgical setlist doesn't usually lead to a deeper relationship with God. Deeper engagement would mean approaching prayer and God with the anxieties, frustrations, and joys that are on our hearts. It would mean sharing ourselves honestly with the subject of our prayers, the *atah*, when we say *Baruch Atah*.

In Parshat Vayera, our patriarch Abraham does just this. He deepens his relationship with God not by following a setlist, but by communicating honestly and intentionally with God.

God has decided to destroy the cities of *s'dom v'ammorah*. God shares this plan with Abraham, but Abraham is not comfortable with it. The Torah tells us, "Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?"

וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאֵף תִּסְּפֶה צְדִיק עִם רָשָׁע

Vayigash Avraham vayomar: ha'af tispeh tzadik im rashah?

In the Midrash of *Bereshit Rabbah*, the rabbis discuss the meaning of the word *vayigash*. Rabbi Nehemiah says that *vayigash* is the act of **piyus**, appeasement or persuasion. This same verb describes Joseph's brother Judah approaching and *humbling himself* before Joseph in Egypt. Other rabbis say, *vayigash* refers to **tefillah** – pleading and praying; this word also describes Elijah the prophet when he approaches God and *pleads* for a sign of God's truth and power. And Rabbi Yehuda says, *vayigash* means an approach to do **milchamah**, battle. This verb is used to describe a *war* in the days of King David.

According to the midrash: "Abraham said: 'If [this conversation] entails appeasement, I am coming; if it entails prayer, I am coming; if it entails battle, I am

coming.’” Abraham knew that his conversation with God might require him to speak in a variety of ways, to communicate a variety of needs or emotions. And he was prepared to do any, or all, three.

I’m impressed, and a bit jealous of Abraham. I rarely feel like my own communication with God is so varied or intentional. It's strange though, because I, like most everyone, do engage in those three modes of communication in my everyday life. I appease, I plead, I challenge, but it doesn't often feel easy to incorporate these modes in *tefillah*.

Out of those three aspects of *vayigash*, the one I feel most naturally during *tefillah* is the one that means pleading or praying. This fall, I led High Holidays services for the first time. As I chanted the *Hineni* prayer on Rosh Hashanah, the words I was saying resonated strongly with me. I chanted:

הִיָּה נָא מְצַלִּיחַ דַּרְכִּי

Heyeh na matzliah darki...

“Please, help me succeed in the mission which I have undertaken to stand before You.”

This year, the words helped me access and articulate my emotional state. I *really* wanted to do a good job, to lead the community through a holy experience. When the time came to lead, I just had to plead that my preparation, instincts, and the holiness of the day would help me guide the community through a meaningful and enjoyable service.

Appeasement, or persuasion, is also a mode of communication familiar to me, but not one I often feel during prayer. The rabbis understand this mode of *piyus* to be an emphasis of the supplicant’s humble status, in contrast to the greatness of the other person, to sway them in your favor.

I used to attend a poetry festival in New Jersey. For four days, I would go to panels and readings of poets who ranged from professors to poet laureates. The panels often ended with audience Q&A. Most of the audience “questions” began with the attendee telling the poet how much they admired the poet’s work, or their outlook on life and art. And only then, after emphasizing the poet’s great impact, would we get to the question.

We feel this instinct, when we meet public figures whom we admire, to tell them how much they mean to us. It feels like we get to be in a relationship with them, even briefly, when we share how they’ve impacted our lives, providing context for whatever we say next.

Our liturgy might help us access this path to connection with God. Much of our service emphasizes God’s greatness as Creator of the world and the

Jewish people. Prayer could be an opportunity to have a sort of audience Q&A with God. We could build on the words already in our siddur to share how God has touched our lives—and then to ask to know more, to be in closer relationship.

Finally, the third rabbinic understanding of *vayigash* is related to battle, to combat and conflict. Abraham approaches God with what we might call “fighting words”. Abraham challenges God, saying that a truly just God would not wipe out any righteous people, even along with a majority of wicked people. Rabbi Yehuda understands these harsh words as akin to battle.

This is the aspect of prayer which feels most surprising and difficult. I’ve personally never been in a physical fight, or even a battle of wits on social media. Conflict can be dangerous and lead to estrangement

or other unwanted consequences. Our Torah even includes many stories of people challenging God and being punished for it.

But when Abraham approaches God with fighting words, God listens. It seems as if God *wants* Abraham to offer a challenge, since God decided to share the plan with Abraham in the first place.

This God, the God of Abraham also welcomes *our* challenges, our own indignations at what's happening in the world. Although conflict can be scary, sometimes we have to air our grievances with friends and family, so that we can come to a healthy resolution and continue to be friends and family! God welcomes this kind of conflict, when it comes from a desire to remain in relationship with God, and to continue to hold onto Jewish tradition.

Going back to our Bereshit Rabbah midrash, the rabbis didn't identify *all* the times the verb *vayigash* is used in Tanakh. I want to bring our attention to one more instance. This verb is used by Joseph in Egypt, as he prepares to reveal his true identity to his brothers. Joseph says, “‘Come forward to me.’ And when the brothers came forward, he said, ‘I am your brother Joseph ...’”

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו גְּשׁוּ-נָא אֵלַי -- וַיִּגָּשׁוּ

Vayomer Yosef el-echav “g’shu na” vayigashu

G’shu-na is an invitation from Joseph to his brothers to come close. And when they do, Joseph is able to show them his true self. Perhaps this is the overall meaning of *vayigash*, of an approach—coming closer for the sake of an authentic relationship, where each party shows up as who they really are.

Prayer is God's constant invitation to approach. It is an opportunity to deepen our relationships with God and with ourselves, by sharing how we are really feeling—whether that's angry or excited or hopeful, overflowing or drained. The siddur gives us a setlist, and then it is up to each of us to bring the words to life, and specifically, to our lives.

So, may we accept God's invitation of *G'shu Na*, of authentic approach. And may we, like Abraham, be able to say: whatever today's conversation with God entails, I am coming.