

Yad Avraham Institute
WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARIES SERIES

The Portion of

Vayechi

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Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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B"H

Vayechi

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*
Dean

1. Yaakov's Expression Altering the Destiny of the Jewish People

The Torah states at the beginning of the Portion of Vayechi, **"Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt...the years of his life were one hundred and forty-seven years."** The paragraph structure of this Portion is considered to be "sealed/closed (*stuma*)" because of the way it is written in the Torah scroll. Rashi explains that the reason the Portion of Vayechi is "*stuma*" 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 the impurity of Egypt, despite its intense level. Yaakov's presence generated a spiritual energy that created an insular environment for his family. However, upon his passing, the Jewish people became spiritually diminished because the protection of Yaakov no longer existed.

The Midrash tells us that initially it was destined that Yaakov should live 180 years as his father Yitzchak had. However, when Yosef presented his father to Pharaoh, Pharaoh was taken aback by the advanced age of Yaakov and asked him **"How many are the days of the years of your life?"** To that Yaakov responded, **"The days of the years of my sojourns have been a hundred and thirty years. Few and difficult have been the days of the years..."** The Daas Zikainim Baalei Tosafos cite a Midrash that states, "G'd said to Yaakov, 'I have saved you from the clutches of Esav and Lavan. I returned to you your daughter Dinah (after she was raped). I returned to you Yosef (after he was missing for 22 years). Yet you responded to Pharaoh that your years have been few and difficult. I swear that every word of your expression to Pharaoh which is 33 words, will cause 33 years to be deducted from your life.'" Thus, Yaakov only lived 147 years because his response to Pharaoh was considered inappropriate.

The consequence of Yaakov's passing was that the eyes and hearts of the Jewish people were sealed.

Meaning, they had lost the clarity that they had. Every moment of Yaakov's existence had infinite worth vis-à-vis the destiny of the Jewish people. The spiritual erosion would have been delayed 33 years.

The Portion of Vayetzei begins, **"Yaakov departed from Beersheva and went toward Charan."** Rashi cites the Midrash which asks, "Why is it important for us to know that Yaakov had left Beersheva? There are many things that leave Beersheva such as donkeys and camels. It would have been sufficient to say that Yaakov went to Charan. It is to teach us that when a devoutly righteous person (tzaddik) leaves his community it loses its radiance, beauty and splendor." Although Yitzchak and his wife Rivka, who were the Patriarch and Matriarch of the Jewish people, had remained in Beersheva; nevertheless, the spirituality of the community was diminished when Yaakov departed, indicating his unique level of spirituality and influence.

Even more so, Egypt the center of decadence and spiritual impurity, when Yaakov passed away, it remained totally devoid of spirituality. Thus, his passing affected his family negatively. Had Yaakov lived an additional 33 years, the spiritual erosion would have been delayed. Consequently, the bondage of the Jewish people would have been experienced differently. However, because of his failing, Yaakov's family were impacted negatively for an additional 33 years- thus changing the nature of their bondage.

The Midrash tells us that when G'd had sent the Jewish people out of Egypt He said, "Woe to Me that I needed to send them out! The Jewish people had only witnessed ten plagues before I had to take them out of Egypt! I wish that I could have visited upon the Egyptians more plagues!" Bais HaLevy asks, "Why does G'd bemoan the fact that He could not bring upon the Egyptians greater levels of punishment? This is in contradiction to the verse that states, **'And He has mercy on all of His handiwork.'**"

Chazal tell us that the Jewish people in Egypt had fallen to the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity, which is the lowest point before spiritual extinction. If they had gone beyond this point they would not have been able to be redeemed. They needed to leave Egypt at that particular moment, otherwise they would have gone into spiritual oblivion.

Bais HaLevy explains the Midrash to mean that the value of the plagues had a dual purpose. Firstly they were to punish the Egyptians and secondly they were to expose the Jewish people to G'd's revelation – thus purging them from their pagan beliefs. Each plague that they had witnessed further extricated them from their pagan past. It was only because they were not sufficiently purged of the impurity of the bondage, that they succumbed to the sin of the Golden Calf. Had they witnessed more revealed miracles before leaving Egypt, they would have been refined to a point to never return to paganism.

