

Weekly Parsha VAYECHI
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

At the end of the book of Bereshith, as we read in this week's Torah reading, there is little warning as to what the very next Torah reading will discuss and describe. The transition, from the benign and idyllic last years of the life of our father Jacob, is a harsh reality of servitude and slavery visited upon his descendants.

From the biblical narrative, it appears to have been sudden and unexpected. However, we already read in this week's concluding Torah reading of the first book of the Bible, that both Jacob and Joseph speak of redemption from the sojourn in the land of Egypt and a return to the land of Israel.

From the nuances of their words and the hope and prayer that they expressed, it is obvious that they wish to warn the Jewish people that their future lay not in the land of Goshen or the flesh pots of Egypt but rather their stay in Egypt, no matter how many centuries long, should be viewed as only a temporary one.

In this, our forefathers indicated to us that this would be the pattern of Jewish history throughout the ages and that no matter how long the Jewish people would live in countries and areas outside of the land of Israel they should never view those societies as being permanent.

The remarkable thing about Jewish history is how repetitive it has been. If the Jewish presence in ancient Egypt was only for a few centuries, the presence of the Jews in areas such as Babylonia, Egypt, and Eastern Europe generally was for many more centuries than that of Egypt. We are all aware that all those societies came to an end, Jewishly speaking, as did ancient Egypt.

The last words of Jacob and Joseph were to the effect that the Lord would take the Jewish people from Egypt and return them to their ancient homeland, the land of Israel. It is this final message of the book of Bereshith that haunts them and follows the Jewish people throughout the biblical narrative of the remaining four books of the Torah.

Whenever troublesome challenges arose, regardless of the great miracles of survival the Jewish people were blessed with, there always was an element within the people that said it was preferable to return to Egypt rather than continue the struggle for Jewish identity and independence that only the land of Israel could guarantee to them.

Apparently, Jacob and Joseph were aware of this tendency towards weakness and assimilation within their descendants.

Their final message to all future generations of the Jewish people concentrated on the belief that the Lord would certainly redeem the Jewish people from all exiles, whether benign or cruel, and restore them to the challenge of independent nationhood in the land of Israel. That is why at the conclusion of this week's Torah reading we will repeat our ancient model and prayer to be strong and to strengthen ourselves and others for the tasks that always lie ahead.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

In My Opinion STORIES
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

One of the most fundamental lessons in public speaking is the ability, or rather the necessity, of the speaker to tell a story to illustrate the message that is being delivered. People remember stories much longer and with much greater nostalgia than learned interpretations and abstract thoughts and ideas. And if the story is somehow humorous – and the only humor that is acceptable in such instances is self-deprecating humor about one's own inadequacies and foibles – then the story will have even a greater impact on the brain and memory of the listeners.

A story well told and with a distinct moral message is truly a goldmine for the public speaker. And if we think about the events of our everyday personal lives, we will soon discover that there never is a shortage of stories that can be used to illustrate life and human interaction. So, in the broadest sense of our understanding of life, other human beings and current events, we all become storytellers.

The good story influences the future generations of our families, students, and even mere acquaintances. There is no story that is as powerful as the life we live. I think that is the reason why people are so interested in stories about others, especially stories about leaders, holy individuals, and outstanding scholars. This is certainly true in Jewish society, but I have a strong suspicion that it is universally true, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated and intellectual. The entire entertainment industry, such as it is, is dependent on the ability to tell a good story in an attractive and popular way.

Stories took a turn in Jewish life to become holy. In the Chasidic world, stories became the vehicle of information, education, and connection between the holy leader of the group and its followers. Stories were entitled to be exaggerated beyond the limits of true accuracy and reality. They took on a life of their own, adding wonder and hope, knowledge and inspiration and a glimpse of a world that was not tarnished and tainted by human weaknesses.

The great rebbe of Kotsk summed up the matter succinctly when he stated: "A Jew who believes all of the stories of Chasidim is a fool, and he who believes none of them is a heathen."

Just as it required skill to tell a story properly, it also requires skill on the part of the listener to hear the story properly to absorb the message and moral lesson that the story is meant to impart. The story is the outside garb, with the message and moral the internal seed that is meant to be planted within the mind, heart, and soul of the listener. It is this facet of storytelling that has made it so popular in the Jewish world throughout the centuries.

In the simplest terms, all of our history is merely one long story, where the details are important but the message of the story – the eternity of the Jewish people and its connection to Torah, redemption and the land of Israel – is even more important.

I am currently working on completing a book of stories, both personal and communal. Over the many decades of my life, I have been able to collect many stories, most of them from ordinary personal experiences in life. For a long period of time, I found that the best source of my stories, which I then related to my congregation in my Shabbat sermons, was simply shopping in a supermarket in my neighborhood. Something always happened there, from which a story could be made, and a moral lesson derived. The supermarket was such a treasure trove of interesting people and incidents that I often went there even when I had nothing to purchase, simply to view the crowd and take in the experience.

When I began writing the book of stories, I thought that it would be a lighthearted account of human foibles written with compassion, with a certain tinge of mockery. I soon discovered that the book was writing itself in a far more serious vein than I had originally imagined or even intended. Even the most lighthearted of stories contain within them strong lessons for life and moral implications. But the writing of the book is another story, and this is not the place or time for its telling.

Shabbat shalom

Berel Wein

Moving Forwards (Vayechi 5781)

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Office of Rabbi Sacks will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah.

The book of Bereishit ends on a sublime note of reconciliation between Jacob's sons. Joseph's brothers were afraid that he had not really forgiven them for selling him into slavery. They suspected that he was merely delaying his revenge until their father died. After Jacob's death, they express their concern to him. But Joseph insists:

"Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, do not be afraid. I will provide for you

and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:19-21)

This is the second time Joseph has said something like this to them. Earlier he spoke similarly when he first disclosed that he – the man they thought was an Egyptian viceroy called Tzophnat Pa’aneach – was in fact their brother Joseph:

“I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (Gen. 45:3-8)

This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have suffered. But it also establishes another important principle: the idea of Divine Providence. History is not, as Joseph Heller called it, “a trash bag of random coincidences blown open in the wind.”[1] It has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is at work behind the scenes. “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,” says Hamlet, “rough-hew them how we will.”[2]

Joseph’s greatness was that he sensed this. He saw the bigger picture. Nothing in his life, he now knew, had happened by accident. The plot to kill him, his sale as a slave, the false accusations of Potiphar’s wife, his time in prison, and his disappointed hope that the chief butler would remember him and secure his release – all these events that might have cast him into ever-deeper depths of despair turned out in retrospect to be necessary steps in the journey that eventuated in his becoming second-in-command in Egypt and the one person capable of saving the whole country – as well as his own family – from starvation in the years of famine.

Joseph had, in double measure, one of the necessary gifts of a leader: the ability to keep going despite opposition, envy, false accusation and repeated setbacks. Every leader who stands for anything will face opposition. This may be a genuine conflict of interests. A leader elected to make society more equitable will almost certainly win the support of the poor and the antagonism of the rich. One elected to reduce the tax burden will do the opposite. It cannot be avoided. Politics without conflict is a contradiction in terms.

Any leader elected to anything, any leader more loved or gifted than others, will face envy. Rivals will question, “Why wasn’t it me?” That is what Korach thought about Moses and Aaron. It is what the brothers thought about Joseph when they saw that their father favoured him. It is what Antonio Salieri thought about the more gifted Mozart, according to Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus*.

As for false accusations, they have occurred often enough in history. Joan of Arc was accused of heresy and burned at the stake. A quarter century later she was posthumously declared innocent by an official court of inquiry. More than twenty people were put to death as a result of the Salem Witch Trials in 1692-3. Years later, as their innocence began to be perceived, a priest present at the trials, John Hale, admitted, “Such was the darkness of that day... that we walked in the clouds, and could not see our way.”[3] The most famous false accusation of modern times was the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent who was accused of being a German spy. The Dreyfus affair rocked France during the years 1894 and 1906, until Dreyfus was finally acquitted.

Setbacks are almost always a part of the life-story of the most successful. J. K. Rowling’s initial Harry Potter novel was rejected by the first twelve publishers who received it. Another writer of a book about children suffered twenty-one rejections. The book was called *Lord of the Flies*, and its author, William Golding, was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

In his famous commencement address at Stanford University, the late Steve Jobs told the story of the three blows of fate that shaped his life: dropping out of university; being fired from Apple, the company he

founded; and being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Rather than being defeated by them, he turned them all to creative use.

For twenty-two years I lived close to Abbey Road in North London, where a famous pop group recorded all their hits. At their first audition, they performed for a record company who told them that guitar bands were “on their way out.” The verdict on their performance (in January 1962) was: “The Beatles have no future in show business.”

