

Home Weekly Parsha Vayechi
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The conclusion of the book of Bereshith sets the stage for all of the remaining history of the Jewish people. Jacob and his family have settled in the land of Egypt, and live under the most favorable of circumstances. Their son and brother, Joseph, is the de facto ruler of the country that has provided them with prosperity. However, Joseph himself warns them that the situation is only temporary and that there are troubled days ahead.

He tells them that they will leave the land of Egypt, whether they wish to or not, and that when they leave they should remember him and take his bones with them, to be buried in the land of Israel, the home from which he was so brutally taken when he was about 17 years old.

I would imagine that the family of Jacob, when hearing these predictions of Joseph, were amazed, and probably were unable to fathom how their situation could change so drastically from greatness and wealth to slavery and persecution.

The Jewish people are by nature an optimistic people. We always believe that somehow things will turn out well, no matter how bleak the present circumstances may appear to be. Yet, only by remembering Joseph's words would the eventual redemption from Egyptian bondage be realized. Joseph's warnings would accompany them with his remains through the 40-year sojourn in the desert of Sinai. It would remind them to be aware of the historical dangers they would always have to face.

The conditions under which Jews have lived in exile and in the diaspora for millennia have always varied and fluctuated. But the basic message was that we were not really at home. We continually ignored warning signs, and somehow believed that things would get better. Ignoring the warnings of Joseph, many times in our history we doomed ourselves to tragedy and disaster.

If Joseph, the viceroy of Egypt, warned us that Egypt is not our home, then that message could not have been clearer to Jews in the coming millennia. But as the story of Egypt and the Jews unfolds in the book of Shemot, the majority of Jews forgot Joseph's message. And it remained only for Moshe himself to bring Joseph's bones out of Egypt for eventual burial in the Land of Israel.

The Torah will record for us that later Egyptian pharaohs and the Egyptian nation forgot about Joseph and his great accomplishments. The ironic tragedy is that much of the Jewish people as well forgot about Joseph and his message to them. In the annals of Jewish history, this forgetfulness on the part of Jews has often been repeated – and always with dire consequences. The story of Joseph and of the Jewish settlement in Egypt provides the prototype for all future Jewish history. We always need to ask ourselves what Joseph would have to say about our current Jewish world. This is worthy of contemplation.

Shabbat shalom
Rabbi Berel Wein

Family, Faith and Freedom (Vayechi 5780)
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

If you want to understand what a book is about, look carefully at how it ends. Genesis ends with three deeply significant scenes.

First, Jacob blesses his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh. This is the blessing that Jewish parents use on Friday night to bless their sons. My predecessor Lord Jacobovits used to ask, why this blessing of all the blessings in the Torah? He gave a beautiful reply. He said, all the others are from fathers to sons – and between fathers and sons there can be tension. Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh is the only instance in the Torah of a grandparent blessing a grandchild. And between grandparents and grandchildren there is no tension, only pure love.

Second, Jacob blesses his twelve sons. There is discernible tension here. His blessings to his eldest three sons, Reuven, Shimon, and Levi, read more like curses than blessings. Yet the fact is that he is blessing all

twelve together in the same room at the same time. We have not seen this before. There is no record of Abraham blessing either Ishmael or Isaac. Isaac blesses Esau and Jacob separately. The mere fact that Jacob is able to gather his sons together is unprecedented, and important. In the next chapter – the first of Exodus – the Israelites are, for the first time, described as a people. It is hard to see how they could live together as a people if they could not live together as a family.

Third, after the death of Jacob, the brothers asked Joseph to forgive them, which he does. He had also done so earlier. Evidently, the brothers harbour the suspicion that he was merely biding his time until their father died, as Esau at one point resolved to do. Sons do not take revenge within the family while the father is alive – that seems to have been the principle in those days. Joseph speaks directly to their fears and puts them at rest. “You intended to harm me but God intended it for good,” he says.

The Torah is telling us an unexpected message here: the family is prior to all else, to the land, the nation, politics, economics, the pursuit of power and the accumulation of wealth. From an external point of view, the impressive story is that Joseph reached the heights of power in Egypt, the Egyptians themselves mourned the death of his father Jacob and accompanied the family on their way to bury him, so that the Canaanites, seeing the entourage said, “The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning” (Gen. 50:11). But that is externality. When we turn the page and begin the book of Exodus, we discover that the position of the Israelites in Egypt was very vulnerable indeed, and all the power Joseph had centralised in the hands of Pharaoh would eventually be used against them.

Genesis is not about power. It is about families. Because that is where life together begins.

The Torah does not imply that there is anything easy about making and sustaining a family. The patriarchs and matriarchs – Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel especially – know the agony of infertility. They know what it is to wait in hope and wait again.

Sibling rivalry is a repeated theme of the book. The Psalm tells us “how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together.” It might have added, “and how rare.” Almost at the beginning of the human story, Cain kills Abel. There are tensions between Sarah and Hagar that lead to Hagar and Ishmael being sent away. There is rivalry between Jacob and Esau, and between Joseph and his brothers, in both cases coming close to murder.

Yet there is no diminution of the significance of the family. To the contrary, it is the main vehicle of blessing. Children figure as central to God's blessing no less than the gift of the land. It is as if the Torah were telling us, with great honesty, that yes, families are challenging. The relationship between husband and wife, and between parent and child, is rarely straightforward. But we have to work at it. There is no guarantee that we will always get it right. It is by no means clear that the parents in Genesis always got it right. But this is our most human institution.

The family is where love brings new life into the world. That in itself makes it the most spiritual of all institutions. It is also where we have our most important and lasting moral education. To quote Harvard political scientist, the late James Q. Wilson, the family is “an arena in which conflicts occur and must be managed.” People within the family “love and quarrel, share and sulk, please and disappoint.” Families, he says, “are the world in which we shape and manage our emotions.”[1]

The Torah guides us through areas that have been identified in the 20th century as the most important arenas of conflict. Freud saw the Oedipus complex – the desire to create space for yourself by removing your father – as one of the primary drivers of human emotion. Rene Girard saw sibling rivalry as a, perhaps the, source of human violence.[2]

I have argued that the story of the Binding of Isaac is directed precisely at the Oedipus complex. God does not want Abraham to kill Isaac. He wants him to relinquish ownership of Isaac. He wants to abolish one of the most widespread beliefs of the ancient world, known in Roman law as the principle of *Patria potestas*, that parents own their children. Once this has gone, and children become legal personalities in their own right,

then much of the force of the Oedipus complex is removed. Children have space to be themselves.

I have argued also that the story of Jacob's wrestling match with the angel is directed against the source of sibling rivalry, namely mimetic desire, the desire to have what your brother has because he has it. Jacob becomes Israel when he ceases wanting to be Esau and instead stands tall as himself.

So Genesis is not a hymn to the virtue of families. It is a candid, honest, fully worked-through account of what it is to confront some of the main problems within families, even the best.

Genesis ends on these three important resolutions: first, that grandparents are part of the family and their blessing is important. Second, Jacob shows it is possible to bless all your children, even if you have a fractured relationship with some of them. Third, Joseph shows it is possible to forgive your siblings even if they have done you great harm.

One of my most vivid memories from my early days as a student was listening to the BBC Reith Lectures in 1967. The Reith lectures are the BBC's most prestigious broadcast series: the first to deliver them was Bertrand Russell in 1948. In 1967 the lecturer was the Cambridge Professor of Anthropology, Edmund Leach. I had the privilege of delivering these lectures in 1990.

Leach called his lectures *A Runaway World?*, and in his third lecture he delivered a sentence that made me sit up and take notice. "Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents."^[3] It was an important sign that the family was about to be dethroned, in favour of sexual liberation and self-expression. Rarely has so important an institution been abandoned so thoroughly and so lightly.

In the decades that followed, in many parts of society, cohabitation replaced marriage. Fewer people were getting married, they were getting married later, and more were getting divorced. At one point, 50% of marriages in America and Britain were ending in divorce. And 50% of children were being born outside marriage. The current figure for Britain is 42%.

The consequences have been widespread and devastating. To take one example, the birth rate in Europe today is far below replacement rate. A fertility rate of 2.1 (the average number of children born per woman of the population) is necessary for a stable population. No country in Europe has that rate. In Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece, it is down to 1.3. The overall average is 1.6. Europe is maintaining its population only by immigration on an unprecedented scale. This is the death of Europe as we knew it.

