

Parshas Vayechi

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1. Yaakov's Ability to Transcend all Levels of Opposition

The Torah states, **“Vayechi Yaakov – Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; and the days of Yaakov- the years of his life- were one hundred and forty-seven years.”** The Torah tells us that Pharaoh was taken aback when Yaakov came before him. He had never seen anyone more aged than Yaakov and asked him, **“How many are the days of the years of your life?”** Yaakov responded, **“The days of the years of my sojourns have been a hundred and thirty years.”** Thus, the Torah established that Yaakov was 130 years old when he arrived in Egypt. The Torah later tells us that Yaakov passed away in Egypt at the age of 147. It is obvious that if the calculation was made, one would see that Yaakov had lived in Egypt for seventeen years. Nevertheless the Torah feels that it is necessary to mention that he had lived in Egypt for seventeen years. What is the significance of this?

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the numerical value of the word “Vayechi” is thirty-four. Meaning, although Yaakov had actually lived for 147 years, his “life” was defined by the 34 years that he had been with his son Yosef. Yosef was 17 years old when he was sold into slavery by his brothers. Thus he spent the first 17 years of his life with his father Yaakov. In addition, Yaakov spent the last 17 years of his life in Egypt –for a total of 34 years that he spent with Yosef. Although Yaakov our Patriarch had achieved and accomplished many things in his lifetime, such as fathering the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Torah is communicating to us that the essence of his life was the 34-year period that he spent with his son Yosef. However, perhaps we can understand the significance of “Vayechi” in a different manner.

In the Portion of Vayigash, the Torah tells us that G'd came to Yaakov in a vision during the night – *“b'maris ha'layla.”* Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z'tl, in his work Meshech Chachmah, explains that we only find G'd appearing to Yaakov during the nighttime period - *“b'maris ha'layla.”* What is the significance of Yaakov receiving the prophecy during this time? The Gemara tells us that the nighttime period represents exile. Thus it is fitting that Yaakov, being the Patriarch who represents exile, should experience prophecy during the nighttime period.

Reb Meir Simcha continues to explain that the Gemara in Moed Katan tells us that a prophet is able to continue to prophesize outside of the Land of Israel only when his prophecy began in the Land of Israel. Yaakov's first prophecy was in the land of Canaan. Thus, although he was going to Egypt – into exile - his prophecy would continue. This is indicated by the fact that Hashem had spoken to Yaakov *“b'maris ha'layla.”*

When Yosef's brothers had revealed to Yaakov that Yosef was still alive, the Torah tells us that *“the spirit of Yaakov became alive.”* For the 22-year period that Yosef was separated from his father Yaakov, Yaakov did not prophesize because he was in a state of grieving. Gemara tells us that the Divine Presence only comes upon one who is in a state of joy. When Yaakov became aware that Yosef was alive, his prophetic status was re-instated. He became reconnected to that special level of holiness – as is indicated by the verse *“the spirit of Yaakov became alive.”*

The family of Yaakov was denied and deprived of their father's prophecy for 22 years. One would think that if Yaakov were to leave the Land of Israel to go to Egypt, he might once again lose his ability to prophesize. Thus, Hashem appeared to Yaakov in the nighttime period to reassure him that despite the fact that he was going into exile, the Divine Presence would still remain with him. Hashem's communication with Yaakov in Egypt would be no different than it was in the Land of Israel.

Rashi explains that the reason the Portion of Vayechi is "*stuma* (closed) [relating to the closed paragraph structure found in the Torah scroll]" is to indicate that when Yaakov passed away, the eyes and the hearts of the Jewish people became sealed. As long as Yaakov was alive, his family's spirituality was unaffected by their environment, despite its level of spiritual contamination. Yaakov, their father, generated a spiritual energy that created an insular environment for his family. However, upon his passing, they became spiritually diminished because that special protection no longer existed.

Now we are able to understand that the "***Vayechi Yaakov – Yaakov lived***" is referring to the spiritual vibrancy of Yaakov, despite the Egyptian environment. Just as Yaakov existed as a spiritual being in the Land of Israel, so too did he continue to exist in that context in Egypt despite its depravity and spiritually contaminated state.