All this explains Winston Churchill’s great remark that “success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

It may be that what sustains people through repeated setbacks is belief in themselves, or sheer tenacity, or lack of alternatives. What sustained Joseph, though, was his insight into Divine Providence. A plan was unfolding whose end he could only dimly discern, but at some stage he seems to have realised that he was just one of many characters in a far larger drama, and that all the bad things that had happened to him were necessary if the intended outcome was to occur. As he said to his brothers, “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”

This willingness to let events work themselves out in accordance with providence, this understanding that we are, at best, no more than co-authors of our lives, allowed Joseph to survive without resentment about the past or despair in the face of the future. Trust in God gave him immense strength, which is what we will all need if we are to dare greatly. Whatever malice other people harbour against leaders – and the more successful they are, the more malice there is – if they can say, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good,” they will survive, their strength intact, their energy undiminished.

Shabbat Shalom: Vayechi (Genesis 47:28-50:26)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – “Gather together and I shall tell you what is to happen at the end of the days” (Genesis 49:1)

The portion of Vayechi, and the entire Book of Genesis, concludes with Jacob’s deathbed scene in which he “reveals to his sons what will befall them at the end of the days,” expressing the various strengths and weaknesses of each of his heirs and foretelling what each tribe will contribute to the great collage of future Jewish history. He is both Jacob the father of a family as well as Israel the father of a nation – and he leaves the world in the fullness of his success as a parent who has finally united his family and as a patriarch who has established the guidelines for an emerging nation with a mission to unite the world.

Jacob is indeed called by our Sages “the chosen one of the Patriarchs.” What made him deserve this very special accolade? What is the unique contribution which he made to the legacies of Abraham and Isaac? Our Sages compare Abraham to a mountain, Isaac to a field and Jacob to a house (or household) (Pesachim 88a)

Apparently, the secret to a successful family – as well to a successful nation, which is after all, a family “writ large” – is to be found within the persona of Jacob, perhaps even within the very blessings he bequeaths to his sons. What is it? The major challenge to each of the Patriarchs was that of succession. Each needed to identify which of the children in the next generation would be the bearer of the Abrahamic legacy. The major struggle within Jacob’s life was the deception he perpetrated upon his father, albeit at the behest of his mother, to wrest away the blessings Isaac had meant to bestow upon his older brother, Esau.

This act of deception, no matter how justified it may have been in the light of the characteristics of each of the brothers, was to haunt Jacob for the rest of his life: He is deceived by Laban, who argues that in his place the younger sister does not receive a prize before the elder; he is deceived by his sons who tell him that a wild beast tore apart his beloved Joseph; and he is even deceived by Joseph who, while dressed up as the Grand Vizier, requests that Jacob send Rachel’s only remaining son, Benjamin, to Egypt.

His punishment goes even further: His beloved Rachel dies before her time because she deceives her father Laban by stealing his household gods (in the Mari and Nuzu documents from that time, the one who got the household gods also received the parental inheritance.)

And Jacob seems to be so resentful of his loving mother's role in suggesting and facilitating his deception that the Bible mentions his weeping over and providing the burial for his nurse Deborah with ne'er a mention of Rebekah's death and Jacob's mourning over her.

Now, at the end of his life, the time has come for Jacob to bless his own sons. In previous commentaries, I have maintained that Isaac wanted to give the material blessings to Esau and the spiritual "messianic" blessings to Jacob, whereas Rebekah had insisted that both areas of leadership must go to the same son, to Jacob.

And indeed, Joseph's dreams expressed his mastery in both the realm of the material (the 11 sheaves of grain bowing down to his sheaf) as well as of the spiritual (the 11 stars bowing down to him). Logic would indicate that Joseph would receive both of these blessings from Jacob.

But this is not to be the case. You will remember that, in the past, the rejected son was ousted from the family: Ishmael was actually banished from Abraham's household and Esau left the ancestral homeland for Seir-Edom. Jacob has learned that different strengths may warrant different blessings, that in a true family one victor need not be the recipient of all with the loser going into exile. A family – much like an orchestra – provides the possibility for different individuals (or tribes) each playing the instrument they can play best for the ultimate achievement of a harmonious symphony.

Hence Judah receives the spiritual blessing of the scepter of messianic leadership, the ingathering of all of the nations to Jerusalem when the world will be at peace (Gen. 49:10). And Joseph receives the blessing of material fruitfulness (the ten tribes, especially Ephraim and Manasseh) and the physical ability to overcome the arrows of our enemies (ibid. 22-26). Jacob succeeded in uniting his family and in giving a charge to the tribes for a united nation. The latter has yet to be achieved – and therein lies the prescription for the true coming of our redemption.

Shabbat Shalom!

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message - Vayechi 5781-2021

"Revealing the Time of the Coming of the End of Days"

(Updated and revised from parashat Vayechi 5761-2001)

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's parasha, parashat Vayechi, is the only "sealed" parasha in the Torah, meaning that there are no empty spaces between last week's parasha, Vayigash, and this week's parasha, Vayechi. Usually each new parasha begins with a new paragraph, or is separated from the previous parasha by a space of at least 9 letters. But, Vayechi begins as if it were a continuation of last week's parasha.

The biblical commentator Rashi, opines on the opening verse of our parasha (Genesis 47:28): למה פְּרָשָׁה זוֹ חֲתוּמָה? Why is this parasha sealed? Rashi responds by citing the reason found in Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 96:1) that Jacob attempted to reveal the time of the end of days to his children, but lost his power of prophecy. Consequently, the parasha is sealed.

The famed Chassidic master, the Sefat Emet, explains that the reason the Al-mighty does not allow the time of the "End of Days" to be revealed, is because if the Jewish people knew when the ultimate redemption would come, they would not really feel the pain of גְּלוּת –galut, and exile would no longer be exile.

The great 19th century commentator of the Bible, the Malbim, notes in his commentary on the book of Daniel, that the time of the end of days is hinted at in the final verses of the Book of Daniel. In fact, the Malbim actually calculates the exact time that the redemption is to arrive. When the Malbim's commentary was published, there was a great outcry, and the Malbim received many letters from rabbis denouncing his eschatological calculations. Many of the protesters cited the rabbinic calumny, warning that, (Sanhedrin, 97b), תפוח עץ צמחן של מחשבי הקצין, "Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end of days." – which was their way of saying, "They should drop dead!"

The Malbim responded to his critics with the following parable: A Jewish merchant from Poland and his young son traveled to Leiptzig, Germany. In those days, long before trains, the trip, made by wagon,

took several weeks, and required staying over in many cities and lodging in numerous places. A journey of such length to Leiptzig was considered a big event and required weeks of preparation. Finally, the day of departure came and the family accompanied the father and son to the wagon, to begin their arduous journey.

After traveling several miles, the son turned to his father and asked, "Father, is the journey to Leiptzig long?" Instead of responding, the father gave his son a nasty look. The son quickly understood that his question was considered foolish, one that he would not dare ask again.

And, so, they traveled, for days and weeks, from city to city, from town to town, from inn to inn, until one day the young boy suddenly saw his father turn to the wagon driver and ask him, "Are we far from Leiptzig?" This bothered the boy, who turned to his father and asked, "When I asked if the journey to Leiptzig was long, you gave me a dirty look as if I had asked the most foolish question, and now you yourself ask the same question?"

The father responded by saying, "It's true that we both asked the same question. The difference was in the timing. You asked the question when we first set out on the journey, just as we got on the wagon, and took the first steps in a long and dangerous road of hundreds of miles. If a person asks at the beginning of a journey, while there is still a long way to go, it is a silly question. But, now that we are close to the end of the journey, and there are only a few miles left before us, now, it is entirely proper to ask about the remaining distance to Leiptzig."

And so it is, explained the Malbim, with regard to the end of days. When we, the Jews, were first exiled, our holy rabbis understood that before us was a long and treacherous journey that would continue for thousands of years. This journey would be filled with terrible tests and suffering. Had the time of the end of days been revealed to our people, how long and distant it would be, the people would have lost hope and would have been filled with depression and despair. All efforts to bring the end of days would have been extinguished and all hope would have vanished. For, after all, who has the strength to traverse such an endless path? And, who has the tenacity to hope for redemption, which is so far away? That is why our rabbis said, "Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end of days." Let no one dare reveal how long this journey is.

But now, at a time when all signs indicate that, thank G-d, we are close to the end of galut, that the end of exile is near, and that the journey is about to come to a conclusion, now it is permitted to point out, that yes, we have reached the end of the journey and we can indeed reveal what the remaining distance to Leiptzig truly is. Thus the Malbim responded to his critics.

The rabbis of Talmud predicted that the end of days would be a very difficult period. They speak of חֶבְלֵי מַשִּׁיחַ –Chevlei Mashiach, the travail of the arrival of the Messiah, מִלְחַמַת גּוֹי וּגְמוּלָה the wars of the great nations, and דְּיַוָּן שֶׁל גִּיהֵנוֹם, the judgment of the valley of Hinom.

When I first composed this parasha commentary in 2001, I was in Israel, and saw first-hand how difficult is this period of redemption. Mothers and children were being murdered by Palestinian terrorists, and Arafat was demanding sovereignty over the Kotel, the Western Wall. There was even talk of giving up Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount. Now we have seen the sudden development of peaceful relations, known as the Abraham accords, between the State of Israel and several Arab countries.

