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Staying Connected to Israel

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht

At the end of sefer Bereishit, we find Yaakov Avinu's last words before his death, in which he describes the history of Me'arat haMachpeilah, which Avraham purchased from Ephron haChiti. Have Yaakov's sons never heard of Me'arat haMachpeilah? Were they unfamiliar with its history? Why does Yaakov end his life with this history lesson?

Additionally, as the funeral procession travels toward Eretz Yisrael, Yosef escorts it to the eastern bank of the Jordan, where they wait for a week. Afterwards, they enter Eretz Yisrael and travel to Chevron, where they bury Yaakov. Why does Yosef first lead the funeral procession to the eastern bank of the Jordan, rather than traveling from Mitzrayim to Chevron directly?

The answer to these questions is as follows: In the 17 years that Yaakov spent in Mitzrayim, he realized how comfortable and complacent his children were becoming, as the final passuk of Parashat VaYigash testifies, "And Israel dwelled in the land of Egypt, in the land of Goshen, and they took possession of it (va'ye'achazu bah) and were fruitful, and multiplied exceedingly" (Bereishit 47:27). Before his death, Yaakov Avinu wanted to teach his family that the true achuzah, the true possession, is not Goshen, but Eretz Yisrael. Reviewing the history of Chevron and Me'arat haMachpeilah was the way to teach this lesson.

Chevron was where Avraham Avinu made the initial connection to Eretz Yisrael. He paid 400 silver shekel for Me'arat haMachpeilah, which Rabbeinu Ephraim on the Torah, one of the Tosafists, explains corresponded to the dimensions of Eretz Yisrael – 400 parsah by 400 parsah. By taking possession of Chevron, Avraham was really taking possession of all of Eretz Yisrael. Ephron's statement of "and all the trees therein" is another code that the purchase of Chevron represents the purchase of something greater, as planting trees is the first thing we are to do when we

enter Eretz Yisrael.

In Chevron, Avraham made connected to Eretz Yisrael. In Chevron, Avraham connected to Hashem, through the brit milah. (Chevron is therefore called Kiryat Arba, because four tzaddikim—Avraham, Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre—were circumcised there.) In Chevron, Avraham connected to the previous generations—Adam and Chava. This is the true place of achuzah, and this is the lesson Yaakov wished to remind his children before his death.

For this very reason, Yosef brought the entire procession to the eastern bank of the Jordan, teaching his family that even though, in the future, some of the tribes would dwell on the other side of the Jordan, they must recognize that it is the wrong side of the Jordan, and the true Eretz Yisrael is on the western bank of the Jordan.

Practically speaking, the lesson of Yaakov is that we must not make ourselves too comfortable in the Exile. We must rather feel as if we have just arrived. This is attested to by the first passuk of Shemot, "And these are the names of the Children of Israel coming (haba'im) to Egypt," which speaks in present tense (haba'im) rather than in past tense (sheba'u), which would have been more appropriate. The navi Yeshayah confirms this: "Haba'im yashresh Yaakov, yatzitz ufarach Yisrael" – those who view themselves as arriving recently (haba'im) in the Exile will take root and blossom.

If we follow in the footsteps of our father, Yaakov, we will merit the fulfillment of, "Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov [as in haba'im yashresh Yaakov, representing the Exile], but it shall be called Yisrael [as in yatzitz ufarach Yisrael, representing growth in Eretz Yisrael]" – and we will merit the ingathering of the exiles and the complete Redemption, speedily and in our days.

Menashe and Ephraim: Tying up Loose Ends

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin

Upon hearing that Yaakov has fallen ill, Yosef gathers his sons, Menashe and Ephraim, and rushes to his father's bedside.

During the ensuing conversation Yaakov takes two dramatic steps that carry powerful practical implications for the future.

1. Yaakov proclaims that Menashe and Ephraim will be considered on par with his own children in the determination of his legacy. Through this statement, Yaakov creates the tribes of Ephraim and Menashe in place of the single tribe of Yosef.

