

Parshas Vayigash

IT'S FOR THE BEST

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

וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה, אֶל-יַעֲקֹב: כַּמָּה, יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֶּיךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב, אֶל-פַּרְעֹה, יָמֵי שְׁנֵי מְגוּרֵי, שְׁלָשִׁים וּמָאתַי שָׁנָה: מְעַט וָרַעִים, הָיוּ יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי, וְלֹא הִשְׁיִגוּ אֶת-יָמֵי שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי אָבֹתַי, בְּיָמֵי מְגוּרֵיהֶם – 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 חֲזַרְתִּי אֶל תּוֹרַתִּי... כִּי אֹרֶךְ יָמִים וְשָׁנוֹת חַיִּים – 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 שְׁנֵי חַיֵּי – “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 עָשָׂרָה שָׁנָה; וַיְהִי יָמֵי-יַעֲקֹב, שְׁנֵי חַיָּו-שִׁבְעַת שָׁנָיִם, וְאַרְבָּעִים וּמָאתַי 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, שְׁנֵי חַיָּו – Yakov's days and years became years of life, to the extent that שִׁבְעַת 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.

DEDICATE IT BACK

After Yosef reveals his identity, he assures his family they will be taken care of in Egypt. His father receives word to leave Canaan, and come to Egypt. Yosef goes to meet him for the first time in years:

וַיֵּאָסֶר יוֹסֵף מְרֻכָּבָתוֹ וַיַּעַל לִקְרֹאת יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו גִּשְׁוֹנָה וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו וַיִּפֹּל עַל צַוְאָרְיוֹ וַיִּבְךְ עַל צַוְאָרְיוֹ עוֹד
and went up to greet Yisrael his father... He fell on his neck and wept excessively. (46: 29)

The Midrash says that Yosef wept on Yakov's neck, but Yakov didn't reciprocate, because he was reciting Shema. This seems like it was inopportune moment, to say the least. Why not enjoy the moment, and embrace his long lost son, presumed dead for 22 years?

The Maharal explains that when Yaakov saw that his son, Yosef, had become an executive in Egypt, he could comprehend God's plan and Divine providence. His prophecy had been cloudy for years, and this had been the hidden truth. He understood that Hashem is faithful to those who fear and love Him. A monumentally important moment in his life, that in his wildest dreams he could never have imagined, could nonetheless be dedicated back to Hashem.

The Midrash teaches that Yakov never lost sight of Hashem's guiding hand. It was there when he needed something, but it remained there when he had all he wanted to. With such clarity, it was easy to dedicate this moment back, filled with love and gratitude towards Hashem; to attach himself more to Hashem through love than he could through his years of misery and anguish. And so he said Shema – the **קבלת עול מלכות שמים**; he wasn't ignoring the moment of rebirth of their family at all.

This behaviour is unusual. But should it be? People know that when they need something, they can turn to Hashem. But when everything is going well, will their prayers be with the same fervour and intensity?

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:

אֵל 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:

הֲתַחַח אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי אֲשֶׁר מִנַּע מִמֶּךָ 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 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 from what was intended to be a wilful wrongdoing.

And perhaps the same was true of Yosef and his brothers. They conspired to commit, perhaps justifiably, a nonetheless horrendously evil act to him. In hindsight, it had turned out for the best in the end, and the family were reunited – just as in the case of a woman who circumstantially did nothing wrong. But they certainly weren't to know that at the time. He bore them no ill will, but it was not his place to forgive their evil intent – וְהָיָה לָהּ. Due to the turn of events they had done nothing wrong, but הֲתַחַח אֱלֹהִים אָנֹכִי – he was not in the place of God.

Simply put, the ends did not justify the means. Yosef told his brothers that they were only circumstantially sorry.

Rabbeinu Bachaye shares a frightening thought. Chazal understand that Yosef not forgiving his brothers resulted in the Asara Harugei Malchus – the Ten Martyrs – one of the greatest tragedies in Jewish history. Each took the place of a member of the group who had sold Yosef. Yakov was not told, as an oath was agreed between a group of 10; such an oath cannot be annulled.

Only there weren't 10 men present at the sale – there were nine! Binyamin was not there, Reuven had left, and Yosef not a party to his own sale and exile. So why are there ten martyrs if only 9 people sold Yosef?

There is a concept that a minyan can take place with 9, as Hashem joins in – Hashem was the 10th member of this group. It is implicit to be so, because Yakov could not use his prophecy to identify the truth about Yosef; Hashem was in on it.

R' Shamshon Ostropolier uses the first two words of a pasuk in Bechukosai as an acronym to explain- וְכָל מַעֲשֵׂוֹ – וְכָל בְּקָר וְצֹאן – Any tithe of cattle or flock of all that pass under the rod, the tenth shall be holy to the Lord” (27: 32)

In reference to Rabbi Akiva, arguably the greatest of the lot:

וְכָל מַעֲשֵׂוֹ becomes וְכָל בְּקָר וְצֹאן וְכִי לְמַא מַח עֵקִיבָא, שֶׁהוּא רֹאֵה בְּקָר וְצֹאן – Why did Akiva die? He was just a shepherd!
שֶׁבַח – כל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹר תַּחַת הַשֶּׁבֶט – Those (nine) who passed on were for a שֶׁבַח.
קֹדֶשׁ לָהּ – But the tenth, Akiva, was קֹדֶשׁ לָהּ.