Let us hope and pray that the גְּאוּלָּה —ge'ulah, the ultimate Redemption, is not far off, and that the few miles left to "Leiptzig" will not take very long. May we soon behold the dawning of the Messianic era, and may the travail of this very long and arduous journey in galut finally come to an end.

May you be blessed.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah Parshat Vayechi

Our Covid-19 journey – how should we respond to its uncertainty?

It has no beginning.

Every parsha starts at the beginning of a fresh paragraph. There's either a short gap or a longer gap before it. Parshat Vayechi, however, has no beginning. It flows directly on from the end of the previous week's parsha. So why is this the case?

The 15th Century scholar Rav Meir Yechiel of Ostroff gives a beautiful peirush. He tells us that when the 70 souls of the family of Yaakov Avinu came down to Egypt, they didn't know at what point in their journey they were.

Confusion

There was so much doubt, so much confusion. They knew they were going into exile. But how long would it last? Would it be happy? Would it be trying? When would their redemption come? When would they be going back to their land?

Because the beginning, the middle and the end of their journey was not known to them, that's why the beginning of the parsha is not clearly defined.

What was the response of Yaakov Avinu during those challenging times of uncertainty? In a word: Beracha. Blessings.

Yaakov Avinu counted his blessings, and he wanted those around him to do likewise. In particular at that moment he appreciated his family. Coming right at the end of the book of Bereishit – the book of the dysfunctional family – Yaakov Avinu wanted to bring his divided family together, and he showed them how his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menashe, got on so well together – a model for future peaceful domestic coexistence.

Blessings

Berachot, blessings, are what Yaakov Avinu gave to his family. Vayechi is full of them: a blessing for each and every child, a blessing for his grandchildren, charging us to bless our children likewise for all time. Indeed, the blessings of Yaakov Avinu as presented in Vayechi continue to provide inspiration for us to this very day.

I believe that all of this is highly relevant to us at this very point on our journey of Covid-19. Ever since the pandemic commenced, we've known we're on a journey but it's been a very challenging time for us because usually, you can plan ahead. We know when we'll be working, when our holiday period will be, and we're able to put things in the diary. But even now as the vaccines are starting to be rolled out, we don't know what's waiting around the corner for us – no point in this journey is clearly defined for us – so what should our response be?

It should be berachot.

Just like Yaakov Avinu, we need to count our blessings. We need to step back and prioritise what is really important in life and like Yaakov Avinu, highlight how crucial our families must be for us all.

In addition we need to bless others, to let them know how much we appreciate them, to give them words of praise and also to invest in the future. The pandemic presents us with many challenges. These are trying times – people are dying, people are ill, people have lost their jobs, people are lonely and there is an increase of mental illness. But together with that, like Yaakov Avinu, let's invest now in our future. And through our actions, our deeds and our blessings, may we provide an inspiration now for all time to come.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Rabbi Yissocher Frand - Parshas Vayechi

Yosef's Motivation Reassures Yaakov; Yosef's Legacy Empowers Us Do Not Tell Your Father "I Am Doing It for You;" Tell Him "I Am Doing It for Me"

Yaakov made Yosef take an oath (shavua) that he would not allow him to be buried in Egypt but would bring his body back to Eretz Yisrael for burial in the Cave of Machpelah. Yosef's response was, "I will act according to your words." [Bereshis 47:30]. According to the simple reading of the pasuk, Yosef is positively responding to Yaakov's shavua and agreeing to bury him in Eretz Yisrael.

The strange thing over here is that if a parent asks his child to please bury him in Eretz Yisrael, every son would comply with such a request without taking an oath. For some reason, it seems that Yaakov felt very

uncomfortable here, to the extent that he forced his son to take an oath to corroborate this commitment.

I saw an interesting interpretation in the sefer Darash Mordechai by Rav Mordechai Druk, which may be upsetting to us, but unfortunately, sometimes, it can be very true. He cites an observation from his mother. In Birkas HaMazon, we say "V'Na al tazricheinu Hashem Elokeinu Lo l'yedei matnas basar v'dam v'lo l'yedei halva'asm" – We ask that our livelihood come straight from the Almighty and not via "gifts from flesh and blood." Rav Druk's mother asked – why do we use this expression "gifts from flesh and blood" in the Bentching – why not "gifts from man" (matnas Adam)? She answered – this means we should not need to ask for help from our own "flesh and blood" – i.e., our children – to take care of our financial needs. No one wants to be dependent on his children for support.

There is a famous oft-quoted statement: One mother can take care of ten children, but ten children cannot take care of one mother. Lo l'yedei matnas basar v'dam is not referring to "people in general", but specifically to our own flesh and blood, our children. Please Hashem, let it be that I do not need to come on to the largesse of my children for my basic needs.

The Shaloh haKadosh in fact says (and one has to be the Shalo'h haKadosh to suggest such a bold idea) that when Yaakov arrived in Egypt and was greeted by Yosef, Yaakov said "Amoosa ha'Paam" (Let me now die) [Bereshis 46:30]. The usual interpretation was that Yaakov expressed happiness: I can now die a happy man that I have been reunited with my beloved son Yosef. The Shalo'h states that Yaakov was saying "Now that I am going to need to be dependent on my son Yosef to support me and provide for my needs here in Egypt – I would rather die!"

With this thought in mind, we can understand two things. First, we can understand why Yaakov was so nervous about his funeral arrangements that he made Yosef take an oath. Yaakov was very uncomfortable with the whole idea of asking his son for a favor. Second, we now have a new insight into Yosef's response: "I will act according to your words." It does not mean "I am going to go ahead and fulfill your wishes and bury you in the Land of Canaan." Anochi E'eseh kiDvarecha means "I also am going to do as you say. I also want to be buried in Eretz Yisrael!"

Yosef is saying to his father – the reason I am going to fulfill your request is not for your sake. I am going to do it for my sake because I want to be buried there as well! The greatest way of assuring that I will be buried in Eretz Yisrael is that when my children see that I schlepped you back to Eretz Yisrael, I can assume they will do the same for me. Yosef was in effect putting Yaakov's mind at ease. "Dear father, do not consider this a favor you are asking from me. It is in no way an imposition on your son because I am not doing it for you. I am doing it for me!"

Not Why Weren't You Like Yosef? But Rather Why Didn't You Use the Spiritual Power That Is Our Legacy from Yosef?

The Rambam [Yesodei HaTorah 5:10] paskens that if someone violates Torah law without being forced to, but merely as a callous and wanton act of disrespect for the Word of G-d, he has desecrated the Name of G-d (Chillul HaShem). This is not a case of someone who has a strong desire for pork or a lust to engage in promiscuous activity, rather, this speaks of someone who violates Torah law out of spite (l'hach'is). The Rambam continues that if a person does a mitzvah or refrains from doing an aveirah for no ulterior motive (not for seeking honor or reward or fear of punishment) but simply because it is the Will of G-d – he has Sanctified the Name of G-d. He gives as an example of this, Yosef's refraining from sin when tempted by the wife of Potiphar.

If a person sits in the privacy of his home – nobody sees him, nobody watches him, nobody knows what he is doing – and yet he refrains from doing an aveirah simply because the Ribono shel Olam said so, that is a Kiddush HaShem, by definition.

There is a famous Gemara [Yoma 35b]:

To the wicked person they say (prior to Judgement in the Next World) "Why did you not engage in Torah study?" If he says, "I was handsome and entangled with my evil inclination," they say to him "Were you any

more handsome than Yosef?” They say about Yosef HaTzadik that each and every day the wife of Potiphar would attempt to seduce him with words. It was a daily battle and yet he went ahead and refused her advances – not because of fear or honor but solely to fulfill the Will of the Almighty. We tell the wicked person: “Look at Yosef!” The Gemara concludes that Yosef is me’chayev ha’Resha’im. He is the paradigm of a handsome person who was tempted to sin by beautiful women, and yet he withstood those temptations.

The Sefas Emes asks a question here: We tell a wicked person “Why were you not you like Yosef?” The wicked person can have a quick comeback: “I was not like Yosef because my name was not Yosef haTzadik!” Suppose someone tells me “You know Rav Chaim Kanievisky has this big chumra that he observes – why don’t you keep that chumra?” I will tell him “I don’t know if you haven’t noticed this, but I am not Rav Chaim Kanievisky! I am not on that spiritual level!” How can the Heavenly Court come to a new arrival and ask him “Why were you not like Yosef?” The answer he will give is obvious: “I am not Yosef! Yosef was the classic Tzadik Yesod Olam – what do you want from me?”

In order to understand the Sefas Emes’ answer to this question, we must first grasp the implication of a pasuk in this week’s parsha: The brothers were afraid of what Yosef might do to them after Yaakov died. He called them and said to them: “Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good: in order to accomplish – ka’yom ha’zeh – that a vast people be kept alive.” [Bereshis 50:19-20].