2. The patriarch blesses his grandchildren as follows: "Through you will Israel bless, by saying: 'May God make you like Ephraim and like Menashe...'" To this day, Jewish parents bless their sons with the formula "May God make you like Ephraim and like Menashe," while daughters are blessed with the prayer "May God make you like Sara, Rivka, Rachel and Leah."

Questions:

Why are Ephraim and Menashe counted among the tribes of Israel? No other grandchild of Yaakov is accorded this singular honor.

Why are Ephraim and Menashe chosen as the paradigms for our sons to emulate rather than the patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov? Do the oldest sons of Yosef possess specific character traits that we wish upon our own children or are we arbitrarily fulfilling Yaakov's prophetic prediction: "Through you [Ephraim and Menashe] will Israel bless...?"

Approaches:

Ephraim and Menashe's central place in both the legacy and blessing of Yaakov reflects a number of critical ideas. The selection of Yosef's children to this position, in fact, brings closure to a series of interlocking themes that have coursed through the Yosef story, and, in some cases, the entire book of Bereishit.

A. The tribal legacy: Yosef's reward.

We will see that Reuven, Yaakov's eldest son, loses the firstborn's leadership role as a result of his personal failings. In his place, Yehuda earns and assumes those responsibilities of leadership.

There are two other privileges of the birthright, however, which Reuven loses, as well. The honor of religious stewardship is reassigned to Levi while the double inheritance normally accorded to the firstborn is transferred to Yosef.

The creation of the tribes of Ephraim and Menashe can thus be attributed to Yosef's merit. As a reward for his righteousness and in acknowledgment of his achievements, Yosef receives his "double portion" as the progenitor of these two tribes.

B. Emphasizing Yosef's aloneness.

While the creation of two tribes bearing the names of Yosef's sons can certainly be seen as a reward for Yosef's righteousness, this same phenomenon, in ironic fashion, underscores a tragic dimension of his life. Yosef's name does not appear in the list of tribes along with his brothers. Yosef's lonely position as the ultimate outsider is thus cemented and preserved for posterity.

Yosef never succeeds in becoming part of any society in which he finds himself. Although wildly successful in Egypt, he never earns the full trust of the Egyptians. Even more significantly, he is never fully accepted into the company of his brothers, who do not have confidence in his intentions right through the end.

A delicate balance, mirroring Yosef's complex life, is thus struck in the tribal system. Yosef's material success will be reflected in the double portion he receives through his sons. His isolation, however, is also mirrored in Yosef's own conspicuous and now eternal absence from the company of his brothers.

C. Reaching across the generations.

Yaakov is the first personality in the Torah and the only patriarch to openly relate not only to his children, but to his grandchildren, as well.

The last patriarch, however, goes a major step further. He concretizes his relationship with Ephraim and Menashe through the creation of tribes bearing their names, thereby ensuring that the tribal system of Israel will span the generations. With great foresight, he consciously weaves the concepts of the extended family and of intergenerational relationships into the very fabric

of our national structure. (Note that building upon this phenomenon, Yaakov's son Yosef is the first individual in the Torah to interact with his great grandchildren.⁵) These relationships will remain indispensable to the transmission and development of Jewish tradition across the ages.

D. The blessing: sibling harmony.

Ephraim and Menashe succeed in reversing a tragic trend which characterizes sibling relationships from the time of Kayin and Hevel through the patriarchal period. They are the first major set of brothers, recorded in the Torah, whose relationship is not marked by jealousy, rivalry and strife. The love between Ephraim and Menashe apparently endures even when Ephraim is given precedence by Yaakov over his older brother, Menashe.

