

**Potomac Torah Study Center**  
Vol. 12 #12, January 10-11, 2025; 11 Tevet 5785; Vayechi 5785  
**Tzom Asarah B'Teves is Today, Friday, January 10**

**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

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**May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere during 5785. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world – and may our hostages soon return from captivity. May the stunning collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and the cease fire with Lebanon be the beginning of better news for Israel and Jews in coming days.**

According to Rashi, Yaakov never died. Our tradition also states that "David Melech Yisrael, chai, chai v'kayam" – King David continues to live. How are we to interpret this tradition, especially when Vayechi reports the passing of both Yaakov and Yosef?

Sefer Bereishis opens with one son of the first family of humans killing his brother. After the flood, one of Noach's sons commits a violent act against his father (one that the Torah does not even describe in detail). Even after Avraham becomes the first Jew, immoral acts continue. After God saves Lot from the violent people of Sodom, his two daughters both get their father drunk and seduce him – acts that make both of them pregnant. Yishmael is such a bad influence on Yitzhak that Sarah sends him away – with Hashem's approval. Avraham takes Yitzhak on a journey of three days and is prepared to sacrifice him as a burnt offering, until an angel stops him. Yaakov and Rivka work together to have Yaakov impersonate Esav to trick Yitzhak into giving the younger brother Esav's bracha of wealth. Yaakov favors Yosef so much that his brothers cannot even talk to him in peace. The brothers throw Yaakov into a pit, from which passing merchants take and sell him into slavery in Egypt. Until late in Sefer Bereishis, there seem to be far more ancestors to despise than to emulate as positive examples.

Yaakov's sons finally do teshuvah and, with Yosef's manipulations, demonstrate that they are worthy to remain in the family and become ancestors of modern Jews. When God asks Kayin where his brother is, his response is, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Yosef finally answers this question "Yes!" when he decides to save his brothers and all his relatives by providing them with food during the famine – a decision he makes before he tests the brothers to see whether they would take care of Yosef's brother Benyamin. At the end of Vayechi, when Yaakov blesses Manasseh and Ephraim – and gives the primary bracha to the younger brother (Ephraim) – the brothers accept Yaakov's decision without protest. Yosef's sons provide the first instance of two brothers accepting favoritism without dispute.

Rabbi Label Lam tells us Rashi's interpretation that Yaakov lives on through his descendants who remain Jewish. Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander extends this interpretation of immortality to current times. Consider, for example, some members of the IDF who have fallen in the campaign to wipe out terrorists in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and other countries that attack our people. Rabbi Brander presents examples of fallen IDF heroes who have called for special mitzvot in case of their deaths. Tzvi Marantz, z"l, had a vision of distributing tzedaka boxes for people to set aside money – not for an organization, but directly to families in need of help and support. Or Yonatan Samo, z"l, left a note clarifying that in the

event he were to be killed, he wished to donate his organs to the greatest extent possible. Since his death, seven people now survive with organs from his body. The chesed of these and other fallen IDF soldiers contrasts with the brutal violence of our enemies who take innocent civilians as hostages, rape and kill many of them. and use hospitals, schools, and senior citizen residences as shields to protect the monsters from retaliation.

Rabbi Brander raises the question of how a Jew is to relate to non-Jews when they celebrate their holy days. This question arose very recently when Christmas coincided with the beginning of Hanukkah. Rabbi Brander urges us to keep our holy days separate from the holy days of other religions. The concept of "Merry Chrismukkah" is especially disgraceful and belittles both religions. Rather, we should respect and honor members of other religions that work for a better world and send positive messages to others. Members of other religions who work for tikkun olam join Jews in working for a better world for everyone, and we must respect these efforts. Rabbi Brander has no problem wishing these fine people "Merry Christmas" and accepting "Happy Hanukkah" back from them.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, lived through some of the years of violent anti-Semitism during the Nazi nightmare years. He was a Navy chaplain for many years and visited Israel frequently. He saw anti-Semitism up close in many parts of this country, including Potomac, Maryland. My son was a victim of anti-Semitism during his Air Force training and witnessed a troubling anti-Black incident when he was on deployment. Both Rabbi Cahan and my son experienced ugly behavior of others as well as mitzvot of fine people working to make the world a better place. May our future see many more people working for tikkun olam and far fewer monsters looking to oppress other people.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

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**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.**

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

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## **Haftarat Parshat Vayechi: Living Legacies**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kennet) ( Brander \* © 5785 (2025)  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

*Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, for the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.*

*This week's parsha is dedicated to the memory of*

**First Sergeant Netanel Pessach z"l,**

*a graduate of our Derech Avot High School in Efrat who fell in battle in northern Gaza and to all of the IDF heroes who fell this week while protecting our people and our land. Our hearts ache for Netanel's family. May Netanel's memory – and the memory of all our fallen soldiers – be a blessing.*

The haftarah of Parshat Vayechi invites us to compare and contrast the last will and testament of David Hamelech with that of Yaakov Avinu. In this week's parsha, Yaakov delivers his final messages to all his children, departing from the world with closing words for each of them. He addresses their respective virtues and vices, offering guidance not only for the rest of their personal lives, but for the legacy that each tribe would contribute to the spiritual makeup of the Jewish people.

David, on the other hand, addresses only one of his children in our haftarah, issuing a final set of directives to his son and heir Shlomo. Among other things, Shlomo is instructed to tend to his dying father's unfinished business with various individuals. These contrasting approaches to legacy reveal two distinct paths of leadership and family dynamics, each carrying profound implications for future generations.

**As I write this column, just a few hours after attending the funeral of First Sergeant Netanel Pessach, the twentieth alumnus of the Ohr Torah Stone network to fall in battle,** these ancient episodes take on a deeper and more personal meaning. During Netanel's funeral, with Parshat Vayechi in mind, I found myself reflecting on a commonality between Yaakov and David. In the Gemara in Taanit 5b(, Rav Yitzchak surprisingly declares that Yaakov never died. By the same token, in Rosh Hashana 25a(, Rabbi introduces the phrase, still present in our liturgy and the origin of the popular song "*David, melech Yisrael, chai chai v'kayam,*" announcing that "*David, King of Israel, lives and remains.*" In what sense can truth be found in these two profound statements? ]emphasis added[

Both Rav Yitzchak and Rabbi are clearly speaking not of the physical persons of Yaakov and David, but of what each represents. The legacy of Yaakov, the dynasty of David and the lasting influence of those two individuals on those, our nation, who came after them. We continue to identify with these sources of inspiration and this is what lives on. And, in a manner both moving and tragic, the same is true of those who have fallen in battle. Think of Tzvi Marantz z"l, a graduate of our Neveh Shmuel High School, who had a vision of distributing tzedaka boxes for people to set aside money not for an organization, but directly to families in need of help and support. Today, in his honor, a mission is underway to distribute a million such boxes, as a continuation of his legacy. )If you wish to have a box delivered to your home, please reach out to me at [roshmosdot@ots.org.il](mailto:roshmosdot@ots.org.il).

Or Yonatan Samo z"l, another fallen Neveh Shmuel graduate, who had left a note clarifying that in the event he were to be killed, he wished to donate his organs to the greatest extent possible – and today, seven people are able to continue to live their lives, made possible by his own commitment to kindness. And the same holds true for Netanel, whose mother Revital spoke at the funeral of his being an Ish Chesed, a person of unbounded kindness, asking attendees to follow in his path by dedicating five minutes a day to reconnecting with those with whom we've have lost touch – or those whom we've ignored.

Just like Yaakov and David, these young men and so many others live on through their lasting legacies, through the teachings they have left us and the acts of kindness they modeled for us. When we embrace their virtues and transform

their memory into action, we ensure that their light continues to illuminate our path forward and at least partially, to live on through us.

\* President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact [ohrtorahstone@otsny.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsny.org) or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

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## **Christmas and Hanukkah Coincide This Year. Please Don't Call It 'Chrismukkah.'**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \* © 5785 (2025)  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone

Every December, in greetings, commercials and ordinary conversations across the United States, Hanukkah and Christmas get blended together as “the holidays.” It’s a well-meaning attempt to be inclusive. However, grouping these very distinct holidays together risks watering down the unique messages and traditions of each.

As we approach the relatively rare intersection of Christmas Day with the first night of Hanukkah this year, the urge to wish people “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Chrismukkah” is tempting for many. But when these holidays are blended together through actions like decorating a Christmas tree with Hanukkah ornaments, the core aspects of each holiday are negated or even lost.

Such practices risk further minimizing Judaism and Jewish presence, as Hanukkah gets absorbed into the much more widely celebrated holiday of Christmas. Messages that are key to Jewish identity and history are lost. After all, Hanukkah celebrates overcoming persecution and forced assimilation, when Jews in the Land of Israel emancipated themselves from their ancient Greek conquerors, who had prohibited the practice of Judaism and the reading of the Hebrew Bible. The main act to mark the holiday since then has been the proud display of a menorah to light a better path for us as a people and a better world for society. The holiday is not about adapting foreign practices to better fit in with other cultures.

Likewise, for Christians, blending Christmas together with the secular New Year’s Day – or putting aside a focus on religious rituals in order to embrace a general atmosphere of commercialized celebrations for all – risks diluting or losing the spiritual meaning of the holiday and having Christian traditions fade away. This dynamic fuels growing concerns across American society about the shrinking role of faith as fewer people belong to congregations and communities. In a March survey from the Pew Research Center, 80% of U.S. adults said that religion’s role in American life is shrinking, a percentage that’s as high as the organization has ever measured.

It would be better for interfaith relations for us to see each holiday for what it is on its own. Only by acknowledging the distinctive beliefs – while also recognizing the overlapping values and wisdom – can different faiths work side by side to bring more light to the world. Judaism, especially through the writings of Moses Maimonides, the 12th-century scholar, doctor and philosopher, teaches that every religion can bring knowledge of God into the world.

Jewish theology, therefore, requires looking at other religions, understanding them and considering how to engage with them. When I stroll the streets of New York during this season, the Christmas decorations remind me that Christians are reflecting on joy, peace and hope through their specific celebration of Jesus’ birth. When walking through Jeruslaem’s Old City, I take great pride that since this part of the city has been under Israeli rule, the holy sites of the Christian community are fully accessible, allowing celebration and spiritual reflection.

Respect for the faith of others – rather than their dilution – is especially critical today amid rising antisemitism, religious persecution and the growing role of religious extremism in conflicts around the world.

The Talmud, one of the main works of Jewish law, says that a lighted menorah should be displayed toward a public thoroughfare, but that “in times of danger ]i.e., persecution[, one places it on the table ]inside the home[ and it is sufficient.” In many periods and places, Jews have had to adhere to this admonition.

Over the last 60 years, Christians have become some of the Jews’ biggest allies – not because either side watered down its differing theological beliefs, but because each side has clarified its respect for the other despite those differences. Critically, that’s what the Vatican did when it published its famous *Nostra Aetate* document in 1965, rejecting antisemitism and recognizing Jewish contributions to Christianity.

The path to interfaith understanding has not been an easy process; a strong legacy of antisemitism still lingers. But understanding and respecting theological differences – rather than ignoring them or weaponizing them as a source of conflict – is what has allowed meaningful dialogue. It is what allowed me to visit Abbot Nikodemus Schnabel, head of the Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, after he was spat on by local Jewish extremists this year to offer him comfort – and to work with him on solutions to prevent religiously motivated violence.

Recent progress on Jewish-Muslim interfaith relations has also come from acknowledging differences rather than glossing over them. My organization, an international network of 32 Jewish educational institutions that includes an interfaith relations institute, has made trips to Muslim countries and institutions in the United States and Europe that have proven to be especially powerful and inspiring when we learn new things about Islam. When hosts have made accommodations that allow for Jewish Sabbath observance and kosher food, it is yet another sign of accepting our differences, which is key to any relationship. Future progress hinges on recognizing the uniqueness and needs of each religion; a failure to recognize someone’s faith is a failure to recognize their humanity.

Failing to appreciate our differences only feeds extremism and persecution. There are far too many examples today, but one especially disturbing trend is the growing movement of adherents to extreme Islam who are persecuting and suppressing the small remaining Christian minorities across the Middle East. Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen and Iran have some of the highest rates of reported persecution against Christians. Even countries that don’t rank as poorly can have appalling records. In Egypt, for instance, the Coptic Christian community has long faced intimidation and violence at the hands of Islamic extremists.

Erasure of faith is a dangerous path. That is why when a Jewish family wishes their Christian neighbors a “Merry Christmas” – and their neighbors respond with “Happy Hanukkah” – it is more than just a pleasantry. It is a small but profound acknowledgement of each other’s humanity, a recognition that our differences can coexist and even illuminate one another.

This season, let’s all remember that as menorahs and Christmas trees each add their unique light to our shared world.

\* Rabbi Kenneth Brander is the president of Ohr Torah Stone, an international network of 32 religious educational institutions that includes the Blavatik Institute for Interfaith Dialogue. He previously served as a vice president at Yeshiva University in New York and is rabbi emeritus of the Boca Raton Synagogue in Florida.

<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2024-12-23/christmas-and-hanukkah-coincide-please-dont-call-it-chrismukkah>

]Ed. note: I received this reprint from US News and World Report too late to reprint it during Hanukkah.

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### **Vayechi: In That Way He Never Died**

By Rabbi Label Lam © 2020 (5781)

*And Yaakov concluded commanding his sons, and he drew his legs up[ into the bed, and expired and was brought in to his people. ]Breishis 49:33(*

*and expired and was brought in: But no mention is made of death in his regard, and our Rabbis of blessed memory said: Our father Yaakov did not die. — Rashi*

Absent from this final account of the life of Yaakov Avinu is the mention of his death. By Avraham and others, three stages of death are mentioned. By Yaakov only two are listed. Why? Rashi quotes from the Gemara in Taanis a very strange notion. “*Yaakov did not die!*” What does that mean? Didn’t they bury him? Has he been seen since? What does that mean?

What are the three stages of death? This is not a morbid discussion. Death is a continuation of life as we shall see. Sefer Gesher HaChaim explains that Gviah – expiring means that the vehicle of the soul, the body, breaks down. Imagine someone whose car stalls and dies on the highway. Now the driver must exit the car and walk back. That’s exactly what happens. When the body is finished as a functional host of the soul, the soul departs. That’s the part that we call death.

The word for death, “*MISA*” Rabbi Avigdor Miller ztl. says is related to the word, *YAMUSH*, to be removed. The removal of the soul is called “*death*.” Then finally the soul which no longer has a place in this world departs and returns to what seems to be a communal family gathering with HASHEM in the world of souls. This is all above my pay grade but that’s what the verse usually describes. Why is death not mentioned about Yaakov Avinu?

It’s interesting to note the language of the Talmud as mentioned in Rashi. “*Our father Yaakov did not die!*” That is a hint at the answer. He lives through his children. His mission is continued through the accomplishments of his Klal Yisrael over the many generations. We are still eternally connected. That begs another question. Why then is not the same mentioned with regard to all of the other Avos? Their legacy lives on through us!

Now I am going to venture an answer. I heard from one of my Rebbeim that there are certain Tzadikim that clamor in this world and pine all their days to return and attach themselves to their Creator. There is another rare servant of HASHEM, a different type of Tzadik that remains attached, invested in the activities of this world. The Tosh Rebbe describes how these Tzadikim while they continue to glean merits from those who act on their behalf, do not want to eat from what the Zohar calls “*the bread of shame*.” They don’t want something for nothing, so they continue to repay with their merits and bring success and salvation to those who act on their behalf. Again, don’t ask me how it works.

The Ribnitzer Rebbe told one of his Gabaim, “*I do not remain beholden to anyone.*” It was understood that he meant that anyone who does actions that benefit his soul, he wishes to repay with yeshuos. The stories continue to pile up about wonders that accrue to those who have prayed at his gravesite. I have my own story to tell but not just now.

Now I am thinking that Yaakov Avinu lost Yosef for 22 years and had to be brought down to Egypt to meet his destiny because he “*settled in the land where his father sojourned*.” Rashi explains there that the whole episode with the brothers hating Yosef arose because Yaakov wanted to settle, retire, so to speak. Rashi says, “*Isn’t it enough for Tzadikim that they attain tranquility )forever( in the next world!?*”

Perhaps Yaakov realized his error after those years of dislocation. He rededicated himself to repair that fault. Therefore he was blessing and commanding his children right up to the very end of his life, and beyond. He did not let go at that point. He remains forever a parent involved with his children. Yaakov Avinu forfeited that tranquility, never departed, and in that way he never died.

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5781-vayechi/>

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## The Mitzvah to Plan for the Future

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2020

*What does the Torah have to say about a person making concrete plans for the eventuality of her death? Is it appropriate to sign a health care proxy or to make out a will?*

There is no better example than our patriarch, Jacob. When this week's parasha, Vayechi, opens, Jacob is getting older and sees that his death is not far off. So, what does he do? He plans for it. He calls Joseph to his bedside, refers explicitly to his impending death )"I will lie down with my fathers"( and makes arrangements for his burial.

G-d willing, we will all live a long, long life — but we will all die eventually. This is not planning for a tragedy; it is planning for an eventuality, for a natural event that is part of G-d's world.

Here's the puzzling thing though: We know this, and yet, we often don't act on it. How many of us avoid signing our own proxies? How many of us avoid talking to our parents about formulating an advance medical directive or choosing health care proxies because we would rather not speak about such unpleasant things or are afraid of upsetting our elders?

We need to do better. Taking such concrete steps like choosing a health care proxy and discussing our wishes, both personal and religious, ensures that our requests are fulfilled in a situation where we cannot communicate for ourselves. It is also a profound act of caring for one's family. It saves those left behind from the agony of not knowing what they should do or if they have done right by us. And it protects families from fighting over the right thing to do.

Talking to one's parents about this can be difficult. We fear the reaction )"So, are you waiting for me to die?!"(. But there are ways to have the conversation with sensitivity. Perhaps: "Mom, I love you and I hope you live for many, many more years. But when that time comes, I want to make sure that we are doing everything we can for you, and that it is in accordance with your wishes."

Oftentimes, parents are relieved and grateful for the opportunity to talk realistically about their futures. Elders most fear losing their independence, being a burden, and losing their cognitive capacities, so a dignified opportunity to discuss these fears is very much welcomed. Thus, it may be the adult children who are fearful of facing the natural progression of life and death.

And when it comes to making out a will, we tend not to have the same reservations. Many people do make a will when they got older. But often people feel that there is no need to do this when they are younger, say in their 30s or 40s. And yet, sometimes people die young. We should not let concerns of considering such unpleasant possibilities get in the way of being responsible and taking care of our family by asking: Whom do I trust to raise my children, and how will they be provided for financially?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was once asked whether a person is allowed to buy life insurance, or whether this would reflect a lack of bitachon, faith in G-d. He responded unequivocally that to buy life insurance is permissible and religiously desirable )Igrot Moshe OH 2:111, 1963(. Rav Feinstein draws on multiple midrashic sources to demonstrate that faith in G-d means a belief that G-d gives us the strength, and will continue to give us the strength, to do what we need to do to provide for ourselves and our loved ones. But we must do our part, which includes not only getting a job rather than waiting to win the lottery, but also planning for the future.

In a later responsum )IM OH 4:48, 1965(, he was asked to opine on whether a person with limited means should buy term life or whole life insurance. Taking his cue from the provisions in the ketubah )marriage contract( that were instituted by the rabbis to protect the financial interests of a man's wife and children after his death, Rav Moshe concluded that term life is preferable. Whole life is an investment that bears returns during one's life; term life is an insurance policy to ensure that one's family is provided for in case of an early death. For Rav Moshe, a person must not only earn money now, he must also plan for the future and for his loved ones.

Nowhere in either responsum does Rav Moshe raise the concern of ayin hara (invoking the evil eye), not even when he discusses buying theft, fire, or car insurance, events that could be tragic and that are not inevitable. Taking these concrete steps is simply living up to our obligation to take care of ourselves and our families.

After Jacob makes practical plans for his death and burial, he gives out blessings — first to Joseph's children and then to all of his children. If we take care to get our affairs in order, to make sure that our family is provided for and that our wishes for the end are known, then we will have truly left them with a great blessing.

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives

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## **Strength and Tears: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

As Joseph rose to a position of power in Egypt, we imagine him to have been a clear-headed, pragmatic official. He had to develop a plan for gathering and storing seven years worth of produce. He then needed a plan for responsible distribution of food during the seven years of famine. He had to create a vast bureaucracy to implement fourteen years of complicated management of resources. As the years of famine continued, Joseph centralized government control so that Egypt's land became nationalized under Pharaoh.

This amazing work would have required a strong, efficient and single-minded leader, one who would not let emotion get in the way of pragmatism. Yet, Joseph is the character in the book of Bereishith who displays the most emotion!

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted that the Torah records seven acts of Joseph weeping:

*"They span the full spectrum of emotion, from painful memory to the joy of being reunited, first with his brother Benjamin, then with his father Jacob. There are the complex tears immediately before and after he discloses his identity to his brothers, and there are the tears of bereavement at Jacob's deathbed. But the most intriguing are the last, the tears he sheds when he hears that his brothers fear that he will take revenge on them now that their father is no longer alive."*

Joseph was not only a strong-minded official; he was also a soft-hearted human being. By stressing Joseph's weeping, the Torah is reminding us that ideal leaders must not only be strong and pragmatic, they also need to be sensitive human beings.

Some people are efficient but hard-hearted. Some are compassionate but inept. Some are neither efficient nor compassionate. And some are in the Joseph model. They work hard; they are single-minded in getting things done; they are clear-headed and pragmatic; but they are also kind, empathetic and sensitive human beings.

Years ago, I met with a congregant who was chairman of a huge company. I imagined it would have been impossible to rise so high without being very tough and competitive. Yet, this congregant was very affable, kind, generous, thoughtful. I asked him: how did you become chairman of the company when you are such a nice man? He answered: to succeed, one needs good judgment and the ability to work effectively with others. One can be a strong leader and a nice person at the same time. This congregant followed the Joseph model!

We all can learn from the Joseph model. We can strive to be efficient and pragmatic while also being compassionate and considerate. It's good to be strong...and emotionally healthy.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

**The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during and since the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](http://jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its current fund raising period. Thank you.**

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3307>.

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## **Reaching for Greatness: Thoughts for Parashat Vayhi**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

This week's Torah reading brings us to the end of the book of Bereishith. During the past months, we have read the magnificent account of the creation of the universe; we learned about Noah and his times. We then were introduced to the lives of individuals who revolutionized human civilization: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his siblings.

These remarkable people laid the foundations not only for the people of Israel but for much of human civilization. The Torah describes these heroes of faith with their strengths and weaknesses, their victories and failures. They are not presented as having super-human talents or genius; rather, they appear to be very fallible human beings striving to fulfill their human potentialities. They are shepherds and seekers of God; they are parents and moral guides; they are courageous and wise...but not always.

These pillars of civilization were, to a great extent, loners. As Abraham himself said, he was a "*stranger and a resident*" among the people. A stranger — he was not at home within the pagan society in which he lived. A resident — he was a constructive and helpful member of the community. Our spiritual fathers and mothers, while being cooperative and sociable, were not at home in general society. They had different dreams and aspirations. They heard God's voice. They were striving for something beyond their own time and place. They were not afraid to stand alone, to be different, to defy the popular norms.

Human greatness often entails loneliness and alienation. It is nurtured by successes and failures, by trials and errors. It is fostered in an environment of quiet thoughtfulness. The greatest people often are the most humble and self-effacing.

Dr. Fred Hoyle, a famous English astronomer of the 20th century, made an astute observation.

*"It seems to be characteristic of all great work, in every field, that it arises spontaneously and unpretentiously, and that its creators wear a cloak of imprecision...The man who voyages strange seas must of necessity be a little unsure of himself. It is the man with the flashy air of knowing everything, who is always on the ball, always with it, that we should beware of."* (Of Men and Galaxies, Prometheus Books, NY, 2005, p. 28).

Dr. Hoyle expresses concern for the over-specialization characteristic of modern society. To be a "success," one must increasingly be seen as an "expert," a member of the in-crowd, a popular team-player. *"More and more, the professions will cross over into the entertainment field. Those of us who are not employed directly in industry will come to realize that what we are really in is 'show biz.'"* (p. 52)

What is increasingly valued in our world is entertainment, putting on a show for others, image-making.

Because of this cultural and spiritual degradation, the environment to produce real greatness is diminished. *"It is a mistake to imagine that potentially great men are rare. It is the conditions that permit the promise of greatness to be fulfilled that are rare."* (p. 25)

As we read the stories of our Biblical ancestors, we are given a unique opportunity to delve into their world. We can re-focus on spiritual striving, and free ourselves of the glitz and show biz that pervade our lives. We can seek to develop our own personal greatness, even as we are fully conscious of our many weaknesses and failings. Most of all, we can shake off the artificiality and superficiality that attempt to choke our spirits; we can reclaim our own souls, our own essential selves.

Our Biblical ancestors were not flashy know-it-alls with a glib word for everyone. They were not show-people or seekers of popularity. They were able to stand alone, to strive for God and Godliness, to attain human greatness. These are qualities that can transform lives and change the world.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

**The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during and since the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](https://www.jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its current fund raising period. Thank you.**

<https://www.jewishideas.org/reaching-greatness-thoughts-parashat-vayhi>

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### **Vayichie -- Compliments** By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \*

*Dedicated in Memory of Mr. David Rhine Sholomo Dovid ben Avraham Yitzchak z.l.*

*May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel*

Our father, Yakov, lived his life with a tremendous sense of mission. His was the task to create the Jewish family and through it, the Jewish nation. He mentored his children with love and authority with an eye on a vision: Through good deeds mankind will bring about the utopia of the End of Days.

As Yakov neared death, he called upon his children and stated that he wished to inform them about the End of Days. Perhaps he wanted to share when it would happen, or perhaps he wanted to share what it would be like. But, as Rashi tells us, the Divine inspiration left him, and instead he gave blessings to each of the children.

At first it seems that the blessings to the children were the next item on Yakov's to do list. When Yakov was unable to share what he wished to share about the End of Days, he decided to move on and bless the children. But when we consider this momentous event in Yakov's life, we realize that Yakov had wanted to share the vision of what the end goal looked like. When he realized that he couldn't share what the end goal looked like, he instead shared how to get to the end goal.

Yakov's message to each child was that of blessing and clarity. He acknowledged life's challenges, triumphs, and even weaknesses, giving each of his sons clarity in the qualities they personified. Yakov couldn't talk about the End of Days, but he talked in a way that each of his sons knew what they needed to do to bring us closer to the goodness of the End of Days. Focusing on those qualities day by day is the way that we will reach the end goal, even if the end goal is not something that we can see yet.

The story is told of a young man who came into a barber shop wearing large, bulky headphones. He motioned to the barber that he would like a haircut, but under no circumstances may he remove the headphones. The barber, a kind fellow, tried to accommodate. He proceeded to give the young man a haircut, carefully working around the headphones. Then, when he was just about done, he removed the headphones for a few seconds, and quickly trimmed the remaining hairs. By the time the barber was ready to replace the headphones on the man's head, the man slumped over dead.

The barber was stunned. Curious, he brought the headphones to his own ears to hear what the man had been listening to that was so important. The words were distinct: "Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breath out."

There are two strategies to reach great and lofty goals. One strategy is to focus on the vision. But Yakov found out that the vision that he wanted to share was too lofty to be shared. Instead, Yakov focused on the second strategy to reach a goal. That is, stay on track, day by day. Breathe in, breathe out. Do what you can today, tomorrow, and the next day. If we stay on track, eventually we will get there.

Each of us has words that reverberate daily in our mind's ear. It is up to us to make sure that the words we hear are helpful and complimentary. As one mentor said, *"I pity the person who doesn't know their shortcomings. They don't realize that they must improve. But even worse is the person who doesn't know their attributes because they are not aware of their strength. How are they to begin their personal journey?"*

I believe that giving compliments should be viewed as a social contract that we are obliged to deliver to our loved ones and to those we work with. How else will they know their attributes, if we, who are close to them, don't notice and point them out? How will a person who is efficient, or organized, or friendly, or has a good voice, know their attribute and potential if someone they trust doesn't acknowledge it?

Compliments are more than a nice thing. They are more than something that lubricates the relationship. Compliments help people know themselves and reach their potential. Compliments help formulate the voices in our minds, invigorating us and those around us to do our best to step forward — one breath at a time — to a great and glorious future.