Meanwhile in the United States, a significant part of the population is living in neighbourhoods with few intact families, disadvantaged children, damaged neighbourhoods, poor schools, few social facilities, and a desperate shortage of hope. This, for sections of America, is the end of the American dream.^[4]

People who look to the state, politics and power, to deliver the good, the beautiful and the true – the Hellenistic tradition – tend to regard the family and all it presupposes in terms of fidelity and responsibility as a distraction. But for people who understand not just the importance of politics but also its limitations and dangers, relationships between husband and wife, parent and child, grandparent and grandchildren, and siblings, are the most important basis of freedom. That is an insight that runs all the way through Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, summed up in his statement that "as long as family feeling was kept alive, the opponent of oppression was never alone."^[5]

James Q. Wilson put it beautifully: "We learn to cope with the people of this world because we learn to cope with the members of our family. Those who flee the family flee the world; bereft of the former's affection, tutelage, and challenges, they are unprepared for the latter's tests, judgements, and demands."^[6]

That, surprisingly, is what Genesis is about. Not about the creation of the world, which occupies only one chapter, but about how to handle family conflict. As soon as Abraham's descendants can create strong families, they can move from Genesis to Exodus and their birth as a

nation. I believe that family is the birthplace of freedom. Caring for one another, we learn to care for the common good.

Shabbat shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Parshat Vayechi (Genesis 47:28 — 50:26)

By Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – In a most uplifting and inspiring deathbed scene, grandfather Jacob/Israel peacefully takes leave of this world by blessing, evaluating and prophesying about every one of his sons, delineating the tribe that will emanate from each and establishing the National Republic of tribes that will emerge from all of them together.

The petty rivalries have been laid aside, the storm undrang of exiles, wars, famines and inter-sibling savagery unto death have seemingly been forgotten; a divided family torn asunder by jealousies and ambitions is turning into a nascent nation, united—if only during this brief period—by their aged Patriarch, whose last words are presenting the blueprint for the Divine destiny set aside for the purveyors of the Abrahamic blessing, that all the families on earth will be blessed with peace because of this unique nation.

For those of us who have been carefully following the adventures of this remarkable family, fraught with intrigue but always propelled onward by a Divine Spirit of "compassionate righteousness and moral justice," there is one jarring note in Grandfather Israel's will and testament of prophetic blessing: In each previous generation, the elder and the more aggressive son was rejected in favor of his younger and gentler brother (Isaac trumps Ishmael, Jacob trumps Esau) and in this latter instance, Rebekah demonstrates to Isaac, albeit by deception, that Jacob, if necessity warrants it, has the wherewithal to utilize the hands of Esau to get what is rightfully his. Hence Isaac eventually rejects Esau and gives both the physical double portion of the blessings and the more spiritual Messianic birthright legacy to Jacob.

As I have written in a previous commentary, the Malbim explains that Isaac had originally intended to split the inheritance, giving the more material blessings to the more aggressive and materialistically oriented son, Esau, who would know how to train and equip an army, how to navigate the stock market and how to initiate start-up hi-tech projects, as it were, and to give the more spiritual, Messianic birthright legacy to the wholehearted, tent-dwelling Jacob, who could more naturally deal with that mission of Israel, to teach morality and peacefulness to all the nations of the earth.

Rebekah argued that in order for Torah ethics and spirituality to be enabled to "conquer" the world, if God was indeed to be enthroned on earth, then Torah would require a protective army and a strong financial base to make this a real possibility. And when Rebekah proved her point by "coating" Jacob with the external garb and might of Esau, Rebekah won the day and both blessings and birthright went to Jacob.

Now that it's Jacob's turn to bestow material blessings and Messianic birthright, I would have thought that he, of all people, based on his own experience, would have given both gifts to the same favored and beloved wise son of his old age, to the son of his most beloved Rachel, to Joseph. But no, Jacob does what his father Isaac had thought to do initially: He creates a division between the physical blessings and the spiritual birthright. He bequeaths the blessings of heavenly rain and earthly produce, innumerable seed and a double tribal portion of land, and even the mighty bow of vanquishing warfare upon the financially adept Grand Vizier, Joseph (Gen. 48:22- 49:26) and he awards dominion over the family, the majestic and spiritual birthright of King Messiah, the recipient of fraternal fealty as well as peaceful homage from the ingathering of all of the nations, to the ba'al teshuva (penitent) Judah. Why does Jacob revert to the concept of Isaac rather than to that of Rebekah, the mother who so adored him? You will remember that the victory of Rebekah over Isaac may have been short-lived. Jacob was plagued by his deception of his father until his dying day. Almost from the moment he left his father's house for Laban-land, his mother's brother substituted his elder daughter for her younger sister under the marriage canopy with the prescient words, "It is not the practice in our

place to give the younger before the elder,” and not only his ten sons but even his beloved Joseph deceived him—the ten brothers with the bloody coat and Joseph with his garb of Grand Vizier.

Jacob understands only too well that the bearer of the righteous legacy of Abraham dare not descend into deception; and so only when he succeeds in disgorging the Esau from within himself, the unfortunate result of twenty-two years with Laban, will he be empowered with the name Yisra-El, purveyor of the God of righteousness (Yashar-El).

Moreover, when the head of a family must decide upon who is to be the real continuator of his legacy, he must choose the individual child who most represents the major ideals and goals to which the family is dedicated.

However, when one is about to form a nation, a consortium of twelve (or thirteen) tribes which will comprise the peoplehood of Israel, the goal becomes “e pluribus unum,” a united vision which emerges from joining together multiple strengths and different ideas; not a conformity but rather a cultural pluralism which combines together and unites behind a commitment to the ideal of morality and peace.

In such a situation, no brother is to be rejected unless he will do damage to the ultimate vision; there is room for many leaders, each with his particular gift and emphasis, as long as they all stand behind a God who demands compassionate righteousness and moral justice. Since acceptance of the eventual goal depends upon the ability of Israel and the nations of the world to repent, to return to God in Heaven, on both counts, Grandfather Jacob/Israel chose Judah, the consummate ba’al teshuva and the unifier of the family, to receive the prized legacy of Messianic leadership.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rambam’s Letter to Yemen

With so much tragedy confronting the Jewish Nation on a daily basis we search for an answer! The Rambam in the year 1211 wrote such a letter. We ask everyone to spend a few moments dwelling on the words the Rambam sent to the Jews of Yemen. We will also bring a few other priceless words the Rambam left us with which has provided an incredible to the Jewish Nation since its initial writing.

The Jews of that time were subject to unspeakable cruelty that spared no one so to in our times we again as a Nation are being subject to an incredible test of both faith and survival may these words help give us the strength to overcome yet another difficult period in the history of Klal Yisrael as we await the birth pangs of the final redemption.

“Know, my brothers, that G-d has led us on a hard path with this nation of Ishmael, which does so much to torment us and create laws to persecute us. There has not stood against Israel a nation more evil, none that has done so much to cast us down, subjugate us and treat us with hatred.

“We who suffer what a person cannot bear have accustomed ourselves, both great and small, to tolerate their subjugation. But with all this, we suffer their evil outbreaks all the time. As much as we bear it in order to be with them in peace, they incite against us war

and the sword. And how much more, if we foolishly irritate them, then we are giving ourselves over to death.

The Creator of the world will in his compassion, remember us. He will gather the exiles

of his portion to gaze at the sweetness of G-d and visit His Beis Hamikdash. He will bring us out of the valley of the shadow of death. He will remove the veil from our eyes and the darkness of our hearts, and establish for us the verse, “The nation that walks in darkness saw great light, light shall dwell upon those who dwell in a land of the shadow of death”. (Yeshayahu 9:1). May he bring darkness in his wrath and anger upon all those who against us, and may he illuminate our darkness, as he had promised: ‘Behold, the darkness shall cover the land and clouds over the nations, and you shall Hashem shine.’

(Ibid. 60.2).

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon was referring to the persecution campaign of the Yemenite government. In our times virtually every Arab nation and most of the member countries of the United Nations have condemned Israel in defending itself and seeking peace much as our forefathers have always done before us. R’ Moshe zt’l gave the Jews the following answer and we can apply this answer even more so today.

“Such activities should not decrease one’s faith in G-d, in his Torah and in Moshe His servant. There is no doubt that these are the birth pains of the Mashiach that are Sages

prayed that they not be forced to experience. That some Jews have assimilated and converted, and others have not. This has already been predicted by Daniel. He was told

by G-d that when the exile would be long and we would suffer many sorrows, many people would be weakened in their religiosity. Doubt would enter their hearts and they would be led astray.