The True Meaning of Achdus

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

As Yaakov Avinu realizes that his end is near, he calls his children to his bedside and he instructs them, “he’asfu ve’agidah la’chem es asher yikra eschem be’acharis ha-yamim,” assemble together and I will tell you what will happen to you in the “End of Days.” Yaakov then reiterates this message, “hi’kavtzu ve’shimu be’nei Ya’akov,” gather and come listen to your father. (49:1-2)

The Midrash is intrigued by the apparent redundancy of Yaakov's invitation. After all, first he says “he’asfu,” and then, immediately thereafter, he repeats “hi’kavtzu,” both of which mean essentially the same thing, gather or assemble. The Midrash, therefore, assumes that there is an additional, deeper, message imbedded in Yaakov's invitation. Among the various suggestions offered, the final opinion cited in the Midrash is that “tzivah osan al ha-machlokes,” Yaakov instructed them to avoid machlokes, bitter and needless infighting, and he reminded them, “kulchon asifah achas,” you should all be one group.

It's no secret – and it certainly was no secret to Yaakov – that the relationship between the brothers had often been strained, to put it mildly. Now, shortly before his death, Yaakov calls his children together and speaks to them as a loving father, saying, please kinderlach, no more fighting, come together and unite. Of course Yaakov wasn't just talking as a father and wasn't just speaking to his children; he was also talking as a forefather to all of his descendants, and

E. A world apart.

Yaakov reacts with wonder when he reflects upon meeting his grandchildren towards the end of his life. This reaction mirrors the unexpected nature of Ephraim and Menashe's success. These two children grew up in exile, separated from their extended family since birth, yet remained identifying members of their family.

The patriarch, therefore, selects his two grandchildren as the paradigm for blessings across the ages. Their selection sends a powerful message across the turbulent history of our often scattered people.

“May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe,” we bless our sons. May you always be spiritually connected to your family and people, no matter where you live, no matter how physically distant you may be.

his message was eternally relevant: avoid the self-destruction that inevitably comes with machlokes.

And yet, given this backdrop and this understanding of why Yaakov called his children to his deathbed, the content of what he told them, the actual blessings, seem to belie that very goal. After all, if the purpose was to increase achdus and decrease antipathy, then wouldn't it have made more sense to give the very same blessing to all of the children, or perhaps one general beracha to all of them as a group? Instead, not only did Yaakov give each of the brothers a different blessing, but some of them got what appear to be more positive and complimentary berachos than others received.

Rather than inspiring harmony and brotherly love, it appears as if the blessings will create jealousy and enmity. Why did Yaakov do this and how does this further the goal of “tzivah osan al ha-machlokes?”

HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein suggests that perhaps the answer to this question lies in the Torah's “summary statement” after Yaakov finished all of the blessings: “Va'yivarech osam,” and he blessed them, “ish asher ke'virchaso berach osam,” each according to his blessing he blessed them.” (49:28) This pasuk is also confusing in that not only is it redundant, but it shifts between plural, “osam,” and singular, “ke'virchaso.

The Ohr Ha-Chayim explains that the phrase “each according to his blessing” means, “ha'rauy lo ke'fi be'chinas

nishmaso u-kefi ma'asav," that the berachos were perfectly calibrated and consistent with the recipient's innermost spiritual characteristics and unique talents and abilities. He explains that Yaakov didn't give the same beracha to all of his children because a true blessing is one which enables a person to actualize his or her unique talents. By definition, therefore, each of the children had to receive different berachos, each suited for their respective personalities.

Despite the highly individualized approach that Yaakov took to the blessings, the verse nevertheless concludes "berach osam," in the plural, to highlight the mutual interdependence of the blessings and the ultimate unity of purpose embodied by the berachos as a whole. The Ohr Ha-Chayim explains that because the brothers are guided by a common goal - they are on the same "team" - when any one of them succeeds, in reality the entire family benefits. Each brother has an area of expertise and the Jewish people needs the collective talents of all of the Shevatim. The greatest success for the collective group comes when each constituent part succeeds in their area of unique focus.

The Final Reconciliation between Joseph and His Brothers

Rabbi David Horwitz

In Parashat Va-Yigash, after Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, and exclaims (Genesis 45:4) I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold in Egypt, he makes the following declaration (Genesis 45:4-8):

Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you. It is now two years that there has been famine in the land, and there are still five years to come in which there shall be no yield from tilling. God has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.