Had the Jewish people been under the influence of Yaakov for an additional 33 years, they would have had a greater spiritual resiliency to the impurities of Egypt. Thus, they would have had the ability not to be drawn to idolatry. The loss of the 33 years of Yaakov's life was something that set the destiny of the Jewish people until the end of time.

2. Being Qualified to Process Truth

The Torah states, **“Yaakov said to Yosef, ‘...But as for me – when I came from Paddan, Rachel died on me in the land of Canaan on the road... I buried her there on the road to Ephrath...’** 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 burying her outside of the land of Canaan). 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 G'd for Mercy on their behalf.... and G'd will respond – and the children will return to their boundary (homeland).”

Yaakov had already been in Egypt for nearly seventeen years together with Yosef. Rachel had passed away many years before that. If Yaakov understood that

Yosef harbored ill feeling in his heart all those years, why did he not explain to Yosef the basis for his decision at an earlier time? It could not have been because Yosef did not have the capacity to appreciate Yaakov's explanation at an earlier age. Yosef is identified by the Torah as the wisest of all of Yaakov's children. If so, why did Yaakov withhold this information from Yosef until the time immediately before his passing?

After the Torah tells us that Yitzchak had married Rivka, the verse states, **“And Avraham expired and died at a good old age...His sons Yitzchak and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah.”** In fact, Avraham did not pass away at this point. It was only many years later that he passed away after Yaakov and Esav had entered into adulthood. Why then does the Torah mention his death at this moment, although it did not occur until many years later?

As the founding Patriarch of the Jewish people, Avraham's responsibility and objective in life was to establish the spiritual foundation to determine the destiny of the Jewish people. It is because he had inculcated within himself the characteristics of mercy/compassion, shame/conscience, and the desire to do acts of kindness do the Jewish people possess them as the spiritual heirs of Avraham. It was because Avraham had enacted the morning prayer service that G'd attentive to the morning prayers of the Jew when he prays in the morning hours. Each of the Patriarchs contributed something unique and vital to the spiritual infrastructure of the Jewish people. It is only because of the Patriarchs that the Jewish people are able to draw upon various levels of Divine Assistance that their forefathers had established. When Yitzchak married Rivka, he assumed the role of Patriarch because prior to that moment there was no Matriarch. When Yitzchak succeeded his father as Patriarch, Avraham's role was no longer relevant vis-à-vis the spiritual destiny of the Jewish people. His era came to an end. From this point on, Avraham lived as a private individual and no longer as a Patriarch. This is why the Torah tells us of his passing after the marriage of Yitzchak.

Similarly, the Torah states when Yaakov returned to Canaan to be reunited with his father Yitzchak, **“Yitzchak's days were one hundred and eighty years. And Yitzchak expired and died....”** Although Yitzchak actually passed away many years later, it was at this point that Yaakov assumed the role of Patriarch. Yitzchak was no longer relevant to the spiritual future of the Jewish people.

Yaakov continuously contributed to the destiny of the Jewish people until his actual death. Yosef, who had fathered Ephraim and Manashe, two of the tribes of the Jewish people, had the status of a semi-Patriarch. He was the only one of Yaakov's sons who had fathered children that assumed the level of "tribes." Yaakov had equated them to his own sons Reuvain and Shimon. The only reason the Jewish people were not subsumed by the spiritual impurity of Egypt was because of what Yosef had provided for them. Yosef had become his father's successor vis-à-vis his family/Jewish people.

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis states, "If one sees a Torah sage becoming angry, he should know that it is due to the fire of Torah that is burning within him. As the verse states, **'My Words are like fire...'**" Rashi explains that because of his Torah study, the Torah sage acquires a broadness that gives him an appreciation and scope for the wrong that is being transgressed. Consequently, he reacts differently than the average person. If one possesses an advanced level of Torah, he merits Divine Assistance that allows him to internalize and grasp with clarity the concepts of the Torah. Thus, his spirituality no longer remains an abstract concept but rather a reality.

When Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov assumed the position of Patriarch they merited special Divine Assistance that gave them the necessary understanding and ability to actualize their roles as Patriarchs. Before assuming their positions as Patriarchs, each of them could not draw upon that special level of Divine Assistance. It was with this Divine Assistance that the Patriarchs were able to determine the spiritual destiny of the Jewish people until the end of time.

It was not until right before Yaakov's passing, that Yosef was to assume the role of a semi-Patriarch and thus merit a similar level of special Divine Assistance that comes about with that level of responsibility. In order for Yosef to fully understand and appreciate the necessity of his mother, Rachel being buried "on the way" he needed to be told Yaakov's motives because he was meant to ascend to that special level after his father's passing. It was only then that Yosef would be able to fully process the burial of his mother "on the way."

3. Replicating the Process of Creation

The Torah states, **"The time approached for Israel 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?

Rashi cites the Midrash which offers several reasons Yaakov did not wish to be buried in Egypt. The first reason offered by the Midrash is that Yaakov foresaw the plague of lice that was meant to come upon Egypt in the future. All the earth in Egypt would be turned into lice. The Gemara tells us that maggots to the flesh of a corpse is the equivalent of a pinprick to living flesh. Therefore, Yaakov did not want to be buried there. The second reason that is offered is that at the time of resurrection, all those who are worthy to be resurrected, their bodies that are buried throughout the world will roll underground to the Land of Israel. This process causes great pain to the body and Yaakov did not wish to endure that pain. The third reason offered by the Midrash is that he did not want to be deified by the Egyptian people after his passing. The Gemara tells us that when G'd will ultimately punish the idolaters He will destroy the deities to which they prayed. The Midrash offers a fourth reason that is not cited by Rashi.

The Midrash states, "Yaakov said, 'I do not want to be buried in Egypt because I do not want to be their redemption.' The verse in Yechezkel refers to the Egyptians as, 'Their flesh is the flesh of donkeys (*chamorim*)...' In contrast, Yaakov is identified as the 'sheep' (*seh*). As it states in Yirmiyah, 'Israel is the sheep (*seh*)...' I do not wish to be the sheep to redeem the donkey.' As it states in the verse, 'the donkey shall be redeemed by the sheep.'" Jewish Law (Halacha) dictates that one is forbidden from benefiting from a first-born male donkey until it is redeemed with a sheep (that is given to the Kohen). If it is not redeemed its neck needs to be broken. Thus, Yaakov did not want to be buried in Egypt because he did not want to be the sheep that redeems the donkey (Egyptians).

Maharal of Prague explains that the quantification of the Egyptian people as "*chamor*" is derived from the word *chomeir* – which means physicality/material. Regarding the spiritual essence of the seventy root nations of the world, the Egyptian people had the least relevance to spirituality. Thus, they are more physical and mundane. Because of their spiritual void, the Egyptian people had sunk to the lowest depths of depravity such as incest, adultery, witchcraft, and idol worship. This caused Egypt to be the most spiritually impure location in the world.

Maharal of Prague, in his work *Gevuras Hashem*, writes that the reason the bondage of the Jewish people needed to take place in Egypt and not in any other location

was because in order to bring about the greatest level of spiritual ascent /kiddusha (holiness) it must be in a setting of the most extreme setting of spiritual impurity. As the Midrash explains, that Avraham, who is compared to light emanated from Terach, who was evil. It was the equivalent of extracting light from darkness. Thus, in order for the Jewish people to develop to their fullest spiritual potential to be worthy of receiving the Torah at Sinai, they had to be in the location of the greatest vacuum of spirituality. Maharal cites many sources to support this principle.

When one serves a deity, one does so in a manner in which he believes that the power will appreciate that level of service and consequently reciprocate. 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 had weaned himself from the material. As a result, the Egyptians would have extricated themselves from the physical and thus elevate themselves to a greater level of spirituality. Yaakov who is compared to the sheep, would be the redemption of the Egyptian people who are compared to the *chamor* (physical/material).

