

D'Var Torah

Parsha Vayeishev

Presented by
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1. Hashem is the True Judge

We read in this week's parsha, **"Yaakov settled (*vayeishev*) in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan"**. Rashi provides one interpretation of the word *vayeishev*, "*settle*," to mean that Yaakov wanted to live in peace and tranquility. Yaakov, at this point in his life, had already experienced many difficulties and hardships such as working for Lavan for 20 years under the most trying conditions. Yaakov also had to confront his evil brother Esav, his daughter Dinah was raped, and his sons, Shimon and Levi, destroyed a community. In addition, his young wife Rachel passed away during childbirth. After experiencing these multiple hardships, Yaakov felt that he wanted to live in tranquility and not be distracted.

Yaakov wished to utilize the peace and tranquility to focus completely on his personal spiritual growth without any disturbances or interruption. He believed that he had experienced enough suffering and that he had been sufficiently purged through his difficult experiences. Rashi explains that since Yaakov believed that he had suffered enough and wished to retire into this state of tranquility, he was confronted with yet another major tragedy – the conflict between Yosef and his brothers! Ultimately, Yaakov was led to believe that a beast had devoured Yosef, his most beloved child, and he had to suffer for twenty-two years with this belief.

Rashi says, **"Yaakov sought to dwell in tranquility. But then the ordeal of Yosef was sprung upon him. The righteous seek to dwell in tranquility. But the Holy One, Blessed be He, said 'The righteous do not consider that which is prepared for them in the World to Come to be enough for them, but they seek to dwell in tranquility in this world as well'"**. Hashem says that tranquility and peace exist in the World to Come; this world is defined by having distractions and difficulties – that is its nature. Since Yaakov wanted to have peace in this world, the tragedy of Yosef was sprung on him. What was the source of conflict between Yosef and his brothers? It was due to a lack of clarity. His brothers truly believed that Yosef attempted to undermine their relationship with Yaakov. Because of this mistaken belief, they perceived Yosef as a *rodeif* (a deadly pursuer). They thought that if Yosef were to discredit them in the eyes of their father, he could curse them – which was the equivalent of death. Yosef's brothers thought he was set on taking the leadership position to become the father of the Jewish people and disposing of them. They therefore felt justified in defending themselves even by killing Yosef.

This conflict arose because of a misunderstanding. Yosef could have averted this entire problem if he had only communicated with his brothers more effectively and carefully. However Yosef lacked the clarity to behave in a more mature and effective manner with his brothers. Why didn't Yaakov's merit protect Yosef and his brothers from this lack of clarity and the subsequent chain of tragic events – namely *Klal Yisroel* going down to Egypt remaining for 210 years?

The answer is that Yaakov was not worthy of the merit to protect his children from this conflict. Yaakov wished to avoid the difficulties of the physical world and wished to retreat into a spiritual existence. Therefore, Hashem decreed that he would not merit having the power to protect Yosef and his brothers from this conflict. Why was it so wrong for Yaakov to wish to retreat into tranquility? Why should Yaakov and his children suffer because he desired to have serenity?

We read from Chazal that Yosef was separated from his father for twenty-two years because Yaakov fled his parents' home for that same length of time and did not fulfill his obligation to honor them. From this we see measure for measure: Yosef was separated from Yaakov for the same amount of time that he was separated from his own parents. This was to be the atonement for Yaakov's failure to fulfill his obligation of honoring his parents for the twenty-two years after he fled from Esav. What does this have to do with Yaakov's desire to settle in peace?

Hashem has many ways to settle the divine accounts. If Yaakov truly understood that he was spiritually deficient because he had denied his parents the proper honor for twenty-two years he would never have believed that he deserved a life of peace and tranquility. Yaakov would have spent his entire life trying to understand and atone for his sin. Despite

all the hardships Yaakov faced, he would not have believed that he had been sufficiently purged of this spiritual deficiency.

However, Yaakov did not understand the depth of his sin. He believed he had the right to have a tranquil life. He believed that he had suffered enough. Hashem disagreed. Because he wished to have a tranquil life rather than atone for his own sin of not honoring his parents, Yaakov neither had the merit to protect Yosef from the conflict with his brothers nor to provide the necessary clarity to Yosef and his brothers. Therefore, Yosef needed to be taken from him for twenty-two years as atonement. What can we learn from this?