“After this, Daniel explained that the wise men who would stand up to the sorrows and remain faithful to G-d and to his servant Moshe would suffer even more, until doubt would enter the heart of some of them as well, and they too would be led astray. Only a small number would remain pure. We see how much sorrow came upon the Jewish Nation in the Holocaust and the long spiritual desert that was cast upon the Nation in the former Soviet Union, which virtually cut a major portion of both our Spiritual and Physical past, leaving just a minority of Jews to serve Hashem Yisborach.

The Rambam continues on in his letter exalting all to listen carefully to what he told them.

“Teach this letter to the young people and the children, in order to strengthen your faith and be strong in the truth: We have the true Torah that was given to us by the greatest of all prophets, with which G-d separated us from all peoples-not because we were fit for it, but out of his love for us. He has made us special by giving us Mitzvos and laws, so that

our superiority is clear insofar as we have the Torah. We were promised by G-d via Yeshayahu that whoever tries to overcome our Torah, whether by force or by argument, will be vanquished: ‘Every weapon made against you will not succeed, and whatever tongue rises against you shall be condemned.’ (Yeshayahu 54:17).

The desire of the Nazarene and Mohammed was to make their religions similar to the Torah of Hashem. But the difference between our Torah and the teachings that are similar to it is like the difference between a living man who speaks and a statue. This state of affairs was also revealed by G-d via Daniel. “There has never been a time that did not have a new persecution and trouble; and afterwards, G-d has always removed it.

“Know, my brothers, that the evil Nevechadnezzar forced everyone to serve idols. Only Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah were saved from this decree. Yet afterwards, G-d destroyed Nevechadnezzar and his law, and the truth returned to its place.

CHANUKAH

The same occurred during the second Beis Hamikdash, when the evil Greeks pronounced terrible decrees of persecution against the Jews in order to wipe out the knowledge of Torah. They forced Jews to desecrate Shabbos, not circumcise their children and to write on their clothing and carve on the horns of their cows that they have no portion in the G-d of Israel. This continued for fifty-two years. And then G-d destroyed their kingdom and the laws altogether.

“G-d already told Yaakov Avinu that even though other nations may subjugate the Jews,

the Jews will always remain. “He promised that He will not reject us all, even if we rebel

and transgress His Mitzvos. Rely on these verses, my brothers. Do not be frightened by the constant persecutions and power of our enemies, and by the weakness of our people. This is all meant to test and to purify us, until only the pious, G-d fearing Jews are left.

Therefore, my brothers, all Jews spread across the world, you must encourage each other-the great encouraging the small, the leaders encouraging the masses. Agree without any question that G-d is

uniquely One, that Moshe is the greatest of all prophets, that the Torah from beginning to end is the word of G-d to Moshe, that it will never be exchanged, and that no other religion will ever be given by G-d. Remember the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai and teach it to your children. This is the basis of our Religion. Stand fast in your commitment and your faith, my brothers. Strengthen your hearts and hope to G-d.”

Grabbing the Daf Amidst the Flames
by Jonathan Rosenblum Mishpacha Magazine

Rabbi Rabbi Hershel Rappaport, a Gerrer chassid, stares fearlessly at Nazi general Jorgen Stroop, commander of the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto

At the first Siyum HaShas held in Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, Rav Meir Shapiro, the initiator of the worldwide daf yomi schedule, peered presciently into the gathering gloom. He quoted the Gemara (Yevamos 121a) in which Rabban Gamliel describes standing on the deck of a ship and seeing a nearby ship crash and break apart, casting overboard a great scholar — no less than Rabi Akiva himself.

After reaching dry land, Rabban Gamliel was shocked when the same Rabi Akiva appeared before him to engage in halachic discussion. Rabban Gamliel asked him how he had survived being thrown into the watery deep — to which Rabi Akiva replied, "A board (daf) of the boat floated into my hands. I grabbed on to it, and I bent my head before each and every wave that came toward me until I reached the shore."

Rav Shapiro emphasized that Rabi Akiva lived during one of the darkest periods of Jewish history, marked by the loss of national independence and the nation's spiritual center of the holy Temple. But even under the harshest Roman edicts against Torah learning, he produced outstanding talmidim, who would restore Torah to its former glory.

The daf of the ship to which Rabi Akiva held tight, said Rav Shapiro, can be understood metaphorically as the daf Gemara to which we must hold tight for protection against the evils of the day and the far greater horrors yet to come.

FOR SOME, continuing learning Gemara was the ultimate act of resistance to the Nazis, yemach shemam. The Nazis sought not only to wipe out world Jewry, but Torah itself. In a directive issued to the German Occupation Forces in Poland on November 23, 1940, German High Commander I.A. Eckhardt demanded that no Ostjuden (Jews of Eastern Europe) be allowed to escape because they constitute the majority of rabbis and "Talmud learners." If the latter escape, Eckhardt warned, "they can bring about the spiritual regeneration of world Jewry, even American Jewry."

Reb Yosef Friedenson, the founder and long-time editor of *Dos Yiddishe Vort*, once related how in the early days of the Nazi occupation of Lodz, two German soldiers burst into the Friedenson family apartment, wildly cursing and shouting. Their madness only increased when they entered the family's elegant living room and saw the large volumes on the bookshelves. Informed that the volumes were the Talmud, remembered Reb Yossel, "they became like mad dogs, throwing the seforim on the floor, trampling them with their boots, and ripping them to shreds," over the period of an hour. Such was the loathing and fear with which the Nazis viewed the Talmud.

One group of 19 young Gerrer chassidim in the Warsaw Ghetto, led by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Fromer, understood exactly where the battle lines were drawn. From the moment they were herded into the ghetto, they defied the German orders by refusing to shave their beards or shed their chassidic dress. They would have been punished with instant death if caught.

They could not obtain ration cards, but in any event, they refused to eat non-kosher food. In the wee hours of the morning, two or three bochurim would leave their hiding place each night to scavenge for food to be split among the group of 19.

And yet, even during the most intense fighting of the ghetto uprising, and on the verge of starvation, they continued learning in an

underground bunker at 14 Mila Street, until their hiding place was discovered in the last ghetto roundup.

FOR OTHERS, the Gemara was the last link to the world they had known before the war. In September 1940, the Judenrat in the Lodz Ghetto sent inspectors to every dwelling to determine who was eligible for the allocations that the German authorities had approved. One of those inspectors was the author Yosef Zerkowicz, whose reflections on what he saw have been preserved in a volume entitled *In Those Terrible Days*.

Zerkowicz noted the different things Lodz's Jews had brought with them into the ghetto — beds and bedding, jewelry and money. But in short order, those things were gone: The beds were chopped up for firewood; the valuables sold for slim loaves of black bread.

But a young man named Yaakov Eli was able to hold on to what he brought with him — the Talmud. The pages may have grown yellowed and faded, wrote Zerkowicz, and the volumes themselves were swollen from water damage, but for Yaakov Eli, "the words looked like blossoming, budding furrows in a field. The yellow of its pages reminded him of his Jewishness, as did the yellow patches he wore front and back... The moisture of the tears that its pages absorbed made his Talmudic chant sound a little sadder but much heartier and deeper."

IN ADDITION, the Gemara provided an answer to the question, "Who am I?" after being stripped of everything — family and friends, possessions, even the clothes on one's back. Rabbi Sinai Adler records in his memoir of Auschwitz-Birkenau, *Your Rod and Your Staff*, a cold winter day when he and his fellow prisoners were subjected to delousing. While they showered and were deloused with harsh chemicals, their clothes were sent for fumigation. The fumigating machine broke down, and the prisoners were left to shiver, with only their leather belts and shoes. Eventually, they were marched back to their barracks, where they could at least look forward to a thin blanket to cover them. But when they arrived, even that solace was denied them: The blankets too were being deloused.

By that point, the prisoners' teeth were chattering from the cold. A Hungarian Jew, lying in an adjacent bunk, suggested to Rabbi Sinai that they huddle together, in the hope that their combined body heat would keep them from freezing to death. The Hungarian Jew told Rabbi Sinai that he knew tractate Beitzah by heart, and that he was careful to review a portion before going to sleep every night. Even in those freezing conditions, he did not want to break with his custom for a single night, and asked Rabbi Sinai to listen as he recited the Gemara by heart.

AND IT WAS the daf Gemara that played a major role in enabling the shearis hapeleitah to rebuild their lives after the Holocaust. At the 12th Siyum HaShas, Reb Yossel Friedenson, a talmid of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, described in a video interview how he and a small group of survivors celebrated the 3rd Siyum HaShas together in Feldafing, one of the displaced persons camps in Germany.

