

Parshas Vayechi

IT'S FOR THE BEST

Upon meeting Pharaoh for the first time, Yakov and Pharaoh have this conversation:

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה, אֶל-יַעֲקֹב: כַּמָּה, יָמֵי שָׁנֶיךָ חִיִּיד. וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, יָמֵי שָׁנֵי מְגוּרֵי, שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאת שָׁנָה: מְעַט יָרַעִים, הָיוּ יָמֵי שָׁנֶיךָ בְּיָמֵי מְגוּרֵיכֶם – And Pharaoh said to Yakov, “How many have been the days, the years of your life?” And Yakov said to Pharaoh, “The days of the years of my sojournings are one hundred thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and miserable, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers, in the days of their journeys.” (47: 8-9)

Yakov lived a tremendously difficult life. He had fled his family to live in hiding from his brother; been cheated and overworked by his father in law; been denied marriage to the love of his youth, been betrayed by his firstborn son; seen the rape of his daughter; seen his sons bickering result in Yosef's disappearance and presumed death for 22 years; and seen Rachel die in childbirth. This was not the future he had sought to create for the Jewish people.

Mishlei 3: 2 advises that תורתִי אל תשכח.... כי אורך ימים ושנות חיים – my son, don't forget the Torah... Because it lengthens days and years of life. Life is lived through peace, wholeness and Torah – pain and suffering are not true living. It therefore stands to reason that Yakov says הָיוּ יָמֵי שָׁנֵי חִיִּי – “The days of the years of my life have been few and miserable,”.

However, the opening of Parshas Vayechi, which addresses the conclusion of Yakov's life, states:

וַיְחִי יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, שִׁבְעַת עָשָׂר שָׁנָה; וַיְחִי יָמֵי-יַעֲקֹב, שָׁנֵי חִיָּו-שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים, וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאת שָׁנָה – And Yakov lived in Egypt for seventeen years, and Yakov's days; the years of his life; were a hundred and forty seven years. (47: 28)

The Torah asserts that at this juncture, just 17 years after “few and miserable”, that וַיְחִי – Yakov truly lived, “living” being the thing he had lacked his whole life, what with all his suffering.

This marks a significant change. Before reuniting his family, he felt his life had been a failure. Now they were together, living in harmony, fulfilling Yakov's ambitions for creating a nation, שָׁנֵי חִיָּו – Yakov's days and years became years of life, to the extent that שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים, וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמֵאת שָׁנָה – he could look back, and his entire life had been worth it in the end, having achieved the harmony he sought his whole life.

Genuine exile begins in chains and handcuffs; Yakov was spared this in his exile because of his merits. The Nesivos Shalom explains how the brothers could attempt to murder Yosef and then sell him, whilst seeming incredibly evil, was actually their bodies expressing what Hashem wanted, that they eventually wind up in Egypt. The people Yosef was sold to we're traditionally salesmen of foul scented products, but Yosef was "fortunate" that they were carrying sweet smelling spices on that day.

But it was not just "fortune", and it was the same with Yakov

There had to be an exile to Egypt. Everything had been calculated precisely. Yakov recognised at the end of his life, that every event in his life had led him to where he was.

Having recognised that all his negative experiences brought him to where he was, he was finally content, satisfied and fulfilled.

THE COMPLETE JEW

The Books of the Torah link with each other, and the conclusion of one story does not terminate it; it transitions into its logical continuation. What common theme is there between the conclusion of Bereishis and the beginning of Shemos?

The Ramban explains that the book of Exodus is known as Sefer HaGeula – the Book of Redemption, or Exodus. The name refers to how the nation of Israel achieved liberty and independence from Egypt, culminating in its receiving the Torah. But only the first quarter addresses the Exodus and independence, and the remainder addresses the Mishkan and its requirement.

Why is that categorised as the Book of Redemption?

The Ramban explains that the book measures the full extent of the Redemption; Redemption of the body is incomplete without a redemption of the soul too. The nation only graduated to distinguished status through spiritual accomplishment, only achieved once the Mishkan was built; and the Shechina rested on the camp. Hence the name 'Book of Redemption' – meaning it tracks the complete redemption – materially and spiritually.

The conclusion of Bereishis contains the same theme.

