

Parshas Vayeishev

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1. The Far Reaching Consequences of Our Decisions

The Torah states, “**Now Dina – the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Yaakov- went out to look over the daughters of the land. Shechem... the prince of the region...noticed her...**” It was after this that the tragedy of Dina’s defilement by Shechem took place. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the reason Dinah is referred to as the “daughter of Leah” rather than “daughter of Yaakov” is that she demonstrated her mother’s characteristic of being outgoing. Regarding Leah the Torah states, “When Yaakov came from the field in the evening, Leah *went out (vateitzei)* to meet him...” This verse refers to the incident of the dudaim (mandrakes) [in the Portion of Vayeitzei]. Rachel, who was barren at the time, asked Leah for the dudaim (which were considered an aphrodisiac) so that she could conceive. Leah reacted strongly to this request and in order for Rachel to have the dudaim, she had to exchange with Leah her night with Yaakov. Consequently, Leah “went out” to inform Yaakov that he was to come to her and not Rachel that night. That act of going out, although it was with pure intent, is considered slightly immodest. Through this incident, Leah actualized her characteristic of being outgoing, and later, Dina demonstrated that she inherited this same trait.

It seems that if Leah had not gone out, she would not have actualized this attribute within herself. Consequently, Dinah would not have inherited it and been defiled.

In the Portion of Vayeitzei, the Torah tells us that Rachel, who was barren at the time, approached Yaakov and told him, “Give me children - otherwise I am dead.” Yaakov became angry and responded strongly to her, “Am I instead of G-d who has withheld from you fruit of the womb?” At this point Leah had already given birth to four sons. The Midrash tells us that Yaakov’s reaction to Rachel’s request was unacceptable and would have consequences. The Midrash says, “Is this the way one speaks to an afflicted person? I (Hashem) swear by your life that your children (from Leah) will bow down to her (Rachel’s) child.” This response from Hashem was because of Yaakov’s insensitivity to Rachel’s pain. Rashi cites Chazal that say Rachel actually said to Yaakov that his father Yitzchak had prayed on behalf of his mother Rivka to become fertile and to conceive. Rachel asked Yaakov, “Why do you not pray on my behalf so that I may have a child.” Yaakov responded, “My father had no other children, but I have other children from Leah.”

If Yaakov had responded to Rachel in a kinder way, his sons would have never needed to bow to Yosef. In fact, all the dreams of Yosef revolved around Yaakov’s children bowing down to him. The intensification of the animosity, which ultimately led to Yosef’s being sold into slavery by his brothers, was caused by his dreams. In addition, had Yaakov been more sensitive to Rachel and prayed that she should conceive, there would have been no need for her to request the dudaim from Leah. The incident of the dudaim occurred because Yaakov did not want to pray on behalf of Rachel. Had it not taken place, Leah would not have actualized her characteristic of being outgoing - “vateitzei” and Dina would not have inherited this negative trait from her mother, thus avoiding defilement by Shechem. Yaakov’s insensitivity vis-à-vis Rachel had far-reaching consequences which affected the relationship between Yosef and his brothers, as well as Dina, and all that evolved from that point onward.

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov first met Rachel he cried because at that moment Hashem communicated to him that she would not be buried with him in the tomb of Machpela. Chazal tell us that the reason Rachel forfeited this privilege was because she took lightly the value of cohabiting (even for one night) with her husband since she had given up that night for the dudaim. Again, the only reason this incident took place was that Yaakov was not willing to pray or

Rachel's behalf.

In the Portion of Vayeshiv we see that Yaakov wished only to have tranquility in his life. He wished to finally live his life in an undistracted and trouble free context. However, as we explained, all of his difficulties evolved only because of the mistakes that he had made. In terms of our own lives, we try to understand the reasons for our difficulties. We should look within ourselves because if we introspect carefully we will realize that we are very often the cause of our own problems. If one truly sees what he is and what he is deserving of, he will realize that he is receiving far more than what he deserves. Therefore, we should appreciate all the goodness which is bestowed upon us.