Though a few of that small group might have begun the cycle of daf yomi and even continued it for a while in the ghettos, none had been able to complete it in the work and death camps. Yet, with three volumes of tractate Niddah among them, they participated in the completion of the cycle. And with four or five volumes of tractate Berachos, they began again. Now, at least, they could dream of completing the next cycle, beginning from "Me'aimasai."

In honor of this week's Siyum HaShas, I've shared the ideas presented to a group of both religious and secular educators at Yad Vashem by my friend and chavrusa Rabbi Ilan Segal, with whom I had the privilege to tour Eastern Europe last winter.

Reasons For Our Minhagim

The Full Kaddish vs Half Kaddish

8535. The rule is that the Full Kaddish aka Kaddish Tiskabel is recited after Shemonah Esrei (and Tachnun). However, at Shachris, following Shemonah Esrei (and Tachnun) only the half Kaddish is said, and the Kaddish Tiskabel is reserved for after Ashrei, Lamenatzeach and U'va L'Tziyon.

8536. If Kaddish Tiskabel would immediately follow Shemonah Esrei at Shachris, we are concerned that the congregation may consider the prayers to be concluded and this would be a disrespect for the Ashrei - U'va L'Tziyon prayer. Thus, only the half Kaddish is said prior to Ashrei.

8537. However, on a day when we also pray Mussaf, the Kaddish Tiskabel is recited after Shemonah Esrei at Shachris because the fact that a Mussaf is still to come will prevent the congregation from thinking that the Full Kaddish represents the conclusion of prayers, and there will not be any disrespect for Ashrei - U'va L'Tziyon.

Vayechi: Jacob's Superior Blessing

Rav Kook Torah

Before his death, Jacob blessed each of his sons. He blessed his beloved son Joseph, saying:

“Blessings of heaven above, blessings of the abyss lying beneath; blessings of plenty and children. The blessings of your father are superior to those of my parents, until the desired hills of eternity.” (Gen. 49:25-26)

- Why did Jacob claim that his blessings were superior to those of his parents?

- What did he mean by the phrase “until the desired hills of eternity”?

Blessings from Above

The blessings of Abraham and Sarah were realized in miracles that God performed for them: a son born to them at an advanced age; and God's protection when Sarah was kidnapped. Isaac and Rebecca were similarly blessed with miraculous intervention in their interaction with the Philistine king Abimelekh.

Jacob prayed that his son would similarly be blessed with Divine protection when needed. This is what he meant by “blessings of heaven above.”

Blessings in the World Below

However, Jacob added that his blessings should also be manifested within the realm of the physical world. He emphasized that they should be “blessings of the abyss lying beneath.”

This is truly an amazing blessing, one reflecting a higher level of spiritual influence. Unlike miracles that disrupt the world's natural order, Jacob prayed that Joseph would merit a life where the physical world is elevated, and God's blessings are evident in the natural world.

In fact, Jacob's blessing is a vision of the World to Come. He foresaw a world beyond simple miracles, a world whose material boundaries continually expand. Thus Jacob described his blessing as one of unending heights: “until the desired hills of eternity.”

This blessing is a vision of a future world: a universe characterized by eternal ascent, able to accept infinite light.

Vayechi: Jacob Did Not Die

The Mitzvah of Levayas Hameis

By Rabbi Avraham Rosenthal

In this week's parsha, we find that Yosef, his brothers, most of their families as well as “all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt” (Bereishis 50:7) accompanied Yaakov Avinu on his last earthly journey. Although we learned about the burial of the other Avos and Imahos in previous parshiyos, this is the first time that the Torah describes an actual funeral procession. Therefore, this week's discussion will focus on the mitzvah of levayas hameis, accompanying the dead, in order to bury him.

A Rabbinical-Torah Mitzvah

The Rambam (Hilchos Aveil 14:1) writes: “It is a positive Rabbinic mitzvah to visit the sick, comfort the mourners, escort the dead, marry off a bride, accompany guests, to be involved in all the needs of the burial, to carry the dead on one's shoulder, walk before him, to eulogize, to dig and bury, to gladden the bride and groom, and provide them with all their needs. All of these are gemilus chasadim (acts of kindness) that

one performs with his body, and they have no limit (as to how much one can do). Even though all of these mitzvos are Rabbinic, they are included in the mitzvah of ‘You shall love your friend as yourself.’ [This refers to] all of the things that you would want others to do for you, you do them for the one who is your compatriot in Torah and mitzvos.”

We see from this Rambam that the mitzvah of levayas hameis, while Rabbinic in nature, has its roots in the Torah precept of Ve'ahavata lerei'acha kamocho.

When Yaakov Avinu requested that his son, Yosef, bury him in Eretz Yisrael, he said to him, “Do with me kindness and truth (chesed ve'emes)” (Bereishis 47:29). Rashi, there, notes that chesed one does with the dead is referred to as “chesed shel emes,” true chesed. In other words, it is a chesed that is 100% altruistic, as the one performing it does not expect anything in return from the one for whom he is performing the chesed.

The Mitzvah

In Halachic Literature, we find several levels of performing the mitzvah of levayas hameis:

- 1) The preferred course of action is to accompany the dead to the place of burial and remain there, until the burial is complete (Sefer Chareidim, Mitzvos Asei 6:11; Shu"t Minchas Elazar, vol. IV, #2). Some say that this is especially true at the funeral of a great individual (Maharil, Semachos #24; Orchos Rabbeinu, page 312).

- 2) According to some authorities, one can fulfill the mitzvah of levayas hameis, even if they are not bringing the body to burial. An example of this is when the body is transported from the place of death to the location where they will perform the taharah, the ritual cleansing procedure (Rabbeinu Yonah, Brachos 11a [dapei harif], s.v. kol haro'eh; Shu"t Tzitz Eliezer, vol. V, Ramat Rachel #50).

- 3) Minimally, one can fulfill the mitzvah by walking four ammos (seven to eight feet) to accompany the bier [Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei'ah 361:3).

According to some authorities, the preferred method of performing levayas hameis is to wait until after the body has been taken outside and walk behind it (Yosef Ometz, page 326; Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus I, 65:3).

Does Not Participate

The Gemara (Brachos 18a) states: “Anyone who sees the dead and does not accompany him, transgresses, ‘One who mocks a pauper (lo'eig larash), insults his Maker’ (Mishlei 17:5).” In other words, Chazal understood that the “pauper” in the pasuk refers to someone who is dead, for he truly has nothing of his own. One who sees the dead and does not perform the mitzvah of levayas hameis transgresses this concept as, in effect, he is saying, “why should I bother to do a chesed with this individual, as he cannot pay me back” (see Rabbeinu Yehonasan Meilunil, Brachos 11a [dapei harif], s.v. hameshamer).

The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Dei'ah 361:3) codifies this halachah and adds that one who does not accompany the dead should be excommunicated.

There is discussion among the Acharonim (see Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus, vol. I, 65:2 and footnote #4) concerning how literally one has to take the words of the Gemara. The Gemara speaks about “Anyone who sees the dead.” Does this mean that one is obligated to perform the mitzvah of levayas hameis only when he sees a dead body? What is the halachah if he knows that there is a levayah in progress, but he does not actually see it? Also, what is the halachah if he sees a crowd of people accompanying the body, but does not see the actual casket? For answers to these questions, one should consult with his or her rav.

Cannot Remain

Although the mitzvah of levayas hameis is to accompany the dead, lechatchilah, the entire way until the beis hakevaros (cemetery) and minimally a distance of four ammos, there is another mitzvah of gemilas chesed, performing kindness, merely by being present at the hespeidim (eulogies). This means that even if one knows that he will not be able to perform the mitzvah of levayah, as the hespeidim will be too lengthy and he cannot remain for the entire time, there is still a mitzvah to attend (Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus I, 65:6).

The Acharonim mention that there is a custom that when taking leave of a funeral procession, one should not merely go his own way. Rather, he should stop and allow the procession to proceed until he can no longer see those accompanying the body (Sedei Chemed, Aveilus, #190; Gesher Hachayim 14:18; Pnei Baruch 5:7 and footnote #27).