What does the expression ka’yom ha’zeh (literally – like this day) mean in this sentence? The English translation in many Chumashim is “it is as clear as day”. But the Be’er Moshe suggests another interpretation which is based on an earlier pasuk in Sefer Bereshis. When Yosef was faced with the seductive temptations of Potiphar’s wife, the pasuk says “Va’yehi ka’yom ha’zeh” (and it was like on this day) [Bereshis 39:11]. The Be’er Moshe says the “Ka’yom ha’zeh” in Parshas VaYechi is alluding to the “Ka’yom ha’zeh” in Parshas VaYeshev. Meaning – Egypt was an amoral society, immersed in promiscuity. Not one Jewish woman in all the years of servitude had a willful promiscuous relation with someone other than her husband. Who gave Klal Yisrael the power to do that? It was Yosef HaTzadik. The fact that Yosef HaTzadik withstood the temptation and did not have a promiscuous relationship with Potiphar’s wife gave Klal Yisrael the ability to withstand the temptations they would encounter in Egypt until they left over 200 years later!

Just like we all know that the ability to be moser nefer (experience martyrdom) comes from Avraham Avinu and we received so much from the Avos via the principle of Ma’aseh Avos Siman L’Banim, similarly, the ability to withstand the temptations of sexual immorality in Egypt came from Yosef – the fact that he did not commit adultery with Potiphar’s wife.

Says the Be’er Moshe: That is the meaning of “Ka’yom ha’zeh”. Yosef tells his brothers – It is all part of the Master Plan to keep the people alive – not only alive physically, but alive spiritually as well! Do you know how your descendants will have the power to do that during two hundred years of Egyptian servitude? “Ka’yom ha’zeh”. It was because ON THAT DAY I was able to overcome my Yetzer HaRah. The Ribono shel Olam placed me in that compromising position so that I should pass the test and pass on to my descendants the ability to withstand such tests. So too, He placed me in this situation, so that I could provide for your material needs at this time.

If that is the interpretation, we can now understand the answer of the Sefas Emes. The Sefas Emes says that when the Gemara says in Maseches Yoma that a person will be asked “How come you could not control your evil inclinations?” and they will cite for him the example of Yosef HaTzadik, they are not saying that they expect him to be like Yosef HaTzadik. They are saying “You have as a heritage, as a legacy from Yosef HaTzadik, the ability to do the same thing! That is part of your DNA.”

It is not like saying “Why are you not like Rav Chaim Kanievisky? It is more fundamental than that. We are not saying you should be like Yosef. We are saying Yosef did something for the spiritual DNA of Klal Yisrael – that forever after they should have the capability of withstanding such temptation.

This is what the Rambam means in Yesodei HaTorah when he gives the example of Yosef HaTzadik as the classic Sanctifier of the Name of G-d. When Yosef told his brothers “G-d put me in Egypt – Ka’yom ha’zeh – he not only meant to save Klal Yisrael from hunger, but to give them the spiritual power to withstand temptations like he himself withstood ‘On that day’.”

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Vayechi: Brothers in Prejudice

Ben-Tzion Spitz

A great many people think they are thinking when they are really rearranging their prejudices. - Edward R. Murrow

Jacob, the patriarch of the family, the father of the twelve brothers who will form the future nation of Israel, is on his deathbed. He calls his sons into his room so that he can bless them and share with them his prophetic visions of their future.

Out of all the siblings, there are only two that he refers to as “brothers,” Shimon and Levi. But the context is not a positive one. Jacob’s parting statement to them reads as follows:

“Simeon and Levi are brothers; Their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, Let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, And when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, And their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, Scatter them in Israel.”

To put it mildly, Jacob’s final words to Shimon and Levi seem to be the opposite of a blessing.

The Bechor Shor on Genesis 49:5 focuses on the word “brothers” and tries to dig deeper into Jacob’s meaning and use of the word. He explains that Jacob is referring to a very basic principle of human socialization. Shimon and Levi were “brothers” in their nature, their disposition, and their prejudices. As a result, they regularly hung out with each other. They both possessed the trait of anger. Their ill will and negative thoughts reinforced each other and led them to violent and dangerous actions (the destruction of the city of Shechem and plotting to kill Joseph). The two of them formed their own echo chamber. When they thought perhaps that they were rationally discussing a topic, they were merely validating their dangerous ideas and emotions.

In that context, the Bechor Shor quotes perhaps the original formulation of “birds of a feather flock together” (attributed to William Turner, 1545), quoting the Babylonian Talmud (completed circa the year 500) “All fowl will live with its kind, and men with those like him” (Tractate Baba Kama 92b), a line which derives from the even older Book of Ben Sira 13:17 (circa 200 BCE) where Ben Sira writes “All flesh loveth its kind; And every man him that is like unto him.”

In any case, Jacob’s prophecy came to fruition. The descendants of both Shimon and Levi were dispersed throughout the territory of Israel, in part, to prevent their getting together and seeking future destructive council with each other.

While it is often nice to seek like-minded people, when it’s about negative perspectives, it’s better to seek out others.

Dedication - To the Israeli Medical system for their incredible vaccine distribution effort.

Shabbat Shalom

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Parashat Vayechi

Different but Complementary

In this week's Torah portion of Vayechi which concludes the book of Genesis, we listen to Jacob blessing his sons as they stand around his bed at the end of his days. Jacob bequeaths a blessing and a purpose to each son. A tribe is going to come of every son and the twelve tribes together will form a nation. Jacob's words shaped the nation and defined the different tribes as a mosaic made of pieces that are different from one another but that complement each other and form one big picture together.

Two of the tribes – Issachar and Zebulun - got blessings from Jacob that were connected and complementary. Zebulun was blessed with a skill for maritime trade: "Zebulun will dwell on the coast of the seas; he [will be] at the harbor of the ships, and his boundary will be at Zidon" (Genesis 49, 13). And Issachar was blessed with the ability to withstand carrying heavy loads: "Issachar is a bony donkey, lying between the boundaries... and he bent his shoulder to bear [burdens]..." (Ibid Ibid, 14 – 15). Our sages explained that this was not a physical burden but rather a spiritual one, carrying the yoke of the Torah: "...for Zebulun would engage in commerce and provide food for the tribe of Issachar, and they (the tribe of Issachar) would engage in (the study of) Torah" (Rashi). Meaning, Zebulun would support Issachar who dedicated his life to the study of Torah.

This begs an explanation since we know a person cannot pay another to keep commandments for him. Can you imagine someone paying his friend to put tefillin on for him, or to make kiddush on Shabbat for him? Of course not. So how is learning Torah different? Why is it enough for the tribe of Zebulun to support the tribe of Issachar? Furthermore, since Torah learning is required of each person to shape his personality, how could the tribe of Zebulun be exempt from it?

Actually, the sages did not mean to say that the tribe of Zebulun was exempt from the commandment to learn Torah. Like every Jew, they also had to learn Torah every day. A Jew cannot live a spiritual life with G-d at its center without learning Torah. We learn Torah not only because we are commanded to do so, but also because we are aware of its tremendous power to change and repair our ways. Even the tribe of Zebulun learned Torah.

But there is another facet to Torah learning that is national rather than personal. In addition to individuals learning Torah, the entire nation has a national obligation to learn Torah and raise people who will serve as the intellectual layer of G-d worshippers, teachers of halacha (Jewish law) and spiritual leaders. This is the entire nation's commandment. Every Jew must fulfill it, either by dedicating his life to learning Torah and teaching, or by supporting someone learning Torah for the benefit of the entire nation.

A national mission cannot be carried out by the entire nation. Every person has different and unique talents and there is no reason to expect everyone to carry out identical missions. Every Jew does his job, one that suits his talents and abilities, and together – when each person does his best to fulfill his own personal role – we create a nation on the foundations of Torah.

When there is no expectation of everyone to behave identically, social tensions are also reduced. Every group, every tribe, and every person understands that one person's job is not necessarily another person's. My mission is not his so there is no reason to be angry at someone who is devotedly fulfilling his own special mission. The twelve tribes were different from one another. They were not expected to be similar, let alone identical. But they were all required to follow the path of Torah, the path of G-d, to live a life of loving-kindness and justice. When this is understood, love and solidarity can exist, with each tribe and each group contributing its own unique contribution to the building of the entire nation.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Rav Kook Torah

Vayechi: Jacob Did Not Die

Chanan Morrison

Third-century scholar Rabbi Yochanan made an astounding claim regarding Jacob:

Rabbi Yochanan stated, 'Our father Jacob did not die.'

Rabbi Nachman asked, 'Was it in vain that they eulogized Jacob and embalmed his body and buried him?'

Rabbi Yochanan responded, 'I derive this from a verse: 'Fear not, Jacob My servant... for I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity' (Jeremiah 30:10). The verse likens Jacob to his offspring: just as his offspring lives, so too, Jacob lives.' (Ta'anit 5b)

What did Rabbi Yochanan mean that Jacob did not die? If he intended to say that Jacob's soul is still alive, that requires no verse - the souls of all righteous people are eternal. And if he meant that Jacob's body did not die, several verses explicitly state that he died (for example, "Joseph's brothers realized that their father had died" (Gen. 50:15)).