2. Egypt- the Setting for the Evolution of the Jewish People

The Torah tells us that before Yaakov passed away he had made a special request of his son Yosef, who was the Viceroy of Egypt. The Torah states, "**The time approached for Yisroel to die, so he called for his son, for Yosef, and said to him - Please – if I have found favor in your eyes, please place your hand under my thigh... please do not bury me in Egypt.**" Why did Yaakov not want to be buried in Egypt? Yaakov did not say that it was because he wished to be buried in the Tomb of Machpelah but rather he said simply that he did not want to be buried in Egypt. Rashi cites the Midrash that offers three reasons Yaakov did not wish to be buried in Egypt.

The first reason offered by the Midrash was that Yaakov foresaw the plague of lice that would come upon Egypt. He did not want the lice to crawl under his body. The second reason is that at the time of resurrection, all the remains of people that are buried outside of the Land of Israel will roll through underground caverns in order to be resurrected in the Land. Yaakov did not wish to be subjected to this painful process. This process will cause pain and Yaakov did not wish to be subjected to this.

The third reason given by the Midrash is that Yaakov did not want to be deified. Yaakov was renowned as a spiritual individual because the famine had ceased when he came to Egypt and his blessing to the Pharaoh caused the Nile to rise and irrigate the land. It is because of this that Yaakov was concerned that upon his death he would be deified. These are the three reasons cited by Rashi why Yaakov did not wish to be buried in Egypt. However, the Yalkut (Midrash) offers a fourth reason for Yaakov not wanting to be buried in Egypt.

The Midrash cites a verse that refers to Yaakov as the "sheep" (*seh*). There is a verse in Yechezkel, which identifies the Egyptians as donkeys (*chamorim*), "**Their flesh is the flesh of donkeys (*chamorim*).**" Yaakov had said, "I do not wish to be the sheep to redeem the donkey." As it says in the verse, "the donkey shall be redeemed by the sheep." The Halacha states that one is forbidden from benefiting from a first-born male donkey until it is redeemed with a sheep (that is given to the cohen).

The Maharal of Prague z'tl explains that the word "chamor" in the verse in Yechezkel, which refers to the Egyptian people, is derived from the word *chomeir* – which means physicality/material. Among the seventy nations of the world the essence of the Egyptian people is the least spiritual. Thus, they are referred as *chamorim*. Because of their level of physicality, the Egyptian people had sunk to the lowest depths of depravity such as incest, adultery, witchcraft, and idol worship.

The Maharal of Prague, in his work *Gevuras Hashem*, writes that the reason the bondage of the Jewish people had taken place in Egypt and not any other location in the world was because in order to bring about a great level of spiritual development/*Kiddusha* (holiness) it must be in a setting of the most extreme level - *Tumah* (spiritual contamination). Thus, in order for the Jews to develop their fullest potential to be worthy of receiving the Torah at the most advanced level, they had to be enslaved in Egypt (the lowest point of spirituality in the world) for 210 years.

The Maharal cites many sources to support this principle. Wherever there is the greatest absence of spirituality it is exactly in that location where the highest level of spirituality could be attained.

When one serves a deity, one does so in a manner in which he believes that the service will bring about the greatest level of respect and worship for that deity. If Yaakov were to be deified and worshiped, as other deities, the Egyptian people would have served him by emulating his unique spiritual posture as a person who is divorced from physicality. The Egyptians would have become less physical and materialistically involved by worshiping Yaakov in this manner. Thus, Yaakov who is compared to the sheep, would be the redemption of the Egyptian people who are compared to the chamor/chomeir (physical/material), causing them to rise to a more spiritual state.

Yaakov did not want this to happen because the Jewish people were only able to advance themselves to the greatest level of spirituality if they were in the abyss of material and spiritual impurity. Thus, the spiritual future of the Jewish people would be jeopardized if Yaakov were to be buried in Egypt.

It is interesting to note that the Torah states in the Portion of Ki Seitzei **"Do not reject the Egyptian."** Rashi cites the Midrash which states that although the Egyptians had enslaved the Jewish people and thrown their male children into the Nile, one must not reject the Egyptian because they were the host country for them in their time of need. Simply, one could understand this to mean that the Jew is not permitted to reject the Egyptian because he must be beholden to him for hosting him in a physical sense. However with our understanding of why Egypt was the location for the Jewish people to experience their exile, we can understand the Midrash in another vein. The Jew must be beholden to the Egyptian people for creating a setting for him to develop his spiritual potential. The only reason the Jewish people were able to attain the highest degree of spirituality was because the essence of the Egyptian was *"chomeir"* -the antithesis of spirituality.