Additionally, when taking leave of the funeral procession, one should recite the following: “Leich beshalom, vetanu’ach beshalom, vetaamod legoralecha lekeitz hayamin.” In the event that the funeral is for a woman, one recites this using the feminine form: “Lechi... vetanuchi... vetaamdi...” This means: “Go in peace, rest in peace and arise for your reward at the end of days.” This is also customarily said to the dead at the conclusion of the burial. This statement acts as a protection for the dead, and it is a part of the mitzvah of levayas hameis (Gesher Hachayim 14:19; Pnei Baruch 5:7 and footnote #76, citing Chochmas Adam and Maavar Yabok).

In the event that a person cannot attend a funeral at all, the Acharonim write that minimally, he should daven for the one who has died, ask that Hashem be compassionate towards him, and recite some Tehillim in his merit (Maavar Yabok, Sifsei Renanim, chapter 21; Pnei Baruch 5:9).

The Procession

There are numerous halachos and minhagim that pertain to the funeral procession. These include:

1) Minimally, there should be a minyan accompanying the body until after the burial so that the mourners can recite kaddish (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei’ah 361:1 and Shach #4).

2) According to some opinions, the preferred method of accompanying the body is on foot, walking behind the casket (Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus I, 65:7).

3) Numerous sources (see Gesher Hachayim 14:17; Nitei Gavriel, chapter 65, footnote #13) write that the custom during the funeral procession is for those accompanying the body to recite the pasuk “Vihi no’am” (Tehillim 90:17), together with the entire chapter of Tehillim 91 (“Yoshev beseiser elyon”).

Those who are unable to recite these pesukim should walk silently, with a serious demeanor. It is considered inappropriate and shows a lack of respect for the dead to engage in irrelevant conversation (Gesher Hachayim ibid.).

It is also a mitzvah during the levayah to daven for the one who died and to give tzedakah for his benefit (Pnei Baruch 5:12).

4) One who is walking within four ammos (seven-eight feet) of the body should cover his tzitzis. This is because having uncovered tzitzis in the presence of the dead is considered lo’eig larash, mocking a pauper, as the dead can no longer perform mitzvos. Even if the deceased person is a woman or child, who during their lifetimes are exempt from the mitzvah of tzitzis, one should still cover his tzitzis (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 23:2).

Greeting Others

Based on Meseches Semachos (1:7), the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Dei’ah 343:2) writes that when a meis is present in a small village, she’eilas shalom is prohibited. (We will explain this phrase shortly.) The Acharonim (see Kerem Shlomo and Daas Torah ad loc.) explain that a “small village” is any place with a population of 100 or less. However, in a larger city, she’eilas shalom is permitted. The Rema adds that when the body is in the cemetery prior to burial, she’eilas shalom is forbidden there. After the burial, she’eilas shalom is permitted as long as one is at least four ammos distant from the graves.

The Acharonim (Aruch Hashulchan ad loc.) extend this prohibition to include any city, even a large one, where the meis’s presence is felt. An example of this would be where a great Torah scholar has passed away. Since everyone in the city feels the loss, she’eilas shalom is forbidden there until after the burial. Another example of this is at the funeral itself, no matter how large, as the meis’s presence is felt there.

What is “she’eilas shalom?” This includes any type of greeting using the word “shalom.” Included in this is “shalom aleichem” or “mah shlomcha” (Hebrew for “how are you”). The Acharonim also maintain that it includes wishing someone “good morning” or “good evening”

(Elyah Rabbah 554:21; Pri Megadim 554, Eishel Avraham #21; Mishnah Berurah 554:41).

The Bracha

The Gemara (Brachos 58b) states that upon seeing Jewish graves, one recites the bracha of “asher yatzar eschem badin.” This requirement is also codified in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 224:12). There is some discussion among the poskim how one should conduct himself concerning this bracha during a funeral.

1) Some maintain that the rule of “ha’oseik bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah” applies. According to this concept, anyone who is involved in a mitzvah is exempt from performing other mitzvos. Since a person participating in the funeral is performing the mitzvah of levayas hameis, he is exempt from the mitzvah of reciting the bracha.

This opinion maintains that he is exempt from the bracha, even after the funeral is over. This is because the halachah is that one does not recite this bracha if he has seen Jewish graves within the last thirty days. Since this person saw the graves during the levayah, he will have to wait until he sees graves again after thirty days to recite the bracha (Kaf Hachayim 224:37, citing Eishel Avraham; Ketzos Hashulchan 46, Badei Hashulchan #18).

2) Others contend that the rule of “ha’oseik bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah” does not apply here, as it is possible to perform both mitzvos simultaneously, i.e., he can recite the bracha while accompanying the meis (Shu”t Kinyan Torah, vol. III, #27.2).

3) Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach ruled that the bracha should be recited after the levayah, before leaving the cemetery. Although it is true that one may recite this bracha only once in thirty days, the entire time that someone is in the cemetery is considered one long “seeing” (Pnei Baruch, chapter #5, footnote #48).

Maamados

The Rema (Yoreh Deah 358:3) writes that some places have a custom when arriving at the beis hakevaros to stop with the meis prior to burial. This is known as the “maamados” which refers to the act of stopping. There are numerous customs concerning how many times to stop. The Rema, himself, writes that some have a custom to stop every four ammos in the beis hakevaros until they reach the grave, while others suffice with stopping two or three times. Other sources write that one should stop seven times (Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus I, 74:14). In Yerushalayim, the custom is to stop in front of every shul (Gesher Hachayim 14.3:1).

The Shach (Yoreh Dei’ah 358:3) writes that the reason why maamados are performed is to chase away the negative spiritual forces that seek to latch on to the dead body. By halting the procession, these forces leave the body alone.

Concerning what is recited during the maamados, there are numerous customs cited in the various sources, and each location should follow the local custom.

In the Beis Hakevaros

Although a separate discussion is required to cover many of the halachos and minhagim pertinent to a cemetery and the actual burial, we will mention a few that relate directly to the mitzvah of levayas hameis:

1) One should not step on other graves unnecessarily. However, if there is a need to do so, for example, in order to bury a body, it is permitted (Taz, Yoreh Dei’ah 364:1; Chochmas Adam 158:12).

2) There is a mitzvah to assist in covering the body with earth (Nitei Gavriel, Aveilus I, 77:2). The custom is that when one finishes with the shovel, he does not hand it to the next person, but rather leaves it on the ground (Maavar Yabok, Sefas Emes #27; Chochmas Adam 158:30).

3) When leaving the cemetery, one should pick up some earth along with some foliage and throw it behind him, and recite the pasuk, “zechor ki afar anachnu” – “remember that we are like earth.” Also, one should wash his face with water. Two reasons are cited for these practices:

a) It is to remind us of techiyas hameisim, the resurrection of the dead, as the pasuk (Tehillim 72:16) states that people will sprout like grass of the earth.

b) It is with these three items, foliage, water, and afar (literally earth, but since eifer, ashes, is linguistically similar, they are often exchanged) that

the tumas meis will be removed when we will have the ashes of the parah adumah (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Dei'ah 376:4 and Shach ad loc.).

4) Some have a custom that when leaving the cemetery they go in a different way from which they came, if possible (Pnei Baruch 5:25).

Washing Hands

After leaving the beis hakevaros one should wash his hands (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 4:18) since negative spiritual forces accompany one who returns from the cemetery (Shu"t Maharil #23). The Mishnah Berurah (4:39) adds that some people are stringent in this regard and wash their hands three times. There is also a minhag to wash one's face upon leaving the beis hakevaros (Magen Avraham 4:20 and Mishnah Berurah 4:42, quoting Maharil).

In addition to washing hands when leaving a cemetery, the minhag is to wash hands after a funeral or leaving the presence of a meis. The Rema (Yoreh Dei'ah 376:5, quoted in Mishnah Berurah 4:43) cites the minhag of not entering a house before washing one's hands. Interestingly, the Rema concludes with the words: "u'minhag avoseinu Torah hi," "the custom of our fathers is Torah," that this is the way one should conduct himself.

There is a disagreement whether one is required to wash his hands if he did not come within four ammos of the dead during a levayah. (See Pri Megadim, Eishel Avraham 21, who writes that it is unnecessary. Sefer Shemiras Haguf vehanefesh chap. 54, footnote 35, quotes Imrei Yosher Leseder Nashim [Hanhagos Chazon Ish #116] that washing is required.) There are various customs regarding whether one should dry his hands after washing, when leaving a beis hakevaros or a levayah. Some maintain that the custom is not to dry them, but they should be left to dry on their own (Sheyarei Knesses Hagedolah, Yoreh Dei'ah 376:14). Others maintain that one may dry one's hands. The Ben Ish Chai draws a distinction between winter and summer, and maintains that one should allow them to dry on their own only during the summer. However, during the winter, when it is cold, he may dry them (Kaf Hachayim 4:78).