The medieval Talmudic commentary Tosafot explains that, when describing Jacob's death, the Torah only says that he "expired," not that he "died" (Gen. 49:33). We need to examine the difference between these two verbs.

Also, why did Rabbi Yochanan make this claim of eternity only for Jacob, and not for Abraham and Isaac?

Two Aspects of Death

When a person dies, two things occur. First, the bodily functions (breathing, pumping of the heart, and so on) cease. This is called *geviya*, expiring. The natural cessation of bodily functions is a sign of a virtuous, well-lived life, since an unhealthy and profligate lifestyle brings about an early demise of the body.

The second aspect of death concerns the soul. After the sin of Adam, death was decreed in order to allow the soul to purify itself from its contact with the body's physical drives and desires. Death purges the soul of those sensual influences that distance one from true closeness to God. The aspect of death that cleanses the soul is called *mitah*.

Thus, Solomon wrote that "Love is strong as death" (Song of Songs 8:6). How is love like death? Just as death purifies the soul from the body's physical wants, so too, a truly intense love for God will overwhelm any other form of desire.

The Impact of Intermediate Actions

All actions that we perform during our lifetime make a deep impression on our souls. The soul is influenced not only by our ultimate goals but also by the intermediate actions we take to achieve those goals. Sometimes, these actions are themselves worthy means for attaining our goals, and their impact on the soul is a positive one.

At other times, a specific goal is achieved via means that contradict the overall objective. This is like scaffolding that is erected when building. The scaffolding is needed to aid in the construction, but is removed once the building is complete. So too, these temporary means will be canceled after the goal is attained, and their impure influence on the soul must be purged.

Jacob's Family was Complete

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are called the *Avot* (forefathers), since the main objective of their lives was to father a holy nation.

Abraham and Isaac's efforts towards this goal included using means that needed to be relinquished once the objective is attained - i.e., they bore and raised Ishmael and Esau. Even though these offspring contested the true goal of the *Avot*, they were needed in order to accomplish their overall aim. Therefore, the Torah uses the word *mitah* to describe Abraham and Isaac's death. It was necessary to purge the influence of fathering and raising these non-Jewish nations on their souls, since this occupation conflicted with their soul's inner mission.

But while the souls of Abraham and Isaac required the cleansing effect of *mitah*, Jacob's "bed was complete." All of his children were included within the people of Israel. Jacob did not need to occupy himself with any transitory means; all of his efforts were eternal, in line with God's design for His world. Therefore the verse says, "For I, God, have not changed; and you, the children of Jacob, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). The eternal nature of the Jewish people is particularly bound to Jacob, the forefather who "did not die."

In certain respects, Jacob did die, but this was only in personal matters, due to the baseness of the physical world and its negative influence upon the human soul. That was not the true essence of Jacob's soul. When the

Torah describes Jacob's passing, it does so in terms of his life's goal, as the father of the Jewish people. The Torah does not use the word "death," since there was no need to purge his soul of its ties to its worldly occupations.

This explains why we do not find in the Torah that Jacob's sons eulogized their father. Only the Egyptians did so - "A profound mourning for Egypt" (Gen. 50:11). Jacob had assisted the Egyptians by bringing the years of famine to an early end. From the standpoint of the Egyptians, Jacob had died, and the connection of his soul to these matters was severed. Therefore, the Egyptians had reason to mourn.

But Jacob's sons, who knew that Jacob was still alive with them, had no need to eulogize their father.

(Gold from the Land of Israel (now available in paperback) pp. 95-98. Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 242-251)

Illustration image: 'Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph' (Jan Victors, 1650)

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Vayechi

פרשת ויחי תשפ"א

ויחי יעקב בארץ מצרים

Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt. (47:28)

Rashi asks (based on a *Midrash*), "Why is this *parsha setumah*, closed?" Despite the fact that *Vayechi* begins a new *parshah*, it is "closed." This means it is not set off by the usual number of spaces that would normally mark it as distinct from the previous *parsha*. (In other words, when there are no spaces it is difficult to discern the beginning of a new *parsha*.) *Rashi* offers his responses. I would like to focus on a meaningful explanation which *Horav Nissan Alpert, zl*, renders.

Life (can be – and is) unpredictable and mysterious. Life is like a "closed book," its final chapters elusive and hidden until one reaches the end. Some individuals cannot tolerate the suspense of reading a mystery novel. Thus, they turn to the pages at the end of the book to find out what happens at the end before they actually read the book. This cannot be done with life. Man is formed from clay (*Adam, yesodo mei afar*), and he goes through life wondering when his end will come. When he is in a period of distress he wonders from whence will come his salvation. We all know that good might emanate from situations that appear (to our mortal vision) to be absolutely bad and vice versa. We never know when – or from where – our salvation will be delivered. (The only thing that we know for certain is that whatever will come, it will come from Hashem.)

Yaakov *Avinu* lived in the land of Egypt. Did the Patriarch ever imagine that the "Egyptian years" would be the best ones of his life? Did he believe that one day he would be reunited with Yosef? Certainly, he hoped that the education and inspiration that he imparted to Yosef would infuse him with positive spiritual character and moral traits, but did he ever dream that Yosef would achieve and maintain *tzaddik*, righteous, status?

Life is filled with surprises – some good and some that are not so (to the mortal eye) good. At the end of the day, the term *olam* (the Hebrew word for world), which shares its *shoresh*, root, with *he'elam/ne'elam*, concealment, is very appropriate. Life is a *parsha setumah*, closed book. We live in an *olam*, world, in which much of life is *ne'elam*, concealed. How do we do it? How do we successfully, confidently, navigate the sea of life? *Bitachon*, trust in Hashem. Without it, we are *ne'evad*, lost at sea.

We have no dearth of stories which demonstrate the significance of *bitachon* and to the lengths to which our people have gone in their commitment to Hashem. The following is a classic story which I remembered this morning, as a good friend rushed out early from *davening* to be at an important business meeting. The story was related by the venerable *Bobover Rebbe, zl, Horav Shlomo Halberstam*.

A follower of *Horav Mordechai Chernobyler, zl*, had a particular habit which he revealed when he visited the *Rebbe* to petition his blessing. The *Rebbe* asked the *chassid* to recount his daily schedule. "First, I go to the market to purchase goods and wares for my business.

Then, I go to *shul* to *daven*. Following *davening*, I go to the market to sell my wares at a profit."

The *Rebbe* wondered, "Why do you start your day by purchasing wares and only afterwards *daven*?" The man replied, "The good merchandise is available early in the morning. If I wait until after I *daven* to purchase my wares, I would be selling inferior quality, because that is all I would find."

It seemed like a common-sense response, one that any of us might agree is acceptable. The *Rebbe* countered with a story about a *melamed*, itinerant Torah teacher, who earned his livelihood by journeying from town to town teaching children Torah. He would eke out a meager livelihood from a profession that kept him on the road and away from home most of the year. In the meantime, his wife and children lived on the debt they incurred, which he paid when he returned home. Understandably, his year's salary meant a lot to him, since it had already been spent.

The teacher was paid for his services with various coins: the wealthy paid with gold; the middle class "preferred" silver; those of more modest means paid with nickel or copper. The teacher made a money belt for himself in which he divided his coins into four pouches. After a year of teaching, he packed his bag and prepared for his journey home.

As the first *Shabbos* of his return trip approached, he knew that he had to remove his money belt and find a place to leave it for safekeeping. At first, he decided to bury it, but, when he saw people in the distance, he became paranoid and alarmed. Pressed for time, he decided the only alternative was to make a dash to the local Jewish inn and pray that the innkeeper with whom he would hopefully deposit the belt was honest and upright. This was a year's earnings, which he could not afford to lose.

His doubts coursed through his mind the entire *Shabbos*. The innkeeper was accustomed to this, since many a Jewish traveler left his money with him for *Shabbos*. As soon as *Maariv*, the evening service of *Motzoei Shabbos* began, the innkeeper brought the money belt to the teacher to allay his fears. "Do not worry," he said. "It is all there – every coin." To the amazement of the innkeeper, right in middle of his supplications, the teacher began counting his coins. (I guess some things do not change.) First came the gold coins, which were all there. The he opened the pouch containing the silver coins and ascertained that everything was there. He then proceeded to do the same with the nickel and copper coins. At this point, the innkeeper, who had observed the entire process, was shocked and a bit perplexed.

"I do not understand you," the innkeeper began. "When you saw that all of your gold and silver coins were intact, why did you not trust me then? Yet, you continued to count the ridiculously less valuable nickel and copper coins."

At this point, the *Chernobyler Rebbe* turned to his *chassid* and asked, "I want to present you with the same question that the innkeeper asked the teacher. Every single morning, you wake up and observe that Hashem has returned your *neshamah*, soul, your body, your very life – which is the equivalent of (the teacher's) gold and silver coins. If Hashem can be "trusted" to return the valuables, what makes you think that He will not provide for your livelihood (your nickel and copper coins)? I think you should work on increasing your trust in Hashem and believe that He will give you the physical sustenance that you require. You have no need to rush off to purchase your goods before you *daven Shacharis*. Hashem takes precedence." P. S. Things have not changed. When we rush out of *davening*, we show where our priorities lie and how much trust we have that all will be provided for us.