One of the joys that I have had over the years is teaching English Composition to high school students and marking their papers. Certainly, it is wonderful to be able to grade a student's paper with, "A+, Excellent writing!" But sometimes a student doesn't quite follow directions, and their writing doesn't meet the project requirements. The proper grade following the rubric might be a B, C, or D. And we do need to grade accordingly. But that doesn't stop me from complimenting the hard work or a well-crafted sentence. To me, it is not a contradiction to share two simultaneous messages on the top of the paper. On the one hand, *"Please reread the project instructions. This is not what was assigned."* On the other hand, on the very same paper, *"I did enjoy your writing. You worked hard and you are quite talented."*

Compliments help the people close to us gain personal awareness. While we can't always help with the end goal, we can help those we care about with what to do day by day to get there. When Yakov realized that he couldn't share the end goal

he provided love and parental insight to bring out the very best in his children.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos,

\* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.

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## Vayechi -- Overly Sensitive For Someone Else

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer\* © 5783

When Yosef is told that his aging father is not well, he immediately goes to visit him. Yaakov, recognizing he is nearing the end of his life, uses this opportunity to elevate Yosef's sons, Menashe and Efraim, to the status of full tribes, awarding each with their own portion in the future land of Israel. He blesses Yosef and his sons, saying the famous words of Hamalach Hagoel, *"May the angel who redeemed me from all evil bless the lads."* In the middle of this discussion, the Torah tells us that Yaakov reminds Yosef of how Rochel, Yosef's mother, died while Yaakov was still traveling back from Lavan's house and was buried on the roadside. )Bereishis 48:1-16(

Rash'i )Bereishis 48:7( explains that Yaakov had a great need to discuss Rochel's burial with Yosef. As is customary, Yaakov sought to be buried in a proper burial spot with other great people and in the land of Israel. Yaakov, therefore, wanted to be buried in Me'aras Hamachpeilah, together with his parents and grandparents, Avrohom and Sarah, Yitzchok and Rivkah. Yaakov shared this desire with his sons. Since they were currently under Egyptian rule and Yosef was the viceroy of Egypt, he put Yosef in charge of his burial. Recognizing that there may be significant hurdles in removing his remains from Egypt and arranging for Yosef to leave the country for the duration of the burial procession, Yaakov even made Yosef swear that he would carry out Yaakov's will.

Despite Yosef's oath, Yaakov still had a concern. He was aware that Yosef was pained by the fact that his mother, Rochel, had been buried on the roadside, outside of the city limits. Although Yosef certainly trusted his illustrious father, that pain for his mother's honor still left an imprint on Yosef's heart. When Yaakov asked Yosef to go the extra mile and ensure that he himself would be buried in a proper burial ground, Yosef couldn't help but be reminded that Yaakov had not done this for Rochel, his mother. This could prevent Yosef from fully committing himself to fulfilling Yaakov's wishes for his own burial. Without Yosef's full emotional commitment, it was possible that Yosef would fail to overcome the challenges in burying Yaakov in a different country.

Yaakov therefore took this opportunity to discuss Rochel's burial with Yosef. He explained that he too was pained at having Rochel buried on the roadside, but he had been instructed by G-d to do so because Rochel was needed there on that road. Many years later, during the destruction of the Temple, the general Nevuzaradan led the Jewish captives into exile along that same road. As they passed Rochel's grave, she sat there on the roadside and cried out, pleading with G-d to have mercy on her descendants. The prophet Yirmiyahu tells us that in response to her cries, Hashem promised that we would ultimately be redeemed. )Jeremiah 31:15-16(

The Gur Aryeh )Bereishis 48:7( asks why Yaakov only explained this to Yosef now? The Torah tells us that Yosef had left Yaakov and returned to the palace after he swore to see to Yaakov's burial. It was only now at a later time that Yaakov brought this up. Why didn't Yaakov explain when he originally asked Yosef to swear?

The Gur Aryeh answers that Yaakov delayed in sharing this with Yosef out of sensitivity for Yosef. In order to explain, Yaakov would have to share some details of pain of the future exile with Yosef. Despite Yaakov's great concern to ensure he'd be buried in Israel going so far as to make Yosef swear, and even though he would have to tell Yosef eventually, Yaakov waited as long as he felt was reasonable before causing Yosef this pain. This slight additional pain in Yosef's life, that he should know earlier of the anguish of an exile in the distant future, was enough reason for Yaakov to delay in ensuring that he would have a proper burial.

When we consider the context, this is even more astounding. Yosef was already in pain over his mother's burial. Though he trusted that Yaakov had good reason for burying her there, he certainly must have felt some measure of comfort in finally knowing why. His comfort was presumably even greater in knowing that her burial on the roadside would ensure the eternality of the Jewish people. Yet, nonetheless, Yaakov estimated that Yosef's pain over the future exile would be greater. In order to delay this subtle increase in Yosef's overall pain, Yaakov waited. Although Yaakov already knew he

was near the end of his life when he made Yosef swear, he waited a little bit longer before taking this final precaution and explaining Rochel's burial place to Yosef.

When it comes to our own emotional pain, we are taught appropriately to be strong and not delay unnecessarily when something needs to be done. Yaakov is reminding us here that we must be careful to maintain our sensitivity when it comes to the pain of another. Even waiting a few days may be worthwhile.

\* Co-founder of the Rhode Island Torah Network in Providence, RI. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD., and associated with the Savannah Kollel.

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## **Vayechi: Favorite Son vs. Man of the People**

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

Choosing a college major is tricky. You start studying for the profession most in demand at the moment, just to find out four years later that the world has drastically changed. Computer programming has been one exception for the last couple of decades, but this too may be changing. Deep neural networks are the new frontier, for now being the closest thing to self-learning machines which are going to beat our comparatively stupid computers. We are looking into a future when machines will not depend on a set of commands programmed by humans, but rather on analyzing millions of cases and mountains of data, and finding a way to make their own conclusions (artificial intelligence). For people in the field, the exciting event heralding that era was Google's DeepMind beating the world's best Go player, Lee Sedol. To reach that moment, DeepMind was fed 30 million moves of human players, but the moment of awe and exhilaration came when DeepMind made an original move, never played before. For the first time, humans were watching a machine thinking independently.

Machines are not ready yet to think like humans, though, since there is still the issue of cracking the code of human unpredictability in a world with endless possibilities of human reactions, emotions, and subliminal messages. One man who knew that the ability to flow with and adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of the human condition was our patriarch Jacob.

Think for a moment about this question: Where did Joseph disappear to, after dominating the last thirteen chapters of the book of Genesis? In the other four books of the Torah the leader and main protagonist is Moshe, of the tribe of Levi. Moshe's disciple and successor, Joshua, is the only one from among Joseph descendants to become a national leader with a positive image. In the rest of the bible, Menashe and Ephraim appear to have a divisive and cantankerous character, culminating with the massacre of forty-two thousand Ephraimites by Jephthah, of the tribe of Menashe. Later on, Ephraim becomes the main force in the creation of the divisive Northern Kingdom, the one tribe singled out and criticized by the prophets active there, most significantly Hosea.

Judah, on the other hand, emerges as the ultimate leader of Israel, the once and future king. After the failed reign of Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, the history of the Israelites revolves around David and his dynasty, both in history and in the literature of the Davidic dynasty, which includes Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs.

This is most surprising, given Joseph's stellar performance and achievements as an administrator and viceroy, and his image as one who saved his family from dying in hunger. Let us briefly review what Joseph was able to accomplish single-handedly, relying purely on his intelligence and communication skills. He was able to secure the position of the second-in-command by delivering a brilliant interpretation intertwined with a job application. He convinced the Egyptian farmers to save more wheat by making them believe that distribution during the famine would be local and merit-based, but then shared the crops equally with all Egypt. Joseph accused his brothers of being spies to enable them to refute the accusation and clear their names when they eventually come to Egypt. He managed to squeeze out of Pharaoh a royal decree for the settling Jacob's clan in Egypt without directly asking for it, and he guided his brothers how to speak to

Pharaoh in order to be allotted the fertile land of Goshen. He also managed, as representative of the crown, to purchase all Egyptian land, while keeping the sharecroppers happy and thankful. Finally, he convinced Pharaoh to let him bury his father Jacob in Canaan, by insinuating that if he denied his request, there would be no guarantee that the king would receive his proper burial and peaceful sailing into the world of the dead. But that glorious past vanishes in the later books of the bible.

The fall from grace of the House of Joseph has its early origins in Jacob's last will. It was expected that Jacob, who showed his proclivity for preferential treatment and disregard of the natural order of birth, would bypass Reuben and appoint another brother as a successor and future leader, but we would have assumed that brother to be Joseph. But Jacob, despite Joseph's impressive portfolio and his status as the favorite child of the favorite wife, decides to appoint Judah, and not Joseph, as king, legislator, and future leader of the Israelites. Jacob does give a wonderful blessing to Joseph, describing his travails and hardships, praising him as one who is set apart from his brothers, and promising him abundance, but never referring to him as a leader. What did Jacob see that made him prefer Judah over Joseph as the future leader, despite Joseph's unprecedented commitment to his father and success as the viceroy of Egypt?

Three words in Judah's blessing hold the key: **עלית בני מטרף** – you have risen from devouring my son. These words could be read in two ways: You ]Judah[ have risen from devouring my son ]Joseph[; You have risen from devouring, my son ]Judah[. Both have a somewhat similar meaning, but the second conveys Jacob's understanding and appreciation of Judah's humanity. Like David after him, Judah is volatile and emotional. He is not immune to sin and irrational moves, but he is able to acknowledge his errors and confronts them. He was actively involved in the disappearance of Joseph, but years later was able to rise above his jealousy and fervently defend his father's other favorite child, Benjamin. He fell prey to his desire when enticed by Tamar, but was able to admit his mistake and publicly announce that she was righteous and he was a sinner.

Jacob's message is that there is no perfect human being and therefore no perfect ruler. With all the elegance and intelligence of Joseph's calculated moves, played out like those of a true Chess Grandmaster, they did not take into account human sensitivities and emotions. On his path to fulfil the goal of saving his clan during the famine, and for the sake of the greater good, Joseph caused unnecessary pain to his father and brothers, among whom was the innocent Benjamin. His behavior at his father's funeral made the brothers think that he was going to cause them harm, and in general he was so busy with running the kingdom that he had no time left for family. That is, I believe, one of the reasons Jacob asks him, when he comes with Menashe and Ephraim, *“who are these?”* as if saying *“I don’t see you anymore!”*

Joseph truly believed in what he was doing and suppressed his own emotions to achieve his goal, but Jacob eventually taught him, and us, that life is not a game of chess, and cannot be played by machines.

This unexpected ending of the saga of the House of Jacob teaches us an important lesson about maintaining a balance between the greater good, whether religious or national, and the immediate needs, sensitivities, and feelings of those surrounding us.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan )Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/ham-ovadia?tab=sheets>**. The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

**Many Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright protections for this material.**

## **Shavuon: Summer Edition**

By Rabbi Moshe Rube \*

*Our hearts, prayers and thoughts are with our people in Israel and their families and friends throughout the world.*

The Auckland Hebrew Congregation is still on summer vacation and should return in another week.

\* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera )Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Knesseth Israel )Birmingham, AL(.

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### **Rav Kook Torah**

#### **Reverence for Sacred Vessels**

The Torah commands us to show reverence for the human body, even after the soul has departed. A body should be buried quickly, we are taught, lest its dignity be compromised. Leaving a body exposed is “*a blasphemy of God*” )Deut. 21:22–23(.

However, in cases where the body is at risk of desecration — if there is a fear that robbers or enemies may abduct the remains for ransom — the Torah permits us to act in ways that, under ordinary circumstances, would seem disrespectful. To protect the body, one is allowed to conceal it in a sack and even sit upon it.

The Talmud in Berachot 18a teaches that these guidelines of respect shown to human remains also apply to Torah scrolls.

#### **Like a Torah Scroll**

This comparison, Rav Kook explains, is highly instructive.

Why do we honor Torah scrolls? We do so to instill within ourselves a love of Torah and a commitment to fulfill its words. We cherish these vessels of divine wisdom, recognizing that they facilitate our spiritual growth.

The same applies to the respect given to human remains. Honoring the body after death reminds us of the profound connection between the physical and the divine. This reverence underscores a vital truth: our bodies are instruments through which we pursue holiness. With our limbs and physical senses, we observe the Torah’s mitzvot, pursue its paths of purity and righteousness, and grow in wisdom and sanctity.

What emerges is a unified teaching: reverence for the human body, like that for Torah scrolls, strengthens our resolve to live a life aligned with the ways of God, which are “*life to those who find them and healing to all their flesh*” )Proverbs 4:22(

)Adapted from *Ein Aya* vol. 1 on Berachot 3:2(

<https://ravkooktorah.org/KVOD-HAMEIT-85.htm>

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### **Vayechi: Moving Forwards (5774, 5781)**

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\*

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.*"<sup>1</sup> 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.*"<sup>2</sup>

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.*"<sup>3</sup> 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.**

#### FOOTNOTES:

]1[ Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold*)New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979(, 74.

]2[ *Hamlet*, Act 5, scene 2.

]3[ Quoted in Robert A. Divine et al., *America Past and Present*, vol. I )Pearson, 2001(, 94.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR VAYECHI:

]1[ How easy do you find it to trust that God is looking after you when things seem to be going terribly wrong?

]2[ Does this idea of Divine Providence give you the strength to forgive those who you feel may have acted against you?

]3[ Which of the lessons in leadership from Bereishit’s Covenant & Conversation pieces have most resonated with you?

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/vayechi/moving-forwards/>

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### Life Lessons From the Parshah: Building Jewish Infrastructure Everywhere

By Yehoshua B. Gordon \* © Chabad 5785

#### My Father, My Teacher

My parents, Rabbi Sholom B. Gordon and Rebbetzin Miriam Gordon, of blessed memory, were sent to Newark, N.J., by the Sixth Rebbe in 1948. My father initially spent three years there starting in 1942, while still single. After my parents' marriage, they were assigned to a new position in Springfield, Mass., and later reassigned to Newark, where I was born and raised.

My father drove me to a Jewish day school in a nearby city every day, hoping I would receive a solid Jewish education. In the early days of first grade, I returned home one day, and my father inquired, "So, are you learning Chumash? Are you learning Torah?" At six years old, I candidly replied, "I'm sorry, but we don't learn Chumash in our school."

Confused, my father asked, "You don't learn Chumash? What, then, are you learning?"

"We have a reader," I explained, "and we learn stories about Yossi Pessi!"

Perplexed, my father asked, "Who's Yossi Pessi?"

"These are made-up stories about a kid named Yossi," I elaborated. "Yossi is a 'pessi,' which is Hebrew for idiot. The stories we read are about all of the silly and foolish things Yossi does and all the trouble he gets himself into."

My father was incredulous. "For this I drive all those miles each day?" he exclaimed. "For this I pay tuition? So you can read and learn about Yossi Pessi?! I'm not happy about this."

Subsequently, he scheduled a meeting with the head of school and expressed his concerns about the curriculum. "My dear rabbi," said my father, "with great self-sacrifice, I drive a long distance and I pay my fair share of tuition to send my son to your school, so that my child can study Torah. Yet, instead of learning Chumash, my child is learning about Yossi Pessi – Yossi the Idiot – some fictional character who is always getting into trouble. That's the workbook. That's what the school is teaching my son. Why would the school do that, dear rabbi?"

The head of school looked at my father, shook his head back and forth, and said, "Ah, today everybody is an educator. Everybody thinks they know about education." He was basically telling my father that if he had wanted advice on how to run his school, he would have asked for it.

My father thanked the rabbi very much, drove home, and immediately started a cheder in Newark. He made a few phone calls, knocked on some doors, took a few kids out of public school, and just like that he started a new school, where I spent many years with my father as my teacher.

I can honestly say that had my father not done so, and had I not merited to become my father's student for all those years, not only would I lack the knowledge I accumulated, but I would also be without the passion that I have for the teachings of Chassidus and Torah. This personal experience vividly illustrates the importance of establishing Torah infrastructure anywhere and everywhere that Jews find themselves.

### **A Yeshivah in Egypt**

The Torah portion of Vayechi begins: "And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years ..."<sup>1</sup> The phrase "And Jacob lived" in Hebrew is "Vayechi Yaakov," which is where the title of this parshah is derived. Rabbi Jacob Ben Asher, the late 13th- and early 14th-century biblical commentator known as the Ba'al Haturim, taught that the numeric value of the word Vayechi is 34, which signifies two 17-year periods in Jacob's life.

The first period encapsulates the years Joseph lived with his father Jacob, from birth until his brothers sold him into slavery. The second 17 years represent the time Jacob spent with Joseph in Egypt — "the best years of his life." During this period, Jacob could finally relax, engage in Torah study with his grandchildren, and enjoy some much-deserved nachat from his family.

## **Best Years ... in Egypt?**

When the Third Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, was taught the first verse of our parshah as a child in cheder, his teacher translated it according to the commentary of the Ba'al Haturim, that Jacob lived his 17 best years in Egypt.

Upon returning home from cheder, young Menachem Mendel posed a question to his esteemed grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, founder of Chabad. *“How is it possible that the best years in the life of Jacob, the most eminent of the Patriarchs, were the years he lived in Egypt, a land of immorality and corruption?”*<sup>2</sup>

The Alter Rebbe explained: *“It is written that Jacob ‘sent Judah before him to Joseph, to show him the way to Goshen.’*<sup>3</sup> The Midrash relates that ‘*Judah’s task was to prepare a House of Study for him, so that the Torah would be studied there, and his sons would meditate upon its teachings.*’”

We are taught that even before the giving of the Torah, the Patriarchs and the tribes — especially the tribe of Levi — devoted themselves to Torah study. Thus, the phrase “*to show him the way to Goshen,*” meant establishing the infrastructure for Torah study, which enables us to become closer to G d and to truly live. This concept is embodied in the phrase Vayechi Yaakov — “*And Jacob lived.*”

## **Goshen’s Legacy**

This teaching of “*to show him the way to Goshen,*” emphasizing the crucial need to establish Jewish infrastructure even in Egypt )i.e., exile(, laid the spiritual foundation for a significant development in the 1920s and ‘30s. During this period, the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, began sending his personal emissaries, known as “*Shluchim,*” to various cities in and around the Soviet Union, including Russia, Poland, Latvia, Georgia, and others. Their mission was to create Jewish infrastructure, often operating underground and at great personal sacrifice, in order to keep the flame of Judaism alive under the Soviets.

Upon his arrival in the United States in 1940, the Sixth Rebbe continued his work, immediately sending emissaries to various American cities in order to establish Jewish infrastructure and combat the assimilation.

When the Rebbe succeeded his father-in-law in 1950, he expanded this effort, sending emissaries all over the world. In 1972, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, the Rebbe announced a birthday wish for 71 new Chabad institutions before his 71st birthday. Despite the seeming impossibility )there were probably only 100 or so Chabad institutions worldwide(, the Rebbe received his gift, and 71 new institutions, including Chabad of the Valley — my life’s work — were established.

It is astounding to observe that after the Rebbe’s passing in 1994, Chabad’s global outreach efforts grew exponentially. One need only do a quick internet search and see that in many places I cannot even pronounce there are shluchim of the Rebbe hard at work creating and growing Jewish infrastructure.

All of this stems from the profound lesson of “*to show him the way to Goshen.*”

## **Dreidel Connection**

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “*to Goshen,*” Goshnah, is spelled with the same four Hebrew letters — Gimmel, Shin, Nun, and Hei — that are found on the Chanukah dreidel. This teaches us that even in Goshen, even in exile, miracles can occur when there is devotion and dedication to building infrastructure for Torah study.

Taking it a step further, our Sages teach that Goshnah — and the letters on the dreidel — have the numerical value of 358, the same as Moshiach, indicating that establishing the infrastructure for Torah study and Judaism is what will ultimately bring about the Final Redemption.<sup>4</sup>

And it is our duty and privilege as students of the Rebbe to wholeheartedly embrace these teachings and dedicate ourselves to building Judaism. We must establish Chabad houses, we must set up Jewish schools, we must build mikvahs. Wherever there are Jews, there must be Jewish infrastructure.

### **Judah, Uniquely Qualified**

Joseph, being the foremost disciple of his father, Jacob, received all of Jacob's wisdom. Remarkably, even when appointed viceroy of Egypt, Joseph upheld his high standards of Jewish practice, maintained his fear of G d, and meticulously observed the laws of Torah and mitzvot. )These laws were prophetically observed by the patriarchs and their families even before the formal giving of the Torah.(

Given this, why did Jacob choose to send Judah to establish an infrastructure? Why not assign this task to Joseph, who was not only his chief disciple but also the ruler of the land? Joseph was highly capable, and Judah was just a simple guy, a foreigner, an immigrant. Why entrust Judah with the immense responsibility of creating a Torah infrastructure?

The answer may lie in the fact that Judah was the forebear of kings David and Solomon, whose descendants led the Sanhedrin. The Tribe of Judah was wholly dedicated to Torah. Although Joseph was also committed to Torah, his involvement in governmental affairs and secular matters set him apart.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Joseph maintained his elevated spirituality even in Egypt because he was on a higher level than his brothers. However, creating an infrastructure for Torah study requires exclusive devotion to Torah, a quality embodied by Judah.

### **Be Strong!**

The parshah of Vayechi marks the conclusion of the book of Bereishit, the first of the Five Books of the Torah. Upon completing each of the Five Books, it is customary to wish each other, "*chazak, chazak, venitchazeik – be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened.*"

May we all be blessed with the strength needed to establish the vital Jewish infrastructure required for nurturing the next generation of Jews.

May we truly merit to see what Jacob yearned to reveal to his sons – that which is hinted in the word Goshnah – the coming of our righteous Moshiach, may it happen speedily in our days! Amen.

### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Genesis 47:28.
2. *Hayom Yom*, entry for Tevet 18.
3. Genesis 46:28.
4. *Benei Yissaschar*, Kislev/Tevet 2:25.
5. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 3 pg. 827.

\* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

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## **Vayechi: The Battle for Peace**

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky \*

In his blessing to his son Gad, Jacob said that his descendants would be valiant warriors who would return from battle without having suffered any casualties.

### **Essence vs. Exile**

*Troops will march forth from Gad, and they will return on their tracks. )Gen. 49:19(*

The ultimate war is the war that we wage with negativity. Our chief challenge in life is to find the redeemable core in every aspect of creation with which we come in contact – even the lowest and most unsavory – and use it to transform that aspect into something positive.

This process is alluded to in the Torah by the commandment to conquer the Land of Israel from the pagan nations that occupied it before the Jewish people. When we set about this conquest with the proper motives and full confidence, demonstrating clearly that its purpose is to transform the world into G-d's home, the enemies capitulate voluntarily, and the "war" is won peacefully and pleasantly.

The cumulative effect of repeating this process over and over will be our transformation of exile – the quintessence of negativity – into redemption – the quintessence of positivity.

May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.

— from *Daily Wisdom* 3

\* A Chasidic insight by the Rebbe on the parshah, selected from our *Daily Wisdom*, by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
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Volume 31, Issue 12

**Shabbat Parashat Vayechi**

**5785 B"H**

**Covenant and Conversation**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l**

**Grandparents**

Every Friday night we re-enact one of the most moving scenes in the book of Bereishit. Jacob, reunited with Joseph, is ill. Joseph comes to visit him, bring bringing with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob, with deep emotion, says: "I never expected to see you again, and now God has shown me your children as well." Gen. 48:11

He blesses Joseph. Then he places his hands on the heads of the two boys. He blessed them that day and said, "[In the time to come] Israel will use you as a blessing. They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'" Gen. 48:20

So we do to this day, with these very words. Why this blessing above all others? One commentator (Yalkut Yehudah) says it is because Ephraim and Manasseh were the first two Jewish children born in exile. So Jewish parents bless their children asking God to help them keep their identity intact despite all the temptations and distractions of Diaspora life.

I heard however a most lovely explanation, based on the Zohar, from my revered predecessor Lord Jakobovits of blessed memory. He said that though there are many instances in Torah and Tanach in which parents bless their children, this is the only example of a grandparent blessing grandchildren.

Between parents and children, he said, there are often tensions. Parents worry about their children. Children sometimes rebel against their parents. The relationship is not always smooth.

Not so with grandchildren. There the relationship is one of love untroubled by tension or anxiety. When a grandparent blesses a grandchild they do so with a full heart. That is why this blessing by Jacob to his grandchildren became the model of blessing across the generations. Anyone who has had the privilege of having grandchildren will

immediately understand the truth and depth of this explanation.

Grandparents bless their grandchildren and are blessed by them. This phenomenon is the subject of a fascinating difference of opinion between the Babylonian Talmud and the Talmud Yerushalmi. The Babylonian Talmud says the following: Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, "Whoever teaches their grandchildren Torah is regarded as if they had received the Torah from Mount Sinai, as it is said, 'Teach your children and your children's children.'" Deut. 4:10-11; Kiddushin 30a

The Talmud Yerushalmi puts it differently. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi used to listen, every Friday, to his grandson reciting the weekly parsha. One week he entered the bathhouse, and after he had begun bathing he remembered that he had not yet heard the weekly parsha from his grandson. So he immediately got up to leave the bathhouse... They asked him why he was leaving in the middle of his bathing, since the Mishnah teaches that once you have begun bathing on a Friday afternoon, you should not interrupt the process. He replied, "Is this such a small thing in your eyes? For whoever hears the parsha from his grandchild is as if he heard it directly from Mount Sinai" (Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:2).

According to the Talmud Bavli, it is a great privilege is to teach your grandchildren Torah. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, the greatest privilege is to have your grandchildren teach Torah to you. This is one argument about which no grandparent will have the slightest difficulty saying that both are true.

My late father, of blessed memory, had to leave school at the age of 14 to begin working to support his family, and as a result he never had the full Jewish or secular education that he would have wanted. I remember from my childhood that – as we walked home from shul on a Shabbat morning – I would be full of questions. "Dad, why do we do this?" "Why did we do that?" My father always gave me the same answer, and that was the answer that changed my life. He said, "Jonathan, I didn't have a Jewish education, so I can't answer your questions. But one day, you will have the education that I didn't have. And when that happens, you will teach me the answers to those questions."

The greatest gift you can give a child or a grandchild is what you empower and allow them to teach you. As parents, we strive to give our children everything. There's one thing we sometimes forget to give them which is the chance for them to give something to us. And that, frankly, is the most important thing there is.

Give your children and your grandchildren the space to give to you. Let them become your teachers and let them be your inspiration. In doing so you will help them become the people that they were destined to be, and you will help create the blessings God wants them to become.

With an exquisite sense of symmetry, just as we begin Shabbat with a grandparent's blessing so we end it, in Maariv, with the words: May you live to see your children's children – peace be on Israel. Psalm 128:6

What is the connection between grandchildren and peace? Surely this, that those who think about grandchildren care about the future, and those who think about the future make peace. It is those who constantly think of the past, of slights and humiliations and revenge, who make war.

Jacob lives a life fraught with conflict and troubles. He knew of revenge and war, of grudges and strife. But he died serene, and full of blessings. And before he died, he blessed his children and grandchildren.

To bless grandchildren and be blessed by them, to teach them and to be taught by them – these are the highest Jewish privilege and the serene end of Jacob's troubled life.

**Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**  
**To Whom Do You Belong?**

And Israel saw the children of Joseph, and he said, 'Who are these?" (Genesis 48:8) Jacob's death, which occurs towards the end of the

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book of Genesis, brings the era of the patriarchs to an end. He will be the last person to be buried in Ma'arat HaMakhpela in Hebron. He will be the forefather whose name, Israel, given to him after defeating the angel in an all-night wrestling bout, is the same name the Jewish people will carry forever. He will be the one patriarch whose twelve sons are transformed into the chiefs of their respective tribes, paving the way for a disparate family to emerge as a nation.

In the lead-up to his death, Vayechi opens with Jacob in his old age asking Joseph not to leave his dead body in Egypt, but to transport his bones back to the burial-place of his fathers. When he takes sick, Joseph arrives with his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe. At the deathbed scene, Jacob narrates his whole history: how he was blessed by God in Luz that he would be fruitful, that his descendants would inherit the land, and that there would eventually be an ingathering of all nations to the land and faith of Israel (the Messianic promise).

But don't we know this already? And if this story is so important, why doesn't he repeat it to all the brothers who will soon be arriving for their blessings, instead of keeping this moment as a private encounter between himself and Joseph and his sons?

Stranger still, in his very next breath the aged patriarch tells Joseph that he wants Ephraim and Menashe to be considered his and not Joseph's, '...just as Reuven and Shimon are mine. (Although Jacob does allow for any sons that Joseph may have afterwards to be regarded as his own.) Jacob then concludes his own history, recounting the sudden death and burial of Rachel. And suddenly, almost as an afterthought, he turns to Ephraim and Menashe asking, 'Who are these?'