One of the reasons given for the custom of not drying one's hands is to indicate that one is not diverting his thoughts from the eventuality of one's death (Maavor Yabok, Sifsei Renanos 19).

Another custom related to washing hands is that one who has finished washing should not hand the washing cup to the next person. Instead, he should put it down (Beis Lechem Yehudah and Chidushei Rebbi Akiva Eiger 376). The minhag is to pour out the remaining water in the cup after one finishes washing (Pnei Baruch chap. 5, footnote 87, in the name of Maavor Yabok). It is possible that this is the reason for the custom of placing the cup in an inverted position after washing (Pnei Baruch ibid. in the name of Nachamu Ami).

Tefillah is the Answer

Although this story is only tangentially related to our topic, I decided to include it, as it was told to me while I was preparing this article, and we can glean a very important lesson from it.

Rav Elimelech Biderman, the noted darshan, related that the Chevrah Kadisha in Yerushalayim brought a meis to Har Hazeisim for burial. The meis had purchased two graves during his lifetime, for himself and for his wife. When the Chevrah Kadisha arrived, they were perturbed to see that the Arab workmen had mistakenly dug the grave that had been designated for the wife. They could not simply bury the meis there, as there was an unrelated woman buried in the neighboring grave, and it is considered inappropriate to do so.

Since they wanted to bury the meis before sunset, the members of the Chevrah Kadisha dug the man's grave themselves. After completing the burial, a representative went to the house of mourning to apprise the family members of what had occurred. (The custom in Yerushalayim is that descendants of the one who died do not join in the funeral procession.)

Upon hearing the events, the mourners were astounded. One of the sons related that three months earlier, his father had written a tzavaah (will) which included burial instructions. A short while after giving it to his son, the father asked that it be returned, as he wanted to add something. The son asked him what he was adding and the father responded that he

wanted only religious Jews to dig his grave. His son told him that such a request is unheard of, and it cannot be fulfilled. The father then called the Chevrah Kadisha and asked if such a thing was possible. They told him that there is no need for such a stringency and no one, even the greatest tzaddikim, has ever requested it. Upon hearing this, the father told his son, "If no one is going to help me, I'm going to daven and leave it up to Hashem to make the arrangements."

And, apparently, He did.

We see from this story the power of tefillah. Even if one davens for something that is seemingly unnecessary, Hashem still takes those prayers into consideration (Be'er Haparsha, Toldos, page 10, footnote #13).

Additional items (CS)

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Yisroel Bowed Down Towards the Head of His Bed

After Yosef acceded to his father's request and swore to him that he would bury him in the family gravesite in the Land of Canaan rather than bury him in Egypt, the Torah records that "Yisroel prostrated himself toward the head of the bed." [Bereshis 47:31]. Rashi brings the teaching "from here we have a source for that which the Sages said – that the Divine Presence of G-d is present above the head of one who is ill." Therefore, Yaakov Avinu, despite the fact that he was ill and weak, turned around and bowed to the head of the bed (the location of the Shechina's Presence).

I saw an interesting thought in a sefer called Tiv HaTorah: Why is it that the Shechina is on the top of the bed of a sick individual? The Tiv HaTorah suggests that the reason is that when a person is lying sick in bed, he thinks that perhaps the Ribono shel Olam has abandoned him. He thinks that the Almighty is angry with him and is punishing him. Chazal say that this is not the attitude a person should have. A person should have the attitude that in spite of my illness and in spite of my suffering, it is NOT because the Ribono shel Olam hates me. For whatever reason it may be, He wants me to go through this – either as atonement or for whatever reason – but regardless, this is for my good!

Therefore, Chazal tell the sick person – you should know that in this debilitating state that you may be in, the Ribono shel Olam is still here with you. Do not give up hope and do not feel abandoned. Do not feel like an outcast.

The author brings an incident (I actually know the person with whom this happened). There was a Jew named Rav Herschel (Tzvi) Kowalsky. He was a big Talmid Chochom. He once learned b'Chavrusa (one on one study partner) with the Chazon Ish. He was the Rosh Kollel of the Socochover Kollel in Eretz Yisroel in Bnei Brak. He was a holy man. At the end of his life, when he was sick, he suffered. When people came into him, they gave him kvitlach (small pieces of paper such as are inserted between the cracks of the Kosel) containing their names and personal prayer petitions. He would take the kvitlach and put them near the top of his bed. He said the top of a sick person's bed is like the Western Wall. Just as our Rabbis say the Divine Presence has never left the Kosel haMa'aravi, so too they tell us the Divine Presence is located by the top of the bed of a sick person.

The point we are trying to convey is that a person should never feel abandoned by G-d at the time of illness or frailty that confines them to bed. On the contrary, Chazal tell us that the Divine Presence rests at the top of the bed of a sick person.

Old News Is Good News

As an introduction to the Torah's narration of the blessings Yaakov gives Yosef's two sons, the pasuk says, "Now Israel's eyes were heavy with age, he could not see; so he brought them near him and he kissed them and hugged them." [Bereshis 48:10] Prior to blessing Ephraim and

Menashe, Yaakov tells Yosef “I did not imagine seeing your face, and here G-d has shown me even your offspring.” [Bereshis 48:11]

Now let us ask, when did it first happen that Yaakov Avinu found out that Yosef was alive finally saw him after their long separation? It happened at the end of Parshas Vayigash — 17 years prior to the Torah’s narration in Chapter 48 where Yaakov takes ill and Yosef brings in his two sons to their grandfather to receive his blessing. What is going on now that suddenly, 17 years later, Yaakov is commenting to Yosef that he never expected to see him again and G-d was so good to him that he showed him even Yosef’s children!? This is old news! Why is he saying it now?

The answer is that to most people, something that happened 17 years ago is old news. We tend to forget it. Man’s nature is that despite the magnitude of an event, as time goes on, it tends to become less and less memorable. We forget how amazed we were. We forget how grateful we were to the Almighty at the time for His kindness to us.

Do we remember our wedding and how grateful we were at that moment that we got married? Do we remember the first time our wife had a baby, how thrilled we were when we had our first child? Do we remember how thrilled we were that we had the merit to march our children down to the Chuppah? Yes, we remember – but it becomes ‘Old News’. Perhaps on an anniversary, these events come to mind, but the excitement of the moment certainly fades with time.

The pasuk is trying to teach us that to Yaakov Avinu, in spite of the fact that this happened 17 years ago, nevertheless, every single day he was in a constant state of giving gratitude to the Almighty for His Kindness to him. It was constantly on his mind.

“Gorgeous” — Is This The Way We Brag When Speaking About Our Children?

The final observation I would like to share is one that I heard in the name of Rav Shmuel Berenbaum (1920-2008), former Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn, NY.

In Parshas Vayechi, when Yaakov Avinu is on his deathbed, he calls in each of his sons and gives them individualized Brochos. As we know, some of these final charges to his children do not exactly sound like blessings. However, in truth, they are all Brochos. As we have said many times, the biggest Brocha that you can give anybody is to point out to him his strengths and his weaknesses so that he will know what he should do with his life. That is what Yaakov Avinu was in effect doing over here with his sons.

Even by his three oldest sons – Reuven, Shimon, and Levi – where Yaakov pointed out their foibles, those were Brochos. He was telling them “You have these character traits and you need to work on them the future. In fact, the advice was taken to heart by the Tribe of Levi. Chazal say that Shimon and Levi were both zealots (ka’naim) and Yaakov pointed it out to them. Levi, at least, was able to perfect that attribute of zealotry. That is why the Tribe of Levi stood up for that which was right at the time of the Eigel Hazahav (Sin of the Golden Calf).

All of these Brochos have a common denominator – even though some of them sound more like blessings and some almost sound like curses – but they are all Brochos because they have one intent: To point out the strength and ability of each individual Shevet and what they should do with their lives. This knowledge is the biggest Brocho that anyone can receive.

This is fine for virtually all the Shvatim: In Yehudah, Yaakov sees Kingship, in Yissacher, he sees Torah learning, in Dan, he sees the ability to judge, etc., etc. The pattern proceeds through all the Shvatim until we get to the Tribe of Yosef. In Shevet Yosef, it does not seem – at least at first blush – as if Yaakov is saying any of Yosef’s strengths.