Yet it seems that his brothers were not convinced that he had forgiven them. Hence, after Jacob died, near the end of Parashat Va-Yehi (Genesis 50:15-21), we read the following:

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph seeks to pay us back for all the wrong that we did him!" So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction:

In light of the Ohr Ha-Chayim's understanding, R. Lichtenstein explained that we can gain a deeper understanding of the achdus that Yaakov was striving for when he gathered all of the brothers together. Yaakov gave them different berachos because he recognized - and embraced - their differences. The achdus of the brothers was not unanimity, but rather, a diversity of personality with a unity of purpose. It's where the distinctive parts work together for the good of the whole, each contributing something unique rather than merely duplicating the contribution of others.

Yaakov's final blessing to his children has been a difficult and often elusive message for his descendants to embrace. As hard as it is, it's equally important that we do not stop striving for this goal. If we truly internalize the fact that we are "kulchon asifah achas," then we can begin to appreciate - and not demonize - each other's differences and, in turn, then we will be the worthy heirs to all of Yaakov's berachos.

So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, "We are prepared to be your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result - the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

But how did Joseph's second declaration, with essentially the same language, change matters in their eyes? (To be sure, R. Ephraim Luntshitz, the author of the work *Keli Yaqar*, mitigates the issue somewhat by suggesting [in his commentary to Genesis, Chapter 50] that the brothers did not truly fear that Joseph would harm them; they were only concerned that he would not provide them with a special added degree of care. But if one understands the biblical phrase pay us back for all the wrong that we

did him as denoting a real fear of harm middah ke-neged middah, one cannot interpret the verse in that fashion. And if the brothers possessed a real fear, that Joseph would harm them, what changed this time?)

Perhaps the fact that the brothers saw that Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him made the difference. Language can be *min ha-saphah ve-la-hutz*, as the Israeli expression goes: People often do not mean the words that they utter. It is much, much harder to fake tears. The brothers intuitively knew that Joseph's tears were genuine, and that he indeed did sincerely forgive them. The Netziv, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, in his commentary *Ha'Ámeq Davar* (ad loc.) stresses the spontaneity and immediacy of Joseph's tears.

For my part, I wish to stress the phrase *Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good*. The previous declaration of Joseph does mention that his brothers sold him into Egypt, but mentions nothing more. But the brothers knew that they had harmed Joseph much more grievously than that! They said to one another, "Alas, we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked on at his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us (Genesis 42:21)." Given that the memory of their cruel behavior was burned into their consciousnesses, for Joseph to merely say you sold me hither could seem like a whitewash! And if it was a whitewash, how could they feel that Joseph really was sincere?

In psychology, the concept of working through pain is very important. In many cases, if one tries to skip steps, one will remain psychologically incomplete. The same holds true for mourning the death of a loved one. One must go through all the steps of mourning before one can move on. Of course, the same holds true for teshuvah, for repentance. (Indeed, many of the insights of Maran Ha-Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, zatzal, on teshuvah illustrate that the halakhot of teshuvah express the notion of working through the feelings of self-loathing as a consequence of the sins one has committed, and a affirmation to re-create oneself anew.)

Joseph's brothers had indeed worked through their feelings and were really truly, sorry for what they had done. And Joseph, as the brothers now understood, had also worked through his feelings and had forgiven them. He did not gloss over the fact that they had terribly, horribly mistreated him. He used the phrase *Besides, although you intended me harm, which can be seen as a response to their phrase the offense (pesha) that the brothers had used in their missive to Joseph*. Keli Yaqar points out that the phrase

pesha specifically refers to the fact that they had wanted to kill him, and the Netziv adds that it refers to the fact that their cruelty towards him was far beyond that expected of a brother. But now, many years later, Joseph worked through it all and he was ready, able and willing to forgive.