Given that Jacob has just been talking about Menashe and Ephraim, his question doesn't make sense. Doesn't he know who they are? After all, they are the focus of the scene. It sounds as if words spoken one moment are forgotten only moments later, a state of mind that could be seen as bordering on senility. Is Jacob losing his wits?

On the contrary! Of all the profound questions that Genesis raises, I think that these two words '—Mi eleh? '(Who are these?) – contain a library of existential philosophy constricted into one line of dialogue. It is a question that could have implications not only for Genesis, but for the entire destiny of the Jewish people. It could well be the question that Grandfather Israel (Jacob) is asking each and every one of us, his descendants.

Jacob knows that his death is the bridge into the next stage of Jewish history. We have

reached the point in the evolution of his family where the seventy souls who came down to Egypt are going to become a fully-fledged nation. They are about to embark on a 210-year period of expansion that will see them emerge from slavery into nationhood. Many of them will suffer, many will assimilate, and some will wander across a desert under the leadership of Moses and ultimately return, as Israelites, to the very place where the family had its origins.

Dying, Jacob clearly understands how the pattern of his life will mirror the subsequent experience of the Jewish people throughout their history. Born in Israel, Jacob goes into exile for twenty years, and returns to the land of his forefathers in an attempt to live out his remaining years in peace. But circumstances don't allow the peace to prevail. Through the mitigating circumstance of hunger, he is forced to leave Canaan for Egypt, where ironically the family of Israel will emerge into a nation. What happens to them among the Egyptians – seventy pioneering souls increasing and multiplying and thriving – is the essential experience of Jews scattered across the Diaspora from Casablanca to Krakow, from Toledo to Texas. They arrive few in number and thrive until either the Pharaohs of each community rise in protest and expel them, or until assimilation takes over. While the majority of the Jewish community will dissolve in the great melting pot, there will still be a chosen minority who will endure as children of Israel, who will survive as committed Jews.

At this point in time, Jacob stands at the midpoint of five generations. Gazing back, he sees his grandfather Abraham; gazing ahead, he sees his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe. Each generation is characterized by a unique relationship with the land of Israel. Abraham, born in another land, reveals the One God to the world, and arrives in the land towards which God has directed him, the land of Israel. His son, Isaac is the first native son, a true citizen in that he never leaves the land in which he is born. Jacob, in contrast, becomes a modern Jew because his exile and wanderings parallel the exile and wanderings of the Jews in Diaspora. Joseph, born in Israel, will leave, never to return while he is alive – the experience of many Jews who find their success in business ventures and opportunities across the major capitals of the globe.

And finally, we have Menashe and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph, for whom the land of Israel is only a legend. They weren't born there, and they will not die there. Their entire lives are spent in the exile of Egypt. These sons of Joseph represent the longest period of our history, where for 2,000 years – until the early part of the twentieth century – Israel was also only a legend. Until 1948, most Jews in the

## Likutei Divrei Torah

world could identify with Ephraim and Menashe because for them, Israel was also unattainable. How did we survive? How did the dream and vision of Abraham cling to generation after generation of Jews who never lived in the land, and whose great-great-grandchildren would not live there? Would they retain the dream of their great-grandfather Israel, or would they disappear into the rainbow of nations?

When Jacob asks Joseph to give him his sons, his true intention can be deduced from the very fact that Jacob asks for them in the midst of recounting his own history, the blessings that God gave him at Luz and the promise that his descendants will inherit the land. Jacob sees a successful Joseph, acculturating within the Egyptian milieu. He places a claim on Menashe and Ephraim. He wants them to be his, and not Joseph's; he wants their first allegiance to be to the Abrahamic culture and not to the Egyptian culture; he wants them to at least yearn to live in Israel, not to be content with remaining in Egypt.

Hence Jacob insists on his question, the question that must plague every single Jew in every generation: 'Who are these? 'Do these sons belong to Joseph, Grand Vizier of Egypt, or do they belong to Jacob, the old bearded Jew? Do they belong to the civilization of the pyramids or do they identify with the 'Covenant between the Pieces'? Are they content in Egypt or do they long for Israel?

The answer is clear. Not only does Joseph receive a double blessing, but his sons become tribal heads, equal to Reuven and Shimon, Jacob's eldest sons. Later in the portion Jacob will inform Joseph that all future generations will use Ephraim and Menashe as a paradigmatic blessing: They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe, ' which is how parents bless their sons on Friday night. Menashe and Ephraim were children of Egypt who were nevertheless claimed by and chose to adopt Jacob-Israel as their true father. It is only those children who make a similar choice who remain part of the eternal Jewish people.

## Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

**"Shoot From Hip and Ask Questions Later" – Is Not a Quality for a Jewish Leader**  
On his deathbed, Yaakov gives brachos to his children. He begins with his firstborn son and tells him: "Reuven, you are my firstborn... Yeser s'ais v'yeser az (greater by raising and greater by might)." (Bereshis 49:3).

What do the words "yeser s'ais v'yeser oz" mean? Rashi interprets, "You were potentially fit to be greater than your brothers by having the kehunah, as indicated by the word s'ais which is related to the expression "nesias

kapayim" ("lifting of the palms," which takes place during Birkas Kohanim). Rashi also interprets the expression "v'yeser oz" as implying that Reuven should have also had the leadership role in Klal Yisrael – malchus (monarchy). Rashi infers this from the similar expression "v'yiten oz l'malko" (Shmuel I 2:10).

What caused Reuven to lose this greatness, for which he had been destined? Yaakov continues his blessing to Reuven in the next pasuk: "Pachaz k'mayim al tosar olisa mishkivay ovicha" (Haste like water – do not take more, because you mounted your father's bed...) (Bereshis 49:4). Rashi interprets "Pachaz k'mayim" – your impetuosity, which caused you to react impulsively when you felt your mother was slighted (in the incident in which Reuven shifted Yaakov's bed from the tent of Rochel's handmaiden to the tent of his mother, Leah, following the death of Rochel). The impulsiveness you demonstrated on that occasion disqualified you from being the king. Rashi says the expression "pachaz k'mayim" connotes fast flowing water that is in an apparent hurry to get to its destination. "You are like a quick flowing stream – too quick, too trigger-happy. Therefore, you are ineligible to receive all these extra benefits (kehuna and malchus), which you were destined to receive."

On the other hand, by the bracha of Yehuda – who does receive the monarchy – the pasuk says: "A lion cub is Yehudah; from prey my son, you ascended (m'teref b'nee alisa)" What does that mean? Rashi interprets: You, Yehuda, were part of the conspiracy to kill Yosef. You were the one who came up with the supposed story that Yosef was killed by a wild animal. You were part of all that. But what happened, Yehuda? You changed your mind. You withdrew and you said "What gain will there be if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? (Bereshis 37:26) You argued, let's not kill him, but rather throw him into a pit. We can sell him to the Yishmaelites.

According to Rashi, Yaakov further noted that this is not the only time Yehuda changed his mind and regretted an earlier statement. He also initially issued a decree that Tamar should be executed (when he suspected her of being unfaithful and having illicit relations outside her family). But upon seeing her evidence to the contrary, he said "She is more righteous than I." (Bereshis 38:26)

What is Rashi teaching? Rabbi Buxban from Florida wanted to explain these Rashes as follows: There is one quality that disqualifies a person from being a king or a leader in Klal Yisrael – the quality of impetuosity and impulsiveness. Knee-jerk reactions are unacceptable for a Jewish leader. A leader

needs to be able to think things through, and rethink things if necessary. Before carrying out a decision, a king must ask himself "Is this the right way to go?"

Reuven did not rethink his steps. He was offended. He stood up for his mother's honor – all well and good. But he didn't say "Hey, wait a minute! Let me think this thing through. What am I doing to my father? I am insulting him." Because of that quality, Reuven could not be the melech.

Yehudah, on the other hand, also made mistakes. His initial reaction was "Let's kill Yosef. Let's kill Tamar." But then he thought about the matter and said "mah betza" (What is to be gained by this)? He changed his mind and retracted his position. He said, "Maybe I was not right." That is an attribute needed to be a melech Yisrael.

"Shoot from the hip and ask questions later" is not the quality we want in a Jewish leader. And if a person cannot say the words "I was wrong. I made a mistake" he cannot be the melech.

Reuven ultimately did teshuva. In fact, the Medrash (Bereshis Rabbah 98) says that when Yaakov Avinu explains that Reuven did teshuva, he expresses it as follows: "You have made yourself a mikvah of water and have purified yourself within it."

Those who know a little about the laws of tahara (ritual purification) know that there are two kinds of bodies of water that can provide tahara to a person. The first is called a "mikvah" which is an accumulation of rainwater. It must be completely still water, so still that if there is any leakage, it is not a mikvah anymore. It is called zochalim (flowing waters), which invalidate a mikvah. The other type of medium of purification is a "ma'ayan," which is a fast-flowing stream. If a person immerses in the Mississippi River, he has achieved the highest form of tahara. A "ma'ayan" even purifies a Zav (a form of impurity which cannot achieve tahara by immersion in a standard "mikvah").

Yaakov emphasizes that the way Reuven repented was by immersion in a mikvah. As opposed to "pachaz k'mayim..." (as impetuous as a fast-flowing stream), which was the quality of Reuven that previously caused him to offend his father. Now he immersed in a stationary mikvah. The choice of that mode of tahara is symbolic. Reuven said to himself, "No. Don't rush. Sometimes we need still waters, like the waters of a mikvah, rather than the fast-flowing waters of a ma'ayan."

### Likutei Divrei Torah

#### How the Doctor from Minnesota Won His Friday Night Bet With the Yerushalmi Yid

There is a custom throughout the Jewish world to bless our children on Friday nights. (Some people do this every Friday, and some people do it specifically on Erev Yom Kippur.) We bless our sons with the famous blessing (from this week's parsha) "May Elokim make you like Ephraim and Menashe." (Bereshis 48:20) and we bless our daughters with the blessing "May Elokim make you like Sora, Rivka, Rochel, and Leah."

Over the years, we have said numerous peshatim on the meaning of the bracha "May Elokim make you like Ephraim and Menashe." Tonight, I would like to say over the following story which I heard recently:

There was a medical conference in Yerushalayim that brought together experts from all over the world on the topic of epilepsy. A doctor from Minnesota, who was a world-renowned expert in this field, came to the conference. He met there a Yerushalmi looking Jew who was participating in these meetings.

This was not the type of person who looked like a doctor (although today it is not always easy to tell). The doctor asked him, "Nu, is your medical expertise in the field of epilepsy?" The Yerushalmi said, "No. I am not a doctor at all, but I have a child who has epilepsy. Many times, I have travelled all over the world to conferences on this condition to hear what is new in the field. I want to know if there are any new medications or new treatments. Now there is an epilepsy conference in Yerushalayim, so certainly I came."

The Yerushalmi then invited the doctor, the epilepsy expert, to his home for Shabbos dinner the Friday night after the conference concluded. The doctor accepted the invitation.

As the guest entered the house, the host told him (in private), "I have five daughters. One of them has epilepsy. I bet you won't be able to tell which of the five has epilepsy. Her epilepsy is for the most part under control, and my daughter is perfectly normal. She is not self-conscious about her condition. I bet you won't be able to tell which daughter has epilepsy."

The doctor responded, "Listen, I am a world class expert in epilepsy. I will be able to tell which daughter it is." The host asked, "Would you like to bet on that?" The doctor said he did! (I don't know what exactly they bet, but that is not important to the story.)

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Throughout the entire meal, everything was fine. There were no outward manifestations of her illness at all. After the meal, the host (privately) asked the doctor, "So tell me: Which is the one that has epilepsy?"

The doctor said (not in front of the daughters) "It is that one!" The host was astonished. He said "You are right! How did you possibly figure that out? She behaves exactly the same as all of her sisters! How did you know?"

The doctor explained: "Do you know how I knew? It was because when you benched your daughters before the meal, I saw that your heart rate increased when you benched her."

When we sit at our Shabbos tables Friday night and we bench our children, in our minds we think "What do I want from this child? What do I want this child to be? What do I want this child to become?" As much as this father knew his daughter's illness was under control, still, her condition affected his heart strings. It affected his heart rate. That is how the doctor knew.

The moment when we bless our children Friday night is really special. We have a unique ability to connect with each child, and then give each a bracha asking that they become like Ephraim and Menashe or like Sora, Rivka, Rochel and Leah. This is a most emotional moment. Perhaps the outer manifestations of these emotions are not visible to the average person. Perhaps this is not even something we are ourselves aware of — but these subconscious expressions of bracha come from the deepest place in our heart.

#### **Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

You can live forever! Jacob never died. This extraordinary statement is recorded in the Gemara, (Mashechet Ta'anit). There we are told how Rav Nachman and Rabbi Yitzchak were exchanging words of Torah, and when they came to Jacob our Patriarch, Rabbi Yitzchak declared, "Ya'akov Avinu lo met" — "Jacob, our Patriarch never died".

Rav Nachman challenged him: "In the Torah we read how he was eulogised, he was embalmed, he was buried. So how can you say Jacob never died?" Rabbi Yitzchak replied: "I learn it from a scriptural source in the book of Jeremiah Chapter 30. There, the prophet tells us about the promise of Hashem, that the day will come when the children of Jacob will be reunited in the Holy Land at a time of redemption. Therefore, 'Ma zar'o ba'chayim af u'ba'chayim' — since his descendants are alive, he too is alive."

Since Jacob influenced so many people who

internalised his values and passed them on through the generations, he is considered still to be alive. We often reflect on the immortality that our souls can attain, through life in Olam Habah — the world to come. But the Gemara wants to teach us that there is an additional form of immortality which we can attain here, in this world.

In the Book of Bereishit, there are two parshiot which have in their titles the term 'life'. They are 'Chayei Sarah' and 'Vayechi'. 'Chayei Sarah' means 'the life of Sarah' but if you look at the content of the parasha, it is all about her death. And similarly, 'Vayechi', our parasha of this week, describes the death of Ya'akov, the death of Yosef — the death of that entire generation. But the message is very clear: because Sarah's values continued to be cherished and to be transmitted throughout the generations, the parasha is called 'Chayei Sarah' — Sarah is alive! Similarly, Ya'akov is very much alive even to this day! We speak about him and reflect upon his great teachings and therefore the parasha is called 'Vayechi' — because he lives on and on.

There is a double message for us here. First of all, we can guarantee that our forebears remain alive through us — through all the good deeds that we perform. And secondly, we can attain our own immortality by touching the hearts and moulding the minds of as many people as possible. If Jacob is still alive today, so too, we can be alive forever.

#### **Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah**

##### **Is Sibling Rivalry in the Bible Finally Resolved? - Yael Maimon**

Parashat Vayechi concludes the book of Bereishit and is filled with closures and resolutions. It portrays the final days of Yaakov in Egypt, his blessings to his sons and Yosef's children, his passing and burial in the Me'arat HaMachpela, the ultimate reconciliation between Yosef and his brothers, and Yosef's death.

Among these numerous narratives, I'd like to delve into a small yet intriguing detail that caught my attention: Menashe's lack of protest regarding Yaakov's blessing (Bereishit 48:11–20):

"And Yisrael said to Yosef, 'I did not think to see your face, and behold, God has shown me also your offspring.' And Yosef brought them out from his knees, and he bowed with his face to the ground. And Yosef took them both, Ephraim in his right hand to Yisrael's left, and Menashe in his left hand to Yisrael's right, and brought them near to him. And Yisrael stretched out his right hand and placed it on Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand on Menashe's head; he intentionally crossed his hands, for Menashe was the

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firstborn. And he blessed Yosef and said, 'The God before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the God who has been my shepherd from my existence to this day, the angel who redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be called upon them, and the name of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak; and let them multiply abundantly in the midst of the earth. 'And Yosef saw that his father placed his right hand on Ephraim's head, and it displeased him. He grasped his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Menashe's head. And Yosef said to his father, 'Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn; place your right hand on his head. 'But his father refused and said, 'I know, my son, I know. He too shall become a people, and he too shall become great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations. 'And he blessed them that day, saying, 'By you shall Yisrael bless, saying: May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe. 'And he placed Ephraim before Menashe."

During Yaakov's blessing of Menashe and Ephraim, Yosef positions Menashe, the firstborn, to Yaakov's right and Ephraim, the younger, to his left. However, Yaakov crosses his hands, placing his right hand — the symbol of greater blessing — on Ephraim's head. Even when Yosef tries to intervene, pointing out that Menashe is the firstborn and should receive the more significant blessing, Yaakov insists that his actions are intentional: "His younger brother will be greater than he."

What stands out is Menashe's silence. He does not protest or object to this discriminating reversal.

In contrast, the stories of sibling dynamics throughout the Bible emphasize Menashe's silence as extraordinary, noble, and far from a given. The book of Bereishit is replete with tales of favoritism and painful jealousy among siblings: Kayin and Hevel, Yosef and his brothers, Yaakov and Esav, and Rachel and Leah ("When Rachel saw that she had borne no children to Yaakov, she became envious of her sister. She said to Yaakov, 'Give me children, or I shall die!'" Bereishit 30:1)

In each of these cases, the perceived favoritism or advantage given to one sibling evokes intense jealousy, often leading to tragic consequences.

Jealousy is a fascinating and complex emotion. On the one hand, it is natural, human, and almost unavoidable. On the other hand, it is destructive and painful, often seen as a source of negativity: "But envy is the rottenness of the bones" (Mishlei 14:30). Kohelet also remarks, "I have observed that all labor (one's bad deeds, according to Rashi) and all skillful

enterprise (Rashi: "deeds not done 't'shem shamayim – 'with no ulterior motive' spring from a man's envy of his neighbor" (Kohelet 4:4).

However, jealousy can also be a driving force. The Sages teach, "The jealousy of scholars increases wisdom." In his Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace, Rav Kook describes how the "wheel of life" is propelled not by jealousy but by "the power of love for God's name and His ways." With his characteristic sensitivity, Rav Kook acknowledges the dual nature of jealousy: while it is far from ideal and destined to fade in a utopian future, it can also serve as a motivating force in life.

In prayer for better days, for the safe return of the hostages, and for Divine protection for our soldiers.

#### **Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org**

**Rabbi Yaakov Neuberger**

#### **The Heels of Victory**

In other years I admit it seemed unremarkable. This year, the passuk and mostly the Rashi, stays with me as it is that for which we all daven. Let's study them together and perhaps we will thereby earn the full realization of our prayers, or at least more focused davening.

It's the ambiguous phrase that concludes Yaakov's cryptic beracha to his Gad, "Many military forces will force themselves deep into [Gad] בָּקָר יְהָא יָד עֲקָר- and he will overpower [them, turn them] on [their] heels.

The reference to their "heels" has elicited a range of commentaries. Seforim explains that Gad will watch the heels of their enemies as the latter flee in defeat. Rashbam interprets that Gad will see the heels of their brethren, as they will protect them until they are all safely settled. Invoking that בָּקָר has referred to the cunningness of Yaakov Avinu, Ohr Hachayim has explained that Gad will successfully employ creative strategies against their enemies.

Why is Gad, who ultimately lived in the far reaches of the northeast of our land, so embattled? Rav Hirsch, following in the steps of many earlier commentators, explains that Gad lived near the border, absorbed the bold border incursions of unfriendly neighbors, and was always on guard against more. According to Rashi, Yaakov Avinu refers to the courage and commitment that Gad displayed in fulfilling his word to Moshe Rabbeinu; he led the nation in our battles to win the land from the Kna'anim and stayed with them until the land was well settled. Indeed, many years later as Gad was on the cusp of leading the Jews into our homeland, Moshe Rabbeinu's beracha also refers to Gad's battle-worn courage and integrity. He also notes that Gad's request to

settle the land in the northeast made them the home to Moshe's burial spot. It was due to Gad's decision to stay in the northeast that Moshe was buried among Jews. Though the precise place where Moshe's neshama ascended will always be a mystery, the area can be respectfully visited and appropriately venerated. Perhaps the juxtaposition of ideas hints to us that their commitment to the love of the legacy of Moshe Rabbeinu earned for them their successes in battle.

Yet, it is another Rashi that came alive this year like no other commentary. The heels that Yaakov mentions are the heels of every soldier of Gad. Yaakov Avinu blesses shevet Gad with the only beracha, as we know so well, that a nation at war wants to hear, i.e. that each and every soldier returns home "on his heels", healthy in mind and spirit.

Every tribal beracha is for the entirety of our people and is merely highlighted through the character and experiences of each tribe. What we would give to see this beracha, our ongoing prayer, well fulfilled during these times. May it be His will going forward.

#### **Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam**

#### **Brochos Can Be Found!**

And he said, "Swear to me." So, he swore to him, and Israel prostrated himself on the head of the bed. (Breishis 47:31)

Yaakov is ready to bless his children right before his departure from this world. We may be used to viewing this scene as a wise father giving his parting message to each of his beloved children. There may be another dimension at play here. Yaakov is well positioned at this time to be a conduit for delivering Brocho for other reasons besides his patriarchal stature. The Torah shares a detail here about Yaakov's conduct and the reason for his behavior. After Yosef swears to his father Yaakov that he will bury him in the Land of Israel Yaakov bows down at the head of the bed. Our sages deduce from here that the Schina, the Divine Presence is found at the head of a sick person. This is a valuable qualification for Yaakov to be worthy to fount Brochos at this time.

Why is the Schina to be found at the head of a sick person? Dovid HaMelech writes in Tehillim "The sacrifices of G-d are a broken spirit; G-d, You will not despise a broken and crushed heart." (51:19) The Kotzker Rebbe said, "There is nothing more whole than a broken Jewish heart!" When someone is sick, they are naturally very humble. They are coming to terms with their mortality and their absolute dependency on HASHEM. The ego is obliterated. The heart is broken. That is an

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invitation for HASHEM to visit the truly humbled.

I had the incredible privilege to take each of my boys to Eretz Yisrael immediately prior to their Bar Mitzvos to put Tefillin for the first time at the Western Wall and to seek Brochos from holy people. On the fourth such visit I was with my son Meir Simcha at Yad V'Shem, the Holocaust-museum.

We found ourselves traveling near an elderly Jew who was shepherding what looked like his Israeli daughter and two grandchildren. He was leading the tour for them, pointing and describing with animation. As I looked closely, I noticed his arm that was stretched out. He was wearing short sleeves and I detected, there were the numbers. He was speaking from first hand experience.

Then I looked more closely and I saw something more. There on that same arm with the numbers was the faint impression of Tefillin straps from Davening. We engaged him in conversation. I told him that I came from America for one week to seek Brochos for my son who is becoming a Bar Mitzvah. We have been to many Gedolim and great people but the Satmar Rebbe asked, "To whom can we give Kevitel nowadays!?" (Who can give genuine Brochos?) Find someone who has numbers on his arm and still puts on Tefillin." I told him it would be the greatest honor if he would please bless my son. It was an emotional moment of tears and joy as he blessed my son.

Now it's hard to find people walking around with numbers on their arms. They are fewer and fewer as time goes by. From whom can we seek such a Brocho, B'zamn HaZeh? I once heard a story about a Baal Teshuva in Eretz Yisrael who had a nasty tattoo on his arm from his earlier days. Now he was learning and raising a wonderful family. He wanted badly to go to the Mikvah especially before Rosh HaShana but he was afraid to reveal the dark secret of his past. So, he scouted out the Mikvah and figured out a plan, that he would come when it was not so busy, and he would park himself near the water where he could walk quickly with the towel on his arm and he would go in and out unnoticed.

When he arrived, it was busier than he expected and he became nervous and flustered. He started to hurry and there was water and soap on the floor. In one quick misstep his feet flew out from underneath him and the towel went flying. He fell flat on his back and a noisy bustling Mikvah scene was suddenly very silent. In that moment he realized all was known. There was no quick recovery to soften the public embarrassment and extreme awkwardness he was experiencing. At that moment an elderly man with numbers on his

arm stood nearby and said, pointing to his arm, "This was my Gehinom. (Now pointing to his tattoo) That was probably your Gehinom. Let's go into the Mikvah together." Find a broken-hearted person, someone scarred with pain, who somehow persists with Emunah. By such a person for sure, Brochos can be found!

### Mizrachi Dvar Torah

#### Rav Doron Perez: The Politics of Hope

The essence of the Jewish mission in the world was called by Rabbi Sacks zt"l "The Politics of Hope". Judaism is, perhaps, about hope more than anything else.

And this concept is nowhere clearer than in this week's Parasha where the concept of hope is mentioned to one of Ya'akov's children, Dan. Dan had only one child, Chushim, who was deaf-mute according to the Sages. Yet, Ya'akov says to Dan, "for your salvation I hope for, G-d." Indeed, his prayers were answered – the tribe of Dan became one of the largest as we see in the counting in the Book of Numbers.

No situation is hopeless. Everything needs hope.

The anthem of the State of Israel, HaTikva, "The Hope," is based on a verse in Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 37 where the dry bones say they have "no hope." The anthem responds by saying "we have still not lost our hope." In spite of the ups and downs of life, we continually hope for a better and brighter future.

### Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash

#### Rav Yishai Jeselsohn

##### Yaakov's Multiple Firstborns

I. Who bears the status of firstborn among Yaakov's children? - The status of firstborn occupies a central place in the Torah's stories about Yaakov. The struggle for the birthright occupied a central place already at the time of Yaakov's birth, and continued among his sons. Reuven is Yaakov's firstborn, as we know from the descriptions of their births and as reiterated in Yaakov's blessing to Reuven:

Reuven, you are my firstborn, my might, and the first fruits of my strength; the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. (*Bereishit* 49:3)

However, Yehuda plays a more central role in the lives of Yaakov's children, as expressed in several foundational events.

When Yosef comes to his brothers in Dotan, Reuven suggests to the brothers that they should cast Yosef into a pit, planning to later save him. In the end, Reuven's plan is not realized, because the brothers follow Yehuda's counsel to sell Yosef to the Yishmaelites. Despite Reuven's desire and attempt to fill the role of the leader who directs his brothers back to the right path, it is Yehuda whom the brothers obey.

The same is true during the years of famine, when the brothers try to convince their father Yaakov to send Binyamin with them to Egypt. Reuven agrees to "sacrifice" his sons for the

cause: And Reuven spoke to his father, saying: You shall slay my two sons, if I bring him not to you, and I will bring him back to you. (*Bereishit* 42:37)

Yaakov, however, refuses Reuven's suggestion. Yehuda later undertakes the same mission, and in contrast to Reuven, he succeeds.

This success is emphasized in a *midrash*:

"Yehuda said to his brothers..." (*Bereishit* 37:26). Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai said: The verse speaks in praise of Yehuda. In three places, Yehuda spoke before his brothers and they crowned him king over them. "Yehuda said to his brothers"; "Yehuda and his brothers came... [and Yehuda said]" (*Bereishit* 44:14, when first facing Yosef after the goblet was "found" in Binyamin's bag); "Yehuda approached him [and said]" (*Bereishit* 44:18). (*Bereishit Rabba* 84)

Of course, a third factor can be added to the "struggle" between these two brothers: Yosef. Already at the beginning of *Parashat Vayeshev*, Yosef boasts to his brothers, with his dreams and their implications, that it is he who will enjoy the birthright. Yosef also receives his father's support, to some extent – in his favoritism and his gift of a *ketonet passim*.

Thus, three of Yaakov's sons have a claim to the birthright: Reuven, Yehuda, and Yosef.

II. "He may not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the beloved" - In our *parasha*, when Yaakov "blesses" Reuven, to a large extent he officially transfers his birthright from him. This is explicitly stated in the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*; when the prophet lists the members of the house of Yaakov, he describes the complex status of the firstborn, which had been removed from Reuven and transferred to Yehuda and Yosef:

And the sons of Reuven the firstborn of Israel – for he was the firstborn; but, since he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef, the son of Israel, yet not so that he was to be reckoned in the genealogy as firstborn. For Yehuda prevailed above his brothers, and of him came he that is the prince; but the birthright was Yosef's. (*I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 5:1-2)

Rashi mentions the transfer of the birthright in his comments to our *parasha*, and also explains the reason for removing the birthright from Reuven: "Excellency [yeter; "more"] in dignity [se'er]" – It would have been appropriate for you to be superior [yeter] to your brothers by being endowed with the priesthood; [the word se'er is] an allusion to the priests' raising [nesi'ut] of their hands.

"And excellency in power [oz]" – In royal rank, as in: "And he will give strength [oz] to his king" (*I Shmuel* 2:10).