ויברך את יוסף ... יברך את הנערים ויקרא בהם שמי ... ויברכם ביום ההוא לאמר בך יבורך ישראל

He blessed Yosef ... shall bless the lads and shall call them my name... And he blessed on that day, saying: "In you shall Yisrael (be) blessed." (48:15,16,20)

Yaakov *Avinu* actually gave two blessings: one to Yosef, and one to Ephraim and Menashe. Upon reading the text of the blessings, however, we confront an anomaly: Yaakov actually directed the blessing

meant for Yosef at his sons – Ephraim and Menashe. The blessing that Yaakov *Avinu* gave to Ephraim and Menashe was all about Yosef. Concerning Yosef's blessing, the Torah writes, *Yevareich es ha'naarim*, "He (Hashem) should bless the lads," while, concerning Ephraim and Menashe, the Patriarch said, "In you (singular), shall *Yisrael* be blessed," which implies that the blessing was to him. *Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl*, posits that these blessings touch upon the greatest blessing one can give a father: that he have children that will do him proud, children who will be a credit to him and his legacy. Likewise, every child wants (or should want) that his parents be considered blessed people on account of him. Knowing that one is a source of pleasure and satisfaction to his parents is an amazing blessing. We may suggest that when children have parents of whom they are proud, it is a blessing. Knowing that your "last name" does not cause you grief as a result of a parent's ignoble reputation is a blessing. Furthermore, I think the Torah is alluding to a double-edged responsibility that parents and children have towards one another. A father/mother should think twice before undertaking an activity that might shed ignominy upon their children's good name – and vice-versa.

These blessings, however, have greater significance, as the *Rosh Yeshivah* explains. Parents are a link in the transmission of *Yiddishkeit*/Jewish heritage to their children, the next generation. When parents eschew their responsibility to live up to the elevated lifestyle of *emunah* and *bitachon*, faith and trust in the Almighty, bequeathed to them by our forebears, they have failed not only themselves, but also their progeny. If parents do not live up to their obligations to Hashem, the continuity of the blessing is severed, and, rather than inherit blessing, their children are heirs to a curse.

When Shifrah and Puah, at risk to their own lives, saved the Jewish infants, Hashem gave them a unique reward. The spiritual trait, *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, which gave them the fortitude to do what was right, despite the decree of the evil despot, Pharaoh, became their permanent trait and legacy transmitted through the generations to the members of their respective families: *Malchus Bais David* – the Davidic dynasty; the Houses of *Kehunah* and *Leviyah*. Thus, descendants of Shifrah and Puah became heirs to a noble, eternal spiritual gene: *yiraas Shomayim*. The houses of *Kehunah* and *Leviyah* and *Malchus Bais David* –spiritually represented the material/physical leadership of the eternal Jewish nation. Their blessing was not a one-time deal, but rather, a blessing of *nitzchiyus*, eternity, that will never be lost.

When Yaakov blessed Yosef through his children, he signified that the entire Patriarchal legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov would flow through Yosef to his children, with no distortion or diminishment in any way. He blessed Yosef that he should be able to transmit his spiritual inheritance without embellishment, in its entirety. This is all fine and well, but singling out two grandsons and granting them tribal status is, in and of itself, a recipe for envy. To bless the one son who was at the center of the controversy between the brothers, which ultimately was the reason for so much strife and so many years of anguish, seems to be counterproductive. Yaakov *Avinu* knew all this, and he certainly was not naïve. Yet, he believed that *Klal Yisrael* would understand that they will always have one individual who stands out, who is blessed with extraordinary capabilities, and who, despite all of his unique attributes, remains unpretentious and self-effacing. The Patriarch prayed that *Klal Yisrael* would view these lads with *nachas* and admiration, not with envy. He prayed that their success not fall prey to the destructive power of the evil eye, and that they garner respect, not opposition; admiration, not envy. At the end of the day, one should not go out of his way to call attention to himself or his child, but, at the same time, stunting a gifted child just because of what others might say is just as wrong. The only true competition that we have in life is ourselves. As such, we must strive to be the best that we can be, thereby fulfilling our own individual potential.

בך יבורך ישראל לאמר ישימך אלקים כאפרים וכמנשה

By you shall *Yisrael* bless saying, "May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe." (48:20)

Yaakov *Avinu* assured Yosef that, throughout the ages, Jewish parents would bless their sons that they grow up to be like Ephraim and Menashe. Why should these two grandsons of Yaakov, children raised in the pagan, hedonistic society that Egypt epitomized, be the paradigms of Jewish parents' hopes for their children? At first blush, the mere fact that they "made it" in Egypt speaks volumes about them and their upbringing. If so, Yaakov would be speaking only with regard to the *galus* Jew, who is challenged by the non-Jewish, assimilationist environment. This is obviously not the case. Yaakov spoke to all Jews, under all conditions, whether they are living in Yerushalayim with the *Bais Hamikdash* extant, or in *galus*. Ephraim and Menashe are the exemplars of the *ben Torah* for whom every parent wants his son to aspire to become. Why? What made them so special – even more than the *Shevatim*, Tribes, that included the greatest leaders of *Klal Yisrael* from whom the nation is nurtured?

Horav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel, zl, explains that Ephraim and Menashe exemplified the Torah Jew who overcame the phenomenon of *yeridas ha'doros*, the decline of the generations. This general concept posits that the further removed we are from *Har Sinai*, the weaker we are spiritually. *Chazal* (*Shabbos* 112b) state the inevitable rule: If the previous generations were like angels (we perceive them to be angels), then we are humans (we may call ourselves human beings). If the previous generations were humans, then we are like donkeys." (Obviously, this *Chazal* begs explanation.) On the surface, maintaining our spiritual status quo is an uphill challenge. This becomes even more challenging when we view our lives through the lens of the previous generations. They achieved so much despite the many challenges and obstacles which they had to confront. Ephraim and Menashe not only remained totally committed and wholly observant in a spiritual climate that was anything but conducive to spiritual growth, but they were able to achieve tribe status. They were counted as Reuven and Shimon. Concerning their spiritual growth, they experienced no generational decline. This is the blessing that we give our children: Be like the great leaders of the previous generation. Let them be your models; let them be your lodestar and inspiration.

How did Yosef merit not one, but two sons, who triumphed over the malady of *yeridas ha'doros*? *Rav Elya Baruch* explains that Yosef lived with *d'mus d'yukno shel Aviv*, an image of his father, constantly before him. Even in the cesspool that was Egypt, in the dungeon, against the seductive force of Potifar's wife, his father's image was always present in his mind. He was never alone. Surely this is how he raised his sons. When Ephraim and Menashe grew up, they saw Yaakov *Avinu* before them at all times. He was not merely their grandfather, he was their father, their *Rebbe*. Their father presented everything that they learned as coming from Yaakov. Is it any wonder that they achieved tribal status? They lived as Yaakov's sons!

This is the form of *chinuch*, Torah education, we received in *Telshe Yeshivah* sixty years ago. My *Rebbeim* and *Roshei Yeshivah* were, for the most part, survivors of the Holocaust. They had themselves been students in Telz, Lithuania, and the scene of learning, coupled with the image and intensity of their saintly *Rebbeim*, was fresh in their minds. When we had *shiur*, it was almost like a group of young, American boys being transported to the little classroom in the *mechinah* of Telz Europe. Our *Rebbeim* spoke about their *Rebbeim* as if they were present. The image they presented to us was palpable. We were imbued with love for Torah and a competitiveness to excel. We were competing, however, with *talmidim* from Kamenitz, Grodno, Slabodka, Baranowitz. We were in a different milieu. Our *Rebbeim* had never left; so they invited us to join them.

With regard to the *d'mus d'yukno shel aviv* (or *imo*) (*Yeurshalmi Horiyos* 2:5) that saved Yosef from falling prey to Potifar's wife's advances, I wonder how many of us are concerned regarding the personal *d'mus d'yukno* that we present to our children. Yosef was saved from disaster due to the image his father presented to him. Our children grow up with the values we impart to them through instruction and by our demeanor. They might forget the instruction, but the demeanor will remain with them throughout their lives.

אל תיראו כי תחת אלקים אני ואתם חשבתם עלי רעה אלקים חשבה לטובה

“Fear not, for am I instead of G-d? Although you intended the harm, G-d intended it for good. (50:19,20)

In the last few *parshiyos*, we have been reading about Yaakov *Avinu's* sons, the *Shivtei Kah*, Twelve Tribes of *Klal Yisrael*, the closest link to our Patriarchs from whom our Nation descends. We refer to them by name and relate their activities; their sale of Yosef, followed by their encounter with the viceroy of Egypt, aka, Yosef; their ensuing remorse over their lack of empathy with his pain; their being supported by Yosef in Egypt; and, finally, their apology and request for absolution for their misdeed. Reading all this, we might lose sight of the greatness of these individuals. They were no simple human beings; they were refined to the level of Heavenly Angels in the guise of men. Their “failings” were relative to their extreme level of spirituality. Their successes were indicative of their spiritual edification. Clearly, they were not typical human beings.