There is another allusion to this when Yosef meets Binyamin for the first time since childhood. The Torah says how he cried on his necks – plural – (45: 15) וַיִּבֶךְ עַל־נְקָתָם.

This is odd as we have one neck – עַל־נְקָתָם instead reads ‘עַל־יָהּ’ – for the ten Harugei Malchus.

The last sections are not literal explanations – pshat. But the flow of the story is that he did not forgive them, and it had serious ramifications.

DYING OF EMBARRASSMENT

There is a Midrash that says that when we eventually go up to Heaven and are put on trial to account for our lives, we will be as humiliated and mortified as the brothers before Yosef.

The Beis HaLevi delves into the specifics of what this means.

On a simplistic level, the Midrash means to say that we cannot bluff someone who knows the truth. The brothers claimed that their brother was incidentally not with them; but Yosef knew why, and when he revealed himself to them, there was nothing they could say. Similarly, in Heaven all is known. There is nothing to be said.

On a more sophisticated level, we must admire the nobility Yosef displayed. For one: וְלֹא יָכַל יוֹסֵף לְהִתְאַפֵּק לָנֶכַח – Now Yosef could not bear all those standing beside him, and he called out, “Take everyone away from me!” So no one stood with him when Yosef made himself known to his brothers.

Rashi remarks that Yosef could not abide that an Egyptian stand beside him, and witness his brothers humiliation when revealing his true identity.

Do not forget that at this point, from the brothers perspective at least, they had been bullied, falsely imprisoned, harassed and interrogated by a foreign ruler. They had him on their own; he was unguarded. There was every possibility they’d have murdered him and escaped (Shimon and Levi in particular had a track record...), but he took a chance so as not to embarrass them publicly.

The brothers do not attack, and Yehuda steps forward and tried to persuade their counterpart with a heart rending plea on behalf of their old father. They did not want to bring Binyamin to Yosef for their fathers sake. Yosef’s reply:

וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אֶחָיו אֲנִי יוֹסֵף הָעוֹד אֲבִי חַי וְלֹא יָכְלוּ אֶחָיו לַעֲנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנֵי יוֹסֵף. – And Yosef said to his brothers, “I am Yosef. Is my father still alive?” but his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence.

The Beis Halevi points out that the first thing he said to them after telling them who he was, was “is my father still alive?”. He clearly knew Yakov lived; Yehudah had just spoken at length about him. The fact he asked this question regardless is telling, heartrending and completely ironic. It means “Is he not my father too? Was he not alive back then for you to not have abandoned and disowned me? Is he only alive to you now?”.

They were shocked into silence, not just because of the surprising turn of events, but because he was right. Their hypocrisy had been revealed, and they died of embarrassment, literally or figuratively. This is תּוֹכַחָה – rebuke in its true form – from the word לְהוֹכִיחַ – to compellingly prove. He did so convincingly – it is this that is

experienced in Heaven.

Yet instead of shouting at them, or gloating at how the tables had turned, he bore no will toward them. He simply said **וַיָּגֶשׁוּ נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגָּשׁוּ** – “Please come closer to me,” and they drew closer (45: 4). He embraced them all.

It is simply unfathomable to acted in such a fashion to our tormentors and antagonists; even when faced with far lesser evils than he’d suffered. It is no small wonder he is identified Yosef HaTzaddik with such singularly unique character traits such as these.

STEP UP

As the brothers return to Egypt to secure Shimon’s release by bringing Binyamin, as instructed by the disguised Yosef, Yehuda steps forward as representative of their party:

וַיִּגַּשׁ יְהוּדָה וַיֵּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי – Yehudah approached him and said, “Please my master...” (44:18)

This is Yehuda taking the lead. But he had two senior brothers present, Reuven and Levi; in addition to Shimon who was being held captive. Why did Yehuda take the lead?

The Vilna Gaon points out that the notes on these words are **סגול, מונח, זרקה, רביעי, קדמא ואולא**. What is remarkable about them appearing here, given that they are standard notes that appear everywhere; and how does this explain the turn of events?

When Yosef had imprisoned Shimon to ensure the brothers brought Binyamin to him, Yakov refused to release him. Yehudah guaranteed Binyamin’s safe return, ‘If I don’t return him, and place him before you, then... **וְחָטַאתִי** – I will be sinning against you all the days’. The Midrash explains this last phrase to be referring to the World to Come – he put his future on the line to illustrate his awareness of the gravity of the situation, after which Yakov acquiesced.

The Vilna Gaon explains that the earlier conversation is referenced when he took the initiative as their leader:

קדמא ואולא, רביעי – The fourth son rose and stepped forward.

זרקה, מונח, סגול – **וַיִּזְרֹק אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִלְּנֹחַ בְּחוּךְ עַם סְגוּלָה** – He threw himself into a situation he risked severing himself from the Jewish people.

The Torah records the immense self sacrifice he displayed; the type a true leader possesses.

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