And what caused you to lose all this? "Unstable as water" – The impetuosity and the precipitance with which you so hastily showed your wrath, just like water that rushes headlong in its course. Therefore, "you shall not excel [al totar]" – you will not receive all these many prerogatives that were appropriate for you. (Rashi, *Bereishit* 49:3-4)

In his commentary to this blessing, the *Or Ha-Chaim* asks a deep question about the patriarch Yaakov, which relates directly to the struggle mentioned above. In *Parashat Ki Tetze*, the Torah

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describes a scenario that seems to precisely reflect the house of Yaakov: If a man will have two wives, the one beloved, and the other hated, and they have borne him children, both the beloved and the hated; and if the firstborn son be hers that was hated; then it shall be, in the day that he causes his sons to inherit that which he has, that he may not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the beloved over the son of the hated, the true firstborn; but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the hated, by giving him a double portion of all that he has; for he is the first fruits of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his. (*Devarim* 21:15-17)

In addition to the word "ono," "his strength," which connects the first born of the hated wife to the blessing given to Reuven, the stories themselves are almost parallel. A man has two wives, one beloved and the other hated – in the case of Yaakov, Rachel and Lea, Rachel being the beloved wife and Lea the hated one (*Bereishit* 29:30-31). The firstborn, i.e., Reuven, belongs to the hated wife, and yet Yaakov advances the son of the beloved wife – Yosef. These verses, which could have been written about the house of Yaakov, raise a great question for the *Or Ha-Chaim* – why did Yaakov choose to give precedence to one of his sons?

Before we begin to explain these verses, there is one investigation that we must conduct, and that is: how did Yaakov do the reverse of what is written in the Torah: "He may not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the beloved over the son of the hated," by giving the rights of the firstborn to Yosef, the son of Rachel, his beloved wife, over Reuven, the son of Lea, the hated wife? (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bereishit* 49:3)

Regarding the preference that Yaakov showed Yosef over the rest of his brothers, there might perhaps have been room to say that indeed, Yaakov made a mistake, as it would appear from the Gemara's criticism of his favoritism (*Shabbat* 10b). But the question is intensified by the fact that Yaakov repeats the same behavior in our *parasha* and gives precedence to Yehuda, a younger son, over Reuven, his firstborn. It is true that Yaakov gives a reason for doing so, but there is still explanation needed.

We have raised two questions:

1. Why does Yaakov give precedence to **Yosef** over Reuven?
2. From where does Yaakov's preference for **Yehuda** stem?

The *Or Ha-Chaim* addresses both questions. He opens his discussion with an issue we have discussed [in the past](#) – whether the patriarchs were commanded to fulfill the entire Torah, in its plain sense. This question arises here because if they did observe the Torah, then apart from the moral and conceptual problem of giving precedence one son over the others, there would also be a halakhic problem. We will not focus on this question; instead, we will devote our examination in this *shiur* to the moral question of advancing younger children over an older brother, and try to understand from what this stems.

III. The Effect of Actions on the Soul - The *Or Ha-Chaim* prefaces his explanation with an important introduction to the service of God and

the spiritual life, which touches upon the depths of spiritual wisdom. Although I am obviously not an expert on these matters, I cannot exempt myself from trying to explain them. I will try to explain them to the best of my ability, praying that I will not make any mistakes. This is what the *Or Ha-Chaim* writes:

In order to resolve the issue: It is known that all the manifestations of spirituality in the world are divided into three aspects: One is *kedusha* (sacred, holy); one is *chol* (profane, or mundane); and one category of spirituality is *ra* (evil). Each of these produces branches and a desire for itself. The category of holiness produces branches of the good and of eternal bliss, and it desires rational ideas. The category of *chol* is characterized by the desire to eat of that which is tasty to the mouth and enjoyable to the eye, to build houses of earth and stone, and to prepare garments and the like. The category of *ra* is characterized by the desire for every abomination, to do all that God hates, choosing to steal, cheat, deceive, and to consume forbidden foods..., and it appeals to him to engage in illicit relations with a menstruant woman, a non-Jewess, a married woman, a man – all of which is remote from the aspect of holiness. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

In the spiritual world, everything can be associated with one of three areas: holy, *chol*, and evil. The category of the profane includes neutral matters, the category of the holy contains the commandments and the good, and the category of the evil is made up of transgressions and lusts. The *Or Ha-Chaim* goes on to explain the role of Israel in this spiritual system:

Everything that exists is within these three categories, whether of the category of goodness and purity, or of the intermediate category, that we call *chol*, or of the category of evil and impurity. Inasmuch as the Jewish people belong to the category of the holy, God commanded them not to taste [i.e., absorb] things which characterize evil, be it in the form of food or drink, speech or thought, or in sight, hearing, or scent... God decreed that the category of holiness would be commanded, and the category of *chol* would be permissible, and whenever a person associates himself with one of these elements, his soul similarly forms an attachment with the root underlying such element, be it positive or negative. (Ibid.)

These three categories do not relate only to the momentary act, but have the power to influence the human soul. Man is born with a pure soul, but involvement with profane and evil elements causes these forces to enter into his soul:

It follows that, even though a person's soul is pure and clear, when he introduces elements from the category of evil, there is an intermingling in his soul of elements from the categories of good and evil, and this brings about a taste of bitterness for that soul, to become afflicted either in body and soul in this world or in the soul alone after his death. This is the mystical dimension of the "laundry" mentioned in *Shabbat* 152b, [where soiled souls are described as being] handed over to the "washer" [after death]. (Ibid.)

Moreover, the more a person attaches himself to evil, the more he desires it: You should know

that to the degree that evil clings to a person's soul, so that soul yearns for it. For example, if his soul has become infected with the impurity of adultery, it will develop a yearning for this aspect, as above. For every aspect desires its like, and as a person gorges his soul on aspects of evil, the desire for evil will grow and he will distance further from the aspect of good. Take this principle in hand: that there is no deed in this world, or any movement, that does not have a foundation in spirituality; and anything prohibited, that God informed us is prohibited – anyone who attaches himself to it draws evil to his soul. (Ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* provides us here with a fundamental principle in spirituality. Everything in the world has spiritual powers with the potential to influence the soul, and it is incumbent upon the people of Israel to adhere to the aspect of the holy and the good.

A weighty question has been raised by philosophers on the one hand and psychologists on the other: Is a person at birth like a blank sheet of paper, or does he begin his life with certain basic qualities, on top of which he shapes his personality? The Rambam answers this question in a clear, decisive fashion:

It is impossible that man would be endowed by nature, from the beginning of his creation, with either virtue or vice, just as it is impossible that he should be born skilled by nature in any particular practical work. It is possible, however, that he would have a natural predilection for a particular virtue or vice, so that the actions of one [trait] will be easier for him than those of another. (Rambam, *Shemoneh Perakim* 8)

Man is not born with particular virtues and attributes, but adapts them to himself over the course of his life. However, he is certainly born with certain capabilities and inclinations that influence the shaping of his character. This is also the opinion of the *Or Ha-Chaim*, who attributes those qualities to the earliest moments of the person's formation:

There are people whose nature at birth is drawn towards doing evil, and they grow up to do evil, whereas others by nature can avoid evil with no trouble at all, and who, if they desire, are able to turn back with ease. This stems from the composition [of their respective life-force] at the time of conception. If a parent concentrated on physical gratification at the time he engaged in procreation, and certainly if he fantasized about another or was preoccupied with impure thoughts... For the thought in that situation builds a framework in the child. This is a major principle, that parents are the builders of the soul of the child. If the conception was in purity, holiness descends from Heaven; if there is anything in it of the category of evil, through that will enter the aspect of evil... This is the rule: only evil yearns for evil; that which contains no evil at all will not yearn for it. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

These words are based on the Gemara in *Nedarim* (20b) and on the spiritual idea taught by the *Or Ha-Chaim* above – every action influences the soul, such that the actions of a person's parents at the time of his conception impact upon his soul. Of course, this influence does not

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predetermine the person's attributes and behavior, or there would be no room for free choice, commandments, or reward and punishment (see *Shemoneh Perakim*, ibid.), but a certain tendency is planted in his soul.

IV. Reuven's Instability and Haste - How do these spiritual ideas relate to our question? Let us return to the conception of Reuven. In our *parasha*, Yaakov testifies that Reuven is his firstborn and the first fruits of his strength. According to Rashi and the Midrash,<sup>11</sup> Reuven was conceived from Yaakov's first act of intercourse with Lea – and at that moment, Yaakov thought she was Rachel. The *Or Ha-Chaim* sees this as the basis and root of Reuven's problem:

Let us now examine what happened with Yaakov, for at the time of Reuven's conception, Yaakov's thoughts were not perfect in the aspect of the good, in that his thought and his deed were not in the same place, and this is not at the level of good, as you find that *Chazal* considered a similar situation as children born of an exchange [where a man has intercourse with one wife while thinking about his other wife]. Even though Yaakov's situation was different in that his thought and knowledge was perfect – meaning, he thought about Rachel and to the best of his knowledge she was Rachel, and not that he knew she was Lea yet thought about Rachel, which would be called children born of an exchange – nevertheless, there was something of the impure in it.

Go out and learn from what followed from this, for Reuven went and defiled his father's couch.<sup>12</sup>

He performed this deed of impurity, the like of which not one of the sons of Yaakov did, not even when Yosef was tested [by the advances of Eshet Potiphar]. Even though *Chazal* said (*Shabbat* 55b): "Whoever says that Reuven sinned is in error," nevertheless, Scripture considered it a sin, either because that is what he did, or because it is fitting to be said about him. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The ideas here are profound, and I will try to explain them in a simpler way. Reuven is indeed the firstborn, but his being the firstborn was rooted in a mistake. Yaakov intended that his firstborn would come from Rachel, and only in the morning did he learn that he had engaged in intercourse with Lea. Reuven also tries to function as the firstborn, but time after time, he fails. Apart from the incidents that were mentioned above, the defilement of his father's couch is an example of this. With good intentions and a desire to assert leadership and chart a path, Reuven repeatedly does the wrong things. What happens here is an echo of what happened with his birth: a desirable intention, but an undesirable act.

Yaakov attributes this to an attribute of instability – Reuven is "unstable as water": "Unstable like water." This means: You were hasty to defile my couch, and you failed to conquer your inclination but instead acted with haste, like an unstable person, failing to hold yourself back to vanquish the spark of evil which was rooted within you. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bereishit* 49:4)

If we wish to compare Reuven and Yosef on this point, we can compare what Reuven did to the incident of Yosef and Potiphar's wife. There, though it was very difficult, Yosef manages to overcome his inclination. In fact, the root *ipuk*, "restraint," appears several times with respect to Yosef. This may be the reason Yaakov gave precedence to Yosef over Reuven.

V. Yaakov's Preference for Yehuda - There is a fundamental difference between Yaakov's preference for Yehuda over Reuven and his preference for Yosef. While his preference for Yosef stems, according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, from Reuven's actions and his choosing the less good parts of his soul, Yaakov's choice of Yehuda stems not from a flaw in Reuven but from Yehuda's actions.

Rashi draws our attention to the fact that this difference is explained in the same verses we already cited from *Divrei Ha-Yamim*:

And the sons of Reuven the firstborn of Israel – for he was the firstborn; but, since he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given to the sons of Yosef, the son of Israel, yet not so that he was to be reckoned in the genealogy as firstborn. For Yehuda prevailed above his brothers, and of him came he that is the prince; but the birthright was Yosef's. (*I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 5:1-2)

While regarding the transfer of the birthright to Yosef, the verse describes Reuven's deficiency, regarding the transfer to Yehuda, it is Yehuda's actions that are highlighted. The *Or Ha-Chaim's* explanation of the precedence to Yehuda also strengthens this distinction, offering an explanation with regard to Yehuda that is, to a great extent, the very opposite of his explanation of the transfer of the birthright to Yosef:

When Yaakov said "You shall not excel," he further hinted that although Reuven acted with haste when he did something inappropriate, he did not act with haste when doing something positive – for he did not go first to repent. As *Chazal* said (*Bereishit Rabba* 84): "Who caused Reuven to confess? Yehuda." Even though they said: "Nobody initiated repentance before Reuven," he did not utter a confession until Yehuda came and said: "She is more righteous than I." At that time, Reuven jumped and said: "I profaned my father's couch." Thus it is brought in *Midrash Tanchuma*, that this is a tradition that they had. According to their words, we can say that for this reason, Reuven's royalty was given to Yehuda, because of the full confession that caused Reuven to confess. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

With respect to Yehuda and Reuven, it was actually Yehuda who acted with haste. Here, we are not dealing with an attempt to assert leadership, but just the opposite – to admit his weakness and mistake. It seems that apart from the sense of patience and judgment that a leader must display when he comes to make decisions and assume leadership, the *Or Ha-Chaim* teaches us here that with regard to admitting a mistake, there is a great advantage to haste. These words cry out from the story of Yehuda and Tamar, in contrast to the story of Reuven, which is written in the Torah in a confused matter and a lack of clarity. In other places as well, it seems that Yehuda is quick to confess before his brothers.

When the brothers regret selling Yosef (42:21-22), Reuven speaks up his brothers, but he is quick specifically to justify himself: And Reuven answered them, saying: Did I not speak to you, saying: Do not sin against the child; and you would not hear? Therefore also, behold, his blood is required. (*Bereishit* 42:22)

On the other hand, Yehuda demonstrates at the beginning of *Parashat Vayigash* that he is ready to admit his mistake and sacrifice his freedom because of it.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* transforms Yaakov's difficult behavior into a great lesson, both in serving God and in leadership. He teaches us to distinguish between the holy, the profane, and the evil, and to know that every choice has a great effect on the soul, not just on the momentary act. The *Or Ha-Chaim* calls upon us to be hasty in fleeing from evil, on the one hand, and in admitting a mistake, on the other – qualities that are important both for public leadership and for every individual in governing themselves. (Translated by David Strauss)

<sup>[1]</sup> See *Bereishit Rabba* 98,4.

<sup>[2]</sup> Of course, Reuven could have overcome this urge, but we know that he failed to do so.

## **Home Weekly Parsha Vayechi**

### **Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

This book of Bereshith, which comprises a substantial part of the entire written Torah, contains within it almost no commandments and is basically a book of narrative tracing the development of one family – eventually seventy in number – and of the difficulties that this family encountered over generations. So what therefore is its main message to us living in a far different world, millennia later? I think that the message of Bereshith is the obvious one of family and its importance. The Torah purposely and in minute detail describes for us how difficult it truly is to create and maintain a cohesive family structure. Every one of the generations described in Bereshith from Kayin and Hevel till Yosef and his brothers is engaged in the difficult and often heartbreaking task of family building. There are no smooth and trouble-free familial relationships described in the book of Bereshith. Sibling rivalry, violence, different traits of personality, and marital and domestic strife are the stuff of the biblical narrative of this book. The Torah does not sanitize any of its stories nor does it avoid confronting the foibles and errors of human beings. The greatest of our people, our patriarchs and matriarchs, encountered severe difficulties in attempting to create cohesive, moral and cooperative families. Yet they persevered in the attempt because without this strong sense of family there can be no basis for eternal Jewish survival. There is tragic fall -out in each of the families described in Bereshith and yet somehow the thread of family continuity is maintained and strengthened until the family grows into a numerous and influential nation. This perseverance of family building, in spite of all of the disappointments inherent in that task, is the reason for the book of Bereshith. It is the template of the behavior of our ancestors that now remains as the guideposts for their descendants. The task of family building remains the only sure method of ensuring Jewish survival. Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

### **The Last Tears**

#### **Vayechi**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** At almost every stage of fraught encounter between Joseph and his family in Egypt, Joseph weeps. There are seven scenes of tears: 1. When the brothers came before him in Egypt for the first time, they said to one another: “Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come on us” ... They did not realise that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. He turned away from them and began to weep, but then came back and spoke to them again. Gen. 42:21-24  
 2. On the second occasion, when they brought Benjamin with them and, deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep: He went into his private room and wept there. Gen. 43:29-30

3. When, after Judah’s impassioned speech, Joseph is about to disclose his identity:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it. Gen. 45:1-2

4. Immediately after he discloses his identity:

Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Gen. 45:14-15

5. When he meets his father again after their long separation:

Joseph had his chariot made ready and went to Goshen to meet his father, Israel. As soon as Joseph appeared before him, he threw his arms around his father and wept for a long time. Gen. 46:29

6. On the death of his father:

Joseph threw himself on his father and wept over him and kissed him. Gen. 50:1

7. Some time after his father’s death:

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” So they sent word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept. Gen. 50:15-17

No one weeps as much as Joseph. Esau wept when he discovered that Jacob had taken his blessing (Gen. 27:38). Jacob wept when he saw the love of his life, Rachel, for the first time (Gen. 29:11). Both brothers, Jacob and Esau, wept when they met again after their long estrangement (Gen. 33:4). Jacob wept when told that his beloved son Joseph was dead (Gen. 37:35). But the seven acts of Joseph’s weeping have no parallel. They span the full spectrum of emotion, from painful memory to the joy of being reunited, first with his brother Benjamin, then with his father Jacob. There are the complex tears immediately before and after he discloses his identity to his brothers, and there are the tears of bereavement at Jacob’s deathbed. But the most intriguing are the last, the tears he sheds when he hears that his brothers fear that he will take revenge on them now that their father is no longer alive. In a fine essay, “Joseph’s tears”[1] Rav Aharon Lichtenstein suggests that this last act of weeping is an expression of the price Joseph pays for the realisation of his dreams and his elevation to a position of power. Joseph has done everything he could for his brothers. He has sustained them at a time of famine. He has given them not just refuge but a place of honour in Egyptian society. And he has made it as clear as he possibly can that he does not harbour a grudge against them for what they did to him all those many years before. As he said when he disclosed his identity to them: “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 . . . 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. 45:5-8

What more could he say? Yet still, all these years later, his brothers do not trust him and fear that he may still seek their harm. This is Rav Lichtenstein’s comment:

“At this moment, Yosef discovers the limits of raw power. He discovers the extent to which the human connection, the personal connection, the family connection, hold far more value and importance than power does – both for the person himself and for all those around him.” Joseph “weeps over the weakness inherent in power, over the terrible price that he has paid for it. His dreams have indeed been realised, on some level, but the tragedy remains just as real. The torn shreds of the family have not been made completely whole.” On the surface, Joseph holds all the power. His family are entirely dependent on him. But at a deeper level it is the other way round. He still yearns for their acceptance, their recognition, their closeness. And ultimately he has to depend on them to bring his bones up from Egypt when the time comes for redemption and return (Gen. 50:25). Rav Lichtenstein’s analysis reminds us of Rashi and Ibn Ezra’s commentary to the last verse in the book of Esther. It says that “Mordechai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and was great among the Jews and well received by most of his brethren” (Est. 10:3) – “most” but not all. Rashi (quoting Megillah 16b) says that some members of the Sanhedrin were critical of him because his political involvement (his “closeness to the king”) distracted from the time he spent studying Torah. Ibn Ezra says, simply: “It is impossible to satisfy everyone, because people are envious [of other people’s success].” Joseph and Mordechai/Esther are supreme examples of Jews who reached positions of influence and power in non-Jewish circles. In

modern times they were called Hofjuden, “court Jews,” and other Jews often held deeply ambivalent feelings about them. But at a deeper level, Rav Lichtenstein’s remarks recall Hegel’s famous master-slave dialectic, an idea that had huge influence on nineteenth century - especially Marxist - thought. Hegel argued that the early history of humanity was marked by a struggle for power in which some became masters, and others became slaves. On the face of it, masters rule while slaves obey. But in fact the master is dependent on his slaves – he has leisure only because they do the work, and he is the master only because he is recognised as such by his slaves. Meanwhile the slave, through his work, acquires his own dignity as a producer. Thus the slave has “inner freedom” while the master has “inner bondage.” This tension creates a dialectic – a conflict worked out through history – reaching equilibrium only when there are neither masters nor slaves, but merely human beings who treat one another not as means to an end but as ends in themselves. Thus understood, Joseph’s tears are a prelude to the master-slave drama about to be enacted in the book of Exodus between Pharaoh and the Israelites. Rav Lichtenstein’s profound insight into the text reminds us of the extent to which Torah, Tanach, and Judaism as a whole are a sustained critique of power. Prior to the Messianic age we cannot do without it. (Consider the tragedies Jews suffered in the centuries in which they lacked it.) But power alienates. It breeds suspicion and distrust. It diminishes those it is used against, and thus diminishes those who use it. Even Joseph, called “Yosef HaTzaddik: Joseph the Righteous” weeps when he sees the extent to which power sets him apart from his brothers. Judaism is about an alternative social order which depends not on power but on love, loyalty and the mutual responsibility created by covenant. That is why Nietzsche, who based his philosophy on “the will to power,” correctly saw Judaism as the antithesis of all he believed in. Power may be a necessary evil, but it is an evil, and the less we have need of it, the better. [1] In Alei Tziyon (Vol. 16, Iyar 5769): Special edition in honour of HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, 109-128. Also available online: <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayigash/josephs-tears-part-2-2>

## Superstitious Customs

**Revivim – Rabbi Eliezer Melamed** -- It is forbidden to believe in traditions that lack logic, and to act upon them \* Jews are commanded to focus their faith on the Torah and commandments, which uplift a person and guide them to be good and just \* The prohibition against counting Jews is not a custom, but a commandment from the Torah \* Many people customarily count individuals for a minyan or a trip by reciting verses \* It is permitted to round the upper side of the Tablets of the Covenant \* There is no need to heed the opinion of the stringently inclined who, in doing so, cast aspersions on the earlier authorities Q: Our family, who immigrated from Russia, has various customs that were common in Eastern Europe. I don’t know whether these have Jewish origins, or if they are permitted. For example, when a completely black cat crosses our path, it is considered a bad omen, and we make sure to change our path, as otherwise, we fear it will bring us danger. Similarly, if we leave the house and remember we’ve forgotten something, it is forbidden to return, as it brings bad luck. Instead, we must take a short detour, and only then return. It is also forbidden to whistle in the house, because whistling causes a lack of money. We also avoid sitting at the corner of the table because the person sitting there will not marry for seven years. Before going on a trip, after packing all the luggage, we sit in silence for at least a minute, so that harmful spirits will think we are still at home, and will not harm us. A: These customs are forbidden. In fact, these customs are prohibited because of the “divination” prohibition (Minachesh), as it is stated: “There shall not be found among you... a diviner, a soothsayer, or a sorcerer” (Deuteronomy 18:10). It is also said: “You shall not eat on the blood, you shall not practice divination or soothsaying” (Leviticus 19:26). A diviner is one who believes without logic that certain events are bad omens, and when these events occur, the person believes they must avoid their path, or actions. Examples of this are found in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b): “If bread fell from his mouth, or a staff dropped from his hand, or a raven called out when he began his journey, or a deer stopped on his way, or a snake crossed on his right, or a fox on his left”. Anyone who refrains from their path or actions due to such omens is violating the prohibition of divination. Therefore, it is forbidden to believe in superstitions that lack logical basis, and act upon them. The Roots of Superstitions in the Practices of Sorcerers As a general rule, superstitions were created by individuals with mystical intuition, often sorcerers, who felt that certain things hinted at danger, or success. Sometimes the divination was based on a natural feeling, such as the belief that a person who

began their business day by paying a high tax, might be depressed and fail in their business that day. The diviners deduced that paying taxes at the start of the day caused mystical forces to harm the person, and thus, they instructed to always avoid paying taxes at the beginning of the day, week, or month.

However, Jews are commanded to believe in the Torah and the commandments, which uplift the person and make them good and just, adding blessing to the world, and not to turn to superstitions that lack logical foundations. Even when diviners occasionally succeeded in predicting the future, they did not see the full picture, and therefore, the one who follows them, even if they benefit in the short term, ultimately loses twice. First, relying on their guidance prevents the person from considering rational options that would bring them more blessing. Second, following them focuses all their attention, including their spiritual attention, on external success, and leads them away from the Torah, whose guidance is meant to uplift a person morally and add blessing to their life, both in this world, and the next. The Prohibition of Counting Jews Q: Are there not customs in Judaism that lack logic, and are meant to bring good luck or avoid bad luck, such as the custom of not counting Jews?

A: This is not a custom, but a commandment from the Torah. When it is necessary to count Jews, they should not count themselves, but should each contribute a ‘half-shekel’ donation for the Temple, and then they count the half-shekels, knowing their number, which prevents a plague from affecting them (Exodus 30:11-12). This is how Saul counted his soldiers, using pebbles, or broken pottery (1 Samuel 11:8; 15:4). This is because “the counting is controlled by the evil eye” (Rashi). This happened with King David when he ordered the census of Israel, and a plague broke out as a result (2 Samuel 24:2-4; Berakhot 62b). parently, David believed the prohibition against counting Israel was only relevant when they left Egypt, when it was a novelty that Israel was a great nation, and the Torah commanded not to count them directly. However, the prohibition applies for all generations (Ramban and Kli Yakar on Exodus 30:12).

### Reason for the Commandment

The reason that counting leads to a plague in Israel is that the Jewish nations’ root is in the higher realms, above and beyond the accepted measure and counting in this world (see Numbers Rabbah 2:17). When they are counted like anything else in the world, their root is disregarded, and this harms their vitality. Only when there is a practical need in this world, is it permissible to count them for that specific time, as was the counting of the Israelites during the time of Moses, which was done for military purposes related to the conquest of the Land (in the sections of Numbers, and Pinchas). Even then, they were counted via a commandment, such as the half-shekel, where the counting was based on the commandment they were fulfilling, not on themselves. How to Count Participants for a Minyan or Hikers on a Trip

Since it is forbidden to count Jews by their heads, many people customarily count individuals for a minyan, or a trip, by reciting verses. For example, the verse “Save Your people, and bless Your inheritance; shepherd them and carry them forever” (Psalms 28:9) which in Hebrew has ten words, and each person is assigned one word. When the verse is completed, it is understood that a minyan is present (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 15:3). One may also count mentally (Chesed Le’alafim 55:10), or by counting fingers or toes, but not the head (Torah Lishma, 386). Population Census

The State of Israel, like other countries, periodically conducts population censuses for organizing the economy, taxes, military, education, healthcare, transportation, and more. Even before the establishment of the state, the question arose whether public leaders were permitted to conduct this census. Rabbi Uziel permitted it because the censuses are done for a purpose, and not by personal counting, but through another method, namely forms (Mishpatei Uziel 4, General Matters 2).

Today, this question no longer arises, as the number of residents is known to the state authorities through a close monitoring of births and deaths recorded in the Ministry of the Interior’s computers. The primary purpose of current censuses is not to determine the population size, but for additional statistical data, and there is no prohibition in this. Drawing the Tablets of the Covenant with Rounded Upper Side

About a year ago, I addressed a question regarding the cover image in my “Peninei Halakha” books, depicting the Tablets of the Covenant with a rounded upper side. Some claim that they should not be depicted this way, as the Tablets were square, and the rounded depiction was derived from the customs of non-Jews. While I explained that the main halachic ruling permits making the upper side of the Tablets rounded, people still ask why not heed the opinion of those who argue against this. Casting Aspersions on the Early Authorities

A: The reason we need not follow their opinion is because doing so would be “casting aspersions on the early authorities.” For many generations, Jews in synagogues around the world adorned the Holy Ark, or the curtain, in the shape of two tablets with a rounded upper side. Similarly, we learned about liturgical poems where one prays to the angels, such as “Merciful ones, bring our mercy before the Merciful One,” where many great rabbis, both early and later authorities, ruled it is forbidden to say such prayers, as prayer should only be

directed to God, as the Rambam established in the fifth principle of the Thirteen Principles of Faith: "To God alone is prayer due, and no one else is worthy of prayer." Among the rabbis were Rabbi Yaakov Antoli; Maharam from Rotenburg, Mabit, Maharal (Netiv Avodah 12), Korban Netanel (Rosh Hashanah, end of first chapter), and 'Teshuva Me'ahavah' (1:60). Nonetheless, Jews are accustomed to follow the opinion of the majority of the rabbis who saw merit in these prayer formulas, one reason being not to cast aspersions on the early authorities who practiced saying them. The Chatam Sofer (Orach Chaim 166) wrote that he does not oppose the public saying these prayers, but personally, he extends the previous section of prayer until the congregation finishes the poem.

Indeed, there is a dispute about whether the prohibition of changing a custom out of respect for the early authorities applies only in matters of marriage and family lineage, as the aspersions are also cast upon their descendants. Some argue that even in other matters, it is forbidden to change out of respect for the early authorities (see, Talmudic Encyclopedia, Volume 37, "laz":4). However, in this case, since the opinion of the stringent ones is not particularly strong, as explained further, there is no need to be concerned with their opinion, and cast aspersions on the early authorities. The Stringent Opinions and Their Rejection

In recent years, two rabbis opposed the custom of rounding the upper side of the Tablets of the Covenant. The first, in 1963, was Rabbi Eliyahu Katz (Devarot Eliyahu, Orach Chaim 1:96), and after him, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (in a talk from 1981). Their claim was that this custom was learned from Christian imagery, while the Tablets in the Ark were rectangular.