When Yaakov *Avinu* was *niftar*, passed away, the brothers noted that Yosef's relationship with them had been altered. The camaraderie that seemed to prevail during Yaakov's life suddenly came to an end. The brothers worried that the time of reckoning had arrived, since their father was no longer alive to protect them. The brothers attempted to assuage the feelings they perceived Yosef was holding against them. *Targum Yonasan ben Uziel* teaches that the brothers sent the sons of Bilhah to speak with Yosef. During the debacle that preceded the controversy and eventual sale of Yosef, he had been closest with them. Since they were the sons of a co-wife who had originally been a maidservant, Yosef was able to identify with them. They were all more or less in the same boat. *Bnei Bilhah* presented to Yosef, on behalf of all the brothers, their sincere apologies for what had occurred years earlier. They even claimed that their saintly father had instructed them to speak with Yosef and that Yosef should acquiesce and absolve them.

Chazal (*Bereishis Rabbah* 100:8), quoted by *Horav Eliyahu Svei*, *zl*, identify Yosef's specific behavior that indicated a change in attitude towards them: When their father was alive, Yosef ate his meals with his brothers. Following Yaakov's passing, Yosef no longer invited them for dinner. Apparently, out of respect for Yaakov, he had eaten with them. That reason no longer applied. This concerned them.

Yosef replied to their unasked query: “You thought that I was angry and preparing to take revenge. It could not be further from the truth. When Father was alive, he had me sit at the head of the table, superseding Reuven, the first born, and Yehudah, the monarch. I acquiesced out of profound respect to our father. Now, I just cannot do it. I will not sit at the head of the table when Reuven and Yehudah sit at regular places. It is not my place to lord over my brothers. On the other hand, as viceroy of Egypt, it would be disgraceful for me not to sit at the head of the table. To circumvent the problem, I do not eat together with you. If I cannot do it respectfully, I will not do it.”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* views this *Chazal* as a characterization of the incredible spiritual/moral character of Yosef *HaTzaddik*. For seventeen years, at the behest of his father, Yosef sat at the head of the table. We become complacent creatures of habit after a few weeks. Yosef did this for seventeen years! Yet, the moment his father passed, he refused to return to the head of the table. It belonged to Reuven or Yehudah. No one but Yosef would question his place at the head of the table. It was not right. His brothers superseded him. Reuven was the firstborn, a position which elicited respect. Yehudah was royalty, and, as a monarch, he was obligated to sit at the head of the table. Only one solution could resolve this problem. He would not join them for the meal.

As the *Rosh Yeshivah* asks: Can we imagine what it means to sit in an exalted place/position for seventeen years and immediately rescind it? Just like that? These, the *Rosh Yeshivah* posits, are not the actions of a human being. These are the actions, the sensitivity, of a *malach*, angel. We now have a glimpse into the world of the *Shivtei Kah*.

Va'ani Tefillah

ברכת כהנים – *Bircas Kohanim*. The Priestly Blessing.

The last blessing of *Shemoneh Esrai* is the blessing of Peace. Without *shalom*, we are in a negative state and unable to enjoy the preceding blessings. Rather than explain the blessings, I will relate a vignette that occurred shortly after the *Brisker Rav*, *zl*, moved to Yerushalayim. The *Rav davened* at home with a *minyan*, quorum, comprised of exactly ten worshippers. He had one issue concerning the *minyan*. In *Eretz Yisrael*, real *Kohanim* recite *Bircas Kohanim* every day. In order to achieve this, it is critical that one member of every *minyan* be a *Kohen*, unless the *minyan* can “borrow” a *Kohen* from another *minyan*. As *Rosh Hashanah* loomed closer, the *Rav* was able to obtain the services of a *Kohen* who, albeit *davening* at another *minyan*, would arrive at the end of *Mussaf* for the Priestly Service. He regretted that he could not join them for *Shacharis*. *Mussaf* arrived, but the *Kohen* did not. He *davened* at another *minyan*, which took its time with *Shacharis*.

The worshippers at the *Rav's minyan* were becoming impatient. Some suggested that they begin *Mussaf* without the *Kohen*. The *Rav* was immovable. They would wait as long as it would take. After a while, the *Kohen* arrived filled with apologies, and the service commenced. When *davening* had concluded, the *Rav* turned to his select group of worshippers and said, “You have much to learn from the *Chassidim*. They travel for days, weeks, even months, in the blazing heat and frigid winter, through pelting rain and freezing snow, for one purpose: to spend *Yom Tov* with their *Rebbe*. Why do they come? They yearn for that *brachah*, blessing, which the *Rebbe* gives them. It melts away all the trouble, and the entire journey becomes worthwhile. You have the opportunity to receive *Bircas Kohanim*, concerning which Hashem declares, *V'samu es Shemi al Bnei Yisrael v'a'ani Avracheim*; ‘And they will place My Name on *Bnei Yisrael*, and I will bless them.’ Yet, for Hashem's blessing you, too, are too anxious to wait a mere half hour!”

לעילוי נשמת לאה בת ר' זלמן ע"ה נפטרת י"ד טבת ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

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The Four “Exiles”

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

In several places in Tanach and midrashim, there is reference to the Jewish people being subjected to four exiles. Most midrashim and commentaries understand that the four empires (or exiles) that ruled over the Jewish people described by Zechariah (Chapter 6) and Daniel (Chapters 2 and 7) refer to Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and Rome (see, for example, Ramban, *Bereishis* 36:23 and *Bamidbar* 24:20). However, the *ibn Ezra* (*Daniel* 2:40) and others disagree, noting that the Roman Empire has long disintegrated, and a new “empire,” that of the Moslem Arabs, swept across a huge tract of the world. The *ibn Ezra* concludes that since Greek and Roman culture were very similar, the third golus is Greece and Rome together, and the Arabs are the fourth.

Golus Bavel

We are, unfortunately, very familiar with the destruction of the first *Beis Hamikdash* by *Nevuchadnetzar* the King of Bavel, much of which is described in various places in Tanach. The city and country of Bavel was in Mesopotomia, literally, the area “between the rivers” – the Tigris and the Euphrates – which form the center of the contemporary country of Iraq. To this day, descendants of the Jewish communities who lived in Iraq, where Jews lived for 2,500 years, are referred to as Jews of Bavel. Persia

Not many years after the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*, the powerful empire of Bavel was overrun by the Persian Empire. The Jews were now under the authority of a new nation. Many Jews spread across all 127 provinces (which probably means 127 major cities and their environs) of the new empire, and they were certainly known in the capital city of Shushan, located in modern Iran. Although Persia and Greece are known as *malchuyos*, their relationship to the Jews does not fit the classic definition of an exile or a diaspora, since the Jews were not driven from the country where they lived. Persia overtook Bavel, and thereby changed the culture and indeed geography of where Jews

lived, but it is not accurate to say that we were “exiled” to new places. It is, however, accurate to say that, under the new management, Jews now spread out from Bavel to the entire ancient world.

By the way, this period of time coincides with the end of the period of the Tanach. The books of this era include Esther, Chaggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Daniel, Ezra and Nechemiah. Under Persian rule, Jews were permitted to return to Eretz Yisroel and build the second Beis Hamikdash. From a Torah perspective, the leadership of the Jewish people is the group called the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah, the Men of the Great Assembly. Among the many things they developed was our structure of tefillah and brochos, as well as many takanos. One of these takanos created the current structure of our kerias haTorah in which we call up at least three people and read at least ten pesukim.

Greece, or more accurately, Hellenism

According to all opinions (I will explain shortly what I mean), the next “exile” was Greece, or, probably more accurately, the Greek culture and philosophy that spread across the entire Middle East and included sections of Europe and Africa and what is usually called “south Asia.”

Alexander the Great, referred to by Chazal as Alexander Mokdon, Alexander of Macedonia, swept away all before him. His father, Philip of Macedonia, expanded from his small country in north-western Greece (or south-western Balkans, depending on which term is considered politically correct this week) and eventually conquered all of Greece -- no small accomplishment, when you realize that the Greeks were frequently at war with one another, and each city was in its own country. Building on his father's conquests, Alexander established the largest empire the western world had known to his day -- from the Balkans to India, and even extending southwestwardly to include Egypt.

From a Jewish perspective, Alexander's era coincides with the end of the period of the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah, and the beginning of the era of the Mishnah. We have all heard the story of how Alexander dismounted and prostrated himself to Shimon Hatzadik, who was the kohein gadol, and was the last of the Anshei Keneses Hagedolah. In acknowledgment of Alexander's sparing the citadel that is the Beis Hamikdash and the city of Yerushalayim, at this time a fully functional and Jewish city again, the Jews of the era accepted upon themselves to name their sons after Alexander, thus forever making his name, and its Jewish shortening, Sender, into Jewish names.