But how did he do it? The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard writes in his book *Fear and Trembling* about a man who keeps on attempting to put himself in Abraham's position and is constantly trying to answer the question, "How could Abraham perform the *Aqedah*?" Before one answers that question of devotion *bein adam la-maqom*, perhaps one should first attempt to answer a question *bein adam la-havero*: how could Joseph achieve the magnificent magnanimity to forgive the harm that they intended him? The answer is that Joseph recognized although they desired to harm him, God intended it for good. What does that mean?

Philosophers distinguish between the proximate cause of an event and the ultimate cause. The former is an event which is closest, or immediately responsible, for causing some observed result. This exists in contrast to a higher-level ultimate cause which is usually thought of as the "real" reason something occurred. These terms can correspond roughly to the use (by late medieval Jewish {and non-Jewish} scholastic philosophers) of the terms primary cause and secondary cause. God is the ultimate, primary cause of what happens in this world. But God works through secondary causes. To be sure, any particular individual agent possesses free will and may choose to harm someone. But God has many agents. And His purposes are for the good. Thus, the actions of any particular secondary agent are really not that significant. Joseph accordingly worked through the pain that his brothers caused him by realizing that all human efforts are ultimately not that significant. The world is ordered by a Divine Being. He wanted Joseph to live. Moreover, God wanted to maximize the number of people who would be saved from the famine and consequently survive. God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.

And, in a final, magnificent display of *Imitatio Dei*, the Imitation of God, the highest spiritual level that a human being can reach, Joseph also reached into his heart and found enough love to wholeheartedly help his brothers and their families. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Motivation & Values

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

We are familiar with the final blessings that Yaakov bestows upon his progeny as he prepares for his imminent death. Before Yaakov blesses the tribes, he first tells Yosef that he wishes to be buried in the family plot, the cave of Machpela that Avrohom had bought to bury Sarah. Yaakov then asks Yosef to swear that he will indeed fulfill this wish, which Yosef does. The Rishonim are bothered by this request. Did Yaakov think that Yosef wouldn't fulfill his death-bed command? What was Yaakov's motivation for obtaining an oath from Yosef?

The Ramban suggests that Yaakov was trying to nip certain eventualities in the bud before they could materialize. Paroah might try to dissuade Yosef from leaving Egypt to bury his father. The viceroy of Egypt might have trouble getting a visa for such an endeavor. Especially since Paroah may have seen political and religious gain from having such a holy person as Yaakov buried within the borders of Egypt. However, Paroah would be respectful of an oath, especially when it manifested itself as a son's reaction to his father's dying request. Yaakov thus ensured that Yosef would be able to complete his request without any hindrance from Paroah.

The Ramban's second answer hinges on Yaakov's understanding of human nature. Yaakov knew that even Yosef would be more inclined to fulfill his command with the extra motivation. We are more inclined to complete a task when there is more riding on its completion. An oath to himself and G-d would no doubt motivate Yosef to complete the task with even more gusto. This is an incredible idea in light of the fact that the request made of Yosef was already the death wish of his father. One would expect Yosef's motivations to be very high without any further cause, and

yet Yaakov still felt that an oath could galvanize Yosef even more.

The idea that the Ramban is expressing is similar to an eloquently presented concept in Pirkei Avos (1:15). "If I am not for myself then who is for me"; this familiar quotation has a number of possible meanings. One group of commentators explains that it refers to personal growth. If we do not encourage ourselves to grow then who will be our watchdogs? If we don't push ourselves to constantly reach for new spiritual heights then who will ensure that we do? Rabbeinu Yonah comments on this Mishna that internal motivation is the most effective type of motivation. When we push ourselves to grow and succeed then we do ourselves the favor that no one else can.

We too must recognize and take advantage of this dictum in our own lives and especially in the lives of our children. Our hopes and desires for our children's Jewish life and values rest on their own shoulders. We can hope to inculcate them with these values and practices before they are put to the test in their adult lives. However, we must remember that the best motivation that our children can have is their own internal motivation. We can lead the way but we must be sure they are doing more than just following. Their motivation can't remain the desire to make us happy or live up to our expectations. Our children deserve the best motivation there is: their own internal motivations and values.