However, for several reasons, their opinion was not accepted by many rabbis. First, their position assumes that the Tablets should be made exactly as they were in the Tabernacle, but according to halakha, we do not find this requirement, and on the contrary, it is forbidden to make items exactly as the Temple's vessels. Those who want to replicate them must make slight changes (see Avodah Zarah 43b; Sefer HaChinuch 254; Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 141:8).

Second, it is doubtful whether the Tablets were truly rectangular, as it can be learned from the Zohar (Section 2, p. 84:2), that the upper side was rounded because they were formed from two drops of dew. Rabbi Avraham Azulai, the author of Chessed Le'Avraham, in his explanation of the Zohar Ohr HaChama, wrote that the Tablets were partly rounded, and partly rectangular.

In practice, even after hearing the arguments of these rabbis, in tens of thousands of synagogues in Israel and abroad, the custom of rounding the upper side of the Tablets remains unchanged. This was also written by the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu (Responsa HaRav HaRashi, 1988-1989, Siman 198), and it was reported in the name of Rabbi Elyashiv (Yisah Yosef, Orach Chaim 3:36). It was also written in Responsa Mishneh Halachot (15:168), and Even Yisrael (8:57).

### Parshat Vayechi: To Whom Do You Belong?

**Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone** "And Israel saw the children of Joseph, and he said, 'Who are these?'" (Genesis 48:8) Jacob's death, which occurs towards the end of the book of Genesis, brings the era of the patriarchs to an end. He will be the last person to be buried in Ma'arat HaMakhpela in Hebron. He will be the forefather whose name, Israel, given to him after defeating the angel in an all-night wrestling bout, is the same name the Jewish people will carry forever. He will be the one patriarch whose twelve sons are transformed into the chiefs of their respective tribes, paving the way for a disparate family to emerge as a nation. In the lead-up to his death, Vayechi opens with Jacob in his old age asking Joseph not to leave his dead body in Egypt, but to transport his bones back to the burial-place of his fathers. When he takes sick, Joseph arrives with his two sons, Ephraim and Menashe. At the deathbed scene, Jacob narrates his whole history: how he was blessed by God in Luz that he would be fruitful, that his descendants would inherit the land, and that there would eventually be an ingathering of all nations to the land and faith of Israel (the Messianic promise). But don't we know this already? And if this story is so important, why doesn't he repeat it to all the brothers who will soon be arriving for their blessings, instead of keeping this moment as a private encounter between himself and Joseph and his sons? Stranger still, in his very next breath the aged patriarch tells Joseph that he wants Ephraim and Menashe to be considered his and not Joseph's, "...just as Reuven and Shimon are mine." (Although Jacob does allow for any sons that Joseph may have afterwards to be regarded as his own.) Jacob then concludes his own history, recounting the sudden death and burial of Rachel. And suddenly, almost as an afterthought, he turns to Ephraim and Menashe asking, 'Who are these?' Given that Jacob has just been talking about Menashe and Ephraim, his

question doesn't make sense. Doesn't he know who they are? After all, they are the focus of the scene. It sounds as if words spoken one moment are forgotten only moments later, a state of mind that could be seen as bordering on senility. Is Jacob losing his wits? On the contrary! Of all the profound questions that Genesis raises, I think that these two words – 'Mi eleh?' (Who are these?) – contain a library of existential philosophy constricted into one line of dialogue. It is a question that could have implications not only for Genesis, but for the entire destiny of the Jewish people. It could well be the question that Grandfather Israel (Jacob) is asking each and every one of us, his descendants.

Jacob knows that his death is the bridge into the next stage of Jewish history. We have reached the point in the evolution of his family where the seventy souls who came down to Egypt are going to become a fully-fledged nation. They are about to embark on a 210-year period of expansion that will see them emerge from slavery into nationhood. Many of them will suffer, many will assimilate, and some will wander across a desert under the leadership of Moses and ultimately return, as Israelites, to the very place where the family had its origins. Dying, Jacob clearly understands how the pattern of his life will mirror the subsequent experience of the Jewish people throughout their history. Born in Israel, Jacob goes into exile for twenty years, and returns to the land of his forefathers in an attempt to live out his remaining years in peace. But circumstances don't allow the peace to prevail. Through the mitigating circumstance of hunger, he is forced to leave Canaan for Egypt, where ironically the family of Israel will emerge into a nation. What happens to them among the Egyptians – seventy pioneering souls increasing and multiplying and thriving – is the essential experience of Jews scattered across the Diaspora from Casablanca to Krakow, from Toledo to Texas. They arrive few in number and thrive until either the Pharaohs of each community rise in protest and expel them, or until assimilation takes over. While the majority of the Jewish community will dissolve in the great melting pot, there will still be a chosen minority who will endure as children of Israel, who will survive as committed Jews. At this point in time, Jacob stands at the midpoint of five generations. Gazing back, he sees his grandfather Abraham; gazing ahead, he sees his grandchildren Ephraim and Menashe. Each generation is characterized by a unique relationship with the land of Israel. Abraham, born in another land, reveals the One God to the world, and arrives in the land towards which God has directed him, the land of Israel. His son, Isaac is the first native son, a true citizen in that he never leaves the land in which he is born. Jacob, in contrast, becomes a modern Jew because his exile and wanderings parallel the exile and wanderings of the Jews in Diaspora. Joseph, born in Israel, will leave, never to return while he is alive – the experience of many Jews who find their success in business ventures and opportunities across the major capitals of the globe. And finally, we have Menashe and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph, for whom the land of Israel is only a legend. They weren't born there, and they will not die there. Their entire lives are spent in the exile of Egypt. These sons of Joseph represent the longest period of our history, where for 2,000 years – until the early part of the twentieth century – Israel was also only a legend. Until 1948, most Jews in the world could identify with Ephraim and Menashe because for them, Israel was also unattainable. How did we survive? How did the dream and vision of Abraham cling to generation after generation of Jews who never lived in the land, and whose great-great-grandchildren would not live there? Would they retain the dream of their great-grandfather Israel, or would they disappear into the rainbow of nations? When Jacob asks Joseph to give him his sons, his true intention can be deduced from the very fact that Jacob asks for them in the midst of recounting his own history, the blessings that God gave him at Luz and the promise that his descendants will inherit the land. Jacob sees a successful Joseph, acculturating within the Egyptian milieu. He places a claim on Menashe and Ephraim. He wants them to be his, and not Joseph's; he wants their first allegiance to be to the Abrahamic culture and not to the Egyptian culture; he wants them to at least yearn to live in Israel, not to be content with remaining in Egypt. Hence Jacob insists on his question, the question that must plague every single Jew in every generation: 'Who are these?' Do these sons belong to Joseph, Grand

Vizier of Egypt, or do they belong to Jacob, the old bearded Jew? Do they belong to the civilization of the pyramids or do they identify with the 'Covenant between the Pieces'? Are they content in Egypt or do they long for Israel?

The answer is clear. Not only does Joseph receive a double blessing, but his sons become tribal heads, equal to Reuven and Shimon, Jacob's eldest sons. Later in the portion Jacob will inform Joseph that all future generations will use Ephraim and Menashe as a paradigmatic blessing: They will say, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe,' which is how parents bless their sons on Friday night. Menashe and Ephraim were children of Egypt who were nevertheless claimed by and chose to adopt Jacob-Israel as their true father. It is only those children who make a similar choice who remain part of the eternal Jewish people. Shabbat Shalom

### Parsha Insights By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner Parshas Vayechi

#### Tears of Joy

This week we read the parsha of Vayechi, completing the Sefer {Book} of Breishis. "Vayechi Yaakov {And Yaakov lived} in the land of Mitzrayim {Egypt} for seventeen years. [47:28]"

When Yaakov arrived in Mitzrayim and was brought before Paroah, he told Paroah that he was one hundred and thirty years old. The Torah later tells us that Yaakov lived for one hundred and forty seven years.

The arithmetic is simple. Why did the Torah need to tell us that Yaakov lived in Mitzrayim for seventeen years?

The Ramban writes that Breishis is called the 'Sefer Yetzirah,' the Book of 'Forming.' It contains both the physical forming of the world, the creation, and also the life-events of the Forefather's which 'formed' and shaped the destiny of their offspring. Their lives laid out the blueprint for what we would endure and experience as a nation.

We as a nation have endured and are enduring many difficult exiles and persecutions along the demanding path toward our ultimate redemption. The blueprint for this was laid out by Yaakov and the many challenging hardships he endured throughout his life. There are commentators who go as far as to delineate how each of Yaakov's hardships aligns with each of our exiles.

Ultimately, we will reach the point of redemption. The point where we will be able to look back, reflect, recognize the need for and appreciate each national and personal stumble and persecution that we were subjected to. This too must be contained in the formative blueprint of our Avos' lives.

Where does the Torah allude to this state of redemption?

"And Yaakov lived in the land of Mitzrayim {Egypt} for seventeen years. [47:28]" The Medrash teaches that Yaakov was vibrantly alive for those seventeen years. (It's interesting to note that the numerical value of the word 'tov' {good} is seventeen.) Having endured all of the hardships his life would contain, he was in a redeemed state, similar to the state that one experiences in the World to Come.

The Ohr Gedalyahu explains the exact moment when Yaakov reached this state. When Yaakov arrived in Mitzrayim he had an emotion-filled reunion with his long lost son, Yosef. "He (Yosef) appeared before him (Yaakov) and fell on his neck and wept. [46:29]"

Yosef fell on the neck of his father and wept. The passuk {verse} pointedly writes this in the singular. Yosef was crying on his father's neck. His father, Yaakov, wasn't crying on his neck. What was he doing? Rashi brings from the Medrash that he was reciting the 'Shema' prayer: Hear Israel, Hashem is our G-d (Elokim), Hashem is One.

The questions are very obvious. Why did Yaakov decide to say Shema precisely at the moment when he sees his beloved son after a twenty-two year separation? Not five minutes earlier, not five minutes later! Furthermore, if this actually was the only time to say it, why didn't Yosef also recite the Shema?

The Maharal explains beautifully that at that moment, Yaakov's heart was filled with a most incredible, all-encompassing feeling of love. Yaakov didn't want to let that once in a lifetime opportunity pass without utilizing it to its full potential. He wanted to channel that feeling toward Hashem. At the moment when Yosef came to him, when the feeling of love was at its strongest, he said the 'Shema.'

However, based on what we've said so far, the Ohr Gedalyahu offers a different explanation.

"Hear Israel, Hashem is our G-d (Elokim), Hashem is One." We have different names for Hashem, each describing a different way that He deals with and interacts with this world. He is called Hashem, referring to His compassion. He is called Elokim, referring to His judgment. In this confusing world there are different names for what we view as almost contradictory ways that Hashem acts. Ultimately, Hashem will be one and His name will be One. Ultimately, we will achieve that understanding that there was no contradiction whatsoever in the myriad ways that He dealt with this world. There were no separate situations of 'tov' {good} and 'ra' {evil}-Hashem is Elokim. His name will be One.

"Hear Israel, Hashem is our Elokim, Hashem is One." That is a proclamation of our belief that we will ultimately reach that understanding and clarity.

Yaakov had thought that Yosef, along with his life-mission of fathering the twelve tribes of Israel, was lost. He was in a state of darkness. A state where the pieces of the puzzle didn't seem to fit together correctly. Suddenly, he hears the news that Yosef is alive. Not just in a physical sense, that Yosef is alive and is ruler of Mitzrayim, but in a spiritual sense, "Yosef, my son, is alive." He had continued to behave as a son of Yaakov even during their long separation.

The pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place for Yaakov. He had his twelve sons intact. All righteous. Yosef had remained true to his upbringing under the most trying of circumstances. That which seemed to be his greatest cause of anguish, the disappearance and seeming death of Yosef, was suddenly transformed into his greatest cause of joy. Yosef's disappearance wasn't a foretelling that he had failed in his mission of building the nation. On the contrary! Yosef was busy transforming Mitzrayim into the place which would then transform his family into a nation.

He looked back on his life. It all made sense. It was 'tov.' He said the Shema. He lived and breathed the Shema. He had reached that stage of tangible understanding while still existing in this confusing world.

Yosef, on the other hand, was about to begin the national odyssey of retracing and re-'forming' the blueprint that had been laid out by the Forefathers. He was still at the beginning of the journey. He didn't say Shema-many tears would be spilled before that point would be reached. He cried on his father's neck...

May we speedily reach the stage where our tears will be of joy as we too pronounce the Shema with that perfect understanding that Hashem is Elokim. Chazak, chazak v'nischazek! Good Shabbos, Yisroel Ciner

### Asarah Beteiveis on Friday??!

#### By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Question #1: Fasting on Friday

May we fast on a Friday? Question #2: An Unusual Year

In what ways is this year different from most other years? Question #3: Who Stole the Date!

Why do some years miss having Asarah Beteiveis? Question #4: Unusual Presidents

What did Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon have in common? Introduction

In a previous year when the Tenth of Teiveis fell on Friday, Moshe, one of my students where I taught at the time, came to me, rather incredulously, "I heard that Asarah Beteiveis falls on a Friday this year—but I thought that we cannot have fast days on a Friday? I don't remember ever fasting on Friday!" Answer

Although Moshe's halachic assumption is inaccurate -- there is no halacha banning fast days on Fridays -- it is easy to comprehend why he thought so. In our current, fixed calendar, the only fast day that ever falls on a Friday is Asarah Beteiveis, and indeed it happens this year. Asarah Beteiveis last coincided with Friday seven years ago, and the time before was three years prior, which was the year that Moshe posed his observations. At the time, ten years had transpired since Asarah Beteiveis had fallen on a Friday, certainly way before Moshe was old enough to fast. To explain why Asarah Beteiveis is the only fast that falls on a Friday requires a bit of complicated explanation about our calendar, but it is well worth it to have a deeper understanding of this very important

institution. So find a relaxing place to do some entertaining calculations. First, we need some historical background. When the Torah commands us to create a calendar, it includes two different responsibilities: First, that Rosh Chodesh and the length of each month are determined on the basis of when the new moon appears, and, second, to have the holiday of Pesach fall in the spring and the holiday of Sukkos in the autumn (in the northern hemisphere). Thus, we have two separate and very different requirements, one of having the months determined by the moon, which is a little more than every  $29\frac{1}{2}$  days, and the second of having years that coordinate with the seasons, which follow the solar year, which is a bit less than  $365\frac{1}{4}$  days. Sanhedrin calendar

To accomplish having the dates and holidays fall according to the seasons, the halacha is that some years have 12 months, or approximately 354 days, and others have 13 months, or approximately 384 days. Since 12 Hebrew months is shorter than a solar year, unless we occasionally add another month, Pesach would fall approximately 10 days earlier each year until, eventually, it would be in the winter. Adding an extra month periodically adjusts that Nissan remains in the spring. The mitzvah of the Torah is that the Sanhedrin is responsible every month to decide whether a month is 29 or 30 days long, and of deciding whether a year should have an extra month. In the latter case, the head of the Sanhedrin appointed a special committee to review the relevant information and determine whether the year should be 13 months or only 12. Hillel's calendar

Initially, these decisions were made by the heads of the Sanhedrin, and, indeed, when Moshiach comes, we will again have this procedure. This was the system in place for thousands of years – from the time of Moshe Rabbeinu until almost 300 years after the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash. At that time, the head of the Sanhedrin, Hillel Hanasi (often called Hillel II or Hillel III by historians, to avoid confusion with his better-known ancestor, Hillel Hazakein, usually simply called "Hillel"), realized that, because of Roman persecution, the Sanhedrin's days were numbered, and it would be necessary to switch to a different method for determining the calendar. Hillel Hanasi implemented a temporary Jewish calendar, which is the one that we currently use. Although many people refer to it as a "permanent calendar," it will be in use only until we again have a Sanhedrin, which will then be in charge of the calendar. Hillel's calendar kept the same, basic structure of 29- and 30-day months and 12- and 13-month years, but it is based purely on calculation and not on observation or changes of circumstance. The two major changes in this new calendar are: A leap of fate

The leap years occur following a regular pattern of seven leap years and 12 non-leap (usually called "common") years in a 19-year cycle. The third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, fourteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth years of the cycle are always leap years, and the rest are common years. The new calendar bases itself on an estimate, an average time that it takes the moon to revolve around the Earth. This molad calculation is that each new moon appears 29 days, 12 hours, and 793 chalakim (singular: chelek) or  $793/1080$  of an hour after the previous new moon. Once one knows when the new moon, called the molad, occurred on the previous Rosh Hashanah, one could now add either 12 or 13 times the above figure and determine the time of the molad in the next year, which is the most important factor in determining the date of the next Rosh Hashanah. (The term chelek, used on Shabbos Mevorach when announcing when the molad is, equals  $1/1080$  of an hour, or 3 and  $1/3$  seconds.) The haves vs. the have-nots

In Hillel's calendar, most months have a determined number of days, either 29 or 30, and only in two months, Marcheshvan and Kislev, does the number of days vary. Furthermore, whether those two months are 29 or 30 days long has nothing to do with the appearance of the new moon, which was the most critical factor under the Sanhedrin calendar, but is determined by two Rosh Hashanos (Rambam, Hilchos Kiddush Hachodesh 8:5), the Rosh Hashanah of the coming year and that of the year following. A year in which both Marcheshvan and Kislev have only 29 days is called chaseirah, lacking or defective; one in which Marcheshvan has 29 days and Kislev has 30 is called kesidrah, as expected or regular; and one in which both Marcheshvan and Kislev have 30 days is called sheleimah, full or excessive. The terms chaseirah,

kesidrah, and sheleimah apply in both common and leap years. Thus, in Hillel's calendar, all common years are either 353 days (if both Marcheshvan and Kislev have 29 days), 354 days (if Marcheshvan has 29 days and Kislev has 30) or 355 days (if both Marcheshvan and Kislev have 30 days) In a leap year, Adar Rishon always has 30 days, and Adar Sheini always has 29 days. Thus, the addition of an extra month of Adar in a leap year always adds exactly thirty days, and leap years are either 383 days (if both Marcheshvan and Kislev have 29 days), 384 days (if Marcheshvan has 29 days and Kislev has 30) or 385 days (if both Marcheshvan and Kislev have 30 days).. Another major innovation

Did you ever notice that Yom Kippur never falls on Friday or Sunday? If it did, we would observe two consecutive days that both have the stringency of Shabbos. Indeed, when the calendar was based on observation, this could and did happen (She'iltos of Rav Acha'ei Geon, #67; Ha'emek She'eloh ibid, Note 22; Rambam, Hilchos Shabbos 5:21). However, Hillel's calendar does not allow Yom Kippur to fall on either a Sunday or a Friday, and does not allow Hoshana Rabbah to fall on Shabbos, which would cause the cancellation of the Hoshanos ceremony. As long as the calendar was determined on the basis of eyewitness testimony, it was halachically more important to have Rosh Chodesh fall on its correct day than to be concerned about the difficulties created when these holidays fall on or next to Shabbos (Ha'emek She'eloh ibid; Gri"z, Hilchos Kiddush Hachodesh). Once we fulfill the mitzvah in a less-preferred way with Hillel's "permanent" calendar, keeping Yom Kippur from falling on Friday or Sunday and keeping Hoshana Rabbah from falling on Shabbos are factors to be included in establishing the calendar. To accommodate these innovations, Rosh Hashanah must fall only on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday or Shabbos. Were it to fall on Sunday, Hoshana Rabbah would be on Shabbos; on Wednesday, Yom Kippur would be on Friday; and on Friday, Yom Kippur would be on Sunday. When Rosh Hashanah in the coming year would naturally fall on Sunday, Wednesday or Friday, an extra day is added to the calendar to move Rosh Hashanah to Monday, Thursday or Shabbos (Rambam, Hilchos Kiddush Hachodesh 7:1). This is the predominant reason why Marcheshvan and Kislev are sometimes 29 days and sometimes 30 -- to make the exact length of the years flexible. There is one other factor: Sometimes, Rosh Hashanah takes place not on the day of the molad, but the next day, because the molad occurs on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah and is not visible until the next day. When Rosh Hashanah was determined by the observation of witnesses, this information was important not only in determining when Rosh Hashanah falls, but also for interrogating potential witnesses testifying to the appearance of the new moon. Hillel's calendar also does not allow Rosh Hashanah to be established on a day when the molad falls on its afternoon. In order to accommodate all these various calendar requirements, Hillel Hanasi established four rules, called dechiyos, which, together with the astronomical calculation used and the 19-year leap year rotation, form the basis for determining our calendar. (Because these dechiyos are extremely technical, I will not explain them.) Because the nineteen-year cycle synchronizes the lunar calendar with the solar year, the Hebrew and English dates of births, anniversaries and other occasions often coincide on the nineteenth anniversary of the event. If yours does not, but is off by a day or two, do not fret. Your record-keeping is accurate, but the cycle of nineteen years only relates to whether it is a leap year, not to whether the years are of the exact same length. As explained above, the lengths of Marcheshvan and Kislev are determined by other factors, and the secular year also varies in length, with the occasional addition of the 29th of February, which influences this also. These factors affect whether your 19th, 38th or 57th birthday or anniversary coincides exactly with its Hebrew/secular counterpart, or whether it varies slightly. Fourteen types of years

Based on all these calculations, there are seven prototype years for a common year and seven for a leap year that fulfill the calendar rules. Each of these fourteen template "years" is called by a three-letter acronym, called a kevias hashanah, in which the first letter identifies the day of the week of the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the second letter denotes whether the year is chaseirah, kesidrah, or sheleimah, and the third letter identifies the day of the week of the first day of Pesach. Let's

use this year as our example: Rosh Hashanah fell on Thursday. Both Marcheshvan and Kislev are 30 days this year; therefore, this year's kevias hashana is נזנ, meaning that Rosh Hashanah fell on the fifth day of the week (ז), the year is sheleimah (ו), and the first day of Pesach is on Sunday, the first day of the week (ז). No letter is used to denote whether the year is a common or leap year, because this is understood by knowing how many days of the week Pesach follows Rosh Hashanah. In a common year that is kesidrah, Pesach falls two days later in the week than Rosh Hashanah, and in a leap year, it falls four days later, the two additional days being the extra two days that the extra month of Adar Rishon, thirty days long, adds to the day of the week count. Of course, these calculations must be adjusted one day in either direction, if the year is chaseirah or sheleimah. Either way, the number of days between Rosh Hashanah and Pesach (and whether it is chaseirah or sheleimah) tells us whether it is a common or leap year, so there is no need to include this in the acronym. Back-to-back

During the Hebrew calendar years 5784 and 5785, we discover the fairly unusual situation of having back-to-back years with Asarah Beteiveis falling on Friday, both in 5784 (2023) and in 5785, (when it falls on January 10, 2025), each for a different reason: In 5784, which was a leap year, Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbos and the year was a chaseirah – both Marcheshvan and Kislev had 29 days. 5785 is a common year in which Rosh Hashanah fell on Thursday and it is a sheleimah, because both Marcheshvan and Kislev have 30 days. When this happens Asarah Beteiveis of the second year falls exactly 385 days after the previous Asarah Beteiveis. Since the number 385 is perfectable divisible by seven, the number of the days of the week, the dates will fall on the same weekday. At this point, we can explain another of our opening questions: What did Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon have in common? The last time Asarah Beteiveis fell on Friday in two consecutive years was in 5733 (on December 15, 1972, when Richard Nixon was president) and 5734 (on January 4, 1974). No one reading this article was fasting the previous time that Asarah Beteiveis occurred on Friday in back-to-back years, since this was on December 20, 1901 and January 9, 1903. Both of these fasts occurred when Teddy Roosevelt was president, having succeeded to the office on September 14, 1901, when William McKinley succumbed to his wounds inflicted by Leon Frank Czolgosz. Thus, Teddy Roosevelt and Richard Nixon were the only two people in the twentieth century to have Asarah Beteiveis fall on Friday in two consecutive years while they were President of the United States! The next wait for back-to-back Friday Asarah Beteiveis observances after 5784 and 5785 is not quite as long. Someone blessed with good health and longevity can look forward to fasting on two Fridays of Asarah Beteiveis in the years 5831 (on December 12, 2070) and 5832 (January 1, 2072 -- providing an auspicious way to celebrate the secular New Year). You presumably have noted that the secular, or solar, years 1902, 1973, 2024 and 2071 all miss having Asarah Beteiveis. This is, in itself, not particularly significant. Almost every halachic leap year causes the pushing of Asarah Beteiveis into the next secular year. As a result, seven of nineteen secular years miss out on Asarah Beteiveis. (Actually, it is slightly less, since, about twice a century, Asarah Beteiveis after a leap year falls on December 30 or 31.)

#### Biblical Source

Although it would appear that the reason no other fast occurs on a Friday is simply a coincidence of the fixed calendar, one early authority contends that observing Asarah Beteiveis on Friday has a Tanach basis and deep halachic significance. The Avudraham explains this on the basis of the following pesukim in the book of Yechezkel: "And the Word of Hashem came to me in the ninth year in the tenth month (Teiveis) on the tenth of the month, saying, 'Son of man, write the name of this date, this very day (etzem hayom hazeh); the king of Bavel has surrounded Yerushalayim, on this very day, be'etzem hayom hazeh'" (Yechezkel 24:1-2). Since Yechezkel identifies the Tenth of Teiveis as etzem hayom hazeh, this very day, and then even repeats this assertion, these words require that Asarah Beteiveis be observed on the date that it occurs and may not be moved.

The Avudraham expressly states that if Asarah Beteiveis were to fall on Shabbos, we would be required to fast on Shabbos, just as we are

required to fast when it falls on a Friday. This means that, in his opinion, prior to the establishing of our calendar by Hillel Hasheini, whenever Asarah Beteiveis fell on Shabbos (during the period after the Churban), Klal Yisrael fasted on Shabbos, similar to the fasting we do when Yom Kippur falls on Shabbos! This ruling of the Avudraham seems unusual – particularly, since there is no record in the Gemara of such a halacha. The Beis Yosef (Orach Chayim 550) takes strong issue with Avudraham's approach, and questions why Asarah Beteiveis should be treated differently from any other rabbinically ordained fast. In addition, Avudraham's position conflicts with Rashi (Megillah 5a s.v. aval) and the Rambam (Hilchos Taanis 5:5), both of whom mention that when Asarah Beteiveis occurs on Shabbos, the fast is postponed to Sunday. Nevertheless, we must understand the conceptual basis on which the Avudraham, himself a well-respected Spanish rishon, understands Asarah Beteiveis to be a stricter fast than the others. It would seem that its significance is because it is the beginning of the tragedies that resulted in the churban. Conclusion

The pasuk promises us that the "Fast of the Fourth (month, the Seventeenth of Tammuz, the fourth month counting from Nissan), the Fast of the Fifth (Tisha Be'av), the Fast of the Seventh (Tzom Gedalyah) and the Fast of the Tenth (Asarah Beteiveis) shall be for celebration and happiness for the household of Yehudah" (Zechariah 8:19). May we use the fast days and other days of mourning for reflection and teshuvah, so that the words of the prophet are fulfilled speedily and in our days!

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#### Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Transformative Power of Holding Space for the Pain of Another  
Why Does Genesis End on Such a Low Note?

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

The resting place of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Queens, NY  
Experiencing the Other

Sadie goes to see her rabbi. She complains about her very bad headaches, and whines, cries, and talks about her poor living conditions for hours. All of a sudden, Sadie shouts, overjoyed: "Rabbi, your holy presence has cured me! My headache is gone!"

To which the rabbi replies: "No Sadie, it is not gone. I have it now."

#### Culminating Words

Thus are the culminating words of the first—and in many ways the foundational—book of the Torah, the book of Genesis:

"Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; they embalmed him and he was placed in a coffin in Egypt[1]."

This ending is disturbing. Could have Genesis not concluded on a more inspiring note, just like the four following books of Moses?

Even the fifth and final book, Deuteronomy, which concludes with Moses' passing, culminates with a eulogy so rarely moving that it leaves one with an unforgettable impression of Moses.

Indeed, for thousands of years the classical Jewish sages, authors and rabbis have paid special attention to concluding their written volumes and verbal speeches on a positive note[2]. Even if the subject matter was one of melancholic nature, they desired that at least the punch line, the "last inning," as it were, should invigorate readers and listeners with a message of hope and promise.

