

**פרשת ויגש**  
**Seeing the Good, Showing the Good**

This past Sunday, my brother Mordechai married Suri, and became the last of my mother's children to marry. Most of you know that I'm the middle child among seven children, and that we lost our father over two decades ago, when we ranged in age from between two and sixteen. So naturally, the whole family – fourteen children and children-in-law, together with twenty-four grandchildren danced around my mother for her *mezinka-tantz*. This happy and joyous dance moved me in a way that I did not expect, not because it brought together the entire family, which was wonderful, but because of the reactions of the members of our community who stood and watched. You see, when a large family like mine suffers such a devastating loss as we did so many years ago, how does it go on? How could my mother possibly raise such a large family, with so many children and responsibilities alone? It's an impossible task. So, while she produced such an amazing family by the force of her will, she didn't do it alone. She had help – from her family, from her friends and neighbors; from our teachers and rebbeim; from our entire community. As we danced around her during that dance, and I saw a tear well up in Rabbi Anemer's eye – and I've never seen him cry before -- I felt a great deal of joy and excitement, but also thanks. I felt thanks to God for having brought our family to such a wonderful day, but I also felt thanks to have been raised by a community of caring and loving people, who danced together with us, if not with their feet, than with their hearts. I've been saying מודים with a little more concentration this past week, because at least for this week, I realize that I have a lot to be thankful for.

Life is funny that way – each of us at some time in life must endure excruciating emotional pain. But then, at other times, we enjoy incredible elation. So what wins out? Do we focus on the times of pain and sadness and difficulty, or the gladness and celebration? To be honest, each of us must answer that question for ourselves, each and every day.

Ya'akov Avinu finally realizes his life's last desire: to see his beloved Yosef alive. He even tells Yosef outright, "Now that I've seen you, God can take me tomorrow and I wouldn't care." He can finally rest a happy man.

After their tearful reunion, Yosef takes his father to meet his boss, the King of Egypt, for what proves to be a strange encounter. Ya'akov – a man of God, first blesses Par'oh – he gives him a ברכה. Then Par'oh asks: כמה ימי שני חיך – "How old are you?" At the time, he's one hundred and thirty years old. But instead of just answering, Ya'akov editorializes. "I'm one hundred and thirty years old," he tells the king, but he adds, מעט ורעים היו – "the years of my lifetime have been short and harsh, and have not approached the years of my fathers' lifetimes."

The דעת זקנים, the commentary of the תוספות on the Torah, quotes for us a very disturbing Midrash. The Midrash teaches us that when Ya'akov says these words to פרעה, God angrily responds: אני מלטתיך מעשו ומלבן והחזרתי לך דינה וגם יוסף – I saved you from the clutches of Lavan and Eisav. I returned your daughter Dinah from the clutches of a ruthless rapist, and your son Yosef – who you've thought dead for the past two decades, stands before you alive and well – and you're complaining about your bad and short life?! It's not enough?! It's not as much as your fathers?! חיך – says God to Yaakov – "I promise you that for each word you used, from the ויאמר until the end of your little speech, you'll live one less year than your father did!"

And so it was. While his father Yitzchak lived to the ripe old age of 180, and Ya'akov, because of these 33 words of complaint, dies at the age of 147.

First and foremost, the powerful message of the Midrash speaks to us loudly and clearly. Everyone experiences pain – some endure more while other bear less. There isn't a person alive who never experienced suffering. For whatever reason, God made suffering an integral part of the human condition. But how we choose to relate to that suffering – or conversely, to the inevitable joys in life, speaks volumes about us, our emotional condition, and

our relationship to God. For all the things we have to complain to God about – and each of us probably has a legitimate gripe or two – how many things do we have to give thanks for at the very same time? How many good things do we take for granted and simply assume, when we choose to focus on the pain in our lives?

But the Midrash leaves us with a glaring problem: simply put, the numbers don't add up. If you add the words together – and each word equals a year of Ya'akov's life, so add carefully – Ya'akov's complaint only lasts for 25 words. How do you get all the way to 33? Only if you begin counting all the way back at the ויאמר of פרעה – when פרעה first asks him, "How old are you?" That seems a bit unfair. I can understand why God would punish Ya'akov for complaining. But why punish Ya'akov – a year a word! – for something that someone else asks him?

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz, the longtime Rosh Yeshiva of the Mir yeshiva in ירושלים and the author of שיחות מוסר, explains that according to the Midrash, God does indeed punish Ya'akov for Par'oh's question, because Ya'akov himself prompts the king to ask the question in the first place. If you think about it, Par'oh's question seems strange. When you meet someone, the first thing you ask him might be "How are you?", but it's not usually "How old are you?" According to דעת זקנים, Par'oh asks Ya'akov his age because he looks unusually old and worn. He might be 130, but to Par'oh, he looks much older than that. So he asks him, "How old are you? Can you really be as old as you look?"

According to Rav Shmuelevitz, God punished Ya'akov for Par'oh's question because not only does Ya'akov not feel a sense of gratitude and gladness for the good in his life; he has so completely internalized his bitterness that it manifests itself not just internally, but externally as well. Par'oh needs only one look at Ya'akov to see that this man carries something terrible inside of him, which has not only spiritually, but also physically consumed him.

How many of us wear our emotions for everyone to see? Do they see our joys – our שמחות and our nachas? Or do we exhibit our anguish in small but unavoidable ways?

On Thursday the world celebrated New Years, and ushered in 2004. One of the silly מנהגים that the media likes to report on – especially when nothing else bad happens, and there's no new Michael Jackson interview to ponder – is the yearly ritual of "New Year's Resolutions." Each year, people resolve to join a gym, get a new job – whatever – knowing full well that within two weeks, they're going to break that resolution, and fall back on old habits.

To me, these "New Year's Resolutions" seems like another opportunity for each of us to be negative about ourselves. What don't I like about myself that I know I'm not going to change? What don't I like about my life that won't be any different next year? Americans – for some reason, maybe because we have so much – love to focus on the negative; on what we're not, and on what we don't have. But the Torah teaches us to focus on the good – on the tremendous blessings each of us have in life.

So in the spirit of the New Year, I'd like to suggest an easy resolution for each of us that might really make a small but meaningful change. Actually, it's not my idea, but רח"ל's idea. Each morning, right when you get up, recite מודה אני. Hopefully, everyone here still says מודה אני, but realistically, it's an easy habit to fall out of. Fall back in. Every morning, right when you wake up, let's give thanks to God for giving us another day. Say the words, and think about what they mean – שהחזרתי בי נשמתי בחמלה – "that you have returned to me my soul in kindness." Think about the good that you have to look forward to in the day. Just that brief moment can really change your outlook for an entire day.

Let us learn to focus less on the sad, and more on the glad. When people see us they should see our nachas for our children and grandchildren on our faces. They should see our successes, and not our failures. And when they look at us they should think (not ask), "How old is he?" not because we look too old, but because we look too young – because we're always ready ברוך ה', and able to say – "Thank God – I have much to be thankful for."