Decisions & Direction

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

And Jacob concluded commanding his sons, and he drew his legs [up] into the bed, and expired and was brought in to his people (Bereishis 49:33)

With his sons gathered around his bed to receive final blessings and instruction from their beloved father, Yaakov draws his last breath. With his death came the end of an era. The sun of the Patriarchs had set as the sun of the nation

of Israel began to rise. But Yaakov was much more than a father; he was a unifying force in an often fractured family. In last week's Parsha Yehuda pleads with Yosef (who had not yet revealed his true identity) to release Binyamin and he says, "For how will I go up to my father if the boy is not with me? Let me not see the misery that will befall my father (Bereishis 44:34)!" It was the image of his suffering father

that prevented Yosef from maintaining his detached façade and moved him to reveal his true identity. Yosef proceeded to make a dramatic yet, puzzling statement, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive? But his brothers could not answer him because they were startled by his presence (Bereishis 45:3).” Why did Yosef ask about his father? Just one verse earlier Yosef was moved by Yaakov’s suffering. In fact, throughout the multiple conversations between Yosef and his brothers, Yosef always asks about the welfare of “their father.” Why during the moment of revelation did Yosef ask, “Is my father still alive?”

The commentaries offer differing approaches. Some explain that Yosef was asking if Yaakov was healthy. Others explain that Yosef wasn’t sure if the brothers were telling the truth. Perhaps, they had conjured up the image of an elderly father to play off Yosef’s sympathy when in fact Yaakov had already died. And still others, explains that Yosef was rebuking his brothers; “Is it possible that after all you have done to my father, he is still alive?!”

There are two more interpretations that provide a dramatically different understanding of Yosef’s question. Rav Shmuel Borenstein (1856-1926), the Rebbe of Sochachov in his work titled, *Shem M’Shmuel* explains that Yosef was asking, “Is my father’s spirit still alive? Does he still possess the Divine spirit within?” Yosef was asking his brothers if his father was the same man he knew twenty years ago or had he become someone different. Did he still possess the spirit of holiness or had it dissipated with time? Rav Meir Shapira of Lublin (1887-1933) explains that Yosef was posing the question to himself. He was asking, “Ha’Od Avi Chai B’Kirbi, does my father still live within me?” Do I still feel that connection to my father? Do I desire to have him in my life? Do I still feel that love I once knew?

Yosef understood that traumatic life experiences change who we are. Truth be told, it is not just traumatic experiences – life changes us. As children we are loving, caring, trusting, optimistic and content. As we get older and experience failure, hurt, betrayal and set back we begin to replace these childlike qualities with sarcasm, cynicism and pessimism. Life changes us. In the moments after the revelation Yosef wonders to himself can I become the person I once was? Can my father become the person he once was? So much has happened, so much has changed, Ha’od Avi

Chai, does the father I knew still exist? Does the person I once was still exist?

Amazingly, when Yosef asks the brothers this question, there is no reply. Because no one can answer this question for Yosef; Yosef must decide for himself. Yosef must decide if he will let twenty years of difficulty and pain define him or if he will choose to reclaim his former self. Yosef decides that he will be a loving benevolent brother who will work to repair his family. And he sends an important message to his father. He says, “Hasten and go up to my father, and say to him, ‘So said your son, Joseph: “God has made me a lord over all the Egyptians. Come down to me, do not tarry (Bereishis 45:9).” The Hebrew phrase for “do not tarry” is “al taamod.” This can also be translated as, “do not stand in place.” Yosef was telling his father, I know that the spirit of God has not been upon you for the last twenty two years, I know that you have not been “alive” during these last two decades when you thought I was dead – but it doesn’t have to continue like this. Don’t stand in place – if you want to change your attitude and disposition you have the ability to do so. I have done it and father, so can you.

