## [Forging Unity – ALEPH and Parshat Vayigash](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/forging-unity-aleph-and-parshat-vayigash)

There is a story that Rabbi Shmelke and his brother were once learning a passage of Mishna:

חַיָּב אָדָם לְבָרֵךְ עַל הָרָעָה כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהוּא מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַטּוֹבָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֵת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ

*One must bless for the bad in the same way as one blesses for the good, as it says, “And you shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might”…* (Deuteronomy 6:5)

* Mishna, Brakhot, 9:5

This passage greatly distressed them, as they thought, “How can we possibly give praise and thanks for hardship and suffering as we do for our wellbeing?” So, they brought their dilemma to their master, Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch.

“Go ask Reb Zusha,” replied the Maggid, “You will find him in the *beit midrash* (the house of study) smoking his pipe.”

So, they went and found Reb Zusha, merrily smoking his pipe and chanting verses of sacred text. When they put their question to him, he just laughed and replied, “Ha! You certainly have come to the wrong man! If you want to know how to give thanks for bad things, you must find someone who has experienced something bad! I, unfortunately, have never experienced anything bad in my life, so I cannot help you.”

The brothers were awestruck and speechless, because they knew Reb Zusha’s life had been a web of poverty and anguish. But gradually they began to realize – the answer had to with the way Zusha received suffering; *he received suffering with love.*

The Hasidic master, Rabbi Tzadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823 – 1900), taught:

*“If you want to understand the spiritual meaning of a Hebrew letter, look at the first word in the Torah that begins with that letter…”*

We find the first instance of א *aleph* in the first verse of the Torah:

בְּרֵאשִׁ֖ית בָּרָ֣א אֱלֹהִ֑ים אֵ֥ת הַשָּׁמַ֖יִם וְאֵ֥ת הָאָֽרֶץ׃

*Bereisheet bara* ***E****lohim et hashamayim v’et ha’aretz*

*In the beginning of* **אֱ**לֹהִים***E****lohim creating the heavens and the earth…*

* Genesis 1:1

This first instance of *aleph* is the Divine Name, **אֱ**לֹהִים – *Elohim.* As a Name of God, *Elohim* is remarkable, in that it is a plural word – it actually means “gods.”

But, the verb *create* is conjugated in the singular – בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים – *bara Elohim*; it is as if we were to say in English, “Gods *is* creating.” We wouldn’t say that; we would say “gods are creating.” By saying “is,” singularity is implied in the plural word.

In this way, the very first sentence of the Torah gives a message to the dominant polytheistic culture in which the Torah appeared: “The deities you worship are actually a singular Reality.”

Furthermore, *Elohim* can also mean “mighty ones” or “judges,” and for this reason, *Elohim* is associated with might and power. Accordingly, in Kabbalah, *Elohim* is associated with the *sefirah* of *Gevurah* (Strength) on the Tree of Life. In addition, one of the meanings of *aleph* is “ox,” also reinforcing this sense of might and strength.

From all of this, we can begin to get a picture of the inner meaning of *aleph: aleph* has to do with the inner strength it takes to be unified in oneself, to be singular, uncomplicated, un-self-contradictory.

There are two levels of unity in a person – *inner and outer unity.*

Inner unity is something that we already are on the deepest level; there is always already only one experience happening right now. Our present experience is multifaceted and constantly changing, but all the content of experience is appearing and disappearing within the one space of consciousness. We are already that space of consciousness on the deepest level; there is nothing we have to do to achieve this deepest oneness of being.

According to the Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as the Arizal, this inner unity is represented by the form of the *aleph –* a letter ו *vav* in the middle with a י *yod* on top and a י *yod* on the bottom. The letter ו *vav,* when appearing as a prefix to a word, means “and.” The upper י *yod* represents the “waters of joy” and the lower י *yod* represents the “waters of bitterness.”

In this way, the form of the *aleph* embodies the attitude of saying “yes” to bitterness and sweetness, to the full spectrum of experience that appears and disappears. Again, this is already what consciousness does; at the level of awareness, we are simply aware of whatever appears; it is only at the level of thought and feeling that we judge good and bad, what we like and what we don’t like.