3. Yosef- the Heir of His Father Yaakov

The Torah states, **"And it came to pass after these things that someone said to Yosef, "Behold! - your father is ill." So he took his two sons, Manasheh and Ephraim, with him...Yaakov said, "And now your two sons who were born to you in Egypt before my coming to you in Egypt shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasheh shall be mine like Reuvain and Shimon..."** Meaning, that although Manasheh and Ephraim were only his grandchildren, and were not raised under his influence and tutelage, they assumed the status of tribes as his own children, Reuvain and Shimon. Thus, they were established as the *"shivtei Ka – the Tribes of G'd."* Yaakov continues to say to Yosef, **"But as for me – when I came from Paddan, Rachel died on me in the land of**

Canaan on the road, while there was still a stretch of land to go to Ephrath; and I buried her there on the road to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem.”

Yaakov explained to Yosef that he did not bury Rachel his mother in the Tomb of Machpelah, but rather “on the road.” Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that Yaakov said to Yosef, “I did not bring your mother Rachel even into Bethlehem (which is in the Land of Israel). I know that you (Yosef) have a claim in your heart against me (for not burying your mother in the Tomb of Machpelah). However, you should know that it was only because of G’d’s Dictate that I buried her there, so that she should be of assistance to her children when Nevuzaradan will take them into exile. When the children of Israel will pass by her grave on that road she will come out and cry and beseech Hashem for *Rachamim* (Mercy) on their behalf.... and Hashem will respond – and the children will return to their border (homeland).”

If Yaakov understood that Yosef harbored ill feeling in his heart against him since the passing of his mother, then why did Yaakov not explain to Yosef the basis for his decision sooner? It could not have been because Yosef did not have the capacity to appreciate Yaakov’s explanation at an earlier age. Yosef is referred to by the Torah as the wisest of all of Yaakov’s children. If so, then why did Yaakov withhold the basis for his decision from Yosef until the time immediately before his passing?

As much as Yosef possessed all the qualities of his father and was thus loved by him to a greater degree than any of his children; nevertheless, Yosef was not the person who fully internalized and understood all of the aspects and ramifications of exile (*golus*). Only Yaakov is identified as the Patriarch of exile. He established within himself (and thus within all of his progeny until the end of time) the ability to survive spiritually-despite all of the overwhelming negative influences of exile. All of Yaakov’s children, except for Binyamin, were born in exile. No other Patriarch experienced exile like Yaakov. Although Yosef was similar to his father in every sense of the word, he was not able to fully appreciate and internalize the reality of exile, as his father had.

When Yaakov was about to pass away, he chose to transfer the responsibility of being the guardian of the Jewish people to Yosef, who had himself experienced exile. Yosef had survived the Egyptian environment despite being a solitary individual without any level of support. It was only at the time that Yaakov transferred the responsibility to Yosef that he could fully appreciate and understand the value of Rachel being buried “on the road.” If Yaakov had shared with Yosef the basis for his decision to bury Rachel on the way, although he had the capacity to comprehend its value, at an earlier time he would not have been able to fully internalize it. It was only at the point when Yosef assumed the full responsibility for the Jewish people that he was able to absorb that the importance of his mother’s burial location was to plead with and beseech Hashem for His Mercy to guarantee that the Jewish people would return to their homeland.

4. Yaakov’s Bestowment of Kingship Upon Yehudah

The Torah tells us that before Yaakov passed away he blessed his children. The blessing which he gave to his son Yehudah was one of “kingship.” As the verse states, “...the scepter shall not part from Yehudah...” The princes and leaders of the Jewish people descend from Yehudah. In fact Ramban explains that the reason the family of the *Chashmonayim* became extinct was that even though they had defeated the Greeks, when they re-inaugurated the Temple and assumed the position of “king” of the Jewish people, they violated the dictate of Yaakov, our Patriarch. He had stated that the kingship shall not pass from the house of Yehudah. The *Chashmonayim*, who were Kohanim from the

Tribe of Levi, had no relevance to that position. Why did Yehudah, the fourth son of Yaakov, merit to be chosen as the “king” of Israel?