Last week the world lost a truly remarkable person with the passing of Nelson Mandela. After spending twenty seven years in prison on charges of trying to overthrow the apartheid government, one would have expected Mandela to seek revenge and visit hurt upon those who had deprived him of over two decades of freedom. Yet, he emerged with a message of reconciliation and societal harmony. He transformed a nation all while avoiding a bloody civil war. Mandela once said in an interview, “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.” He had to make a choice to reclaim his sense of kindness and love for the other - even the antagonistic other. Nelson Mandela understood that man has a choice about the person he becomes.

The era of the Patriarchs had ended, but their children continued to inspire. Yosef teaches us one of our most important life lessons. Trauma changes us, life changes us but at the end of the day, we decide the kind of people we are going to be, we decide the disposition and the life outlook we adopt and possess.

The Funeral Procession of Yaakov Avinu

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

The funeral procession for Yaakov Avinu is treated in the Torah with much elaboration. “And they came to Goren Ha-Atad (“Threshing Floor of Thorns”) in Transjordan and held a great and heavy eulogy.” (Bereshis 50:10) Rashi explains in the name of Chazal (using a variant text of Sotah 13a): “All of the kings of Canaan and the princes of Yishmael went to war, and when they saw Yosef’s crown placed on the casket of Yaakov, they all ceased and placed their crowns on Yaakov’s casket also, making the casket appear like a threshing floor surrounded by a fence of thorns.”

This homiletic interpretation obviously describes the high esteem and reverence accorded to Yaakov Avinu by the ruling forces in Eretz Yisroel, such that they observed a ceasefire and lay down their arms in deference to Yaakov’s funeral and bestowed honor upon the deceased. Is there any specific symbolism to this unusual midrashic narrative?

Canaan and Yishmael represent opposites. Whereas the culture of ancient Canaan represents the basest levels of social hedonism and abomination, Yishmael represents the unruly man, who cannot live within a social framework and must dwell in the wild. Whereas Canaan is fixated upon becoming one with the community in a perverse and amoral fashion, Yishmael assaults the community from without, ravaging the community rather than coming to terms with it. Whereas Canaan embodies “religion” of lustful, debased and self-indulging physical involvement and materialism, Yishmael embodies a fiery brand of monotheism and religious fury.

Each party to the above contrast has a major deficiency. Canaan cannot attain true faith and the real spiritual, as it clings to and is stuck in the quagmire of hedonistic indulgence, and Yishmael cannot deal properly with normative society and the material world.

Who possesses the resolution of this stark contrast of

deficiencies? Yaakov. As borne out in previous divrei Torah in this series, Yaakov lived on a plane of spirituality, escorted by, grappling with and encountering malachim (angels), while being part of this world. Yaakov successfully brought heaven to earth and lived in the world by elevating it toward kedushah.

The kings of Canaan and the princes of Yishmael, upon seeing Yaakov’s regal casket, dropped their armaments, for each of these warring factions was engaged in a battle against a force of great deficiency. When encountering the force which embodied the successful engagement with the physical and its elevation to the spiritual, the force which was dialoging with heaven while being grounded on earth, the kings of Canaan and the princes of Yishmael were made still and conceded to the truth that Yaakov represented.

What is the significance of Yosef’s crown being perched upon Yaakov’s casket, such that “when they saw Yosef’s crown placed on the casket of Yaakov, they all ceased and placed their crowns on Yaakov’s casket”?

Chazal tell us that once Yosef was born, Yaakov was prepared to return to Eretz Yisroel and deal with Eisav. Yosef was the counterforce to Eisav, as the pasuk states, “And the House of Yaakov will be a fire and the House of Yosef its flame, and the House of Eisav will be (consumed like) straw”. (V. Rashi on Bereshis 30:25, from Medrash.) Whereas Yaakov was on the run from Lavan and Eisav, and had to leave Eretz Yisroel due to famine, Yosef was a secure ruler, manifesting a monarchy of kedushah and emunah in the material world. Yosef was the realized force and actualization of the concepts embodied by Yaakov. This force, the flame of Yosef, emanating from the casket and persona of Yaakov, caused the warring forces of Canaan and Yishmael to become subdued and silenced and to concede to the true resolution of life’s battle.