Yaakov did not want this to happen because this would deny the Jewish people the necessary setting for the, attain their spiritual potential. Thus, the spiritual future of the Jewish people would be in jeopardy if Yaakov were to be buried in Egypt.

Before creation came about there was no existence. The state of vacuum is also part of Creation. Upon G'd's Creating the world, He Willed something from nothing (*yeish maayin*). The consequence of *yeish maayin* was considered the ultimate in goodness. As the Torah states, **"G'd saw all that He Created and it was very good."** Whenever a semblance of this process repeats itself, it also brings about the ultimate good – namely, Avraham emanating from Terach. The person who introduced monotheism to all mankind emanated from Terach, who was evil. The Midrash compares this to extracting light from darkness. The Jewish people, being placed in an environment that was a spiritual vacuum would ultimately produce people that were worthy to be taken as G'd's Chosen. They ascended to a level that qualified them to be the recipients of the Torah.

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 for 210 years. However with our understanding of what Egypt represented, 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 develop their spirituality to its fullest was because of the spiritual vacuum that existed in Egypt.

4. *The Forfeiture of Reuvain's Birthright*

The Torah states before Yaakov passed away, he blessed his sons. He blessed Reuvain saying, **"Reuvain, you are my firstborn, my strength and my initial vigor, foremost in rank and foremost in power..."** The Midrash explains, "Yaakov had said to Reuvain you as my firstborn had three crowns in your hand– priesthood (*kehunah*), kingship (*malchus*), and that of getting a double portion (*bechorah*) and you were qualified to have them all ...However you have forfeited them. What was the cause of this? You were impulsive (like water/unrestrained). Therefore, you will be no different that any of your brothers..." Reuvain moved the bed of his father, Yaakov from the location that he had designated it to be without his permission. This was considered to be a grave sin with far-reaching consequences. Reuvain had taken his father's bed from the tent of Bilha, the maidservant of Rachel, and placed it in his mother's tent (Leah). His decision to do this was because he was personally offended that his father had not chosen his mother's location to be his. Reuvain was driven by impulse. Therefore, he had failed.

Sforno writes, "...Although Reuvain was the first born, he forfeited his crowns because of his impetuous behavior. When he tampered with the bed of his father Yaakov, he profaned the honor of his father and the honor of the Divine Presence. Since the location of the Divine Presence was upon Yaakov, by moving his bed it was the equivalent of tampering with the Divine Presence." Although, Reuvain's impetuous behavior had serious consequences, why could he not repent and reinstate himself? Possibly one could say that because he possessed the character flaw of impetuosity, it was something inherent in his being – thus it would be passed onto his offspring. Therefore, he and his progeny are not qualified for priesthood and kingship.

The Torah tells us that after Yosef recounted his prophetic dreams to his brothers, his relationship with

them became tenuous. When he was sent by his father to seek out their welfare, his brothers wanted to kill him. The Torah states, **“Reuvain heard (what his brothers were planning), and he rescued him from their hand; he said, ‘We will not strike him mortally!...Shed no blood! Throw him into this pit in the desert...intending to rescue him from their hand, to return him to his father.’”** The Torah attests to the fact that Reuvain’s intent was not to leave Yosef to die in the pit, but rather to save him. Had Yosef been killed, there would not have been a Jewish people because he was one of the twelve tribes. Yaakov mourned the loss of Yosef for twenty-two years because he believed that he had failed as Patriarch who was destined to establish the tribes of Israel (which are twelve).

Sforno explains, “Reuvain had rescued Yosef from their hands. When one behaves impulsively in the heat of the moment, one may bring about iniquity that cannot be corrected. Even a tzaddik may fail in this area of acting impulsively, as in the case of Reuvain’s failure by moving the bed of his father.” Reuvain understood the destructiveness of acting impulsively. He thus intervened and suggested that Yosef should be thrown into the pit. Reuvain, through his own regretful experience, appreciated the consequence of impetuous behavior. It caused something that could not be retracted. He had desecrated the honor of his father and the honor of G’d. Through his own negative experience, he gained clarity and thus prevented his brothers from killing Yosef.