The Torah states, **“Then Yaakov called for his sons... Yehudah your father’s sons shall prostrate themselves to you. A lion cub is Yehudah; from the prey, my son, you elevated yourself. He crouches, lies down like the lion, and like the awesome lion, who dares rouse him?”** Yaakov compares Yehudah to the lion who despite his enormous strength is able to restrain and exercise complete control over all his faculties and emotions. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Yehudah exercised this level of control regarding Yosef, his brother. As it is stated in the Midrash, “When Yehudah’s brothers had initially wanted to kill Yosef, he interjected, “What would be the purpose of shedding our brother’s blood?” Yehudah convinced them to sell him into slavery instead. The Midrash continues, “It is also the case that Yehudah exercised restraint regarding the incident of Tamar. When Tamar intimated that Yehudah had fathered the children that she was carrying, rather than ignoring her plea in order to protect his honor and avoid disgrace, Yehudah publicly admitted that he in fact was the father of her children by saying, “She is more righteous than I am.” Despite his dimension of person, and enormous strength and ability, Yehudah was able to keep things in perspective and not allow his conflicts of interest to interfere with what is truly correct. This is indicative of “kingship” and leadership. A king/true leader does not allow his own agenda and conflict to interfere to any degree with what he needs to do.

It is interesting to note that the Torah tells us that Leah initially had difficulty conceiving. After Leah had given birth to her first son Reuvain she said, **“Because Hashem has seen my humiliation, for now my husband will love me.”** After Shimon, her second son was born, Leah declared, **“Because Hashem has heard that I am unloved...”** After the birth of Levi, her third son, Leah said, “This time my husband will become attached to me for I have borne him three sons...” However after she conceived and gave birth to Yehudah, her fourth son, Leah proclaimed her thankfulness to Hashem by saying, **“This time let me gratefully praise Hashem. Therefore she called his name Yehudah.”** If Hashem had allowed Leah to conceive despite her difficulty, why did she not express her thankfulness to G’d after conceiving her first child? Why was it only after Yehudah that she declared her thankfulness to Hashem?

It was only after Leah’s personal issues were addressed by the birth of her first three sons that she was able to give thanks to Hashem. Leah was consumed with her personal need to be accepted and loved by Yaakov and did not focus on being thankful for the gift that was bestowed upon her to be able to conceive. However, after bearing three children, Leah came to a level of understanding and clarity that enabled her to express her gratitude to Hashem. Leah should have come to this realization when she gave birth to her first child, which she did not. However, when she conceived and mothered Yehudah she understood that she had received more than her share of children (There were to be four wives of Yaakov and Twelve Tribes of Israel that were meant to be born. Thus three children would have been her even share of the total number.)

When one expresses his thankfulness, it is an indication that he is appreciative of what he has received. He sees his situation in its true light, although it could have been processed differently because of one’s distractions and conflicts with his own needs. Similarly a qualification which is a prerequisite to be a true leader/king is that one must have the ability to rise above his own conflict and see things as they truly are. A true leader transcends his own personal conflicts and feelings in order to do what is needed. This is Yehudah

Yehudah did not allow his own feelings vis-à-vis Yosef to interfere with doing what was proper and correct. He was able to control and suppress his feelings towards his brother. He merited having this special ability only because Leah, his mother, had achieved this level of clarity and understanding which allowed her to express her thankfulness to Hashem. Thus, Yehudah possessed this trait which qualified him to be chosen as the king.

The language and terminology which the Jewish people utilize to communicate with and beseech Hashem are the words that were set forth by King David, the Psalmist. King David was a warrior and a King of Israel. What qualifies such an individual to understand and appreciate how one must serve Hashem? Tehillim (Psalms) is the expression of King David's yearning, understanding, and appreciating who Hashem is. One would think that Levi, who was chosen to be the officiant of Hashem, would have authored such a text.

Tefillah (prayer) is classified as the service of Hashem. It is only when one subordinates and negates himself and his self interests that he has relevance to understanding who Hashem is. Tefillah is not simply beseeching Hashem for one's own need. We ask Him for our needs only because the request itself is an acknowledgement of recognizing and appreciating Him as the Omnipotent Being. Making the request is only a confirmation that one fully recognizes who Hashem is.

King David displayed and exemplified all of the characteristics of his forbearer Yehudah. He was able to rise above his own issues and invest every moment of his existence to the consecration and sanctification of the Name of Hashem. Because he was qualified to be the king, to the fullest sense of the word, he had the ability to control and subordinate his own self-interest and lead the Jewish people as Hashem wanted him to. Thus, King David, only because of the characteristic of "kingship" that he had inherited from Yehudah, was the one to author the book of Tehillim.