2. The Value of Being in an Undistracted State

The Torah states, **“Yaakov settled in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan.”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain this verse to mean that Yaakov wanted to settle down and dwell in peace and tranquility without any distractions. Until this point, Yaakov was confronted with many challenges and tragedies. He fled his father’s home because his brother Esav wished to kill him. He had to give up all his wealth to Elifaz so that he would not kill him. Yaakov worked for Lavan for twenty years while being exposed to physical and spiritual harm. When returning from the house of Lavan, he was attacked by the archangel of Esav and subsequently had to deal with Esav himself. Yaakov’s soul mate Rachel passed away in childbirth. Shechem raped his daughter, Dina. His sons Shimon and Levi destroyed the community of Shechem in order to avenge the disgrace of their sister and father. Yaakov experienced more hardships than any of the other Patriarchs. Chazal tell us that Yaakov, after experiencing all of these difficulties in life, wanted to have a life of tranquility and peace without any distractions.

Rashi cites Chazal that tell us that because Yaakov wished tranquility and peace in this world, the tragedy of Yosef came upon him. He was sold into slavery and was believed to have been devoured by a wild beast. It is explained that when a tzaddik wishes to be in a state of tranquility in this world, Hashem responds, “Is it not enough that the tzaddikim will have what has been set for them in the world to come?” Meaning Hashem will not grant peace and tranquility to the tzaddik in this world because the challenges of life are meant to improve the tzaddik and assist him in his spiritual growth, which ultimately leads to the tranquil state of the world to come.

The Gemara tells us that the reason Yosef was denied to Yaakov his father for twenty-two years, was because Yaakov did not adhere to his mother’s (Rivka) instruction that he should only be away “for a short while”. Just as he denied his parents the mitzvah of Kibud Av Va’Em – honoring one’s parents, based on the principle of measure for measure, Yaakov was denied a relationship with his most beloved son Yosef for twenty-two years. Yaakov grieved deeply during this period.

Seemingly, the reason Yosef was sold into slavery and was away from his father for twenty-two years was a punishment for Yaakov having been away from his father Yitzchak (Measure for Measure). If Chazal tell us that the reason for Yaakov’s suffering (through the loss of Yosef), was his failure vis-à-vis his parents, then why does the Midrash tell us that the tragedy that befell Yaakov was because he wished tranquility in his life?

The concept of punishment is to atone and to rehabilitate one’s spirituality, which is diminished through transgression. Yaakov believed that because he had suffered to a degree that was beyond the other patriarchs he had atoned for his failing regarding Kibud Av Va’Em. Therefore, he was hoping that Hashem would allow him to live out his life in tranquility. However, the reality was that he was not fully atoned. Since Yaakov failed to see his own spiritual deficiency, he could not address it by himself and it was necessary for Hashem to bring upon him the tragedy of Yosef to atone for that original failing.

The question is why did Yaakov wish to be in a state of tranquility and peace more than the other Patriarchs? One may say that perhaps Yaakov suffered more than his antecedents he felt he

deserved peace and tranquility. However, it seems that this answer is not satisfactory.

Yaakov was the “ish Emes – the man of Truth.” His essence was Truth because he was an embodiment of Torah. The Torah refers to him as, “Yaakov the perfect man who dwelt in the tent (the tent of Torah)”. In order for Yaakov to maintain a level of clarity and not to compromise his standard of Emes, he could not be distracted. The moment one is distracted, perception of reality is blocked. Therefore, Yaakov, being the Patriarch of Emes, wished to be in a state of tranquility and peace so that he would be able to establish a standard of Emes at the most perfect level.

Rambam states in Hilchos Deos (The Laws of Proper Conduct) that it is impossible to understand and to know any aspect of one’s Creator if he is distracted by any physical illness. Therefore, Rambam writes that it is an imperative to maintain one’s health. Even the slightest pain would distract an individual to the point that he would not fully comprehend and appreciate G-d.

Therefore especially Yaakov, who is the Patriarch of Truth (and the embodiment of Torah), understood that he needed to be in an undistracted state to fully succeed as the Patriarch of Klal Yisroel. This is why Yaakov wished to have peace and tranquility more than his antecedents. However, the fact remained that he needed to atone for his failure of not honoring his parents for twenty-two years. Since Hashem wants the tzaddik to have his full share in the world to come, he must atone in this world.

3. Understanding Yaakov’s Special Love for Yosef

The Portion begins, “These are the chronicles of Yaakov...” However, when the Torah discusses his relationship with his son Yosef he is referred to as “Yisroel”. The verse states, **“Now Yisroel loved Yosef more than all his sons since he was a child of his old age...”** The question is why does the Torah use the appellation of “Yisroel” rather than “Yaakov” when communicating his love for Yosef?

Yaakov achieved the status of “Yisroel” after he overpowered the archangel of Esav because he was able to have mastery over both the physical and spiritual. He defied all physical odds by prevailing over his evil father-in-law Lavan and his brother Esav who wished to kill him. Yaakov had proven himself to be a person who could contend with the physical and spiritual despite the impossible. He was identified by Hashem as “Yisroel” in order to establish him as the eternal person who supercedes the physical and the spiritual. Every moment of Yaakov’s existence was to accommodate his spirituality. His involvement in the physical was only as a means to a spiritual end.

Yaakov, Our Patriarch, is referred to as the Patriarch of Golus (exile). The Gemara tells us that Yaakov authored Arvis (Evening Prayer), which is recited at night. The nighttime period represents exile. Just as one is not able to perceive things clearly in the night and very often reality is totally distorted, so too it is difficult to understand Truth because of exile. One has many unanswered questions. Yaakov is the Patriarch who endowed the Jewish people with the ability to be resilient to the overwhelming negative influences of exile because he had achieved the level of “Yisroel”. This is why the Jewish people are referred to as the B’nei Yisroel. All of Yaakov’s children were born to him in exile, with the exception of Binyamin.

When the Torah uses the appellation “Yisroel” regarding his love for Yosef, it is not referring to the fatherly love that Yaakov had for his son. Rather, the name “Yisroel” indicates that he, as the Patriarch, loved Yosef because of his understanding of Yosef’s spiritual dimension. Yosef reflected all of his father’s characteristics. Chazal tell us that both Yaakov and Yosef had similar life experiences: both needed to leave their homes, both were in exile, both needed to survive on their own, etc. They shared similar challenges and difficulties. When “Yisroel” loved Yosef, he saw Yosef as his spiritual successor – just as he was resilient to the pitfalls of Exile (Golus) so too was his son Yosef.

Yosef is referred to by Chazal as “Yosef Ha’Tzaddik – Yosef the Righteous”. Yosef received the

blessing of “*Alei aayin* - You are above the eye,” which meant that he was not susceptible to the human eye (evil eye). The Midrash tells us that he merited this blessing because when he was in Egypt (even as the Viceroy) “his eye did not benefit from flesh that was not his.” Yosef was alone in Egypt, a depraved society immersed in promiscuity and other abominable behavior. He was able to insulate himself from the environment of Egypt and remain spiritually unscathed (as his father Yaakov had done in the home of Lavan) because he was rooted in spirituality. Physicality did not exist for Yosef outside of the context of spirituality. Yosef had a semblance of his father’s spiritual dimension. This is why Yosef’s children Ephraim and Menashe (who were born in Egypt) were considered Tribes of Israel despite their being grandchildren of Yaakov.

Yaakov blessed Yosef by saying that for all time the blessing that Jews will give to their children will be that they should be like Ephraim and Menashe. Meaning, that they should understand that the value of the material is not an end unto itself - but only a means to a spiritual end, which is the Torah itself.

4. Reading Between the Lines

The Torah tells us that Yosef’s brothers threw him into a pit and left him there to die. It 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 Tractate Shabbos, that it would have been sufficient for the Torah to tell us that the pit was empty. Obviously, if it was empty, it had no water. So why did the Torah state that there was no water? The Gemara answers we should 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 this?

Some explain that Yosef’s brothers were unaware that it was a snake pit. If they had known that it contained snakes and scorpions and Yosef was unharmed, then it would have been a clear indication that he was truly a tzaddik. They would have realized immediately that their evaluation of him was incorrect, otherwise, he could have not have survived. The Midrash says that the snakes were contained in the sides of the pit and thus not noticeable from the outside. Therefore, Yosef’s brothers were not able to see them. The only person who was aware of the snakes and scorpions was Yosef. Why did Hashem want him to be the only one aware of this and why did Hashem want Yosef placed into a snake pit at all?

The strained relationship between Yosef and his brothers was a result of his tale bearing to his father. However, it was exacerbated through the dreams that he related to his brothers. He had dreamt that they would bow to him and be subservient to him. He also dreamt that he would be their sustainer. Yosef’s brothers dismissed the dreams as delusions of grandeur. However, Yosef believed that his dreams were prophetic and therefore he had shared them with his brothers. When Yosef was thrown into the snake pit, he began to question the validity of his dreams. Maybe in fact they were only delusions of grandeur and had no relevance to reality. He believed that it was possible that he was going to die.

However, when he was in the pit and noticed that the snakes and scorpions did not attack him, he realized that Hashem was communicating something to him. Although he did not understand at this moment how the events would unfold, he knew that Hashem was with him and there was no reason to despair. The miracle, which Yosef experienced, was only for him to know and no one else.

The Torah tells us that a caravan passed near the pit. Yehudah said to his brothers, “What benefit do we have if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Let us go and sell him to the Ishmaelites.” Thus, his brothers sold Yosef into slavery. The Torah goes out of its way to tell us what merchandise the caravan was transporting - “**A caravan of Ishmaelites from Gilead, and their camels were bearing spices, and balsam, and birthwort...**” What is the significance of knowing this? Rashi cites the Midrash which states, “**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 states that the fact Yosef experienced the pleasant smell of the spices rather than the foul smell of fuels was the reward of tzaddikim. The question is - if Yosef was sold into slavery what is the value of the pleasant smelling fragrances in his predicament.

The answer is that after Yosef was taken out of the pit and put onto the caravan, he noticed that there were no foul smelling fuels as one would have expected, but rather pleasant smelling spices. From this we can understand the "reward of the righteous". Yosef immediately understood that the unusual presence of spices rather than fuels was a message that he should not despair and that Hashem was with him. Despite the bleakness of the moment, Hashem was reassuring him that ultimately things would turn out for the best.

Yaakov, our Patriarch, was a man who dedicated his life to Torah study and was an embodiment of spirituality. The Torah tells us that after receiving the blessing from his father Yitzchak, he needed to flee because Esav was intent on killing him. Yaakov himself was concerned, understanding the nature of the community of Charan and Lavan's influence –, which was the antithesis of holiness. He was not sure that he would be able to survive the continuous onslaught of spiritual deprivation. He was concerned that maybe he would not be able to achieve the standard of spirituality necessary for him to father the Jewish people. Before leaving Canaan, Yaakov slept on top of Mount Moriah. Before going to sleep, he took twelve stones and placed them around his head. The Midrash tells us that the significance of the twelve stones was to determine whether he would be the Patriarch of the Jewish people. If the twelve stones were fused together as one, then it would indicate that he would be the father of the Jewish people. However if they would remain as twelve stones, that would indicate that he was not meant to be the Patriarch. Hashem performed this miracle to give Yaakov confidence. Although he was going up against a formidable community and person, he would return spiritually unscathed.

The Gemara tells us that when the Greeks occupied Israel, they entered onto the Temple Mount and took all of the vials of pure olive oil that were designated for the lighting of the Menorah and contaminated them. Every vial initially had the seal of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) to indicate its pure status. The Greeks broke the seals of all of the vials. When the family of the *Chashmanoyim* defeated the Greek enemy and drove them out of Israel, they wanted to rededicate the Bais HaMikdash (Temple). They searched for oil to kindle the Menorah. They realized that all the oil was contaminated. However, miraculously they located one vial of oil, which was only sufficient to burn for one day. The miracle of Chanukah was that it burnt eight days.

The fact is that many of the Jews at that time had become Hellenized. After the victory over the Greeks had taken place, the question was - will the Jewish people survive after being influenced so negatively by the Greeks? When the Kohanim located the vial of oil that had the unbroken seal of the Kohen Gadol, this was a message from Hashem to the Jewish people that there is no reason to despair. Hashem was with us. The Jewish people still had relevance to purity and light, which is symbolized by the oil. Although at the moment the future seemed bleak, nevertheless they will succeed.

There is a question that is asked by the Bais Yosef - why do we regard Chanukah as an eight-day miracle rather than seven, since there was sufficient oil to burn for one day? One of the answers given by the Bais Yosef is that the vial of oil was divided into eight parts – one for each night. The fact that the Menorah burned for each of the eight nights despite the fact that it had only an eighth of the amount of oil required is the reason even the first day is considered a miracle. Therefore, it is an eight-day miracle.

There is a principle in Judaism that states that one does not rely on a miracle. If this is the case then why did the *Chashmanoyim* divide the oil into eight portions with the hope that Hashem would make it last for the entire night? Was this not considered "relying on a miracle?" The answer is the miracle had already taken place. The locating of the one vial with the unbroken seal was in itself a miracle. The principle of not relying on miracles only applies in situations within a natural context. However, in the case of the Menorah, the vial of oil was already within a context of miracle. The vial of oil has the same significance as the snakes and scorpions had to Yosef, and the spices, and the twelve stones that were fused into one had to Yaakov – all were reassuring

messages from Hashem that ultimately everything would work out.

Often we are given indicators that require our understanding. Indicators such as abilities, skills, successes, or G-d forbid tragedies. If we can process and understand the message that is being communicated to us by Hashem then we would understand that there is no reason to despair. We say that Hashem does not abandon the *Klal Yisroel*. We need to read between the lines and understand that there is no reason to despair but rather be invigorated by all of the miracles that Hashem continuously performs for us. Reb Yaakov Emden z'tl writes in his siddur that there is a present day public miracle, which may even be greater than the miracle of Egypt. The fact that there is a Jewish people despite all of the tragedies and holocausts which befell us throughout history, is the greatest miracle of all time. This, itself is a message to us that Hashem is with us and ultimately the Jewish people will experience the final redemption – the coming of Moshiach.

5. How One's Behavior Reflects Humility

The Torah tells us that Yehudah, the son of Yaakov, had an illicit relationship with Tamar. Unbeknownst to him she became pregnant. When Yehudah approached Tamar he believed that she was a harlot. She requested that he give her his signet ring, cloak, and walking stick as collateral until she received her fee from him. When he later sent an agent to pay for her service and to retrieve his personal effects, the agent was not able to find her. Soon after, it became known that Tamar was pregnant from an illicit relationship. Yehudah ruled that she must be put to death by burning (because she was bound for a levirate marriage [see Ramban]). When Tamar was about to be put to death by fire, the Torah states, **“Tamar sent word to her father-in law saying, “By the man to whom these belong (the signet, cloak, and staff) I am with child. Identify, if you please, whose are this seal, this cloak, and this staff.” Yehudah recognized his items and said, “She is righteous - more righteous than me ...”**

The Gemara tells us that despite the fact that Tamar was about to be burned to death, she did not publicly state that Yehudah had impregnated her but only alluded to that fact by identifying the collateral that was given to her. The Gemara in Tractate Kesubos extrapolates from her behavior that, “it is better to throw oneself into a fiery oven than to publicly embarrass another person.” The Gemara tells a story that Mar Ukvah would give charity to a poor man every day by inserting the coins through a slot in the poor man's door so that he should not know his benefactor and avoid embarrassment. One day after the coins were inserted through the slot, the poor man suddenly opened the door to try to find out who was responsible for giving him charity. Mar Ukvah and his wife immediately fled from that location; however, he pursued them to the point that they had to jump into an oven in order to elude him and avoid embarrassing him. This behavior was based on the principle that we learn from Tamar vis-à-vis her father-in-law Yehudah - “it is better to throw oneself into a fiery oven than to publicly embarrass another person.” How do we understand this?

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that a non-Jew approached Hillel HaZakein (Hillel the Elder) for the sake of converting him to Judaism. He asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah on one leg - Meaning to teach him one principle which encompasses the entire Torah. Hillel responded, “What is detestable to you, do not do unto your fellow man.” That is the all-encompassing principle of Torah and the remainder is commentary. Is there a connection between the principle stated by Hillel and the principle learned from Tamar's behavior?

Originally, Rachel was meant to be the wife of Yaakov. The Torah tells us that Lavan switched Leah for her sister Rachel in order to deceive Yaakov. However, Yaakov was aware that Lavan, his perspective father-in-law (because of who he was), would try to deceive him and exchange another woman in the place of Rachel. Therefore, Yaakov gave Rachel a secret code that she would tell him under the chupah: (“Chalah, Nidah, Hadlikas HaNer – tithing the dough, the laws of family purity, and kindling the Shabbos lights.) These are the three mitzvos particular to woman. Rachel gave the code words to her sister Leah so that she should not be disgraced. Rachel gave away her position as the Matriarch only so that Leah, her sister, should not be embarrassed when Yaakov would ask for the code words. The Gemara in Tractate Megillah tells us that Rachel's behavior was a demonstration of the characteristic of “*shetikah* –silence.”

In Megillas Esther we read that queen Esther would not reveal her Jewish pedigree to her husband king Achoshverosh despite all the incentives that were offered to her. Esther was a granddaughter of Rachel and was from the tribe of Binyamin. Just as her ancestor Rachel possessed the characteristic of silence, so did Esther.

We find that the quality of “silence” is synonymous with humility. A person who is boastful is neither silent nor humble. However, one who is humble is also silent because he has no reason to reveal his own ability and accomplishments. We read in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers) that Shimon the son of Rabban Gamliel says, “All my life I was raised among the wise men and the greatest characteristic that I have found among them was silence.” The literal understanding of this statement is that for one to have full benefit of what is being taught, one must be a good listener; Thus he would be able to gain wisdom. However, this interpretation seems to be difficult because it is understood that a prerequisite to wisdom is that one must pay attention to what is being said. The statement of Shimon can be understood to mean that “silence” is an indication of one’s humility.

Why was Rachel able to take the chance of possibly forfeiting the position as Matriarch in order not to embarrass her sister? How do we understand one’s ability to subordinate and negate oneself to such a degree? This trait manifests itself in silence; however, the characteristic itself is humility.

Not embarrassing another person at the expense of one’s life is an expression of total negation, which is rooted in humility. This manifests itself in silence because Tamar did not reveal that Yehudah was the man who had impregnated her. If one is hearing a Torah lecture and does not feel the need to interject in order to demonstrate his own knowledge – that silence is an expression of his humility.

The Gemara in Tractate Nidarim tells us that humility is the key needed to acquire Torah. This is the meaning of Shimon’s words. Through his exposure to the wisest men of his generation (Torah Sages), he had learned that the most valuable characteristic is silence. Silence is an expression of humility. Because these Torah Sages had that exceptional level of humility they merited to become the greatest sages of their generation.

Hillel taught the convert that the all-encompassing principle of Torah “What is detestable to you, do not do to your fellow man” is in fact rooted in humility. If I value my fellow then how could I possibly treat him in a manner that I myself do not wish to be treated? This principle seems only to address one’s obligations between himself and his fellow man. How then does this principle address one’s obligations between man and G-d? The answer is – once one demonstrates his ability to be humble, there is no difference whether it is between himself and his fellow man or with G-d.