People very often believe that they are being “short changed” or that life is not treating them fairly. Even if this were the case, we need to understand that nothing happens without a reason. Life is a series of causes and effects. When G-d forbid a tragedy befalls us we say *Baruch Dayan Ha’Emes* (Blessed is the true Judge). We do not say this about minor inconveniences. The Gemara gives the example that if one’s ship were to sink at sea with all of his possessions he would say *Baruch Dayan Ha’Emes*.

The reason why this tragedy came upon the person was because G-d is the true Judge and apparently, the tragedy was needed to atone for his sins. We do not understand G-d’s measuring rod or justice – We acknowledge that He is the True Judge. Yaakov believed that he had experienced enough tragedies and that he had sufficiently atoned for his sins. Hashem disagreed and exposed him to even more tragedies. Therefore, regardless of what we face in our lives we need to understand that we are confronted with these situations as a rehabilitation process. We need to appreciate the fact that Hashem is the True Judge and that we should utilize situations in our lives as mechanisms for spiritual growth and atonement.

2. Surviving the Difficulties of Exile

The Torah tells us, “**Yisroel (Yaakov) loved Yosef more than all of his sons since he was a child of his old age, and he made him a fine woolen tunic**”. Rashi explains the words “child of his old age (in Hebrew *Ben Zikoonim*) to mean that Yosef was born at a time of Yaakov’s old age. The Targum Onkelos explains that *Ben Zikoonim* means that Yosef was the wisest of all of Yaakov’s sons therefore all that Yaakov learned from Shem and Aver he gave over to him. Alternatively, Yosef is called *Ben Zikoonim* because he resembled his father Yaakov.

We know that Yaakov taught all of his sons Torah; however, we see from Rashi that the Torah that Yaakov learned from Shem and Aver was only communicated to Yosef and not to his other sons. If Yaakov taught all of his sons Torah – why didn’t he teach them the Torah of Shem and Aver?

The Torah tells us that at age sixty-three Yaakov fled his home to escape Esav; however before he departed for the home of Lavan, he spent fourteen years studying Torah with Shem and Aver. Yaakov is identified by the Torah as a man who studied Torah his entire life (“The man of the tent – the tent of Torah”). So why at age sixty-three does Yaakov need to go to Shem and Ever and learn Torah for an additional fourteen years before working for Lavan? What was the difference in the Torah Yaakov had learned from Shem and Aver from all the Torah that he had previously learned?

Until the moment that Yaakov fled from his home to escape Esav, he had never believed that he would need to leave Eretz Yisroel. He believed that he would live out his entire life in a holy environment. When Yaakov realized he needed to flee to Lavan and hide he knew that he would be in a spiritually dangerous environment. Yaakov understood that Lavan and his community were completely debased. As the Midrash explains, Yaakov prayed to Hashem that he not be affected by the negative influences of Murder, Forbidden Relations, Idolatry, and *Lashon Hara*. How did Yaakov contend with all of these negative forces when he was with Lavan?

The Gemara states, “I (Hashem) created the *Yetzer Hara* and the Torah as its antidote”. When Yaakov returned from his twenty-year stay with Lavan, the Torah tells us that he was completely spiritually unscathed. How did he accomplish this? In order to deal with the evil forces that he would encounter with Lavan, it was necessary for Yaakov to understand the nature of these forces. He needed to study Torah specifically geared to defusing these evil forces.

Shem and Aver were the children of Noach. They witnessed the depravity of the world before the Great Flood. The Torah that Yaakov needed to study with Shem and Aver was based on their personal experience with combating evil forces that existed in the pre-flood society. The Torah that Yaakov learned from Yitzchak did not deal with these issues as we see that Yitzchak is referred to as the “unblemished offering”. Yitzchak was not exposed to the evil influences to which Shem and Aver were exposed. Therefore, Yitzchak could not have provided Yaakov with the necessary Torah to

combat the evil forces that he would face with Lavan. Shem and Ever could teach him the needed Torah and thus provide Yaakov with the tools to defeat the *Yetzer Hara*. This is the reason why Yaakov spent fourteen years learning with Shem and Aver.