So, the practice of *aleph* on this level is the recognition that we are not essentially our thoughts and feelings; we are the open space that transcends thoughts and feelings. As we rest in this recognition, our sense of self shifts its center from identification with thoughts and feelings (ego) to the singular space of awareness, the space of *aleph;* this is meditation.

Outer unity, on the other hand, is not something we automatically have; it is something we must forge through the power of intention and decisiveness. Outer unity means being trustworthy, and not self-sabotaging. It means that once we choose a path, we don’t keep going back in our minds to the other path; it means giving up on all what-ifs, giving up on all resentments and grudges. It means being one in how we think, speak and act. It means *having integrity.*

Accordingly, the *mitzvah* of *aleph* is the *mitzvah* of integrity: *Don’t cheat.*

לֹא־תַעֲשׂ֥וּ עָ֖וֶל בַּמִּשְׁפָּ֑ט בַּמִּדָּ֕ה בַּמִּשְׁקָ֖ל וּבַמְּשׂוּרָֽה׃

*You shall not do injustice in judgement, in quality, in weight, or in measure.*

* Leviticus 19:35

The plain meaning here is aimed at merchants – don’t cheat your customers. When you weigh out the stuff you are selling, use a true scale and give people what they pay for. But on a deeper level, it also means: *don’t cheat yourself.* You have this limited time on this planet, in this body. What is your commitment to your practice, to your learning? Know what it is and stay true to it; don’t cheat yourself.

It is difficult to forge outer unity without awareness of our inner unity. Experientially knowing our inner unity is what allows us to be free, to not be caught by the many contradictory thoughts and impulses that arise. This is why meditation is so important – not merely because it creates a feeling of peace and spaciousness, but because it shows us that *we are spaciousness*. And from that realization, the path toward forging outer unity becomes clear.

This is the easiest way – through realizing the inner unity that we are, we can see and not get caught by the tendencies of outer contradiction. But there is also a harder, and probably more common, way as well – the way of failure. Because when we experience the pain of our own lack of integrity, this can wake us up and motivate us to change course. This was the path of *Yehudah:*

וְעַתָּ֗ה יֵֽשֶׁב־נָ֤א עַבְדְּךָ֙ תַּ֣חַת הַנַּ֔עַר עֶ֖בֶד לַֽאדֹנִ֑י וְהַנַּ֖עַר יַ֥עַל עִם־אֶחָֽיו׃

*“And now, please let your servant dwell, instead of the boy, as a slave to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers…”*

* Genesis 44:33

The beginning of *Parshat Vayigash* is the climax of the *Yosef* story. *Yosef* is fooling his brothers, saying that he is about to take their brother *Binyamin* as a slave for stealing *Yosef’s* magic goblet. Of course, *Binyamin* didn’t really steal it; *Yosef* framed him for the purpose of bringing the brothers to recognize their past sins toward him. Finally, it is *Yehudah* who steps us and takes responsibility. “Take me instead” he says.

This is the *Yehudah* who was shamed for his arrogance and aggressiveness in the last *parshah.* Now, *Yehudah* has been transformed; he has become a *mensch*. He is willing to be a slave himself in order to save his brother and his father. This is the quality of *aleph,* both on inner and outer levels; he is willing to receive suffering with love, like Reb Zusha, for the sake of serving his father and brother.

Interestingly, the words for “father,” *av*, and “brother,” *akh*, both begin with *aleph,* as does the word *Adon,* Lord, the superlative that *Yehudah* calls *Yosef:*

אדון – אח – אב

In this way, *Yehudah’s* humbled and service-oriented relationship with those around him symbolizes our relationship with the the Divine *Aleph* which is the Oneness of All Being. Through recognition and transcending of our past failures, through willingness to feel the sting of their pain and choose to move forward and unify ourselves in service of Reality, we follow the pattern of *Yehudah;* we become *Yehudim,* Jews, in the deepest sense of the word…

***More on Vayigash...***

[**Glass of Sunshine – Parshat Vayigash**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/glass-of-sunshine-parshat-vayigash)12/30/2019 [0 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/glass-of-sunshine-parshat-vayigash#comments)

Rabbi Yehoshua Heschel of Apt said, “A person should be like a vessel that willingly receives what its owner pours into it, whether it be wine or vinegar.”

What does this teaching mean?

The other day I went to see a production of the Nutcracker with my family. I loved it – the lead dancers were wonderful, but also there were many little children who danced adorably as well, at their level.

But I was most impressed by the sets.

One moment the entire huge stage looked like the inside of a fancy mansion, and the next moment the mansion set lifted into the air and was replaced by a winter wonderland. This happened several more times; one set flew away and another completely different scene manifested. It was hard to believe that all those different sets could fit somewhere above the stage, out of sight. Each one looked so substantial; the change from one set to another in a few seconds was truly magical seeming.

And so it is with our different experiences as well.

As I am writing this, the sky has been cloudy for most of the day. The dampened sunlight and cold, moist December air creates in me a somewhat muted emotional tone; the outside is reflected on the inside. Then, about an hour ago, the clouds parted and the sunlight broke through. Instantly, my inner world changed as well – light on the outside, light on the inside – magic!

The weather is a great metaphor for experience in general. Qualities of experience persist for some time, then change. Of course, we are not completely passive; there are many ways we can and must regulate our experience. We certainly have the ability to drink the “wine” and reject the “vinegar.”

And yet, in this moment, a certain experience is already manifest. We can steer the experience in certain ways as we move through time, but whatever experience is already manifest now, that is the experience we must be with now. The “wine” or “vinegar” has already been “poured.” If we do not willingly receive this moment as it is, we create resistance, stress, dis-ease.

But if we do open to this moment as it is, even as we may steer it into the future, then there is a deeper magic that can manifest: we can come to know ourselves as the vessel.

After all, what is a vessel? It is just an open space. The point is that on the deepest level of your being, you are simple openness; you are the “stage” upon which an infinite number of different “sets” are assembled and disassembled instantaneously. You are not the clouds or the sunlight penetrating the clouds; you are the openness of this moment, the stage upon which everything is unfolding.

And, as it turns out, when we are open to both the wine and the vinegar, there is a deeper “wine” that can reveal itself; a deeper “sunlight” that shines from within. There is a hint of this in the parshah:

וַיֹּ֨אמֶר יוֹסֵ֧ף אֶל־אֶחָ֛יו גְּשׁוּ־נָ֥א אֵלַ֖י וַיִּגָּ֑שׁוּ וַיֹּ֗אמֶר אֲנִי֙ יוֹסֵ֣ף אֲחִיכֶ֔ם אֲשֶׁר־מְכַרְתֶּ֥ם אֹתִ֖י מִצְרָֽיְמָה׃
Joseph said to his brothers, “Please approach me.” And when they approached, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt.”

Up to this point in the story, Joseph had been disguised as a merciless dictator, giving rise to fear and despair in the brothers. But then Joseph reveals himself by saying, g’shu na eilai– please approach me.

To “approach” is the opposite of resisting. And just as Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers when they approach, so too when we “approach” this moment with openness, we can come to see that this experience too is our “brother” – whatever quality is present, be it “vinegar” or “wine,” is arising within the field of consciousness that we are. In fact, every experience is only a form – a “disguise” – of our own consciousness. Come to this moment and see – your “brother” is ready to embrace you; your “sister” is ready to kiss you. All are forms of consciousness, and consciousness is nothing but the Divine, alive and awake within you, as you…

וַיִּגַּ֨שׁ אֵלָ֜יו יְהוּדָ֗ה
Vayigash eilav Yehudah – And Judah approached…

That is, to be a “Jew” is to approach this moment with gratitude!

(Jew, Yehudah, is from odeh et Hashem – “I thank the Divine.”)

[**Approaching the Eternal – Parshat Vayigash**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/approaching-the-eternal-parshat-vayigash)
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Recently I was teaching my Bat Mitzvah cohort about the Sh’ma. We talked about how the word sh’ma (listen) is really an invitation not merely to do the act of listening, but to be the listening. When you are the listening, you can take a break from the roles you play – roles like daughter, student, friend, sister, and so on – and simply be a knowing presence.

“But why would we want to do that?” one of them said. “I like my identity!”

“Sure, identity can wonderful. But that doesn’t mean we need it all the time. For example, it’s great to live in a house. But would you want to be trapped in your house?”

“Yes, I love my house! I want to be in it all the time!”

They were toying with me. At their age, it’s not common to want to take a break from identity; there is not yet knowledge of the burden of identity, because identity is still new, still forming.

But on some level, the heart knows. Many people go their whole lives without making this knowledge conscious and intentional, but still the seed is there of the realization: There is much more to existence than identity.

Children are usually not interested in going beyond identity, and most adults aren’t either. Some adults may come to realize it would be a good idea to meditate in order to let go of stress or whatever, but still they don’t necessarily do anything about it. Even fewer will get to the point of realizing: the whole drama of life with its ups and downs, with death ever lurking at the end of the story, is not the deepest level. There is an intuition of something deeper – but how to get to It?

The truth is, we don’t have to “get” to It – all we need do is stop and turn toward It. The mind constantly generates this whole noisy drama of life, but there is a Center. The Center is vast silence, and that Center is none other than your own being, which is not separate from the One Being.

But, we shouldn’t think that the noisy drama and the vast, silent Center are two different things!

Rather, all the content and movement of our life drama are nothing but the Vastness, dressed up in different costumes. We need not turn away from life, we need only to turn more completely toward it. Beneath the costume, the Divine is whispering to us, as Joseph said to his brothers when he revealed himself to them:

אֲנִ֣י יֹוסֵ֔ף – I am Joseph!

The name Yosef (Joseph) means “increase,” so on the deepest level, this is the Divine message to us: whatever we are relating with in the moment, its deepest identity is the Mystery from which all emerges. Then Yosef says,

גְּשׁוּ־נָ֥א אֵלַ֖י – g’shu na eilai – Approach me please!

In other words, don’t be fooled by the masks – come to the heart, come to the vast and silent Center behind all the actors playing out the drama. That Vastness is home, that Vastness is peace, that Vastness is the Divine, and it was Here all along.

But this realization of the Center is not the end of the drama – not at all! Because now that you’ve tasted the Real Thing, you want more – you want to stay there. You want It all the time. But life pulls you back into its chaos again and again! What to do?

Hear the Divine’s message to Jacob, as he prepares to descend in Egypt:

 אַל־תִּירָא֙ מֵֽרְדָ֣ה מִצְרַ֔יְמָה כִּֽי־לְג֥וֹי גָּד֖וֹל אֲשִֽׂימְךָ֥ שָֽׁם – Don’t be afraid of descending into Egypt, because I will make you into a great nation there…

Egypt is Mitzrayim – narrowness, constriction. Don’t be afraid to get pulled back into a constricted state, because it is through your descent that your ascent will become more mature and stable. You can only grow spiritually through the learning that comes through failure.

Then it says:

אָֽנֹכִ֗י אֵרֵ֤ד עִמְּךָ֙ מִצְרַ֔יְמָה וְאָֽנֹכִ֖י אַֽעַלְךָ֣ – I will descend with you into Egypt and I will surely bring you up as well…

Even in the depths of separation there is nothing but the Divine, so the power to return is always inherent within every experience, no matter how far you seem to fall.

גַם־עָלֹ֑ה וְיוֹסֵ֕ף יָשִׁ֥ית יָד֖וֹ עַל־עֵינֶֽיךָ – and Joseph will place his hand on your eyes…

The eyes are a symbol for awareness. Joseph’s name, Yosef, means “increase,” and the hand is a symbol of action: It is through your descent and subsequent ascent that you will gain the power to increase your own awareness, to be free from the tremendous pull ofMitzrayim, to awaken completely out of the seduction of life’s noisy dramas. Then you will say as Jacob said:

אָמ֣וּתָה – Amutah – I will die –

The “me” that is dependent on the Mitzrayim of life’s dramas can die, because

רְאוֹתִ֣י אֶת־פָּנֶ֔יךָ כִּ֥י עֽוֹדְךָ֖ חָֽי – r’oti et panekha ki odkha khai! I have seen Your Face, that it lives forever!