Although we see the impetuous of Reuvain was not something that was an inherent flaw in his character, he forfeited his birthright. It was because of the graveness of the sin that he profaned the Divine Presence through his impetuous behavior.

5. Culpability- Contingent Upon Perception *(from vayigash)*

The Torah tells us that during the years of famine, the surrounding lands needed to purchase grain from Egypt. Consequently, all the wealth of that region was brought to Egypt. The Torah states that Yosef had stored the wealth, **“in the house of Pharaoh.”** The verse seems to indicate that Yosef had personally delivered all the wealth directly to Pharaoh to be under his dominion.

Baal HaTurim points out that the Torah states regarding the plague of wild beasts that came upon Egypt, **“the plague of wild beasts came upon the house of Pharaoh.”** The plague of the wild beasts began with the

house of Pharaoh “he did not remember all the good that Yosef had done for him by bringing all the wealth that had been accumulated into his house and under his jurisdiction.” Thus, Pharaoh was punished measure for measure. Another explanation offered by Baal HaTurim for Yosef had brought the wealth to **“the house of Pharaoh”** is when one wishes to protect something of great value he will hide it in the inner most secure location, which is the house of Pharaoh. Similarly, when the plague of wild beasts came upon Egypt, they penetrated the inner most chambers of Pharaoh’s palace, his personal residence, because he did not remember all the good that Yosef had done for him. Thus, punishing him measure for measure.

It is interesting to note that the Torah tells us that after the plague of frogs there were large mounds of decaying frogs throughout Egypt. Consequently, a great stench came upon the land. In contrast, after the plague of wild beasts, not a single creature remained in Egypt. Had the wilds beasts died as the frogs, the Egyptian people would have benefited from their hides. Since the plague was meant as a punishment, they could not have any benefit from it. Because Pharaoh did not appreciate what Yosef had done for him and his country, he was smitten with a plague from which he could not benefit.

The wealth that came to Egypt was only there for safekeeping until the Jewish people were meant to leave. The wealth needed to come to Egypt to facilitate the promise that G’d had made to Avraham, our Patriarch at the covenant between the parts – **“they (Jewish people) would go out with great wealth.”** If in fact the wealth was not meant to remain with the Egyptians, why was Pharaoh held accountable for not appreciating what Yosef had provided for him? In reality, Pharaoh was not a true beneficiary of Yosef’s consideration.

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that at the time of the destruction of the Temple, G’d had instructed the Angel of Death to write the letter “tuf” in red on the foreheads of all the evil people (rashaim) so that they should be marked for death. However, regarding the righteous (tzaddikim) G’d had said that the letter “tuf” should be written in black to indicate that they should be spared. The Attribute of Justice had complained to G’d that the tzaddikim should also be marked with the letter “tuf” in red because they did not intercede and protest against the evil who were sinning. They remained silent and thus, they also deserved to die. G’d responded, “Even if the tzaddikim had protested, their rebuke would not have been heeded.” The Attribute of Justice said, “Although it is true what You say, that the tzaddikim were not aware that their admonishment would be rejected, they

nevertheless should have protested since they did not know that their rebuke would not be affective. Therefore the righteous also deserve to die.” G'd concurred with the Attribute of Justice and decreed that even the righteous should have the letter “*tuf*” written in red on their foreheads. We see that although the initiative of the righteous would have been futile; nevertheless, they are culpable because of they were unaware of that reality. Culpability is not necessary determined by the outcome but rather by one's initial perception.

Similarly, regarding Pharaoh, although the Jewish people would ultimately be the beneficiaries and masters over all the wealth of Egypt, Pharaoh was not aware of this at that moment. He had believed that he was the ultimate master. Therefore, he should have shown his appreciation for what had been provided for him by Yosef. Thus, he was culpable, deserving to be punished, measure for measure.