Why didn't Yaakov teach the Torah he learned with Shem and Aver to all of his sons? The Torah tells us that Yosef was like his father in many ways: in his appearance, in his experiences (Yaakov was also hated by his brother and had to confront him) and in his mission. Just as Yaakov was the Patriarch who represents survival in exile, so too was Yosef. It was because Yosef created an insulated environment in Egypt that the Jewish people were able to survive the exile, spiritually.

Yaakov saw all of his own characteristics reflected in Yosef. He knew that Yosef, unlike any of his other sons, had the ability to lead the Jewish people through the coming exiles. Yaakov understood that Yosef was uniquely qualified to remain unaffected despite the exile. Therefore, Yaakov taught Yosef the Torah he learned with Shem and Aver because it was the most relevant to him. However, the other sons did not have this. Thus, the Torah of Shem and Aver was not relevant to them. Therefore, Yaakov only taught Yosef the Torah of Shem and Aver because he knew that Yosef would be able to insure the survival of the Jewish people in exile.

3. Our Spiritual Inheritance

The Parsha begins with, **“Yaakov settled in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan.”** Later the Torah tells us, **“Yisroel loved Yosef more than all of his sons since he was a child of his old age, and he made him a fine woolen tunic”**. Why does the Torah refer to Yaakov as “Yaakov” at the beginning of the parsha and then change to “Yisroel” when it mentions Yaakov’s love for Yosef? Evidently, there must be a connection between the name “Yisroel” and the love for Yosef. Yaakov’s love for Yosef is in some way rooted in “Yisroel.”

What is the difference between the name Yaakov and the name Yisroel? We read in the Torah that Yaakov became Yisroel after he wrestled with and defeated the angel of Esav. **”No longer will it be said that your name is Yaakov, but Yisroel, for you have strived with the Divine and with men and you have overcome”**. The Sforno comments on this pasuk that since Yaakov was able to overcome the insurmountable situation, he would always be at the level of “Yisroel” and there would be no situation in the future that he would not be able to overcome. Since Yaakov was able to pass the impossible test of wrestling with the angel (overcoming Esav and Lavan for example), he established his level of spiritual dimension. Yaakov, from this point forth, would be “Yisroel” – the eternal spiritual force that can overcome and supercede anything. The name “Yaakov” represents the physical being; the name “Yisroel” is rooted in spirituality.

The Jewish people are referred to as the B’nai Yisroel (sons of Yisroel) not B’nai Yaakov (sons of Yaakov). We are an eternal people because of our spiritual dimension, which we have inherited from our forefather Yisroel. From this, we are able to understand why “Yisroel loved Yosef more than all of his sons.” The Chazal tell us that Yaakov taught Yosef all of the Torah he had learned with Shem and Aver and that Yosef had a greater spiritual capacity than all of his brothers had. Yaakov loved Yosef more than any of his other sons because it was clear to him that Yosef was his spiritual successor, not because of his ability within the physical realm such as becoming the administrator of Egypt. It was because of Yosef’s spiritual dimension that his father loved him.

The Gemara tells us that since Jews are descendants of the Holy Patriarchs, they are endowed with certain innate spiritual characteristics. Gemara in Yevamos states that every Jew who is a descendant of Avraham has the innate characteristics of compassion, shame and the need to do acts of kindness. This is part of a Jew’s spiritual genealogy. Since the Jewish people are the B’nai Yisroel and have inherited his spiritual characteristics, then we can understand that the Jews have the capability to deal with untenable situations. There will never be a circumstance that cannot be overcome by the Jewish people because we possess the quality of Yisroel.

On a spiritual basis, there is no temptation or situation that we cannot overcome as B’nai Yisroel. The Yaivitz zt”l says that the existence of the Klal Yisroel is a modern miracle even though we do not live in an era of miracles. Despite all of the exiles, pogroms, and devastations, the Jewish people still exist while past civilizations that oppressed us have disappeared. This is because we are the B’nai Yisroel and not the B’nai Yaakov. Therefore, if we understand and appreciate who we are, we will know that there is no task that is too difficult.

4. Transforming the Physical into Spiritual

The Torah tells us about the beauty of Yosef. For example, after Yosef rose from being a slave in the house of

Potiphar to becoming the administrator of the household, the Torah says, **“Now Yosef was handsome of form and handsome of appearance”**. Rashi explains that this means that when Yosef saw himself in a position of authority he began to address his physical appearance by grooming his hair. Earlier in this week’s parsha, the Torah says, **“(Yosef) ...was a youth with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah...”** Rashi cites the Chazal to explain that the word “youth” refers to Yosef’s involvement with activities such as grooming his hair and perfecting the appearance of his eyes. We see that Yosef is associated with beauty.