Yet, the Book of Books chooses to conclude its first installment with a gloomy and despairing punch line: Joseph's death and burial.

That incredible human being who in the best and worst of times displayed enormous dignity and richness of spirit, that tremendous visionary and leader who rescued a world from famine, is now gone. If that is not enough, Genesis informs us that Joseph is embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. There his remains would be stored for hundreds of years until the Jews leave Egypt and bury his bones in the city of Shechem (Nabulus).

While Joseph's father, Jacob, labored hard for assurances that his body would not remain among the morally depraved—and what would turn out to be genocidal—Egyptian people but would be brought back to the sacred soil of Hebron, Joseph's worn and sacred body must remain etched in Egyptian earth for centuries.

Even if the Torah felt compelled to culminate Genesis with Joseph's death, it could have ended with the second-to-the-last verse of Genesis:

"Joseph told his brothers: 'I am about to die, but G-d will indeed remember you and bring you up out of this land to the land that He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... You will bring my bones up out of here.' At least that would have ended the book with a promise for future redemption. What indeed are the final words of the book?

"Joseph died... and he was placed in a coffin in Egypt!"

"Be Strong! Be Strong!"

The question about the ending of Genesis increases upon considering the Jewish custom that when the reader of the Torah concludes each of the books of the Five Books of Moses, the entire congregation thunders out loud: Chazak! Chazak! Venischazak! "Be strong! Be strong! Let us be strengthened!"

This will occur this Shabbat morning in synagogues the world over. When the reader of the Torah concludes with the verse—"Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; they embalmed him and he was placed in a coffin in Egypt"—Jews will exclaim: Chazak! Chazak! Venischazak! "Be strong! Be strong! Let us be strengthened!"

But how can one glean strength, never mind triple strength, from this despairing end?

The Pain of Loneliness

Yet it may be that it is precisely this ending that grants us a deeply comforting message. Unfortunately, we cannot live life without pain. Every life comes with challenges. The very genesis of existence is rooted in a void and a vacuum—the concealment of the Divine infinite presence to allow for an egocentric universe and a perceived sense that we are alone, broken and detached. This means that life, whichever way you twist it, is a confrontation with a void, and a painful experience. No soul entering a body is devoid of the most profound of all traumas -- the feeling of perceived abandonment.

And it is on this journey that I must discover that I am not alone and that I can trust. That G-d is with me and in me at every moment.

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), who survived three years in the concentration camps of Dachau and Auschwitz and went on to create a new school of psychotherapy, Logotherapy, once shared the following story. A woman phoned him up in the middle of the night and calmly told him that she was about to commit suicide. Frankl kept her on the phone and talked her through her depression, giving her reason after reason to carry on living. Eventually, she promised him she would not take her life, and she kept her word.

When they met later, Frankl asked her which of his reasons she had found convincing. "None," she replied. What then persuaded her to go on living? Her answer was simple. Frankl had been willing to listen to her in the middle of the night. A world in which someone was prepared to listen to another's distress seemed to her one in which it was worthwhile to live. He modeled for her the experience of attachment, one which we must each find in the depths of our souls which remains a derivative of infinite Divine consciousness and is never ever alone.

The Presence of Joseph

"Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; they embalmed him and he was placed in a coffin in Egypt." In these very uninspiring words, one may sense such profound solace.

The Jewish people are about to become enslaved and subjugated to a tyrannical government that will attempt to destroy them one by one, physically and mentally (as recorded at the beginning of Exodus). This new Egyptian genocide program will drown children, subject all Jewish men to slave labor and crush a new nation.

What will give the people of Israel the resolve they will desperately need? What will preserve a broken and devastated people from falling into the abyss? The knowledge that one day they would be liberated? Certainly. The knowledge that evil will not reign forever? Absolutely. Indeed, this is what Joseph told the Jewish people before his passing, recorded in the second-to-the-last verse of Genesis: "Joseph told his brothers: 'I am about to die, but G-d will indeed remember you and bring you up out of this land to the land that He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... You will bring my bones up out of here.'

But, then, when Genesis seeks to choose its final words, it provides us with a message that perhaps served as the greatest source of strength for an orphaned and broken Jewish family. "Joseph died at the age of one

hundred and ten years; they embalmed him and he was placed in a coffin in Egypt."

Joseph's sacred body is not taken back to the Holy Land to be interred among the spiritual giants of human history: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebecca; his father Jacob, or his mother Rachel. Joseph's spiritual and physical presence does not "escape" to the heavenly paradise of a land saturated with holiness.

Rather, Joseph remains in the grit and gravel of depraved Egypt, he remains etched deeply in the earthiness of Egypt, together with his beloved people.

It is true for each of us. When I can hold space for your pain, and embrace you in your anguish, telling you that you are not alone, it may provide you with the deep strength to discover your own inner infinite dignity and power.

The burial place of a virtuous and saintly human being contains profound holiness and spiritual energy and constitutes a place conducive for prayer to G-d. Since the soul and the body retain a relationship even after they depart from each other, the space where the physical body of a holy man is interred is a space conducive for spiritual growth, meditation, reflection, and inspiration[3].

"He was placed in a coffin in Egypt"—that is the culmination of Genesis. The Jew may be entrenched in Egypt and all that it represents, but Joseph is right there with him, in the midst of his condition, giving him strength, blessings, and fortitude.

The same is true throughout history. In each generation G-d plants such "Joseph's" in our midst, the Tzaddikim and Rebbes, who are there with the Jewish people in their pain and agony. Sometimes, even after their passing, if we open our hearts, we can feel the touch of their soul, the richness of their spirits, the faith of their lives.

We may be stuck in the quagmire of "Egyptian" dung, yet "Joseph" is present with us. Thus, even in the midst of a dark and horrific exile, we can hold each other's hands and thunder aloud: Chazak! Chazak! Venischazak! "Be strong! Be strong! Let us be strengthened!"

Contemporary Joseph's

This idea transcribed above I had the privilege to hear myself from the Lubavitcher Rebbe 38 years ago, on the Sabbath of the portion of Vayechi 5747, January 1987[4].

I will never forget the emotion the Rebbe displayed while giving this talk. At its conclusion, he noted that the name of his father-in-law, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe (1880-1950), was Yosef (Joseph) and that his father-in-law was interred not in the Holy Land but in New York, and continues to provide energy, inspiration, and blessings to our generation. Indeed, the Rebbe would visit his father-in-law's resting place frequently to pray on behalf of Jews and non-Jews the world over. The Rebbe would spend hours standing at his father-in-law's resting place, immersed in prayer, reading letters that he has received from people all over the world requesting him to pray for them.

I personally observed many times the Rebbe returning from his father-in-law's graveside sometimes close to midnight, his eyes swollen from tears and his back bent over from the extraordinary effort. The Rebbe suffered a stroke, in March 1992, as he was standing and praying at the resting place of his father-in-law.

Two years later, in June 1994, the Rebbe himself was interred near his father-in-law's resting place, in the Montefiore Cemetery in Queens, NY. Thousands of people visit the Rebbe's Ohel (resting place) on a daily basis, praying to the Almighty for themselves and their loved ones. I know many people who have experienced major blessings, often supernatural blessings, following their prayers to Hashem at the "ohel." If you are in need of a blessing for any matter in your life, it is worthwhile to pay a visit there for prayer. (For directions, click here.) It is a place that continues to bestow blessing, inspiration, and strength upon untold numbers of people from all walks of life during our present state of exile, until the bright dawn of redemption which shall transpire speedily in our days. Amen.

[1] Genesis 50:26. [2] See last Tosefos to Talmud Niddah. [3] See Talmud Sotah 34b, based on Numbers 13:22, quoted in Rashi ibid. [4] Published in Sefer Hasichos 5747 vol. 1 pp. 249-268. The idea is based on Zohar Vayechi p. 222b and its commentators Mikdash Melech and Or Hachamah ibid. Commentary of Sifsei Kohen to Genesis 47:29. (Please make even a small and secure contribution to help us continue our work. Click here.)

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## What Books Are On Your Shelves?

**By Rabbi Efrem Goldberg** While print book sales were up less than 1% last year, sales of the Bible rose 22% in the U.S. through the end of October, compared with the same period last year. Many ascribe this phenomenon to anxiety over uncertainty with the economy, security, and the world in general. It seems people are turning to the Bible for hope, strength and faith. The Wall Street Journal reports: "Publishers say the books are selling well at religious bookstores, but also on Amazon.com and at more mainstream retailers. People buy print copies to make notes in and highlight but often supplement them with audiobooks as well." As people who place a tremendous value on the centrality of the Bible and on its study, we see this trend is most welcome. A woman once shared with me a story from her childhood. She attended public school and one day, when school let out it was raining hard. Her mother came to pick her up so she wouldn't have to get soaked walking home. As she entered the car, her mother pointed to the public-school entrance and said, "I can tell you which kids are Jewish and which aren't." Surprised and curious, she asked her mother, how do you know? Her mother answered, "The children who put their books under their shirt or jacket to protect it and keep it dry are Jewish. Those who hold the book over their head to keep their head dry but sacrifice the book are not Jewish." Since our inception, the Jewish people have placed a premium on literacy and on study. As a result, we have been dubbed the People of the Book. For us, study is not relegated to scholars and the elite. There is a mitzvah on every man to engage the book, to learn Torah every morning and every evening. Women, too, are obligated to study the laws that pertain to them. Indeed, the 613th and final mitzvah in the Torah is the obligation to write a Sefer Torah. Rabbeinu Asher, the Rosh, argues that today when we don't study directly from a Torah scroll, this mitzvah is fulfilled when we buy seforim, when we collect and learn Torah books. Seforim, Torah books, should adorn every Jewish home and be its essential décor. There is a prominent teacher of Torah in the greater Jewish community whose father grew up with no Jewish background and had never learned or open a sefer in his life. When this teacher was a young boy and his father was becoming observant, someone in his community instructed the father to buy a set of Shas to keep in his home. The father resisted, explaining there would be no point since he did not understand the words and would be unable to study it. The person said, "That's not why I'm telling you to get a Shas. Get a Shas and display it in your house so your children see and understand that their parents value Torah and its study." The father bought the Shas, his children are now grown up and teach Torah all over the world, and the father himself grew into regular Torah study as well. We don't just learn seforim or collect them, we celebrate them. Indeed, Chabad this week celebrated a holiday, the 5th of Shevat designated to the celebration of seforim. In 1985, the librarians of the Agudas Chassidei Chabad Library began to notice that rare books and manuscripts were missing from the library. Simultaneously, collectors and sellers of rare books began reporting suspicious items entering the market. After an investigation, it came to light that a nephew of the Rebbe was stealing books from the Chabad library and putting them up for sale. When confronted with his actions, he argued that as a grandson of the Friediker Rebbe, the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, the seforim were his rightful inheritance. After several failed attempts to resolve the issue through Beis Din, Chabad filed a restraining order against the sale of any more books from its library. They also filed a lawsuit, and the case was brought before federal judge Charles Sifton. The nephew's lawyers argued that the books were privately owned and were bequeathed to members of the family, essentially his rightful inheritance. Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, the Rebbe's wife was deposed by the nephew's legal team. In her testimony, she famously declared, "I think they [the seforim] belonged to the Chassidim because my father belonged to the Chassidim." Her words and sincerity were compelling and ultimately persuasive to the judge. The trial lasted for twenty-three days. During that time, the Rebbe spoke about it at farbrengens, urging his chassidim to demonstrate how active, vibrant and alive Chabad is by increasing their efforts to spread chassidus. On the 5th of Teves, 5747,

corresponding with January 6, 1987, almost a full year after the trial ended, the judge issued his ruling that the books belong to Chabad. As the news spread among chassidim, they employed a rabbinic phrase from the Talmud: "victory is ours." The intense celebration that followed lasted for days. The chassidim understood that this was about more than just the seforim. The ruling made a statement to the world that Lubavitch was alive and vibrant and that indeed, the seforim and the movement belong to the chassidim, to the people. From that day, the 5th of Teves was designated as a holiday, "Didan Notzach," marked by the purchase of seforim, the printing of sefarim, and the rededication to learning seforim. I had the privilege of visiting the Rebbe's Ohel this week on the 5th of Teves. An enormous crowd was gathered, people were dressed for Shabbos and wishing one another a Gut Yom Tov. Though not a Torah or rabbinic holiday, not a day that appears on any other Jewish calendar other than Chabad's, I was moved by the simcha, the sheer and authentic joy, enthusiasm and love those who weren't even alive when the trial happened still felt towards not only the judicial victory, but to the significance and centrality of seforim.

If sale and study of the Bible is surging in the U.S. in general, all the more so should it be surging among our people, the people of the book. We are living in an age in which there is a proliferation of Jewish and Torah literature in countless languages, in hard copy, online, audio and reading devices and on a diverse range of topics, themes, and ideas. There is so much noise and nonsense in the world today. Engaging Torah is our blueprint, our manual for navigating this complicated world. Don't just buy seforim, learn them and celebrate them, not only on the 5th of Teves, but each and every day.

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## Rav Kook Torah

**Vayechi: Fishy Blessings** Realizing that his death was not far off, Jacob gave his grandchildren, the sons of Joseph, the following blessing: "May [God] bless the lads, and let them carry my name, along with the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac. May they increase like fish in the land." (Gen. 48:16) Yes, fish have astonishingly large families. But so do frogs and many other animals. Why were Joseph's children blessed to be like fish? Furthermore, the phrase "increase like fish in the land" sounds like a very mixed-up metaphor. Fish do not thrive on land; they certainly do not increase there! What kind of blessing is this? Immunity from the Evil Eye

The Talmud (Berachot 55b) explains that Joseph shared a special quality with fish: "The fish in the waters are concealed by the water, and thus not susceptible to the Evil Eye. So too, the descendants of Joseph are not susceptible to the Evil Eye." What does it mean that Joseph was immune to the Evil Eye like the fish? We explained previously that the Evil Eye is an example of hidden influences that exist between souls. An environment of jealousy and hatred can poison not only the atmosphere but also the soul against whom they are directed. This, however, is only true for weaker souls that are easily influenced. The Evil Eye can only harm those whose sense of self-worth is not fully developed, people who need to live their lives in a way that meets the approval of foreign 'eyes.' But if we are secure within ourselves, and our life is focused on our inner truths, then we will not be susceptible to the Evil Eye of those around us. The Evil Eye has no power over those whose robust sense of self-esteem does not let others dictate what is important and worthwhile. Why are fish immune to the Evil Eye? Fish are not concerned with envious eyes above the water. They live in their own world below the surface, a secluded realm that determines the direction of their lives. Like the fish, Joseph remained faithful to his inner convictions, despite the external pressures and influences of his roller-coaster life. Family estrangement, a foreign land, a foreign culture, temptations, slavery and imprisonment — none of these succeeded in leading Joseph astray. Even when he needed to contend with the hardest test of all — the incredible success, wealth, and power as Egyptian viceroy — Joseph was steadfast in his beliefs and inner convictions. Joseph remained true to his own inner world, despite his active participation in a vastly different outer world. Just like a "fish in the land."

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## Chief Rabbi Mirvis

**Asarah B'Tevet** Fasting on a Friday? We will enter the coming Shabbat on empty stomachs. It's interesting to note that we generally don't have fast days on Fridays. The reason for this is that we want to ensure we have the stamina and energy needed to properly prepare for Shabbat. However, every good rule has an exception, and the exception in this case is the tenth of Tevet.

On rare occasions, when it falls on a Friday, we fast on that Friday. And this is exactly what will happen this coming Friday. So, why is this the case? In the book of Ezekiel, chapter 24, we are given details of the events that transpired on the 10th of Tevet. The prophet uses the term "Etzem Hayom Hazeh," meaning "in the midst of this day," which is the very same phrase used in the Torah in Parshat Acharei Mot to describe Yom Kippur. Therefore, just as we always fast on Yom Kippur on the 10th of Tishrei, regardless of which day of the week it falls on, so too, we observe a fast on the 10th of Tevet. One might wonder: why is Asarah B'Tevet, of all the fast days, elevated to such a position? Why must it be kept on the specific day? The 10th of Tevet marks the day when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem during the time of the First Temple. What followed was the destruction of the First Temple, and a series of catastrophes began to unfold. The Second Temple was later built, but many tragedies continued, and eventually, the Second Temple was also destroyed, leading to our exile. Asarah B'Tevet was the original cause—the first event that, had a domino effect, setting many other tragic events in motion. Consider a river with polluted waters. The solution would not be to focus on cleaning the water downstream—that will only help temporarily. The real solution is to go upstream to address the root cause of the pollution. Asarah B'Tevet calls upon us to reflect on the ways in which we, as a nation, sinned, leading to these catastrophic events. And to this day, more than any other sin committed by our people, we recall Sinat Chinam—causeless hatred. In my Drashot, Divrei Torah, and Shiurim, you may have noticed that I frequently speak about Jewish unity. This is the central message of Asarah B'Tevet. It is the root cause of many of the challenges we face as a Jewish nation to this very day. We must never stop and never tire of emphasising the importance of unity among our people. Indeed, by fasting this Friday, in such an uncharacteristic way, let us remember this root cause. Let's direct our focus toward ensuring Jewish unity, not just for today, but well into the future. I wish you a Tzom Kal and Shabbat Shalom.

## Parshas Vayechi

### Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Reb Meir ben Reb Dovid HaCohen. Business as Usual

Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years [...] (47:28). Rashi (ad loc) points out that this week's parsha opens without the customary delineation that is commonly found between two parshios. That is, the Torah is generally broken up into paragraphs and chapters – known as "p'suchos" and "stumos." A chapter ending is indicated by leaving the rest of the line open and a paragraph break is delineated by leaving nine letter spaces blank. However, this parsha begins with no break in the writing from the previous parsha. Rashi goes on to explain that this parsha is "sossum" or "sealed" because this parsha contains the death of Yaakov Avinu, and once he passed away the hearts and eyes of Bnei Yisroel were closed from the suffering of the enslavement, for that is when the Egyptians began to enslave them. Yet this Rashi is directly contradicted by another Rashi in Parshas Va'eira (Shmos 6:16). Rashi says there that the reason the Torah records the age of Levi when he passed away is to teach us how many years the enslavement lasted. As Rashi explains, Levi lived longer than any of his brothers and "as long as Yosef and his brothers were alive the enslavement did not begin." Levi died approximately seventy-seven years after Yaakov Avinu. So, at which point did the enslavement begin?

Furthermore, Rashi's use of the word "sossum" to indicate that this parsha is sealed is a little hard to understand. The halachic definition of a "stuma" would include a nine letter gap, and Rashi's whole point is that here we have no gap at all. Moreover, Rashi seems to be taking poetic license to describe the pain and suffering of Bnei Yisroel ("The eyes and

hearts of Bnei Yisroel were sealed from the enslavement"). This is odd; Rashi doesn't write poetry – Rashi gives us the literal meaning of the words of the Torah. What does Rashi mean by these words? A careful reading of Rashi reveals that he is describing a remarkable phenomena. Rashi is telling us that the eyes and hearts of Bnei Yisroel were closed; that is, they were in denial. Similar to Germany in the early 1930's, the Jewish population refused to "see" or "understand" the looming calamity that was slowly beginning to take shape. The Germans started by publishing virulently antisemitic propaganda – portraying the Jews first as greedy and immoral, and eventually characterizing them as inhuman vermin to be exterminated. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the Jewish population willfully ignored the warning signs, refusing to see or internalize what was really going on. Even many years later, the German Jewish population was shocked that "their" country and "fellow citizens" suddenly turned on them and shipped them off to die. In truth, by 1939 it had already been a decade in the making. Part of the human condition is to ignore what we don't want to see. That is what Rashi is teaching us here. Rashi points out that the parsha containing the death of Yaakov is written like every other verse of the Torah, with a one-space gap between the verses. The Torah writes it thusly to indicate that this event was not differentiated from anything else in their lives. The transition of Yaakov's death, which should have been understood as a momentous signpost on the road to their enslavement, passed without anyone noticing – they sealed their eyes and hearts to the coming slavery. The entire generation was in denial of the looming enslavement, ignoring the slowly changing attitude of the Egyptians that began with the death of Yaakov. By the time Levi passed away, the transition of the Egyptian attitude was complete and the actual slavery began. What a Blessing

And he blessed them that day, saying, "In you shall Yisroel bless, saying, 'May Hashem make you as Ephraim and as Menashe'" (48:20). This week's parsha introduces us to the blessing that Jewish fathers all over the world bless their sons on Friday nights. The text of this bracha is that which Yaakov Avinu composed when Yosef introduced his sons Ephraim and Menashe to Yaakov, "May Hashem make you as Ephraim and as Menashe." There has been much speculation as to what Yaakov intended when he blessed them. After all, very little is known about the actual lives of Ephraim and Menashe. Why would he designate them specifically as the paradigm with which all parents should bless their children? One of the more common answers given is that Ephraim and Menashe are the first two brothers in the Torah who don't have a bitter rivalry or fight with each other. After all, the Torah is replete with stories of brothers in conflict: Kayin and Hevel, Yishmael and Yitzchak, Yaakov and Eisav, Yosef and his brothers, etc. Still, this approach is difficult to accept. First, there are many examples of brothers in the Torah who show no specific animosity to one another: Shem, Cham, and Yefet, and Avraham Avinu and his brothers, to name a few. Second, we have no specific indication that Ephraim and Menashe had a unique fraternal relationship. Third, it isn't a law of nature that brothers have to be in conflict, many famous brothers lived in harmony, such as Moshe and Aharon. Finally, it is highly improbable that none of the children of the other shvatim had positive sibling relationships; why should Yaakov single out only Yosef's children for that reason? Ramban (ad loc) comments that this bracha was a specific blessing to Yosef. When the possuk says, "in you shall Yisroel bless" this refers to Yosef himself. This sentiment is echoed by Targum Yonason Ben Uziel, who adds that this bracha is also given on the day of a boy's bris. Ramban also says (48:15) that Yosef may have actually had more children after Yaakov and his family settled in Egypt, but this bracha was specifically regarding only Menashe and Ephraim. If this bracha is really for Yosef, why does Yaakov specifically designate only Ephraim and Menashe? Yaakov is alluding to a very powerful message, one that would be crucial to all generations of Bnei Yisroel to come. Yosef had come to Egypt as a slave, sat in jail for a few years, and then rose to the highest possible position of authority, below only Pharaoh himself. Egypt was a place well-known for immorality and idol worship. Yet, through it all, Yosef was able to maintain who he was and even raise children with the same values that he had absorbed from the house of his father Yaakov.

Yaakov is alluding to this remarkable accomplishment and foretelling the importance of this for future generations. We bless our children that they should be like Ephraim and Menashe; children who grew up in an environment totally bereft of holiness, yet persevered in representing the values of their father and the Jewish people. Yosef raised children under the most difficult of circumstances and they turned out exactly like him. This is also why Yaakov gives them the ultimate recognition by replacing Yosef with them among the shvatim, each one heading his own tribe. This further explains why we give our sons this blessing on the day of their bris. The day of one's bris a child is "brought into the covenant of Avraham Avinu." Avraham Avinu came from a family of idol worshippers and rose to make it his mission to bring Hashem into a world that had no knowledge of His presence. The very definition of being a Jew is bringing Hashem into this world by carrying on the values of your ancestors, no matter what life's circumstances may bring.

[[www.torahweb.org/torah/2025/parsha/rdst\\_vayechi.html](http://www.torahweb.org/torah/2025/parsha/rdst_vayechi.html)]

Rabbi Daniel Stein

Continuity Can Be Dangerous

Persistent and continuous study is an essential feature, if not the very definition of ameilus be'Torah and an indispensable precursor to becoming a talmid chacham. Even minor or brief interruptions can have potentially deleterious and irreparable effects. For example, the Gemara (Kesubos 63a) relates that at the behest of his wife, Rabbi Akiva spent the first twelve years of his marriage away from home learning Torah in yeshiva. When the stipulated stint of twelve years had concluded, Rabbi Akiva made his way back with his newly acquired cadre of students in tow, all the while expressing the gratitude he felt towards his wife for her heroic sacrifice as he declared "my Torah knowledge and yours is actually hers." When the entourage reached his house, before he could enter, Rabbi Akiva overheard his wife expressing regret about his imminent arrival saying, "if he would listen to me, he would sit and study for another twelve years." Rabbi Akiva took this disclosure to heart and returned to the yeshiva forthwith to complete a full tour of twenty-four years. Even though Rabbi Akiva had already traveled home and was standing at the foot of his door, he did not pop inside for a few minutes or stop to have a cup of coffee with his wife for he was afraid that even the slightest interlude might diminish his momentum and disturb his concentration. In the inimitable words of Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, sometimes twelve plus twelve does not equal twenty-four.

Nonetheless, Rashi (Breishes 47:28) interprets the seamless and uninterrupted continuity between Parshas Vayigash and Parshas Vayechi negatively, as he explains, "This section is totally closed because as soon as Yaakov died the hearts and eyes of Israel became closed due to the misery of the bondage which they then began to impose upon them. Alternatively, because Yaakov wished to reveal the date of the End of Days but the vision was closed from him." Why is the lack of a break between these two parshiyos in the Torah a cause for concern? Isn't uninterrupted study the hallmark of true diligence and hasmadah? If anything, this textual anomaly should be an indication that Yaakov and his sons were constantly learning and shteiging away during this period.

Rav Yitzchok Meir Morgenstern (Likkutei Yam Hachochmah) answers that while consistent and continuous study is critical and laudable, if left

unqualified and undefined, it can have adverse and harmful consequences. Without proper framing and context, intense Torah learning has the potential to become a completely self-absorbed exercise, detached from its spiritual roots and character. For this reason, the Gemara (Megillah 32a) stresses the importance of closing the sefer Torah after it has been read and states, "the greatest among them should furl the sefer Torah, for this is the most distinguished honor, and the one who furls it takes the reward of all of them." Rav Yaakov Leizer of Pshevorsk suggests that the role of furling the sefer Torah is to provide an opportunity to reflect upon the Torah's Divine properties and significance, which is impossible and inappropriate to ponder while actively engaged in the pursuit of studying and processing its content. Rashi (Vayikra 1:1) claims that the purpose of the blank spaces in between the subjects and subsections of the Torah was for the sake of contemplation. These respites are intended not only for analysis but also for emphasizing that Torah study is first and foremost a religious obligation and endeavor. Hence, when these breaks are missing and the parshiyos flow directly from one to the next, it is a sign that the objective of coming closer to Hashem is in danger of becoming overlooked and obscured.

Chassidic doctrine holds that Torah should ideally be studied for the sake of dveikus, as the Tanya (Chapter 5) writes "study for its own sake is to study with the intent to attach one's soul to God through the comprehension of the Torah." To accomplish this goal, the Baal Shem Tov (Tzavaas Harivash) advises, "when studying Torah, pause and rest a bit every hour to bond yourself to Hashem, even though while you are immersed in the study of Torah itself this is not possible." Rav Chaim of Volozhin (Nefesh Hachaim, Chapter 4) passionately rejects this outlook and argues that the Torah is not a vehicle for clinging to God but the very representation of God in comprehensible terms. Therefore, by studying Torah for the sole purpose of understanding the material, one is simultaneously and inevitably engaged in an act of dveikus, since the Torah and Hashem are indeed synonymous. However, even though Rav Chaim of Volozhin believes that pausing Torah study to contemplate God would be nonsensical, counterproductive, and even offensive, he does concede that time should be dedicated to teaching and intermittently reinforcing the precise nature and import of Torah learning. It is lamentable that some veteran talmidim, after spending years immersed in the yeshiva system and sedorim, emerge having never stopped to properly appreciate the spiritual function of Torah study and its relationship to the religious goal of connecting with God.

The Tenth of Teves is a fast day commemorating the beginning of the siege of Yerushalayim by Nebuchadnezzar which eventually led to the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash and the Babylonian exile. A siege is designed to sever the inhabitants that are inside the city from the markets and supplies that are outside the city. Perhaps, part of the mourning on this day revolves around the separation that sometimes develops between our external actions and the internal thoughts that they are designed to evoke. Only if we pause to consider and internalize the spiritual implications of our mitzvos, and specifically talmud Torah, can we begin to combat and overcome the personal siege that exists within ourselves and aspire to restore our continuous connection with Hashem once again.

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## Parashat Vayechi: A Family Becomes a Nation

By Rabbi Eitan Mayer

: This week's parasha closes Sefer Bereishit (Genesis). As we prepare to close the book on this sefer, it is important to briefly review its broad themes.