As a conqueror, Alexander made his worst mistake when, at the age of 33, he got sick and died. Although he left an heir, the baby was not given any opportunity to create a dynasty. Alexander's empire was divided among his generals, several of whom did succeed in creating dynasties. From a Jewish perspective, the two generals that were most important were Ptolemy, who ruled from Alexandria, Egypt, which soon became the location of the largest Jewish community in the world, and Seleucis, who set up his capital in Antioch, then considered part of Syria. Although the geographic and familial origins of the empire were no longer Greek, the culture spread by all the Hellenistic empires was completely Greek and a very powerful cultural influence.

One of the Seleucid emperors, Antiochus Epiphanes, went on a rampage to destroy Judaism, including the mitzvos of bris milah, Shabbos, the study of the Torah, and various other takanos as we know from the Chanukah story. Golus Yovon was a spiritual golus, not a geographic one. It was a war between religion and assimilation. This was probably the first instance of Jewish history in which the main fighters against the Torah were Jews -- self-hating Jews, whom we call the Misyavanim, who were intent on assimilating completely into Greek culture, or redefining their Judaism so that it has nothing to do with anything Jewish or G-dly. (Does this not sound very familiar?)

Rome

According to most opinions, the fourth golus is that of Rome, which, after establishing control of the ancient world from Britain to India, eventually obliterate the Beis Hamikdash and the city of Yerushalayim, murdered thousands, and possibly millions of Jews, driving the Jews from our homeland and ruthlessly annihilated the post-churban state of Bar Kochba with incredible cruelty and bloodshed. At the time of the Mishnah and Gemara, Jews had already dispersed as far west as Spain,

and another aftermath of the Roman conquests was that Jews spread first to Rome, northward to northern Italy and eventually to Germany and France, thereby creating Ashkenazic Jewry. In the course of many centuries, descendants of these Jews moved eastward, forming the vast Jewish communities in Poland, Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe.

As we mentioned previously, The ibn Ezra contends that the Arab Empire was the fourth malchus. How does the existence of the Arab empire fit into the picture according to others? Many In answer to the ibn Ezra's observation that there was subsequently an Arab empire, many understand that the Christian world, and then its sequel, the modern golus, are all continuations of Rome. Others contend that the Arabic culture, which in the time of Middle Ages was heavily immersed in Greek thought, science and medicine, can also be considered a continuation of the previous goluyos. Some commentaries explain that the statue representing the “fourth empire” in Daniel is made of clay mixed with iron -- an allusion of the travails of Rome combined with the Arabic caliphates and conquests.

The Arabs

As I mentioned above, according to the ibn Ezra, the fourth malchus is that of the Arabs. This malchus is a bit different from the others, in the sense that it was never ruled by one individual king or one dynasty. Mohammed, himself, succeeded only in conquering a few cities in the middle of the Arabian Desert. But his spiritual descendants eventually conquered from the Pyrenees Mountains that border between France and Spain, through the northern third of Africa, including also all the countries immediately south of the Sahara Desert -- Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Sudan, Nigeria -- the entire Middle East, almost all of western Asia and south Asia, as far east as the Spice Islands, now called Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. This “empire” ruled a wide band from the Atlantic Ocean through the Indian Ocean, until it reached the Pacific. A lesson!

The actual two destructions of Judea are technically not miraculous. Both catastrophes took place according to the normal course of events. How could tiny Judea, located at a very strategic crossroads of three continents, have avoided falling prey to the rising Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman and Arab powers?! Indeed, the location of Judea was the most unfortunate one possible for a small state that wished to protect its independence.

It was not Judea's downfall that was miraculous. The miracle was the existence of Judea, an existence for which every natural prerequisite was absent. It could exist only because of Divine intervention, and this is true to this day -- when we look to Hashem for His Leadership, we are safe

https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2020/parsha/ryud_vayechi.html

Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

No Strings Attached

As we complete the book of Bereishis we must constantly remind ourselves that there are no Bible stories or narratives, only Bible lessons. Parshas Vayechi begins with Yaakov beseeching Yosef that he not be buried in Egypt. This request is couched by requesting of Yosef, "chessed v'emes." Rashi, citing the Medrash, teaches that chessed that is done with the dead is chessed shel emes as one cannot anticipate any reciprocation from the dead.

In reality I believe the Torah is teaching us not only this particular lesson which has provided the name of the burial societies throughout the millennia of "chessed shel emes", but is teaching the very important principle that ideally all of one's chessed is to be performed without the expectation of reciprocation. Thus, we find in the long narrative that the Torah devotes to Eliezer's finding a wife for Yitzchak, when Rivkah complies with Eliezer's noble requests, he thanks Hashem (24:27) "who has not withheld chasdo v'amito - His kindness and truth - from my master." Clearly, we are not dealing with any service or favor to the dead, but rather the Torah is portraying chessed on the highest level. Note that the Seforno (24:22) explains why Eliezer gave Rivkah the jewelry in recognition of her service even before he asked her for her

name and her family as he was astonished by her genuine altruism, not asking or expecting anything in return. An example of chessed shel emes.

Similarly, we find in the book of Yehoshua (2:12-14) that Rachav, who hides the two spies sent by Yehoshua and saves their lives, requests of them that they swear that just as she has done chessed with them, they too will do chessed with her family by saving them when the Jewish people conquer the land. The spies respond to her that when Hashem gives us the land, we will do with you chessed v'emes. The commentary Metzudas Dovid teaches that they responded that unlike you who are certainly performing chessed but looking for reciprocation in kind, we will extend to you chessed in its pristine form namely without reciprocation.

I believe the following can shed additional light on the term emes with its being devoid of personal subjectivity. The Rambam in chapter 2 of Moreh Nevuchim responds to the following question: at first glance it seems bizarre that when Adam defies G-d and eats from the forbidden fruit, he is rewarded for his transgression. After all, the unique characteristic that separates man from the animal is his intelligence, so is it not strange that after defying his Creator he is rewarded with the knowledge of good and bad? The Rambam answers that indeed Adam had intelligence prior to his eating, as we are told in the first chapter of Bereishis, that he was created in the image of G-d, understood by Bereishis Rabba (8:11) "lehavin u'lehaskill - to understand and to gain wisdom." Therefore, continues the Rambam, prior to Adam's sinning his level of intelligence was absolute, namely true and false. Now, man imbibed the knowledge of good and bad. His original knowledge was objective, now he has the gray area of subjectivity.

This may be clearly understood in the following way. For one man to hit another one is bad; this is a true statement. However, if you tell two men to put on shorts, sneakers, and gloves, call it boxing, call it a sport, it is now acceptable for one man to hit another even if, as often time happens, it can lead to serious injury. Prior to his eating, man's intelligence was objective; like two and two equals four, similarly his values were pure, straight forward, without subjectivity. All this changed with much gray overshadowing the prior black and white perspective.

In Eishel Chayil, Shlomo Hamelech refers to the Torah as Toras Chessed. The Talmud reminds us that the Torah begins with Hashem's chessed of providing clothing for Adam and Chava, and ends with His chessed of burying Moshe. We are commanded to do chessed as the Torah teaches (Devarim 28:9), "vehalachta b'drachav", to go in his image, to emulate Hashem. As He is the practitioner of constant chessed

shel emes, meaning all of His kindness is done with complete and total altruism, as the Ramchal says in Derech Hashem, "Derech hatov le'haytiv - the nature of The Good One is to extend goodness." Hashem created a magnificent world and showers mankind with abundant blessings every second of their existence without needing nor expecting anything in return.

Thus, before performing a chessed, be it bikur cholim, nichum aveilum, or hachnasas kallah, one should ideally say I am about to fulfill the mitzvah of vahalachta b'drachav, emulating Hashem. One should strive to therefore extend help, whenever possible, anonymously, not leaving the recipient of your kindness with the feeling of indebtedness to you.

Case in point; a beautiful story occurred to reflect this message well. A boy with dyslexia and special needs was taught for many months the wrong haftorah. When the family realized the mistake it was much too late to even attempt to teach him the correct one. They asked the late Reb Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l if anything could be done and he ruled that the boy should read the haftorah he studied. He instructed the father to tell the gabbai and congregation that this was in accordance with Rabbi Auerbach's teaching. Anticipating that the congregation might be troubled and concerned regarding the legitimacy of the ruling, the aged rabbi, who was close to 80 years old at the time, walked from Shaarei Tzedek to Sanhedria to personally be present for the reading of the haftorah. What could Rav Shlomo Zalman have anticipated to receive from the family? He exited and taught all of us how we are to perform chessed v'emes, chessed of the highest order.

COVID has hit all of us in a most devastating way. Among the many harsh consequences has been the imposed social distancing which has manifested itself in disallowing one to have Shabbos and yom tov guests. Too many individuals who live alone and who are isolated by the pandemic have suffered greatly from this imposition. It behooves us to act as Avraham Avinu, whose behavior is highlighted in Avos D'Av Noson (7:1) which compares the chessed of Avraham and Iyov. Iyov responded generously to all who came to his home and asked for food and shelter. In contrast, Avraham Avinu initiated chessed by searching for guests and providing them with chessed v'emes. We too must find ways to extend our concern and compassion in creative ways during these trying times.

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לע"נ

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