The Gemara in Yuma tells us that the existence of a Yosef negates any possible excuses on the Day of Judgment that beautiful people might have regarding their level of observance of Torah and Mitzvos. When a beautiful person stands before Hashem after 120 years, he cannot claim that his beauty made it difficult for him to control his actions. Hashem will use Yosef as an example of someone who was very beautiful and yet conducted himself as a *tzaddik* and dedicated his life to the service of G-d.

The Torah also tells us that Yosef’s mother, Rachel was also extremely beautiful. In fact, the Torah tells us that in order to protect Rachel from Esav, Yosef stood in front of her in order to obscure Esav’s view of her because she was very beautiful. Why is it so important that the Torah reveal to us that Yosef and Rachel were so beautiful? Why did the Torah reveal to us that Yosef was involved with enhancing his beauty? Was his grooming a positive or negative action? What can we learn from this?

We find that Yosef was incredibly successful at any activity in which he was involved. When Yosef was sold into slavery, he was quickly promoted to head of the ruler’s household. When he was imprisoned, he rose to become the quasi-warden. When Yosef was released from this service, he became the Viceroy of Egypt who was, to some degree, even more powerful than Pharaoh. Yosef was an individual who always rose to the top of any pursuit. The Torah refers to him as the “sustainer” of *Klal Yisroel* because he settled them and provided for them in Egypt. This level of accomplishment demonstrated by Yosef must be in some way connected with his beauty. What do Yosef and Rachel epitomize?

Yosef and Rachel both epitomized the ultimate in physical beauty and perfection and dedicated their lives to the services of Hashem. The Torah reveals to us the level of beauty and physical perfection of Yosef and Rachel in order to demonstrate how physical attributes can be completely consecrated to serve Hashem and thus achieve spiritual perfection. We see from this that physical attributes, which could have been involved with negative behavior, were totally transformed into positive spiritual behavior.

We can now understand Yosef’s involvement with his beauty as we cited the psukim earlier. Since Yosef was a person who dedicated his physical beauty and all of his abilities to the service of Hashem, we can say that his actions, which were meant to improve his appearance, were for the purpose of demonstrating his physical beauty in a consecrated manner. The world could observe that despite the physical perfection and beauty of Yosef – he conducted himself as a *tzaddik*. Despite Rachel’s beauty, she despised Esav who personified physicality. Both Rachel and Yosef were able to subjugate their physicality in order to serve the spiritual.

This is the connection between Yosef’s beauty and his success. Since Yosef rose above physicality by dedicating his beauty and all of his abilities to the service of Hashem, he was not bound by the limitations of the physical world. Yosef was a subject - yet he was the equivalent of the king. He was a prisoner - yet he was the equivalent of the warden of the prison. The essence of Yosef was spirituality and it revealed itself in every situation. Thus, he was able to elevate himself and transcend the physical.

The Gemara tells us the story of Pinchas Ben Yoer who purchased wheat before Pesach and was attempting to transport it home on his donkey to be processed into matzos. The Gemara tells us he came to a river, which was impossible to cross without the wheat becoming wet and thus invalidating it for Pesach. Pinchas Ben Yoer told the river to split and the river split immediately. In order to understand this story we need to appreciate who Pinchas Ben Yoer was. He was the father in law of Reb Shimon Bar Yochi. He was a person whose entire being was dedicated to the services of Hashem.

If a person takes physicality and consecrates it to Hashem, G-d makes the world subordinate to that person. All the forces of existence are subject to that person’s will since they have transcended physicality by devoting themselves completely to the service of Hashem. This is why Pinchas Ben Yoer was able to split the river. This is also why Yosef was able to achieve an ultimate level of accomplishment in all of his pursuits. Yosef perfected his physicality in order for others to appreciate his level of spirituality.