### SEFER BEREISHIT: A QUICK LOOK BACK:

#### TZELEM ELOKIM:

Bereishit's earlier parshiot recount the events which lead to the creation of a special group of people meant to maintain a close relationship with Hashem. At first, it appears that Hashem 'hopes' to establish a close relationship with all of humanity; all people are created in the "image of God" ("tzelem Elokim"). We noted that the Torah implies that humanity's being patterned after the image of God is not simply a description of human nature, but a tripartite \*mission\*:

- \* Humanity is to emulate Hashem's creativity by procreating.
- \* Humanity is to emulate Hashem's mastery by mastering the created world.
- \* Humanity is to emulate Hashem's moral perfection by behaving morally.

"Tzelem Elokim" is not handed to us on a silver platter, it is a mission. Humanity is granted the basic potential to achieve mastery, creativity, and morality, and is charged to actualize this potential. We are not born "images of Hashem"; we are born as mirrors, so to speak. The choices we make determine whether we will stand before Hashem, reflecting His image, or face in other directions, and therefore reflect things other than His image.

#### FAILURE AND DISAPPOINTMENT:

If "tzelem Elokim" is a mission, then it can be failed. Indeed, humanity begins to disappoint early on. Adam and Hava's older son, Kayyin (Cain), murders his brother, failing as a tzelem Elokim (as demonstrated from the text). Kayyin's descendants readily absorb his example of readiness to murder, clearly a basic moral failure. Kayyin and his "line" are eventually replaced by Shet (Seth) and his descendants.

As humanity grows beyond the proportions of a single family, its moral failure becomes epidemic. Humanity successfully exercises mastery and creativity, inventing crucial industrial processes, musical instruments, and agricultural methods. But morally, humanity has failed. Hashem 'regrets' having created humanity and destroys all of the failed "tzelem Elokim"s along with the animal kingdom, saving only the righteous Noah and his family.

The destruction of the world "uncreates" creation, reversing the step-by-step process of creation with a parallel step-by-step process of destruction. But the seeds of recreation are planted before destruction: Hashem commands that all species be preserved in preparation for the step-by-step recreation of the world. In reestablishing the world, Hashem repeats to Noah and his family the three-part "tzelem Elokim" mission, this time stressing the prohibition of murder in order to address humanity's past failure to achieve the moral part of the "tzelem" mission.

#### A NEW PLAN:

Hashem's "disappointment" leads Him to change the original plan of maintaining a close relationship with all of humanity. Consequently, the next major event the Torah reports is the appearance of Avraham. Until this point, we hear nothing of "special" nations and "special" lands, of Hashem's being "the God" of a particular nation. Avraham's appearance changes all this. Hashem has decided that while humanity at large has failed the tzelem mission, a special group of devoted individuals can achieve this mission (and perhaps eventually lead the rest of humanity closer to this goal).

#### SELECTION: AVRAHAM:

At this point, we began to focus on the selection of the Avot and the rejection of various figures along the way. The Torah

presents the greatness of the Avot as emerging from their successfully meeting the challenges with which they struggle. The strength the Avot display as they develop is what makes them Avot. We traced the growth of Avraham's trust in Hashem from his initial uncertainty of Hashem's promises, to the breathtaking faith he manifests at the Akeida (Binding of Isaac). Along the way, we learned about Avraham's struggles for justice (saving Sodom), his courageous self-sacrifice (saving Lot from captivity), and other lessons too detailed to sacrifice to synopsis. We also examined the rejection of Yishmael for his vicious, cynical sniggering.

### **A HOLD ON ERETZ YISRAEL:**

We paused at *Hayyei Sara* to look at the perspective of the Avot on Eretz Yisrael as a place to \*live,\* not merely a place to make "posthumous aliyah." Avraham's purchase of the Cave of Mahpela focused our attention on his insistence on establishing a permanent personal hold on a piece of the holy ground and his joy at being able to establish permanent \*residence\* there (not merely permanent \*decedence\* there). The same pattern appears later with regard to other Avot, who consistently stress the \*field\* of Mahpela -- the place of fruit-bearing, living trees -- and do not focus only on the cave, the place of burial. As we will see shortly, this theme recurs as *Sefer Bereishit* comes to a close.

### **YA'AKOV, "ISH TAM":**

We turned our attention to the development of Ya'akov, through his deception of his father and brother, his development under Lavan's careful "tutelage," and his heroic self-transformation in facing Hashem's angel and his brother Eisav. His triumph arrives when he merits the blessings of spiritual destiny which Yitzhak had given him in potential twenty years before. The change of Ya'akov's name to Yisrael signifies a change in his character, in his approach to challenges. We also noted the rejection of Eisav as leader of God's future nation and found text-grounded justification for this rejection.

### **YEHUDA AND YOSEF:**

We next turned to the development and selection of Yehuda and Yosef as leaders among Ya'akov's sons. We first traced Yosef's development from self-centeredness and immaturity (noted by Hazal and criticized freely by them and medieval commentators) to Hashem-centeredness, maturity, generosity, and greater mastery of the complexity of leadership. Next, we examined Yehuda's development, pinpointing his greatness in his ability to courageously admit wrongdoing and learn from it, and his capacity for self-regeneration in taking responsibility for his brothers and protecting his vulnerable father's feelings. In this context, we briefly touched upon Re'uvein's mistakes (Hazal refer to him as a "bekhor shoteh," a "foolish first-born"), which, despite his courage, spell his rejection as leader of Ya'akov's sons.

Most recently, we traced Yosef's manipulation of his brothers in his effort to see if they have done teshuva (repented) for selling him and learned the lessons of responsibility necessary for the family to reunite and continue to grow toward its destiny as a nation.

### **TAKE IT PERSONALLY:**

In all of these discussions, our aim has been to understand the Torah and to try to take "personally" all of the lessons these stories offer us in conducting our own lives.

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### **PARASHAT VA-YHI: TRANSITION**

When you write a coherent essay, you make sure (or you ought to, anyway) to structure your paragraphs so that the paragraphs "hold hands" -- you embed transitions in the end of each paragraph and the beginning of the next paragraph in order to communicate to your readers that you are "shifting gears," shifting focus to a new idea, and in order to draw them with you as you move on.

Parashat Va-Yhi is just such a transition. *Sefer Bereishit* follows the relationship between Hashem and humanity from its

universal beginnings to its focus on a small group, and then through the process of the selection of great individuals ("Avot") to found and lead that group. Sefer Shemot develops a different theme: the creation of a national consciousness and national character (see also Abravanel's introduction to Sefer Shemot, which expands on this theme). Parashat Va-Yhi is the transition between the "individuals" theme of Bereishit and the "nation" theme of Shemot.

Imagine that you didn't know that Sefer Bereishit ends with Parashat Va-Yhi. What signs of transition to a new theme could you find in the parasha?

#### **"NO JEW WILL BE LEFT BEHIND" (apologies to MBD):**

Sefer Bereishit follows a pattern of selection and rejection of sons: Yitzhak is chosen and Yishmael rejected, Ya'akov is chosen and Eisav rejected. In contrast, Parashat Va-Yhi confirms all of Ya'akov's sons as members of the future nation, participants in the destiny promised to Yisrael by E-I Shad-dai (recall Parashat VaYishlah). Although some sons are singled out in our parasha for criticism or praise, the fact that no one is rejected despite his flaws shows that Hashem (and Ya'akov) has decided that this entire group will found the nation. Since the theme of Sefer Bereishit is the selection of founders for the nation, and since this process of selection seems to have reached completion, the Sefer is complete.

#### **INTERNAL DIVERSITY:**

This brings up an important observation: our discussions of Va-Yeishev, Mikkeitz, and Va-Yigash have shown that the sons of Ya'akov are highly diverse people. Re'uvein, Yehuda, and Yosef, for example, are all leaders, but their personalities and leadership styles are clearly divergent. The centerpiece of this week's parasha -- Ya'akov's blessings to his sons -- confirms and deepens this observation. Each of Ya'akov's sons faces different challenges and brings different strengths to bear on them. The fact that no one is rejected from participating in creating the Jewish nation indicates that all of these different strengths are necessary. Besides combining the legacies of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov, the nation needs the internal diversity of different perspectives in order to adequately achieve its mission.

To illustrate with just one example, the different strengths of the various shevatim (tribes) have provided leaders whose characteristics enable them to successfully lead in the diverse places and times in which we have needed leadership. Bringing a nation out of enslavement and facilitating the nation's communication with Hashem at Sinai (Moshe, Shevet Leivi) demands a different set of leadership characteristics than does leading a nation into a new land, conquering it, and apportioning it (Yehoshua, Shevet Ephrattyim). Unifying a splintered, tribally organized nation and establishing a permanent dynasty (David, Shevet Yehuda) demands a different set of leadership capabilities than does leading the exiled nation through a time of critical emergency with wisdom and faith (Mordekhai, Shevet Binyamin). There are dozens of such examples; despite Yehuda's basic hold on the monarchy, different circumstances have demanded leadership from other tribes as well. The leadership resources provided by this internal diversity have enabled us to successfully face challenges of all kinds. Hopefully, Hashem will continue to provide us with leaders to help us deal with the challenges we encounter in the present and future.

[Of course, as Jewish history demonstrates, the "down side" of this internal multiplicity is that separate entities can work not only with each other, but also against each other.]

#### **NATIONAL THEMES:**

As mentioned above, Sefer Shemot develops themes of our national development. These themes first begin to resonate in a number of specific contexts in our parasha. Of course, the basic idea that the Avot will produce a nation has been clear since as early as Parashat Lekh Lekha, when Hashem promises to make Avraham into a "great nation." Yitzhak and Ya'akov also receive promises of nationhood. But national themes have slipped into the background in more recent parshiot: VaYeishev, Mikkeitz, and Va-Yigash focus largely on events within Ya'akov's family and make little or no mention of the national aspect. But Va-Yhi brings national themes back into focus in two different ways:

- 1) Specific mention of the future nation or national institutions such as laws and tribes.

2) Mention of the eventual return to Eretz Cana'an (after the Egyptian exile), or restatement of the family's / nation's significant connections to Eretz Cana'an.

## **NATION, INSTITUTIONS, AND LAND:**

Parashat Va-Yhi is not only where familiar national themes ("I will make you into a great nation") begin to reappear in the text, it is also the place where some national themes appear for the first time. When Ya'akov repeats to Yosef the blessing he received from E-I Shad-dai, he is repeating a theme we know well:

BEREISHIT 48:3-4 --

Ya'akov said to Yosef, "E-I Shad-dai appeared to me at Luz in the Land of Cana'an and blessed me. He said to me, "I shall increase you, multiply you, and make you into a throng of nations; I shall give this land to your children after you as a permanent possession . . . ."

But when Ya'akov turns to Shimon and Leivi and curses their anger for their massacre of Shekhem, his words evoke the picture of a nation established on its own land:

BEREISHIT 49:5-7 --

"Shimon and Leivi are brothers; weapons of violence are their wares. In their council shall my soul not come; in their gathering shall my soul not rejoice, for in their fury they killed men, and by their will they uprooted oxen. Cursed is their anger for its strength, and their fury for its hardness; I shall split them up among Ya'akov and scatter them among Yisrael."

Shimon and Leivi must be scattered throughout the national homeland in order to guarantee that they do not once again come together and wreak violence out of measure. Sefer Yehoshua reports that indeed, Shimon receives a portion of Eretz Yisrael surrounded by the portion of Yehuda, whose job is apparently to control Shimon. And the Torah tells us many times that Leivi never receives a portion of Eretz Yizrael, and receives only individual cities scattered throughout the land. (As we will see, Leivi's "punishment" turns out much different than Shimon's!) In terms of our theme, what is clear for the first time is that each of Ya'akov's sons will be part of a nation, that this nation will conquer and occupy Cana'an, and that each son's descendants will receive a portion of the land (except Shimon and Leivi). This already suggests the tribal arrangement of Kelal Yisrael which we know from later on in the Torah, but its appearance here is unprecedented.

Ya'akov's mention of Ephrayim and Menashe's growth into nationhood is also not a "new" story -- they are merely being included in the destiny of Ya'akov's children -- but what Ya'akov says to Yosef just after blessing the two boys sounds a theme which will occupy the first half of Sefer Shemot: redemption from Egypt and return to Cana'an:

BEREISHIT 48:21 --

Yisrael said to Yosef, "I am going to die; Hashem shall be with you and return you to the land of your fathers . . . ."

Ya'akov's blessing to Yehuda also sounds a theme which telegraphs "national institution" as a basic assumption. Not only will Yehuda be the acknowledged leader of his brothers, as Ya'akov predicts as he begins the blessing to Yehuda, but Yehuda's authority will continue far into the future:

BEREISHIT 49:10 --

"The staff ["shevet"] will not be removed from Yehuda, nor law-making authority ["me-hokek"] from between his legs, until Shilo comes, and to him is the gathering of nations."

The mefarshim (commentators) debate whether "Shilo" refers to David, the Messiah, or some other personality or event; they also debate the meaning of "yik'hat amim." But it seems clear that Yehuda is being given broad authority to rule and to make or enforce laws -- a promise which can refer only to a polity governed by laws: a nation.

## TRIBES:

One other very important term which appears for the first time in our parasha is the term "shevet" -- literally, "staff." In fact, this term appears only three times in all of Sefer Bereishit -- all three in our parasha: 49:10 with regard to Yehuda's authority, 49:16 with regard to Dan, and 49:28 with regard to all of the sons of Ya'akov. Note that this word is used here in different ways, since "staff" can symbolize a number of things. With regard to Yehuda, "shevet" refers specifically to leadership (the leader carries a special staff, similar to a scepter, as we see later in the case of Moshe); with regard to Dan, "shevet" seems to mean something very similar to "shofet," "judge"; and when used to refer to all of the sons, "shevet" means what we mean when we refer to the "Twelve tribes" -- each tribal leader carries a staff ("shevet") representing his authority and separate identity from the other tribes, and this term is borrowed to refer to the entire tribe itself.

Although many of us are used to thinking of the sons of Ya'akov as the "shevatim" ("tribes"), the fact is that until now, they have been only individuals, not founders of tribes which comprise a nation. As our parasha looks forward through Ya'akov's blessings into the distant future of the nation and anticipates the national themes of Sefer Shemot, the parasha begins to suggest the notion of tribes.

## A LOOK BACK AT THE LAND:

We have already noted that our parasha anticipates the themes of exodus and redemption in Ya'akov's assurance to Yosef that Hashem will eventually return the family to Cana'an. Yosef also assures his brothers before his own death that Hashem will "remember" them and eventually return them to Cana'an. But our parasha also directs our attention to the dual connections established by the Avot with Eretz Cana'an:

- 1) Hashem's promises to the Avot that they / their children shall inherit the land.
- 2) Avraham's purchase of a permanent personal "foothold" in the land -- the Field of Mahpela.

Ya'akov brings us back to a familiar theme (if you were with us for Parashat Hayyei Sara) when he commands his sons with his final words to bury him in the Cave of Mahpela:

BEREISHIT 49:29-32 --

He commanded them, saying, "I am to be gathered to my nation [=die]; bury me with my fathers in the \*CAVE\* in the \*FIELD\* of Efron the Hittite; in the \*CAVE\* in the \*FIELD\* of Mahpela which is before Mamre in the Land of Cana'an, the \*FIELD\* which Avraham bought from Efron the Hittite as a possession. There they buried Avraham and Sara his wife; there they buried Yitzhak and Rivka, his wife; and there I buried Le'ah -- [in] the purchase from the Hittites of the \*FIELD\* and the \*CAVE\* in it."

The Torah echoes Ya'akov's language in reporting the burial itself:

BEREISHIT 50:13 --

His sons carried him to the Land of Cana'an and buried him in the \*CAVE\* of the \*FIELD\* of Mahpela, the \*FIELD\* which Avraham had bought as a grave-possession from Efron the Hittite, [which is] before Mamre.

Ya'akov's request to his sons seems very repetitive and wordy -- he mentions the field and the cave three times, mentions twice that the field and cave were bought from Efron the Hittite, mentions unnecessarily that Avraham was the one who bought the field, and goes through the entire list of the people already buried there. What is so important about these details?

If Ya'akov's only intention is to give his sons directions to the field and cave, it should hardly be necessary to list the current occupants of the cave, or who originally owned it and who bought it, or to mention "field" and "cave" so many

times. Why such formality, detail, and repetition in describing this piece of real estate? And why does the Torah repeat some of these details in narrating Ya'akov's burial?

If you recall our discussion of Parashat Hayyei Sara (or our brief review of it above), you will remember that we understood the complex and somewhat bizarre negotiations between Avraham and Efron the Hittite as an unspoken struggle on the part of Avraham to buy a piece of land as a personal foothold in Eretz Cana'an, and on the part of the Hittites to prevent him from gaining such a foothold. The "fierce politeness" of the Hittites and the "insistent obsequiousness" of Avraham betray this struggle, hidden beneath a veneer of genteel gentile generosity and gracious but firm Abrahamic refusal. Avraham avoids accepting a free grave-space among the grave plots of the Hittites and succeeds in purchasing not only a grave plot of his own, but a field to go with it; not simply a place to go once he is dead, but also a place to live! And indeed, as the Torah tells us on several occasions subsequent to this sale, the Avot do live in Hevron, the city of the Field of Mahpela (and in which the Cave is located).

Why is Avraham so eager to buy a plot in Eretz Cana'an? Avraham has been promised by Hashem that he will receive Eretz Cana'an. But as he grows older and sees that no process seems to be unfolding which will grant him the land, he begins to wonder whether Hashem intends to fulfill His promise. Eventually, he asks Hashem directly: "How do I know that I will inherit it?" (15:8).

Hashem responds by correcting Avraham's misunderstanding of the promise: Avraham himself would not inherit the land; he would "join his fathers in peace," dying without participating in the struggle for the Land. After four generations of exile and enslavement in a foreign country, his descendants would return to conquer and inherit Eretz Cana'an. Avraham places complete faith in this promise, but he is somewhat disappointed that he himself will not inherit the land. Shortly afterward comes his opportunity to gain a personal stake in the Land: the death of his wife and the chance to use the search for a grave for her as a lever to manipulate the "people of the land" into selling him a plot of his own (since they cannot get away with outrightly refusing to give a burial place to the bereaved Avraham). [For the full development of this theme, our discussion of Hayyei Sara is available those interested.]

### **YA'AKOV TAKES THE LONG VIEW:**

Ya'akov recognizes the danger facing his sons as they settle into Egyptian life and raise their families under Yosef's providence and protection: that they will forget about Eretz Cana'an and their connection to it, that they will not maintain the hope of returning to their land. In order to guard against this, he communicates to his sons the message of return: Hashem will eventually bring them back from Egypt to Cana'an. To reinforce their memories of the land and the importance it holds for the family, he paints a vivid snapshot of one important piece of it -- the family home and burial plot in Hevron:

- 1) He reminds them of the story they all know well of Avraham's cleverness in negotiating with the crafty Hittites, his insistence on buying his own burial plot, and his unblinking willingness to pay an exorbitant sum for it, a story which reminds them how important Eretz Cana'an was to their great-grandfather Avraham.
- 2) He reminds them that what Avraham bought was not just a burial place, but also a field, a place of life (the same emphasis on the field that appears in our parasha features prominently in the original account of Avraham's purchase; that account stressed that the field was full of trees, certainly a symbol of growth and vitality in Tanakh), where Avraham and Yitzhak lived and where they themselves were raised by their father.
- 3) He reminds them that this plot of land also connects them to the Land by virtue of its status as the family burial ground: Avraham and Sara, Yitzhak and Rivka, and Le'ah are all buried there. We all understand the deep emotional connection people maintain to the places their parents or earlier ancestors are buried; Ya'akov is trying to strengthen this connection.

These strategies highlight two aspects of our relationship to Eretz Yisrael (which we discussed at Hayyei Sara):

- 1) "The Field": Our connection to the Land as our living homeland, our place to live our lives, serve Hashem, raise our families.

2) "The Cave:" Our connection to the Land as our ultimate homeland, the place where our dead are buried. Even if we are not able to live there, it is the place we acknowledge as our homeland, the place to which we return to bury our dead because we want them to rest at home.

Unfortunately, the "Cave" gets much more press nowadays than the "Field" -- it is much easier to make a casual touristy visit to the touchstones of Jewish history in Eretz Yisrael (Kotel, graves, archaeological sites, museums, etc.) than it is to make a personal commitment to the "Field" (living in the land, spending time learning in yeshiva there, etc.). But the fact remains that the "Cave" connection serves an important function today as it did then: to maintain our connection to the land even when we have no access to the "Field."

This may explain why Ya'akov is so insistent on being buried in Eretz Cana'an and why Yosef later displays the same desire. Besides his own personal desire to be buried with his wife, parents, and grandparents, Ya'akov also knows that for his sons, bringing his body back to Cana'an for burial will also be a powerful experience which will renew their connection to the land and refresh their desire to return to it. The procession to Cana'an is not merely a funeral, it is also a pilgrimage to the family home.

Yosef understands this, and therefore, when he reminds his brothers that Hashem will eventually return them to Cana'an, he makes his brothers swear that they will bring his bones up with them. This promise not only expresses Yosef's desire to be buried in Cana'an, it also guarantees that Bnei Yisrael will not forget their connection to the land.

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### **PREPARATION FOR SEFER SHEMOT:**

This may sound extreme, but the best way to prepare for learning through any book of Tanakh is to lightning-read the entire Sefer. This is the first step in my own preparation, and I consider it valuable for the following reasons:

1) It quickly reminds us of all the things we think we remember but really don't. This is especially true of books of the Humash besides Sefer Bereishit, since Bereishit is nearly all stories, which are easier to remember than the legal portions of the Torah. Do you, for instance, recall much of the content of Parashat Mishpatim? How about Parashat Tzav? Parashat Shofetim? Got the picture?

2) It helps us overcome the "snapshot" effect: we tend to fall into the trap of looking at Humash in a disjointed way if we look at only one parasha at a time. It is crucial to merge the "snapshots" into a "movie" by taking a quick read through the Sefer (preferably in Hebrew),

- a) feeling the momentum of the story line,
- b) tracing the development of characters over long stretches of text (which we miss if we look only at "snapshots"), and
- c) recognizing the major themes of the Sefer.

As you cruise through the text at high speed:

- a) Note questions and patterns which seem significant.
- b) Write an outline of the major events/sections of the text and consult it as you prepare each week so that you maintain that sense of bird's-eye view which the lightning-read gives you.
- c) Ask yourself why the Torah includes particular events and leaves out others.

Shabbat shalom

## Parshas Vayechi: May God Make You as Ephraim and Menasheh

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

### I. EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH

"They are the sons God has given me here," Yoseph said to his father. Then Yisra'el said, "Bring them to me so I may bless them." Now Yisra'el's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Yoseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them. Yisra'el said to Yoseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." Then Yoseph removed them from his father's knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. And Yoseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Yisra'el's left hand and Menasheh on his left toward Yisra'el's right hand, and brought them close to him. But Yisra'el reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Menasheh's head, since Menasheh was the firstborn. Then he blessed Yoseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." (B'resheet [Genesis] 48:9-16)

This famous deathbed scene is etched into our consciousness and is replayed in Jewish homes every Friday night when we bless our children:

"May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh." (ibid. v. 20)

Upon close inspection, there are a few anomalies regarding this narrative which are worthy of our attention:

- 1) Why did Ya'akov embrace and kiss his grandchildren before blessing them? - we don't find him doing this with his own children in the subsequent blessing scene (Ch. 49).
- 2) Why does it matter which hand is used to bless the "more deserving" child?
- 3) If Ya'akov wanted to raise the position of Ephraim over that of Menasheh, why didn't he insist that they switch positions - why cross his hands? (This question is exacerbated by the end of v. 14 - he crossed his arms since Menasheh was the firstborn - why is Menasheh being the firstborn a reason for crossing his arms?)
- 4) Why did Ya'akov prefer Ephraim to Menasheh, giving him the greater (right-handed) blessing? When challenged by Yoseph, his response was:

"I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations." (v. 19); however, this response is enigmatic and puzzling. If Ya'akov had indicated that Ephraim was more worthy, more saintly or otherwise more deserving, we could understand. His answer indicates anything but that; it seems that Ya'akov has elected to "go with the winner" and support the son who is destined for greatness - what can we make of his response and his thinking?

- 5) What was the blessing with which Ya'akov blessed his grandchildren while he had his hands on their heads? The text indicates that as he placed his hands on their heads, he blessed Yoseph (regarding their well-being) - but not them!

### II. FLASHBACK: YITZCHAK'S BLESSING

Even a cursory reading of our text quickly brings to mind another blessing scene in B'resheet: Yitzchak blessing Ya'akov in the guise of Esav, followed by the actual blessing received by Esav. (I suggest a quick review of Chapter 27 before continuing).

In both scenes, the bestower of the blessing (Yitzchak, Ya'akov) suffers from poor eyesight, he embraces the recipient(s) of the blessing - and the text of the blessing is not mentioned in the text (see 27:23 and v. 27 carefully). More accurately, each scene includes two blessings (v.23 and 27; 48:15 and 20), neither of which is explicitly presented in the text.

There are several questions to be asked about the narrative in Chapter 27 (in addition to the parallel questions we have already raised from Ch. 48) - the resolution of which will help us understand Ya'akov's behavior with his grandsons:

- 6) Why was Rivkah so concerned that Ya'akov get that particular blessing, even at the risk of his being cursed instead?
- 7) What is the relationship - if any - between Ya'akov's purchase of the b'khorah (right of the firstborn) at the end of Chapter 25 and his deceptive taking of the blessing in Chapter 27?

[parenthetical note: the first episode of Ya'akov's life, the purchase of the b'khorah, involves an oath. After Esav agrees to sell his rights to Ya'akov, Ya'akov makes him recommit to that sale through an oath. The final scene of Ya'akov's life, beginning at 47:29, involves his request of Yoseph to be buried in the Land. After Yoseph commits to personally fulfill the request, Ya'akov makes him take an oath. Interesting bookends...but beyond the scope of this shiur.]

- 8) To paraphrase Esav's question (27:38), did Yitzchak have only one blessing to bestow? Why couldn't their father have repeated the same blessing - or given one of equal worth - to Esav?

### **III. THE B'KHORAH - WHERE DID IT GO?**

I'd like to ask one more question before beginning to decipher our text.

As we see from Ya'akov gift of a double portion (Ephraim & Menasheh) of land to Yoseph, he was given the financial benefits of the b'khorah (see D'varim 21:17). The verse in Divrei HaYamim states:

The sons of Re'even the firstborn of Yisra'el. He was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Yoseph son of Yisra'el, so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright; though Yehudah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Yoseph. (Divrei HaYamim I 5:1)

Besides the financial benefits of the b'khorah (double inheritance), there seems to be a second component inherent in the b'khorah - political power. The verse indicates that although the financial rights of Re'even's b'khorah were bestowed to Yoseph, the political component was given to Yehudah, who became prominent among his brothers. The Midrash (Aggadat B'resheet #83) adds a third dimension to the b'khorah - Kehunah (priesthood). (This is further demonstrated by the "switch" of these rights and responsibilities to the Levi'im [Bamidbar 3:41] - where it is clear that representation at worship was the duty of the b'khorot -see also Targum Onkelos on B'resheet 49:3).

In other words, until Sinai, the firstborn in a family would inherit three rights:

Double inheritance,

Political control over the family and

Representation of the family at sacrificial rites.

On his deathbed, Ya'akov gave the financial-b'khorah to Yoseph and the political-b'khorah to Yehudah - but who received the worship-b'khorah?

### **IV. KEHUNAH - THE LEGACY OF EVERY FAMILY**

We know that the families of Avraham and Yitzchak did not follow the ideal pattern for Jewish family life; in each case, only one son was chosen to carry on the tradition of the family and the rest were sent away. The conventional understanding is that the first proper family within our tradition was that of Ya'akov - 12 sons, all included and all maintainers of the tradition. We therefore expect the firstborn (Re'even) to be accorded the usual rights appropriate for that position - and are surprised to see them taken away from him.

I'd like to propose another way of understanding Ya'akov's family. Just as Avraham and Yitzchak's job was to raise one son to follow in their respective footsteps, similarly Ya'akov had the responsibility to raise twelve sons to build upon the tradition he received. In other words, he was not raising one family - with the eldest occupying the conventional position of b'khor;

he was raising twelve families, each of which would have their own b'khor. [Although Re'even is called b'khor Ya'akov (e.g. B'resheet 35:23), this may be referring to simple birth order, not to position within the family.] This explains how Ya'akov "transferred" the b'khorah to Yoseph - something which is forbidden in Sefer D'varim - (see 21:17 again). He wasn't eliminating a b'khor - he was simply appointing the family headed by the financial wizard among the sons as "Chief Financial Officer" of his estate (Eretz Yisra'el). In the same way, he appointed Yehudah, who had earned the allegiance of his brothers, as the family that would rule over the other families - but only with regard to those issues which affect all twelve as a unit. Within each family, the b'khor would hold both financial and political rule. Regarding the Kehunah - the spiritual b'khorah - that remained within each of B'nai Yisra'el and became the responsibility of each of their b'khorot.