The Ksav Sofer explains that Yaakov descendants bless their children to be like Efraim and Menashe. They respectively symbolise the two perfect ways of serving Hashem. Efraim studied day and night with his grandfather, excelling at Torah study. It goes without saying that this is a staple requirement of every Jew. On the other hand, Menashe assisted Yosef with the administration and government of Egypt; a Jew also has to know how to appear and interact to the world. Menashe excelled in that department.

Yakov wished that all his descendants excel in both aspects of Judaism, in the spiritual as well as the material sense. The connection with the book of Exodus is evident. It shows how important it is for a Jew to apply their Judaism both materially and spiritually – to be a great all-rounder!

BE LIKE EFRAIM AND MENASHE

Many families have a lovely custom to bless their children on Friday night. The blessing boys receive is שמך

האלוקים כאפריים וכמנשה – May God make you like Efraim and Menashe.

Why like Efraim and Menashe, over any other notable figure?

Perhaps it is because they were “generation jumpers”. They alone among all their cousins were able to inherit from Yakov, equivalent to that of the older generation, their uncles. How?

My Zaide explained that Menashe and Efraim were worthy of being considered Yakov’s own children, and two of the 12 Tribes because they were born and raised in Egypt. Their uncles were raised in Yakov’s house; it’s not much to bless someone that they continue treading the path they’re already on.

But two boys born in Egyptian exile, to a father who was a senior executive in Egyptian government, abducted from his family and heritage at 17, yet manage to transcend their environment and become truly exceptional, is a remarkable blessing. Even people from ashes can become one of Yakov’s sons. The blessing we impart affirms the recipient has unlimited latent potential, just waiting.

My father explains that that neither son objected when Yaakov crossed his hands to bless them, and predicted that the younger son would achieve greater things. There was no hint of reproach, jealousy or animosity from either; they were content with their lot. Menashe was happy for Efraim to be first and Efraim accepted the responsibility of his portion with grace, without making a big deal of it. My father explains that the blessing we give to our children is that they should have this quality of relationship with each other.

A grounded perspective on things is clearly the common theme, and the undercurrent of the bracha given.

FORGIVENESS – BIG DEAL

After Yosef revealed his identity, and after so many years in exile, Yakov’s family was complete once more. His brothers apologise to him, and Yosef rebuffed them with a bizarre response:

אַל תִּירָאוּ כִּי הִתַּחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנִי – “Don’t be afraid, for am I in place of God?” (50: 19).

He clearly isn’t angry, but how has he responded to their apology?

The Baal Haturim suggests that this is intended to be ironic, poetic justice. He was not the first to use this expression – it had been used years before; when his mother had begged Yakov to give her children, their father replied:

הֲתַחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר מְנַע מִמֶּנּוּ פְּרִי בֶטֶן – “Am I in place of God, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (30: 2)

Why isn’t a simple answer enough – did he accept their apology or not?

The Maharil Diskin answers that it may have been out of his control to forgive them. In the laws of vows (30: 7-9) the Torah describes a woman who makes a vow, but her husband annuls it without telling her. If she intentionally violates the vow that is unknowingly not in effect; counter intuitively, the pasuk says וְהָיָה יְקַלְחָהּ לָהּ – Hashem will forgive her. This woman technically done absolutely nothing wrong – she did not actually violate a vow at all! Yet there is a certain something that does not sit well. The fact that circumstances fell favourably does not detract

not simply tell them to switch places?

R' Chaim Volozhin explains that the nature of the average person is to brush away another persons positive attributes, yet he is ready to confirm or even exaggerate their negative traits. In this way, he looks good in comparison to the other people.

Indeed, when two people face each other, one's left is the other's right and vice-versa. This alludes to the fact that his friend's right, or stature, stands opposite his left, generally the one seen as weaker, i.e. weakening his friend's strengths, whereas his friend's weaker left side is opposite his right, i.e. contrasting his own strengths with his friends weaknesses.

Yaakov, the ultimate man of truth, was not one to detract or embellish any detail. He crosses his hands – the result being that his right hand corresponds with the boys' right and his left with theirs!

R' Moshe Shternbuch notes how meticulous care must be given when relating to the strengths and weaknesses of other people, being sensitive to the way they are spoken to, and about.

The Rambam's explanation of **ואהבת לרעך כמוך** says as much – it's the duty of every person to to love his fellow as himself. Therefore, he must tell of his praiseworthy points... as himself...". Suddenly this takes on new meaning.

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