The *Yesod U'Shoresh Ha'Avoda* writes that if a person performs a mitzvah and publicizes it, he diminishes the value of the mitzvah. However if the intent of the publicity is to motivate others to perform the mitzvah then not only is the mitzvah undiminished, it is enhanced. If a mitzvah is performed completely in secret then others could not be influenced. This is why Yosef emphasized his beauty. His intent was for people to see that despite his exceptional beauty he was a tzaddik and a completely spiritual being. Yosef demonstrated that physicality could be transformed into spirituality by dedicating his beauty to the service of Hashem. We can also learn from this that all of our physical activities have the potential to be transformed into spiritual activities if we have the proper intent.

5. Understanding Hashem's Messages to Us

In this week's parsha, we read that Yosef's brothers threw him into a pit in the ground. The Torah states, "Then they took him, and cast him into the pit; and the pit was empty; no water was in it". Rashi cites the Gemara in Shabbos to explain why the Torah needed to say that the pit had no water in addition to saying that it was empty. It is obvious that if it is empty it has no water. By telling us that the pit had no water, in addition to it being empty, we may infer that while there may have been no water in the pit, there were snakes and scorpions. Why is it important for us to know that there were snakes and scorpions in the pit? Who knew that it was a snake pit?

Rav Meir Simcha zt'l explains that Yosef's brothers were unaware that it was a snake pit. The reason is that if Yosef's brothers knew that there were snakes and scorpions in the pit and Yosef was taken out alive, it would then be obvious to them that he was a tzaddik. They would have realized immediately that their evaluation of Yosef was incorrect because if he were not a tzaddik, he would not have survived the snake pit. Since Yosef did survive, his brothers did not realize that he was a tzaddik, this must mean that they were unaware of the snakes and scorpions in the pit.

If there were snakes and scorpions in the pit how could Yosef's brothers not see them? Rav Meir Simcha zt'l cites the Midrash that states that the snakes were hidden in the sides of the walls and not on the bottom of the pit. The only person who was able to see them was Yosef. Why should Yosef be the only person to see the snakes and scorpions? Another question stems from the following: The Torah describes the caravan of merchants who purchased Yosef and took him to Egypt after he was taken from the pit- "A caravan of Ishmaelites from Gilead, and their camels were bearing spices, and balsam, and birthwort..."

Rashi says, "Why did the verse publicize what their burden contained? To make known the reward of the righteous". For it is not the way of Arabs to carry anything but petroleum and resin whose odor is foul. But for Yosef it happened that spices were the cargo – so that he should not be harmed by the foul odor". Rashi says that the fact that Yosef was exposed to spices rather than foul smelling odors of petroleum was a demonstration of the reward of the tzaddikim. Does pleasant-smelling spices constitute a reward? How do we understand this? Is it the case that if we smell a sweet odor we should consider it a reward in this world?

The answer is this: Yosef had prophetic dreams that informed him that he would become a king and his brothers would bow to him. He also dreamt that he would be the sustainer of the Jewish people as well as the person to control the economy of the entire world. However, when Yosef's brothers threw him into the pit he began to question the validity of his dreams. Yosef despaired. He believed that he not only would not become a king and sustainer, but his brothers were going to kill him!

When Yosef began to despair in the pit, he noticed the snakes and scorpions that were inside the pit with him. He also noticed that they did not attack him. At that moment, Yosef knew that Hashem was performing a miracle for him. He realized that he did not need to despair and that Hashem wanted him to know that his dreams were valid. We see from this that the entire episode of the snakes and scorpions had nothing to do with anyone but Yosef. The snakes and scorpions were in the pit in order to reassure Yosef that he would in fact fulfill his prophetic dreams and that he should not despair.

After Yosef was taken out of the pit by the Arab merchants and put onto the caravan, he noticed that there were no foul smelling odors but rather sweet smelling spices. Yosef knew that usually such a caravan transported foul smelling merchandise. From this we can understand the "reward of the righteous". Yosef's reward was not that he did not smell a foul odor, but rather, that Hashem was sending him a message through having him sense a sweet smell. Hashem was communicating with Yosef that the caravan was transporting him to become a king and that his dreams were in fact true. Therefore, despite the bleakness of the moment, Hashem sent miracles and messages to Yosef not to despair.

Often we are given indicators from Hashem that require our understanding. Indicators such as abilities, skills,

successes, or G-d forbid tragedies. If we can process and understand the message that Hashem is sending us in our daily lives we would know not to ever despair. We say - "Hashem does not abandon the *Klal Yisroel*". We need to read between the lines and know that we should never despair but rather be invigorated by all of the miracles that Hashem performs for us.