## **V. S'MIKHAH - EMBRACE AND TRANSMISSION**

The S'foro (B'resheet 48:18), in explaining the importance of the right hand in Ya'akov's blessing, states:

Since S'mikhah with the hand focuses the spirit toward the object upon which it is placed, like he placed his hands upon him [referring to Mosheh's s'mikhah of Yehoshua - Bamidbar (Numbers) 27:23] and the right hand is [generally] stronger than the left, therefore the s'mikhah of the right [hand] will focus more than the s'mikhah of the left.

S'mikhah is a Halakhah which first appears in the beginning of Vayyikra:

\*v'Samakh Yado\* (He shall lay his hand) on the head of the burnt offering.. (1:4)

The Halakhah of s'mikhah requires that in the case of any private offering, immediately prior to slaughtering the animal, the owner of the offering must lay his hands on the animal with all of his strength (MT Ma'aseh haKorbanot 3:13). In his explanation of the meaning behind animal offerings, Ramban (commentary to Vayyikra 1:9) suggests that the person bringing the offering should view himself as if he were on the altar. The catharsis of Korbanot is achieved when the owner experiences his own sacrifice vicariously through the offering. S'mikhah, performed immediately before the offering is slaughtered, is the process by which the owner transmits his energy into the animal in order that the offering truly represent him on the altar.

[On the point of s'mikhah with all of one's strength - Think of how powerfully we hug a close friend or loved one at times of great sadness or joy - and think of how we hug a casual acquaintance when the occasion calls for it.]

There is another s'mikhah in Halakhah besides that preceding an offering. As S'foro points out, when Mosheh was preparing to transmit the mantle of leadership to Yehoshua, he performed s'mikhah on Yehoshua, laying his hands on Yehoshua's head. Following S'foro's reasoning, Mosheh was transmitting his energy/self, to Yehoshua, investing him with (at least) a connection to Mosheh's experience atop Sinai. Through the 1400 years when s'mikhah was operative (see BT Sanhedrin 14a), each recipient of s'mikhah was given a piece of the experience of Mosheh at Sinai, along with all of the others in the intervening chain. Each recipient had a direct link to the Revelation at Sinai and to the fount from which the Oral Law springs.

## **VI. THREE TYPES OF B'RAKHOT**

Before Sinai, there were three types of b'rakhot bestowed by people:

- a) The conventional well-wishing b'rakhah, (e.g. B'resheet 47:7,10).
- b) The designation-b'rakhah, (e.g. Ch. 49, where Ya'akov gave his children a b'rakhah - which was, essentially, his last will and testament.) This designation-b'rakhah was an assignment of duties, properties etc. within the family.
- c) The conferral-b'rakhah - which was the model for the post-Sinaitic s'mikhah.

Unlike a well-wishing blessing, in which the person who is most deserving gets the finest "wish", this b'rakhah is a real conferral of power and strength to the recipient. Since this conferral-b'rakhah was a highly charged emotional experience, reflecting a deep connection between the two parties involved, in order for it to be effective, the bestower had to first have a direct connection to the recipient. S'foro (B'resheet 48:10) explains that Ya'akov requested that Yoseph bring his sons close in order to embrace them. The embrace was intended to create the proper emotional and spiritual connection between them to make the conferral-b'rakhah effective.

We can now address those questions we asked about the Yitzchak-Ya'akov-Esav scenario:

Rivkah was aware that Ya'akov had purchased the b'khorah from Esav - meaning that he would be "in charge" of the family affairs, both financial and political. [Yitzchak was evidently unaware of the sale - see 27:19] The person in charge is in the greatest need of support and strength; there are always those who would overthrow him and he has nowhere to go but down. The "underdog", contradistinctively, can only move up. Rivkah was so concerned that Ya'akov receive Yitzchak's strength and power - through the conferral-b'rakhah - that she was willing to risk the possibility of a curse.

When Ya'akov approached Yitzchak, his father embraced him (27:22), attended to his voice (*ibid.*) - and "blessed" him. (This is apparently a conferral-b'rakhah, as there are no blessing-words provided here). Yitzchak then ate and drank of the venison brought by Ya'akov, embraced him again, smelled his clothes - and "blessed" him again (vv. 25-27). Note that Yitzchak connected with Ya'akov using all four available senses. Subsequent to these b'rakhot, which I am theorizing are both occasions of s'mikhah, Yitzchak stated:

May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you! (27:28-29)

These words are not the b'rakhah - as he has already blessed Ya'akov. Rather, these words represent a verbal version of the strength he has given his son. Not only has he transmitted the ability to receive God's bounty - he has also given this son the strength to rule over his brother!

There is a textual hint to this idea - in 27:37, Yitzchak declares "I have made him lord over you and have given all of his brothers to him as slaves - and with grain and wine s'makhtiv (I have sustained him)..."; note that Yitzchak himself states that he has performed a type of s'mikhah on Ya'akov!

It is no wonder, then, that Yitzchak is "out of blessings" when the real Esav shows up! How can he give the same ruling strength to two people? The best that he can do is to give Esav the strength that "...when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck" (v. 40).

## VII. EPHRAIM AND MENASHEH (REDUX)

We can now go back to our Parashah and understand it in a new light:

"They are the sons God has given me here," Yoseph said to his father. Then Yisra'el said, "Bring them to me so I may bless them." (48:9)

Ya'akov wanted to confer the strength of leadership on Yoseph's family.

Now Yisra'el's eyes were failing because of old age, and he could hardly see. So Yoseph brought his sons close to him, and his father kissed them and embraced them.(v. 10)

In order confer this strength, he had to first connect with these two sons of Yoseph - which he did by embracing them.

Yisra'el said to Yoseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." Then Yoseph removed them from his father's knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. (vv. 11-12)  
Here we see that the original embrace (v. 10) was merely a preparation for the b'rakhah, not the b'rakhah itself.

And Yoseph took both of them, Ephraim on his right toward Yisra'el's left hand and Menasheh on his left toward Yisra'el's right hand, and brought them close to him. But Yisra'el reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Menasheh's head, since Menasheh was the firstborn. (vv. 13-14)

Since Menasheh was the b'khor, he would always maintain that status and would be the spiritual leader of that family. Menasheh's position in the family necessitated that he not be switched to the left side - so, in order for Ya'akov to give Ephraim the "stronger" b'rakhah, he had to cross his arms.

Then he blessed Yoseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the angel who has delivered me from all harm may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers Avraham and Yitzchak, and may they increase greatly upon the earth." (vv. 15-16)

Note that here he is blessing Yoseph, not Yoseph's sons; this is a well-wishing-b'rakhah, not the gist of the conferral-b'rakhah given to Ephraim and Menasheh.

When Yoseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head to Menasheh's head. Yoseph said to his father, "Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." (vv. 17-19)

This (previously) enigmatic response is now clear:

Ya'akov is not "favoring the winner"; he is giving the greatest strength (his right hand, following S'foro's explanation) to the son who will need it most - whose progeny will be more numerous and widespread.

So he blessed them that day, saying, By you Yisra'el will invoke blessings, saying, 'God make you like Ephraim and like Menasheh.' " So he put Ephraim ahead of Menasheh. (v. 20)

Again, as in the Yitzchak-Ya'akov story, a second embrace leads to a second conferral-b'rakhah. Ya'akov then verbalizes a consequence of the b'rakhah - that these two boys will be the model of all blessings. This is, however, not the essence of the b'rakhah, which is the conferral of power.

### **VIII. POSTSCRIPT**

The Midrash Tanhuma indicates that his younger brother will be greater than he refers to Yehoshua', who will come from the tribe of Ephraim and will conquer the Land. Interesting, is it not, that this s'mikhah was a forerunner to the first "official" s'mikhah given - as Mosheh lay his hands on the head of Yehoshua' and conferred upon him the mantle of leadership.

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## **PARSHAT VAYECHI**

Blessings - we find so many of them in Sefer Breishit, particularly in Parshat Vayechi. What are they all about?

In our shiur, we will first distinguish between three different types of blessings that we have encountered thus far in Sefer Breishit ('bechira', 'bechora' and 'bracha'). Based on these distinctions, we will then attempt to better understand what transpires when Yaakov blesses Yosef in the first chapter of Parshat Vayechi.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Recall (from our shiur on Parshat Toldot) that we identified two categories of blessings to explain the nature of Yitzchak's blessings to Yaakov and Esav. Those were: (1) 'bechira' and (2) 'bracha'.

We used the name 'bechira' to classify God's special blessing to Avraham Avinu that his offspring ('zera') would inherit the 'promised' land ('eretz'). God first bestowed this blessing upon Avraham Avinu at the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha (see 12:1-3) and subsequently repeated it numerous times not only to Avraham, but also to Yitzchak and Yaakov. By tracing these blessings, we were able to show how the 'bechira' process emerged as a primary theme in Sefer Breishit.

In contrast, we used the more general term 'bracha' to classify a blessing of personal destiny bestowed by a father onto his son [or sons]. As examples, we cited Noach's blessings to his three sons (see 9:26-27), and Yitzchak's blessing of prosperity and leadership that were intended for Esav, but 'stolen' by Yaakov [see chapter 27].

Now, in Parshat Vayechi, as the 'bechira' process nears its conclusion, we find how Yaakov bestows blessings of prosperity and success upon his children. Even though these would seem to fall under our category of 'bracha', when we take a closer look at these blessings, we will need to add an additional category to better appreciate their meaning.

### **YAAKOV'S BLESSING TO YOSEF - BECHIRA or BECHORA?**

Before Yaakov blesses all of his children in chapter 49, he first bestows a special blessing upon Yosef and his two children, as described in chapter 48.

To understand the purpose of this special blessing, we must consider not only its content, but also its context.

We begin our study by examining Yaakov's opening statement to Yosef, when he arrives with his two sons (see 48:1-2). We quote this pasuk in Hebrew in order to highlight its textual parallels to earlier blessings to the Avot:

[And Yaakov said to Yosef]: "KEL SHAKAI nir'ah eilai [appeared to me] be-Luz be-eretz Canaan va-yevarech oti, va-yomer eilai, [and blessed me saying:] 'Hineni MAFRECHA ve-HIRBITCHA u-netaticha li-khal amim, ve-natati et ha-ARETZ ha-zot le-ZAR'ACHA acharecha achuzat olam'" (see 48:3-4).

At first glance, this blessing appears to resemble the blessings that we have defined thus far as 'bechira'. To show how, let's quote the almost identically blessing of 'bechira' that Yitzchak had bestowed upon Yaakov prior to his departure from Eretz Canaan (when running away from Esav):

[Textual parallels are highlighted by CAPS.]

[And Yitzchak said to Yaakov]: "ve-KEL SHAKAI yevarech otcha ve-YAFRECHA ve-YARBECHA ve-hayita li-khal amim - va-yiten lecha et birkat Avraham lecha u-leZAR'ACHA itach, le-rishtechet ERETZ megurecha..." (see 28:3-4).

Similarly, we find an additional parallel blessing when God officially confirmed this 'bechira' (to Yaakov) upon his return to Eretz Canaan (again at Bet El):

[And God spoke to Yaakov saying] "ani KEL SHAKAI, PREH u-RVEH, goy u-khal amim yhiyah mi-meka... ve-et ha-ARETZ asher natati le-Avraham u-leYitzchak lecha etnena, u-leZAR'ACHA acharecha eten et ha-ARETZ" (35:11-12).

Considering these parallels, Yaakov's opening statement to Yosef in Parshat Vayechi would appear to convey this same message, i.e. that Yaakov is now bestowing the blessing of 'bechira' upon Yosef - and hence, possibly to the exclusion of his brothers! [If so, this would be quite problematic, for it implies that the 'bechira' process will now continue only through Yosef.]

However, when we consider the context of these psukim (i.e. 48:3-5), it becomes quite clear that Yaakov is not blessing Yosef with the 'bechira'. [Recall that only God can confirm 'bechira', and not the Avot themselves.] Rather, Yaakov first **informs** Yosef about his own 'bechira' as background for the new blessing that is about to bestow - a blessing which we will now categorize as 'bechora':

### **'BECHORA' - TO THE SON OF RACHEL**

To explain this point, let's take a careful look at what Yaakov now states concerning the status of Yosef's two children:

"Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt... shall be mine; Efraim and Menashe are to me like Reuven and Shimon" (48:5).

For some reason, Yaakov decides to grant Yosef a special status. Indeed, all twelve brothers are 'chosen'; nonetheless Yosef receives a DOUBLE portion ("pi-shnayim"). Efraim and Menashe are to be considered 'shvatim' (tribes) - a status equal to that of Reuven and Shimon. In 'Torah terms', we conclude that Yaakov has awarded Yosef the 'bechora' - for "pi-shnayim" [the double portion] is the special Biblical rights of the firstborn son. [See Devarim 21:17 re: 'mishpat ha-bechora'.]

This neatly explains why Yaakov prefaces this blessing of 'bechora' by first quoting God's blessing of 'bechira'. Before bestowing the 'bechora', Yaakov must first explain to Yosef that his special status of 'bechor' is being granted within the framework of the 'bechira' process (see 48:4). It is because the 'bechira' process has reached its completion (with God's choice of Yaakov and all of his children), that it is now incumbent upon Yaakov to grant the 'bechora' to one of his twelve children.

Yaakov thus neither chooses nor rejects any of his children. He simply awards Yosef with the 'bechora', even though Reuven was born first. In essence, Yaakov has chosen the first-born child of Rachel over the first-born child of Leah.

To prove that Yaakov's blessing is 'bechora' (and not 'bechira'), simply note Yaakov's next statement:

"But children born to you after them shall be yours; their inheritance shall be included under the name of their brothers" (48:6).

Should Yosef have any additional children, their portion must be included within the portions of Menashe and Efraim. Had Yosef been the only chosen son; then all of his children should have received special status. However, since he has now become the family 'bechor', he receives a double portion, but no more. Any other children that he may have must be included within this double portion.

[See Rashbam 48:5 & Ibn Ezra 48:4-6!]

### **A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT VA'YISHLACH**

This interpretation also neatly explains the reason for Yaakov's next statement concerning Rachel's death (which otherwise would seem to be totally unrelated):

"When I was returning from Padan, Rachel died suddenly during that journey, while we were still some distance from Efrata [and thus even farther away from Chevron!], and therefore I buried her on the road..." (48:7).

This mention of Rachel's burial most probably relates directly to Yaakov's choice of Yosef as the 'bechor'. By choosing Yosef over Reuven, Yaakov has essentially chosen Rachel over Leah as his primary wife. However, this may come as a surprise to Yosef, for not only was Reuven born first, but Yosef's own mother (Rachel) was buried along the roadside, while Reuven's mother Leah was buried in Ma'arat Ha-Machpela - in the same burial spot where Yaakov himself wishes to be buried! [See 47:29-30.]

Therefore, Yaakov now explains to Yosef that Rachel's burial on the roadside (rather than in Ma'arat Ha-Machpela) was due to unforeseen circumstances, and thus should not be interpreted as an indication of a lower status. On the contrary, despite Rachel's somewhat disrespectful burial, Yaakov still considers her as having been his 'primary' wife.

[Note then when Yaakov had earlier expressed his concern about sending Binyamin to Egypt, he had made a similar statement: "And your servant, my father, said to us: As you know, MY WIFE bore me two sons, but one is gone..." (Yehuda quoting his father in 44:27).]

Therefore, even though Reuven is the firstborn of Leah, Yosef is awarded the **family** 'bechora', since he is the firstborn of Yaakov's primary wife, the "isha" whom he had originally intended to marry.

#### A 'FLASHBACK' FROM PARSHAT TOLDOT

At this point in the narrative (i.e. after 48:7), we find an interesting transition. Now that Yaakov has completed bestowing the 'bechora' upon Yosef, the focus of his blessing now shifts to his grandchildren, Efraim and Menashe - who consequently have now attained the status of 'shvatim' (tribes). As such, they also deserve blessings of personal destiny from Yaakov (i.e. 'bracha'), just as he will later bless all of the tribes (in chapter 49).

However, when we read how Yaakov grants these blessings (in 48:8-20), we find several rather obvious 'flashbacks' to the blessings of Yitzchak in Parshat Toldot (see chapter 27).

For example, both narratives describe an aging father who can barely see (48:10 vs. 27:1), and the 'switching' of blessing between two sons to the consternation of their father (48:17-19 vs. 27:6-9). Furthermore, in both narratives, we find the use of many similar verbs.

One could suggest that the manner by which Yaakov grants these blessing to Menashe and Efraim reflects his own traumatic experience, when he was instructed by Rivka to 'steal' the blessing that Yitzchak had intended for Esav. Even though Yaakov understands that Efraim may reach higher levels than Menashe, he insists upon blessing both of them together. Yaakov does not want these slight differences between Efraim and Menashe to cause strife between them in the future (as was the case between Yaakov and Esav). At this initial stage, he places both children together, bestowing upon them a joint blessing, while providing a small indication (by switching his hands) regarding the potential prominence of Efraim. Despite their different destinies, Efraim and Menashe will need to work together, as they will be part of the same nation, and Yaakov would like this unity to begin already at this initial stage.

#### 'HA-MAL'ACH HA-GOEL'

Now that we have discussed the general framework of Yaakov's blessing to Efraim and Menashe, let's take a closer look at the blessing itself (familiar to us from "kriyat shema al ha-mita"). To appreciate this blessing, we must consider the fact that Efraim and Menashe had grown up with no contact with their uncles and cousins. To facilitate their integration with the rest of the family, Yaakov adds a special blessing:

"ha-mal'ach ha-goel oti mi-kol ra - yevarech et ha-nearim"  
[God's angel who protected me (Yaakov) from all those who wanted to harm me, He should bless these children (to help them 'blend in')],

"ve-yikare ba-hem shmi, ve-shem avotai - Avraham ve-Yitzchak..."

[And they should be known by my name, and by the names of Avraham and Yitzchak (for they are part of the

chosen family.]  
"ve-yidgu la-rov be-kerev ha-aretz"  
[and they should multiply within the land...] (see 48:15-16).

Yaakov very much wants Yosef's two sons to be identified with the rest of his family name; he therefore blesses them so that God should look over them with the same providence that helped Yaakov survive his confrontations with Esav and Lavan.

#### A TIME WILL COME...

Yaakov concludes his blessing to Yosef by reminding him that a time will come when the 'chosen family' will return home: "And Yisrael said to Yosef: I am about to die, but God will be with you and return you to the land of your fathers..." (48:21).

Now that Yosef has been appointed as 'bechor', it becomes his responsibility to inform the future generations of this Divine promise. Yaakov is not sure how long it will be until God will lead them back to Eretz Canaan. Nevertheless, his children must transmit this tradition to THEIR children, so that when the time comes, they will be prepared to meet their destiny.

It is precisely this message that Yosef repeats to his brothers and family on his deathbed, at the conclusion of Sefer Breishit: "And Yosef told his brothers, behold I am about to die, 've-Elokim pakod yifkod etchem' [God will surely remember you] and bring you from this land to the land which He promised by oath to give to Avraham, Yitzchak..." (50:24).

[Compare with 48:21, 46:3-4 & Shmot 13:13-22.]

Yaakov concludes this blessing with one last 'cryptic' statement to Yosef (that obviously requires some explanation): "And I am granting you one - SHCHEM - over your brothers, that I [will] have taken from the Amorites with my sword and bow" (see 48:22).

The commentators argue in regard the meaning of the word SHCHEM in this pasuk. Some understand that Yaakov is now giving the city Shchem to Yosef as an inheritance, but most explain that 'shchem' in this pasuk refers to an extra portion of inheritance that will be given to Yosef AFTER the conquest of the land.

According to the latter interpretation, this final blessing forms an appropriate conclusion. After mentioning that God will one day return his offspring to Eretz Canaan (fulfilling 'brit bein ha-btarim' - 48:21), Yaakov explains that when that time comes, Yosef will receive an extra portion in the inheritance of the land, for the simple reason that he is the 'bechor' - congruent with the opening section of this blessing to Yosef.

#### THE BLESSINGS OF PERSONAL DESTINY

As the family 'bechora' has been awarded to Yosef, Yaakov now summons his entire family (see 49:1) in order to give a personal blessing to each of his sons. Although each son receives what the Torah describes as a 'bracha' (see 49:28 / "ish asher ke-virchato beirach otam"), not all these 'brachot' appear to be what one would call a 'blessing'.

For example, Reuven is told: "You are unstable as water, you shall no longer excel..." (49:4).

Shimon and Levi are rebuked: "Let not my person be included in their council... For when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger..." (see 49:6-7, note that Yaakov is cursing their anger, not his sons!).

On the other hand, Yehuda and Yosef are emphatically blessed with both prosperity and leadership. Other brothers also receive blessings, albeit less promising than those of Yosef and Yehuda, but blessings nonetheless, as opposed to the sharp criticism hurled upon Shimon and Levi.

What is the meaning of these 'brachot'? Will the personal traits of the brothers predetermine the fate of their offspring? Do Yaakov's blessings reflect the principle of determinism and negate the concept of 'bechira chofshit' (free will)?

One could suggest that Yaakov assumes the role of a 'father' (in his blessings to his children) more than the role of a 'prophet'. Let's explain:

As a parent, and the last forefather of God's special Nation, Yaakov must blend the goals of his family destiny with the realities of his life experience. His blessings, therefore, reflect the potential he sees within each of his children.

The fulfillment of life-long goals requires a person to recognize his potential by considering both his good qualities and shortcomings. As Yaakov recognizes his children's varying strengths and weaknesses, he blesses them according to their individual capabilities and talents. Although these blessings do not necessarily guarantee the final outcome, they form a guide that can provide each son with a proper direction that can help achieve his potential.

Yaakov does not intend his harsh castigation of Reuven, Shimon and Levi to result in ultimate condemnation. Rather, he hopes that they will recognize their weakness of character and work towards its improvement. [Note that Yaakov curses Reuven's **anger**, but not Reuven himself.]

Similarly, Yaakov's sharp rebuke of Levi turns later on into a blessing, as the Tribe of Levi later assumed an important leadership position (see Devarim 33:8-12!).

In contrast, Yehuda and Yosef possess a potential for leadership that should be recognized by their offspring. However, this blessing does not guarantee that every descendant of Yehuda or Yosef will become a great later. Even the kings of the House of David must be constantly conscious of their conduct, in order that they be worthy of exercising their leadership (see Yirmiyahu 22:1-5!).

[This idea can help us understand most blessings (even 'birkat kohanim'). A 'bracha' is not a simply mystic chant that determines a future set of events, rather it serves as a reminder to a person that he carries the potential to achieve a certain goal.]

Undoubtedly, the 'brachot' of Yaakov contain additional prophetic and metaphysical significance as well. Nonetheless, they do not negate the basic principle of 'bechira chofshit' [freedom of choice].

## UNITY OR HARMONY

In conclusion, our discussion can help us understand the underlying reason why God wanted Am Yisrael to consist of twelve distinct tribes. After all, if this nation's goal is to represent the ONE God, it would have been more logical that there be simply one tribe - thus forming one homogenous society! Furthermore, why must there continue to be friction between Yosef and Yehuda throughout the entire Tanach?

To explain why, recall our explanation of God's purpose in choosing a special nation (in wake of the events at Migdal Bavel). It was God's hope that this special Nation would lead all Seventy Nations towards a theocentric existence. For this purpose Avraham Avinu was chosen, and for this purpose the existence of 'shvatim' can serve as a model. Let's explain why:

People, by their very nature, tend to group into individual societies, each developing its own national character, personality, goals and aspirations. These societies eventually develop into nations who may occasionally fight over opposing goals, or cooperate in working towards the realization of common goals.

Through His agent, Am Yisrael, God hopes that all nations, while remaining distinct, will recognizing God's purpose in His creation of mankind - and hence cooperate with each other towards the achievement of that goal.

As we see in Yaakov's 'brachot' to his sons, each 'shevet' possesses its own unique character and singularity. The composite of all these qualities can be harnessed towards a common good. As God's model Nation, the cooperation between the 'Twelve Tribes of Israel' in the fulfillment of their Divine and national goals can serve as an archetype for the Seventy Nations to emulate. Through harmonious cooperation and the unifying force of a common goal (and with help of some good leadership), the Nation of Avraham becomes a 'blessing' to all nations (see

12:1-3). Mankind thus realizes its potential, and Am Yisrael fulfills its Divine destiny.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

## FOR FURTHER IYUN

**A.** In his blessing to Efraim and Menashe, "ha-mal'ach ha-gel..." Yaakov makes reference to a "mal'ach Elokim" who consistently saved him from all 'ra' (evil). Explain this reference in light of 31:7,24,29! (note the use of the word "ra").

Why do you think that this blessing is appropriate specifically for Efraim and Menashe (based on the above shiur)?

Modern commentators have suggested that the word 'ra' in this blessing may actually be alluding to the Egyptian god "raah" - If so, then Yaakov is stating that Hashem who has saved him during these final years of his life from the influence of this primary Egyptian god named 'ra' should bless these 'grandchildren' Efraim & Menashe in a similar manner, and save them from Egyptian influence, to the point that they should be known a Yaakov's offspring, and not as Egyptian princes [hence "v'yikareh bahem shmi, v'shem avotei..."]!

## B. HA-TCHAT ELOKIM ANI?

After Yaakov's death, the brothers beg Yosef to forgive them for their animosity towards him. Yosef assures them that they need not worry, for whereas he is not God, he has neither the responsibility nor the right to punish them. [This is the simple and standard explanation]. Yet, if we examine those psukim carefully, we may uncover an added dimension to Yosef's response, "ha-tachat Elokim ani"? Let's explain:

When the brothers ask Yosef's forgiveness, they explain that their father instructed them to say as follows (50:17):

"Forgive the offense and guilt of your brothers... Please forgive the offense of the SERVANTS OF THE GOD of your father..."

Immediately thereafter, the brothers suggest their own punishment, that they be SLAVES to Yosef. Yosef refuses this offer by explaining, "Do not fear, for am I IN THE PLACE OF GOD?" Yosef's answer responds directly to his brothers' comments. First, they ask to be forgiven on account of their being the SERVANTS OF GOD. Then, they offer themselves as SERVANTS to YOSEF. Yosef answers them accordingly: should they become his servants, they will no longer be servants of God. Therefore, Yosef tells his brothers - "ha-tachat Elokim ani?" - should he consider himself a replacement or 'substitute' for God? The brothers must remain God's servants, not Yosef's!

## C. "PAKOD YIFKOD" AND SEFER SHMOT

An obvious question that arises when studying Parshat Vayechi is, why didn't Yaakov's family return to Eretz Canaan once the famine ended? One could suggest that although they could and should have returned, they opted instead for the 'good life' in Eretz Mitzrayim (see the story of Avraham and Lot, 13:4-14). One could even suggest that their enslavement in Egypt was a punishment for this 'unzionistic' attitude.

Nevertheless, it seems as though Bnei Yisrael felt it their Divine destiny to stay in Egypt. This conception most likely evolved as a result of God's promise to Yaakov prior to his departure to Egypt: "Do not fear going down to Egypt, for you will become a great nation there. I will go down with you, and I will bring you back..." (46:3-4).

1. Compare these psukim, as well as 48:21, 50:24 and the psukim of Brit Bein Ha-btarim (15:13-19), with God's revelation to Moshe Rabeinu at the 'sneh' in Shmot perek 3.

2. Note God's Name in the various psukim in Sefer Breishit noted above, and relate it to Shmot 3:13-22.

3. At what point did it become unrealistic for Bnei Yisrael to leave Egypt and return to Eretz Canaan? Had they returned, to what area would they have returned? Who owned the land, etc.?

## D. Between Reuven and Yosef

It is interesting to note that Yaakov himself later refers to Reuven as his 'bechor' - see 49:3), even though he had earlier granted the

'bechora' to Yosef (as we explained in our shiur above). To support our conclusion, there is a pasuk in Divrei Ha-yamim Aleph (see 5:1-2), that explains that Reuven was supposed to be the 'bechor' but because of his sin (when he took his father's 'pilegesh') - he lost his special status. Within the family of Leah, that status was given to Yehuda, but in regard to the entire family of Yaakov, the status of bechor was granted to Yosef. If you have time, I recommend that you see those psukim inside.