Every form we encounter is the Nothing but the Face of the Living, Eternal Presence…

[**What is Egoless Intention? Parshat Vayigash**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/what-is-egoless-intention-parshat-vayigash)
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When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, that he is the one they nearly killed and sold into slavery, he says, "don't be distressed for having sold me here, ki l'mikhyah sh'lakhani Elokim lifneikhem – for it was to be a provider that the Divine sent me before you!"

​Here we have the great paradox that includes yet goes beyond morality. The brothers did him wrong; there's no excusing them. And yet, Joseph says, "Al ta'atzvu – don't be distressed!" Why? Because it needed to happen that way. Their sin leads to their redemption; their evil was all for the sake of Mercy.

And this is our choice now, in every moment – to practice Al ta'atzvu – not being distressed – and instead knowing that this moment is as it should be. This doesn't excuse or justify hurtful and wrong behavior; it just sets it in the widest, infinite context of Reality, and opens the door to redemption, no matter what the situation... if we can remember to approach this moment, as it is.

Good Shabbos!

[**A Little Bee Says- Parshat Vayigash**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/a-little-bee-says-vayigash)
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Have you ever misheard the lyrics of a song and gone around singing it completely wrong?

When I was about four years old, the song “I Believe in Music” by Mack Davis was popular. There was some PBS children’s show I used to watch that put the song with some animation, so I heard it all the time.

Only I didn’t really hear it, I misheard it.

The song actually went-

“Oh I… believe in music… Oh I… believe in love!”

But in my mind, the song went like this-

“Oh-ah! A little bee says… Oh-ah! A little bee!”

I have fond memories of my father shaving in the bathroom, singing, “Oh-ah! A little bee says…”

A few years ago there was some animated Disney movie- I think it was Shark Tale. I was watching it with my four year old son, when suddenly that rap about “big butts” comes on. I sat there, incredulous. Oh no! Corruption!

Luckily, he thought the lyrics were, “I like… big… birds in the cats!”

Then, I got to shave in the bathroom and sing, “I like big birds in the cats!”

When a child hears some catchy music but doesn’t understand the meaning of the words, the child’s mind fills in the meaning spontaneously (and cutely). I was reminded of this when I was leading a Shabbat service a few years back, and I saw a man singing his heart out with the Hebrew prayers. After the service, I spoke with him.

“Wow you were so into davening that prayer!” I said. “You know the meaning of those words is interesting…”

“Don’t tell me what the words mean!” he yelled. “I don’t want to know! If I know the real meaning of the Hebrew, it will ruin it for me!”

Just like children who create their own versions of songs, he had created his own meaning for that prayer, and was davening so passionately. He didn’t want to know the “real” meaning because it wasn’t his meaning, and would probably contain off-putting religious ideas besides.

I think this is true for many American spiritual seekers and practitioners- not just in the Jewish scene, but in many traditions.

Americans chant Sanskrit in yoga classes. They chant Turkish and Arabic in Sufi gatherings. They chant Japanese and Tibetan in Buddhist zendos and temples.

For many of these seekers and practitioners, a lack of understanding the language is freedom. The exotic and foreign sounds can easily accommodate the true prayers of the heart, because they are not locked into any precise linguistic meaning.

And yet, for many people, the opposite is true:

For some who know how to say the words but don’t understand them, the prayers can feel rote and meaningless. Others, who neither know nor understand the words, end up feeling alienated, like outsiders.

In response to that type of reaction, the Second Vatican Council changed the Catholic Mass from Latin to the local vernacular languages in the early 1960s. For some, this made the Mass more meaningful. But for others, getting rid of the Latin destroyed its mystery and power.

You can’t please them all!

No rabbi, no priest, no guru or shaykh or roshi or lama can ever come up with the formula that will “work” for everyone- it’s impossible.

The real question is not how to make it work for everyone. The real question is: How can you make it work for you?

And the question is even broader. It’s not just a question of how to connect with the external language of a traditional practice, but how to connect with any practice whatsoever.