“Ben Poras Yosef, Ben Poras Alei Ayin” [Bereshis 49:22]. I looked up the Art Scroll translation of Ben Poras Yosef. It says, “Yosef is a charming child.” But it gets better than that. “Bnos Tza’ada Alei Shur”. Rashi interprets: The girls of Egypt would step along the wall to gaze at Yosef’s beauty. Yosef was gorgeous. He was handsome. He had, l’Havdil, the looks of a celebrity. This was true to such an extent that they treated him like a celebrity. The Egyptian girls climbed the walls to get a glimpse of the righteous Yosef.

Is this how a father talks about a Jewish child? Have you ever heard someone talk about a Chosson that way? People say: He’s bright, he’s clever, and so forth. Would someone brag and say about a son or future-son-in-law: “He is drop-dead good looking!?” Nobody talks like that. This is not the Jewish way of speaking! Yehudah is Malchus (Kingshim); Yissacher is Torah; Levi is Zealotry; Dan is Judgment. Yosef? Gorgeous! Is that a description of his inner character traits?

And then, “They embittered him and became antagonists; the masters of arrows hated him.” [Bereshis 49:23] Rashi interprets: His brothers, who had sharp-tongues like arrows, hated him.

So let us put it all together: Yosef is gorgeous; he is handsome; all the girls swooned for him; and his brothers hated him! I still don’t see the Brocha here. Where is the definition of his character traits (Kochos haNefesh)? Where are the strengths?

Rav Shmuel Berenbaum says something very interesting. It is a very current idea. People gravitate to people who love them and admire them; people tend to stay away and part company from people who do not treat them nicely and are not kind to them and do not appreciate them.

Rav Shmuel Berenbaum said this is a certain context. We are all painfully aware of a plague that has affected our community for 15, 20 or 25 years now. That is the phenomenon of the “Drop-Out” / “Off the Derech” youth. These children are raised in what seems to be wonderful homes but for some reason they just throw it all away. They leave home and hang out on the streets with the worst of people.

There can be numerous causes for this complex issue. Rav Shmuel Berenbaum suggests that one of the causes can be that such a child does not feel loved by his family, by his peers, by society, by frum society. The kids on the street – they “love” him. They treat him nicely. They treat him with respect.

So where is this kid going to go? “In my school, they treat me like dirt. My parents are always down my throat. Nobody loves me. ‘They’ (on the street) love me.” So where is this kid going to hang out? This is human nature. People will go and will gravitate and will associate with other people who they feel love them, appreciate them, and care about them.

Now we understand the “Brocha” of Yosef and we understand the “Kochos” (strengths) of Yosef. The brothers – the ‘religious Jews’ – they hated Yosef. They spread slander about him. They tried to harm him. He came to Egyptian society and he found the girls were swooning over him. Everybody loves him.

If you were Yosef, what would you do? “I am going to junk this ‘Yiddishkeit’ thing. Who needs it? My brothers – the ‘frumer’? Ha! They treat me like mud! Hey! These Egyptian girls, they cannot get enough of me! So where am I going to go?” And what did Yosef do? He remained a loyal Jew. He remained steadfast to his religion, in spite of the fact that the Egyptian girls swooned and the brothers hated him.

This shows strength of character. This shows commitment. This is the same strength of character that Yosef demonstrated when he was tempted by the wife of Potiphar. He remained steadfast. He was a young man, 17 years old, with no support system, no family, and nothing to hold him back. He withstood the test. This is a strength that testifies to the nature of his personality. That is what Yaakov Avinu was emphasizing here in his blessing to Yosef. The strength of Yosef was that in spite of the fact that the daughters of Egypt, who climbed the walls to get a look at him, loved him and in spite of the fact that his brothers hated him, nevertheless he remained a faithful Jew.

This then follows the pattern of the blessings to the other Tribes –which was to point out their strengths and weaknesses which is the biggest Brocha someone can give.

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The Greatest Siyum

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz - Jan 8, 2020

We just experienced the 13th Siyum Hashas of Daf Yomi. For many people, it is not the speeches that will remain etched in their memories, but the images. Images of old Holocaust survivors displaying their numbers and proclaiming that they have triumphed and survived against all odds.

We are all survivors, though we don't all have those awful numbers on our arms. We have persevered through golus, remaining loyal to Hashem, His people and His Torah. Despite all the various pressures and demands we face, we study Torah every day, for it is the essence of our life.

Some learn a daf a day, and for others it's a daf a week, and others don't even count how long it takes them to do the daf, for in each daf they see layers of understanding and Torah. Some learn halacha and Shulchan Aruch, while others learn nistar and Zohar. Everyone who learns something celebrated with those who learn Daf Yomi. It was a celebration of all who hold Torah dear.

You don't have to have those numbers scratched into your arm to appreciate that decades after we were beaten to a pulp, we are back with a vengeance. Decades after we were shot and gassed, we flourish and multiply. There are more communities, more people, more yeshivos, more schools and kosher supermarkets than anyone could have imagined a little while ago.

People attended the siyum and were overwhelmed by the site of so many people – old people, young people, and people of all ages. They were overwhelmed with emotion because they saw that the Torah remains our base and core. It is not only our religion and culture. It is our nationality, and we are proud of that. We haven't been intimidated by the incidents of today or yesterday.

We stood there and felt the past and saw the future. So many young people, so many children, so much life and happiness and fulfillment. Who could not shed a tear or two? Who could not dance in celebration? It was a kiddush Hashem, yes it was, and for that reason. It was nice that outsiders got a nice impression of us, but that was not the story. We don't do what we do because of what others will say. We have enough pride in what we do that we do it for ourselves, for our neshamos, for our families, and to benefit other Yidden. We do it for nitzchiyus.

We do it because we follow the path of the avos, as set out in the parshiyos of Bereishis we have been studying since Sukkos.

This week's parsha of Vayeichi bears many lessons for us in golus. Referring to the impending passing of Yaakov Avinu, the posuk states, "Vayikrivu yemei Yisroel lomus vayikra levno leYosef" (Bereishis 47:29). As Yaakov's final moments of life approached, he called for his son Yosef. He urged Yosef not to bury him in Mitzrayim, but in Eretz Yisroel: "Al na sikbereini beMitzrayim. Veshochavti im avosai..." He asks Yosef to swear that he will bury him amongst the avos, repeating the request by stating, "Veshochavti im avosai."

The Torah generally refers to our forefather as Yaakov when denoting something that is in the present, while the name Yisroel connotes eternity. We must understand why in this instance the Torah refers to him as Yisroel while he was discussing matters relating to the present. Additionally, why did Yaakov feel it necessary to repeat the request a second time? Why did he only make the request of Yosef? Why didn't he speak to the rest of his children and notify them where he wanted to be buried?

Regarding this final question, Rashi explains that Yaakov made the request of Yosef because "hayah beyado la'asos," he was the one who was able to carry it out. However, since the Torah refers to him as

Yisroel, this meeting, the conversations, and the request are apparently matters of eternal value and not just temporal. Thus, these favors Yaakov asked of Yosef can be understood as matters of longstanding impact.

Perhaps we can understand the request being made of Yosef on a deeper level bearing in mind the exposition of the Baal Haturim, in Parshas Vayishlach when the posuk recounts that Yaakov said to Eisov, "Vayehi li shor vachamor" (Bereishis 32:6). He writes that Yaakov wasn't only referring to his ownership of cows and donkeys, but, more significantly, Yaakov was alluding to his two sons who had the ability to confront Eisov. Yosef, who the posuk refers to as shor, is the alternate power to Eisov. Yissochoer, who is referred to as a chamor, has the power of Torah, because of his diligence in its study.

The Ramban at the beginning of the parsha (47:28) writes, "Yaakov's descent to Mitzrayim is similar to our present exile in the hands of the chaya harviis, Romi harasha... The golus is extending for a long time, and unlike previous exiles, we do not know when it will end."

From the words of the Ramban, we see that golus Mitzrayim contains lessons for us in golus Edom. Thus, even Yaakov's discussions with Yosef pertaining to golus Mitzrayim have relevance to us in our day.

These pesukim tell of cosmic events. Yaakov was laying the groundwork for survival for his children, and their children, in golus. He was joining with Yosef to craft a code of endurance and triumph, igniting that lehavah, the flame that will ultimately consume Eisov.

Thus, we can understand the seemingly repetitious request, "Vayikra levno leYosef vayomer al na sikbereini beMitzrayim. Veshochavti im avosai..." Yaakov said, "Do not bury me in Mitzrayim. I wish to lay with my fathers." Then he said, "Unesosani miMitzrayim ukevartani bekevurosom – Carry me from Mitzrayim and bury me in their burial place."