Moshe Rabbeinu was the most humble person to ever live. He is the only person who merited to be identified by Hashem with this description. Simultaneously, Moshe is referred to as “the servant of Hashem”. They are inextricably connected. Moshe’s level of humility was to such a degree that he did not exist for himself - even for a moment. Therefore, he merited the appellation “Eved Hashem- servant of Hashem”.

Only if one possesses the characteristic of humility can he relate to the concept that “it is better to throw oneself into a fiery oven than to embarrass another person publicly.” It is only possible to value another person to such a degree if one is truly humble. It is because of this special quality, that Tamar merited to be the mother of the Tribe of Yehudah. She completely negated herself. In addition, we find that Dovid HaMelech (King David) who was one of the three most humble people who ever lived, descended from Tamar. He referred to himself as a “worm” and not a man. This is the reason that Yehudah said, “She is more righteous than I am.” It is not because she was simply a better person, but rather, he understood that it was because Tamar was so humble that she did not embarrass him in public. He understood that she would have rather thrown herself into the fire than publicly embarrass him.

6. What is Needed to Maintain an Ongoing Consciousness?

The Torah tells us that after Yaakov was informed that a beast devoured his son Yosef, he believed that his son was dead. Yaakov rent his garments, cried, and grieved the loss of his son. Yaakov's sons and daughters came to console him; however, the Torah states, **"He refused to be consoled."** If it were not for this verse, one would have said that since Yosef was the apple of his father's eye, and Yaakov loved him more than all of his children combined, that the reason he could not be consoled was because of the continuous overwhelming grief that he was experiencing. However, the Torah tells us differently. The reason Yaakov was not consoled was that he "refused" to be. This implies that if he had wished to be consoled, he would have been, despite the enormous loss.

The Midrash tells us Yaakov received a sign from Hashem that if he was outlived by *all* of his sons, then he was guaranteed to be spared Gehinom (spiritual hell). Therefore, if Yosef had been killed, it was an indication to Yaakov that he would go to Gehinom; and with only eleven sons left there would not be a Jewish people. As tragic as it was to lose Yosef or as difficult as it was to believe that there would not be a Jewish people, still, Yaakov could have been comforted if he had been open to receiving consolation from his other children. However, he was not consolable - only because he "refused" to be.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that only the deceased are forgotten from one's heart. Therefore, since Yosef was alive, he could not be forgotten from Yaakov's heart. As the Gemara in Tractate Pesachim tells us, one of the gifts that Hashem gave to humanity was the ability to forget. If one could not forget the pain of losing a loved one, it would be virtually impossible to survive. Since Yosef was alive, Yaakov did not naturally forget him because he refused to be consoled. Yet, even if Yosef was alive, Yaakov could have forgotten him if he chose to do so.

The Torah is teaching us that regardless of how tragic an event may be, a human being has the capacity to forget it if he chooses to forget. Yaakov did not want to forget. He refused to be consoled. He understood that if such a tragedy could occur in his lifetime, it was an indication that he had somehow failed spiritually. He believed that he needed to correct that spiritual deficiency – whatever it may be. He refused to be consoled because he understood that the tragedy of Yosef's passing was an indicator and demanded introspection.

In life, we have experiences that are in some cases beyond our control. Do we actually stop to think why these events affected our lives? Unless something unusual happens to us, in most cases we dismiss it as either happenstance or as something that happens to everybody. If this is the way one views life then he will not sense the opportunity to introspect and correct the spiritual shortcomings. Even after one reflects on his difficulties, if he does not actively do something to keep it in mind, he will forget the unfortunate experience despite its magnitude. The problem, its effect, and its purpose will dissipate and fade away. Eventually, it would have no impact on his life to any degree.

It is only because Yaakov "refused" to be consoled and to forget that he was able to introspect and utilize the tragedy of Yosef's passing to grow spiritually and correct his shortcomings.

We must address all events that we experience in our lives – both positive and negative. Because the only way we will be able understand Hashem's message is by being cognizant and conscious of the event.