I remember several years ago when I was teaching a workshop on prayer and meditation. There was a guy in the class who raised his hand at the end and said, “I’m trying to do the practices you’re teaching me, but every time I try, it just feels so fake, so forced.”

Whether traditional practices feel foreign and alienating because they’re so new to you, or whether you know them so well that they’re boring and tedious, it’s really the same question: How can I connect deeply to an external practice? How can it become authentic? How can it be transformative?

This week’s reading begins after last week’s cliffhanger.

Joseph’s brothers stand around him, not knowing his true identity, seeing him only as a foreign ruler from whom they must beg for sustenance due to the famine. Joseph has been toying with them, threatening to take the youngest brother, Benjamin, as a slave.

Judah steps forward to plead with Joseph:

“Vayigash eilav Yehudah-
-And Judah approached him-

“Vayomer, bi adoni y’daber na avdekha…
         And he said, ‘Please my lord, let your servant speak…’”

The Hebrew wording in Judah’s plea with Joseph has a strange idiom:
 “… bi adoni y’daber na avdekha…”

The word “bi” is usually left un-translated.  Literally, “bi” means “in me” so a literal rendering would be, “In me, my lord, let your servant please speak…”

Or, to say it more clearly, “May my inwardness express itself in speech…”

If Judah represents the expression of inwardness and authenticity, Joseph represents externality, superficiality. Joseph is a political leader. For Judah and his brothers, Joseph is (or seems to be) a foreigner, something alien. And, most importantly, Joseph is hiding his inner identity from them. They can only see the most external part of him.

But Judah, the internal and authentic self, approaches (yigash) the external and foreign form with three special qualities- humility, honesty and sacrifice.

First, he approaches with humility:

“And he said, ‘Please my lord, let your servant speak…’”

Humility is the opposite of coming in with a lot of judgments and ego. With judgments and ego, you’ve already sabotaged any potential for connection before you even begin the conversation. If you want to connect, leave those at the door.

Second, he approaches with honesty:

“For how will I go up to my father if the boy is not with me? Let me not see the misery that will befall my father!”

Judah brings his true concerns and fears- that’s the way to approach prayer. Whatever is really going on inside you, that’s your korban- your offering, your means to draw close. Just like the fellow who didn’t want to know the meaning of the words, fill the sounds of the words with your own sincere cries.

This doesn’t mean you have to be anti-intellectual. If you can understand the words and identify with their meaning, all the better. Then you can take your place in the chain of tradition that brings those words to this moment in history. But whether you understand the words or not, it just means that you fill the words with the energy of your heart.

Lastly, he approaches with sacrifice:

“So now, please let (me) your servant stay instead of the boy as a slave to my lord, and may the boy go up with his brothers.”

On one hand, real prayer has to come from the depths of your own desire. But then, it needs to go beyond that, to be offered for the sake of others. Don’t do it merely for your own experience, but to refine yourself so that you can be of more benefit to others, to bring more light into this world.

Then, the externality of Joseph will break down:

“Now Joseph could not bear all those standing beside him, and he called out, ‘Take everyone away from me!’ And he wept out loud, and said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph!’”

Bring these three qualities to your daily practice, to your synagogue, to the tradition, and it will open itself to you, revealing itself as your brother, your sister; it isn’t cold or alien underneath.

How do you invoke these three qualities in yourself?

The secret is in the tune. Music opens the door. Don’t just recite, chant. Don’t just speak, sing. The nervous system relaxes, dopamine is released, and even incomprehensible words can become carrier waves for depths of longing and ecstatic expressions of the heart, drawing you back into connection with yourself, with others and with the present moment.

As Psalm 147 says:

“Ki tov zamra leiloheinu navah tehillah-
How good it is to sing praises to our God!”

The 18th century Hassidic sage, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, expounded on this verse like this: “It’s good when a person is able to bring about that God sings within him!”

On this Shabbat Vayigash, the Sabbath of Approaching, may everything we approach that appears foreign and alienating open with warmth and connection, revealing the secret brother/sisterhood between all beings. May our words sprout from the fertile soil of melody and rhythm!

Good Shabbos!
love,
b yosef