We can understand that Yaakov was making two distinct requests. Yisroel, the sheim hanetzach, the name that denotes eternity, was requesting, "Although I am now in Mitzrayim, the most tomei of all the lands, with wicked people and a wicked king, please do not bury me, Yisroel, here. Do not bury the netzach Yisroel, the traditions and beliefs that I received from my fathers, in this impure place. Remain separate from these profane people. Don't permit yourself and your children to be influenced by them. Veshochavti im avosai. I wish to be like my fathers, Avrohom and Yitzchok, and be a link in a holy chain, with offspring who follow in my path."

How will that be accomplished? Yaakov makes it clear: Not just by asking to be buried on holy soil, but by emphasizing, "Veshochavti im avosai. I want to rest with my fathers. I want to be connected to them and attached to their sacred mesorah."

Yaakov tells Yosef, "You will be able to do that if unesosani miMitzrayim." While the simple translation of unesosani is to carry, the word also means to uplift and raise (like the meforshim explain on the posuk, "Naso es rosh Bnei Yisroel").

Thus, Yaakov was telling Yosef, "In order to accomplish my wish to be an av, with sons and grandsons following in my path, you must raise me and what I stand for over the Mitzri culture. Raise me higher than Mitzrayim. You, Yosef, my son, have to remain elevated. Remain above your surroundings. Raise your children to live on a different level. That is how they will remain connected to the avos."

When Yaakov said, "Unesosani miMitzrayim," he was referring to the need to remain above the prevailing tumah of Mitzrayim and other goluyos of the future. Hence the use of the name Yisroel. Then, after he expressed his wish for the future, he made his request for the present: "Ukevartani bekevurosom."

Yaakov pleaded with his son, "Al na sikbereini beMitzrayim, don't bury me, my middah and my hard work, in Mitzrayim."

Yaakov appealed to Yosef and not to the other brothers, because the matter he was attending to was not simply with respect to where to bury him, but how to stand up to Eisov and Edom throughout the ages. Yosef was the antithesis of Eisov. He was the one who had the ability to carry out Yaakov's request of transmitting to future generations the secret to surviving and thriving in the hostile setting of golus.

Additionally, Yaakov perceived that Yosef, the kadosh, who perfected the middah of yesod through personal purity and strength, had mastered the ability to transcend the lures of Mitzrayim, the ervas ha'aretz, the capital of permissiveness and hedonism. That, combined with his inherent ability to battle the forces of Eisov, is why Yaakov requested this of Yosef and not his brothers.

The posuk continues: "Vayishova lo vayishtachu Yisroel al rosh hamittah – And Yosef swore that he would do as his father asked. Yisroel bowed to him in appreciation towards the head of his bed."

Once again, the posuk refers to Yaakov as Yisroel, because he wasn't just bowing in appreciation of the fact that he would be buried near his father and grandfather in Eretz Yisroel. The eternal Yisroel of netzach was bowing to the eternal middah of Yosef. Yaakov was comfortable in the assurance that his avodah would continue.

Therefore, the parsha continues with the narrative of the brachos that Yaakov gave to the sons of Yosef.

Yosef brought his two sons, the guarantors of the derech of the avos, the fusion of Bais Yaakov and Bais Yosef that can negate the koach of Eisov. Yaakov saw nitzchuyus. He saw these children of golus, born in impure Mitzrayim but committed to derech Yisroel saba. He responded by giving them brachos, the blessings that have echoed ever since in every Jewish home.

After reporting on the entire conversation and incident, the Torah states, "Vayevorech es Yosef vayomar haElokim asher hishalchu avosai lefonov Avrohom v'Yitzchok haElokim haroeh osi mei'odi ad hayom hazeh. Hamalach hagoel osi mikol ra yevoreich es haneorim veyikorei vohem shemi vesheim avosai Avrohom v'Yitzchok veyidgu larov bekelev ha'aretz" (48:15-16).

This brocha is the culmination of the parsha as we have understood it. When Yaakov saw Menashe and Efraim, the sons of Yosef, he perceived that his offspring would succeed in remaining loyal to his heritage in the exile. Thus, he said, "...haElokim asher hishalchu avosai lefonov Avrohom v'Yitzchok haElokim haroeh osi mei'odi ad hayom hazeh. That same derech that Avrohom, Yitzchok and I have walked on will continue throughout golus."

"Hamalach hagoel osi mikol ra yevoreich es haneorim." Yaakov appreciated that davka Efraim and Menashe carried a strength that others did not have. The malach who protected Yaakov as he went into exile from his father's home protected his grandchildren in their golus. Yaakov prayed that they would have the tenacity and determination in golus Mitzrayim and golus Romi to remain loyal to the precepts of Avrohom and Yitzchok: "veyikorei vohem shemi vesheim avosai Avrohom v'Yitzchok."

The posuk in Chagai (2:9) relates the prophecy that the second Bais Hamikdosh would be more glorious than the first: "Gadol yihiyeh kevod habayis hazeh ha'acharon min harishon." Rav Tzadok Hakohein of Lublin asks that this prophecy is apparently refuted by the fact that many of the revealed nissim of the first Bais Hamikdosh, such as ruach hakodesh and the Heavenly fire, were absent in the second Bayis. How, then, can the novi say that the splendor of the second Bais Hamikdosh would exceed that of the first?

Rav Tzadok quotes the Sefer Heichalos, which explains that in the absence of those open miracles and being removed from the tangible presence of the Shechinah, more glory was present, because the people had to toil and work hard on their own to create the kedusha. The glory that arises from hard work and struggle is superior to that which is brought about as a gift from Heaven. People who work hard for their income appreciate what they have much more than those who live lives of dependency.

Yaakov perceived that a new era was beginning. He delighted in seeing that Efraim and Menashe, children of golus, were determined to live as

their avos did. He determined that they would serve as the paradigm for generations to come, portraying that it is possible to rise to high and exalted levels even when trapped in a place one doesn't want to be in.

After learning that his beloved son, whom he had not seen in twenty-two years, was alive, Yaakov Avinu hurried down to Mitzrayim. On the way, he stopped in Be'er Sheva (46:1). The Medrash states that he stopped there in order to cut cedar trees for use in the construction of the Mishkon when his grandchildren would eventually be redeemed from golus Mitzrayim.

In the midst of the commotion and excitement, Yaakov Avinu remained focused on his mission of leading his progeny into golus. He maintained his equanimity, ensuring that his children would have the supplies they would need to exist in golus and when they would be redeemed.

Perhaps there is a deeper significance here as well. Yaakov brought cedar trees, because, tall and proud, they are a symbol of steadfastness and strength. He was hinting to his children that if they would stand like arozmim, unyielding and proud, they would survive the golus.

Golus is grueling, dangerous and long, but with the firmness of the erez, it is possible to emerge whole and pure. As we endure this period, it behooves us to remain resolute, resisting temptation to sin and sink. We must remain united in our drive and determination not to splinter and divide. Division has caused so many of our problems, historically and presently.

Success and sometimes our very existence in golus is tenuous. We must count and appreciate our blessings while we have them.

Imagine the sight when Moshiach arrives very soon. Thousands of Jews will line up to dance around him. Many will be bearing the scars of daunting nisyonos and tragedies of golus. They will stand there dancing, the children of Efraim and Menashe, with those of Reuvein and Yehuda. The weak will be strong, the wobbly will be tough, and the persecuted resilient. They will celebrate the great siyum, the greatest siyum ever. Everyone will participate as brothers and sisters. Nobody will be left out.

The Torah (49:1 and Rashi inter loc) relates that after he blessed his grandchildren, Yaakov gathered the family together and said that he would tell them what would happen at the End of Days. Yaakov was inspired to reveal the time of Acharis Hayomim, as he saw the unity, the shared mission, and the special kochos of his descendants. He saw that although they were born in the exile, Efraim and Menashe possessed the strengths of Yosef. He was comforted that his offspring would be able to withstand golus and would merit redemption at the End of Days.

Alas, the very nature of golus is that it is enveloped in a film of darkness and its end remains hidden. We do not understand the ways of Hashem, but through it all, we maintain our emunah and bitachon that the end, the keitz that Yaakov visualized, is approaching.

Through smiles and tears, good years and bad, generous hosts and disdainful ones, we follow the example of Yaakov Avinu's cedar trees, of Yosef's strength, of the glory of Efraim and Menashe. We remain strong, honest, incorruptible, united, and committed to each other and our goals, knowing that if we continue to persevere, we will soon be in a better place.

לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה