

Vayechi

A. Exilic Bliss

Vayechi Yaakov beretz mitzrayim shav esrei shana. “Yaakov lived in the land of Mitzrayim for seventeen years.”

The Zohar comments - whereas all of Yaakov's life until this point was full of troubles, Yaakov enjoyed an extraordinarily pleasant stay in Egypt. Yosef was the king of Egypt and made life wonderful for Yaakov and his family. All the brothers got along with each other, and they were all righteous. It was like *Gan Eden* for seventeen years.

However, this took place in Egypt! This is astonishing, given the Torah's emphasis on Eretz Yisrael and the promises Hashem made to the *avos* about Eretz Yisrael. Why did Yaakov, the final father of the founders of our holy nation, why did his ultimate good life in this world take place in Mitzrayim, in exile?

B. Eitz Hada'as and the Eitz Hachaim

In Gan Eden there were two special trees. The *Eitz haChayim*, the Tree of Life, and the *Eitz Hadaas Tov V'ra*, the tree which the eater would gain knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Chava were prohibited from eating from the *eitz haddaas*. They violated this prohibition. However, regarding the Tree of Life, the Torah doesn't say that Hashem commanded them one way or the other. In fact, it appears that Adam and Eve were originally permitted to eat from the tree of life. However, after the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the Torah says that God banished Adam and Chava from the Garden of Eden. He then placed an angel with a fiery revolving sword to protect the road back to the Garden of Eden to prevent Adam and Chava from returning to the garden lest they eat from the Tree of Life.

Before the sin, Adam and Chava were apparently allowed to eat from the Eitz Hachayim. Afterwards, however, Hashem disallowed them. This requires further explanation.

C. The Essential Difference Between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The *pasuk* says that if someone would eat from the Tree of Life, then *v'chay l'olam*, “he would live forever.” The tree thus represents eternity and consistency, no changes. In contrast, the Tree of Good and Evil represents dramatic changes and instability.

Before Adam sinned, when he was totally good without evil inside of him, he was permitted to eat from the Eitz Hachaim. The fruit would make his good state eternal. Hashem would have been happy if man would be eternally good. There was originally, therefore, no prohibition to eat from the Eitz Hachayim and gain an eternal state of goodness.

However, he chose to eat the forbidden fruit of Eitz Hadaas Tov V'ra. By eating that fruit, he changed his character from totally good to paradoxical. He became what people are today, a mix of good and evil. Now we have to struggle with choices between good and evil. We are constantly changing and

evolving. Within each person there are good parts and bad parts of his or her personality. There are even generations that are good and generations of bad that are bad.

However, this state of paradox and struggle is not permanent. A day will come when good will triumph over evil. Then people will eat from the Tree of Life and be in an eternally good situation. Some of our sages say that this will take place around the Jewish year 6000.

Now the righteous who are able to overcome evil in this world go after their death to Gan Eden. There they can eat from the Eitz Hachaim even before the 6000 years of history end. They start their eternal good life after they die.

D. The Never Ending Shabbos

In our prayers we say that Shabbos is *me'ein olam haba*, a taste of the world to come. It is a *yom shekulo aruch*, a day that is eternally long. On Shabbos according to kabbala and chassidus there is no evil. The world is totally good and people are totally good. We do not mention sins and human failures on Shabbos. We make no mention of them in our prayers or Shabbos songs. Even on Rosh Hashana if it is Shabbos we don't talk about sins. Shabbos is a day of only goodness, *me'ein olam haba*. Shabbos is like the Eitz Hachaim, eternal unchanging goodness.

How do we know if we are celebrating Shabbos the way it is supposed to be kept? If at the end of Shabbos you feel the same inspiration and sweet spirituality you felt at the beginning of Shabbos, if your Shabbos feels like a day of elevated spirituality above the rough and tumble of daily life, then you have truly kept Shabbos. We have to feel at the end of Shabbos that Shabbos is just beginning. There is no beginning, middle and end of Shabbos. It is a world unto itself.

My rebbe Rav Yosef Soloveitchik *zt"l* explained that also halachically, the concept of Shabbos day never ends. The rules of Shabbos are eternal. On Shabbos, we will never go back to work, we will always have the pleasure of being together with Hashem. He is our Master and Friend, whom we are with on the Shabbos day. He is our Shabbos guest and we are with Him together in the palace of Shabbos. However, the *mitzva* of *havdala* appears when the stars come out. The recitation of *havdala* stops this sublime day. On the Shabbos day we keep Shabbos as if it is to last forever. We have no problems to worry about. We do not plan anything for the coming days. Halacha levels a prohibition on Shabbos against discussing weekday plans. Shabbos is constant, like the Eitz HaChaim, and does not change forever. However, surprise – along comes *havdala*. When we say *havdala* Shabbos suddenly ends and goes away.

We can say that the six days of the week are the turmoil and tumultuous existence of the Eitz Hada'as Tov V'ra. They are a mixture of good and evil. The six days are a very confusing time, full of paradoxical choices, full of good and evil. Shabbos, though, is like the Eitz Hachaim. It is a constant. If during the six days one is able to gain some achievement of goodness and bring it into the Shabbos, the Shabbos will strengthen that goodness and give it constancy. We then can take that strengthened constant goodness with us into the following week. During the week we have to focus on goodness, with great persistence. This will develop in us a connection to the non-worldly eternal, *olam haba*. This *gan eden* type feeling will then come to us more strongly on Shabbos because of the way we conducted ourselves during the six days of the week.

To summarize, in Gan Eden there were two trees, which represented respectively constancy and change. The two *zmanim*, Shabbos and *y'mei hachol*, represent respectively pure spirituality on one

side, and on the other change, turmoil, conflict and paradox.

E. Constancy and Change in Other Areas

We have seen constancy and change embodied in trees and in time. This same phenomenon exists in the celestial bodies of the heaven. The sun represents constancy. Every single day, 365 days a year, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The same sun rises, shines and then goes down. It does not change; it is constant and reliable. This is the Eitz Hachaim of the heavenly bodies. The sun is the source of all life in the world. The other heavenly body, the moon, is always changing. Every single day of the month for thirty days, the moon appears differently each day. It has a different size and shape. It even disappears at the end of the month for a day or two. Fifteen days later it is full, and another fifteen days later it is gone. This is like the *Eitz Hada'as Tov V'ra*.

Chassidus and kabbala revealed the secret that certain phases of the moon represent evil, especially the latter half of the lunar month when the moon is getting smaller. Other phases represent goodness, namely the first half of the month until the 15th day of the month, which represents the full expression of goodness. Many Jewish holidays are on the 15th of the month. Pesach, the holiday of our exodus from Egypt begins on the 15th of Nissan. Sukkos, the happiest days of the year, begins on the 15th day of Tishrei. The birthday of the trees is on the 15th of Shvat. Purim in Jerusalem is celebrated on the 15th of Adar. The 15th of the month represents the resolution of the conflict of good and evil, the victory of the good.

Many Jews have a *minhag* to marry on the night of a full moon since the full moon represents redemption, the resolution of the problem of good and evil. But then the moon gets smaller until it gets smaller and disappears. This represents evil. When people were more sensitive to spiritual currents, there used to be a *minhag* not to get married in the second half of the month. The first 15 days is when good is ascendant. These days are considered days of good *mazal*. The last 15 days are days when evil is getting stronger, thus the old custom not getting married during the last 15 days of the month.

The sun never changes. It is the Eitz Hachaim, and the source of life in this world. The moon, on the other hand, is always changing. It represents change.

F. Yaakov as the Sun, The Shvatim as the Moon

In the midrashim, Yaakov is compared to the sun. The story of Yaakov involves the sun. After he flees from Eisav, the sun sets and Yaakov goes to sleep. There the midrash there compares Yaakov to the sun. When the sun goes down, Yaakov goes into *galus*. But he will return to Israel, like the sun which will eventually rise again. Yaakov's twelve boys have a different style. They are represented by the moon. They represent the twelve months of the year.

Chazal composed a beautiful *mashal*. Yaakov is like the sun. He is constant, like the Eitz Hachaim. Yaakov was always a *tzadik* since a young boy studying Torah with his father. He is the great sage of Israel, the one who is the source of *bracha* in Parshas Vayechi. These blessings defined the future greatness of Bnei Yisrael. Yaakov is the sun, constant goodness. Yaakov does not change, he never sinned. He remained a *tzadik* in Lavan's house and in Mitzrayim. The gemara says *Yaakov Avinu lo mes*, he didn't die, as if he had eaten from the Tree of Life.

Yaakov's twelve sons are not constant. They go through their terrible periods of evil and sins, such as when they sold Yosef as slave. They were guilty of the terrible sin of kidnapping and selling a brother.

Even Yosef in his youth provoked his brothers, and was in part responsible for the terrible enmity between himself and them. The twelve sons represent change. Ultimately, all the sons of Yaakov repented and reconciled.

G. The Shvatim as Unique Individuals

This dynamic of the sons is not only change from good to evil and back. On the good side too, every tribe is different. Each tribe has its special quality, even when Yaakov criticizes some of his children. Yaakov values the strength and glory of Judah and even in a certain way of Shimon and Levy. He praises the courage and nobility of Yosef, and the righteousness of Binyamin. Yaakov encourages the business sense of Zvulun, and the love of Torah of Yissachar.

In addition to the unique skills and talents of each tribe, each tribe has its own special location in Eretz Yisrael. Some tribes are mountain people, like Yosef and Binyamin. Their souls belong in the mountains of Israel. They have great vision and imagination like Yosef the dreamer, and they therefore live in places where you can see far and wide. Zvulun, the great businessman, belongs on the coast near the ships and wharfs, where he can supervise the goods that are being exported and imported. He knows how to talk to the gentiles in the language of business, and create a *kiddush Hashem*. Yissachar is the *masmid*, day and night committed to Torah studies in the *yeshivos*. The great warrior Yehuda lives in the desert to express the qualities of his soul. He can live in harsh conditions and make even the desert bloom. Even in the most difficult situations Yehuda can be a *tzaddik* like David and our future Mashiach, son of David.

Every tribe fits into its own unique section of Israel. The country has every geographical feature: mountains, rivers, seas, forests and deserts. We are all different, so the land needs variety to fit each personality of the twelve groups of Jews that constitute Am Yisrael. From snow capped Mount Chermion to the desert of Negev, to the clear beautiful blue water of Eilat and the incredible Mediterranean Sea, Israel has everything. This is because the Jewish people have everything. Every part of the human being is in Israel. Our mission is to develop all the different facets of our human soul.

When the *kohen gadol* wore the *choshen*, he carried twelve precious stones on his chest near his heart, each one engraved with a name of one of the *shavtim*. Each gem has its own color: green, white, yellow, blue, black, etc. Each gem represented a tribe of Israel, one of the twelve months of the years, the changes of season from one month to the next.

H. Develop Your Unique Talents

What is true about the *klal* is also true about the *prat*. Each one of us has a sun and a moon personality. Some things about us are constant. We are committed to Torah. We are part of the Jewish people. We all love the Land of Israel and our fellow Jews. We are like the sun.

Then again, each one of us has our own special qualities that make us different from anyone else. We are obligated to develop our unique, individual qualities, just like Yaakov's sons who received their own special blessings.

I personally am blessed to be a teacher. Others are talented in different ways. Everyone has Hashem's unique blessing for him or her. No one else has the special blessing that you have.

We each have our own special experiences every day, Hashem arranges them for us so we can express

our unique talent in our own individual way. In this way we are like the moon, constantly changing, unique and different.

I. Constancy and Difference When Raising Children

As we raise our holy Jewish children we must remember these two ideas, constancy and individuality. We must constantly be there for our children. We must be home every night to talk to our children. We always have to share Shabbos with them. We have to be there for them in school. We have to model for them the stability of a committed Jewish life.

We also have to treat them as individuals. We have to help them develop their individuality, like the sons of Yaakov. *Chanoch la'naar al pi darko*. Develop each child in his or her own special way. Some children need a different school, and a special game. Every child needs some special individual attention. Teach each child that they are unique and show them that you are too.

Sun and moon are fundamental parts of being Jewish and human. Constancy and individual expression are two fulcrums of being a Torah Jew.

J. Why Yaakov's Best Years Were in Egypt

Shem Mishmuel explains that for this reason, Hashem gave Yaakov the greatest seventeen years of his life in Mitzrayim, to show us that the sun rises in Egypt like it rises in Israel. Even the holy Land of Israel is not integral for the *tzaddik*. Moshe, the greatest Jew who ever lived, never set foot in Israel. We know Israel is vastly important. But it is not necessary for the *tzadik*. Yaakov reached the highest levels of *tzidkus* in Egypt in his last seventeen years. This is a lesson for everyone still living in *galus*. We cannot say we live in a bad environment in a non-Jewish world. It does not need to affect us in a bad way. We can be like Yaakov in Egypt, and be a *tzadik* in New York or Los Angeles or wherever we are. This was the challenge of Yaakov, who had to live in Mitzrayim. Yaakov's son Yosef was like his father, he never changed in Egypt. He is a tremendous model for us. Yaakov's grandchildren had every excuse not to serve Hashem because they were enslaved in Egypt, but they had the models of Yaakov and Yosef to remain constant and loyal to their Jewish heritage.

Yaakov finished his life in Mitzrayim to teach every single Jew that environment is not an excuse. It may provide a greater challenge. It is also an opportunity to grow by overcoming the challenge of a bad environment. Whenever we can we should choose a good environment. But we should understand that the sun rises in Egypt just like in it does in Israel.

Our dream of is to go higher, to go to Israel. In Israel We can develop our individuality in a special way, encouraged and nurtured by the unique propensities of each special area of the Holy Land.

We have learned about the sun and the moon, the *etz hachaim* and the *eitz hadaas*, of consistency and of individuality. The Torah wants us to be a holy people in a consistent way. The Torah also wants us to be individually creative and to develop the special holiness that each one of us uniquely has. The Torah wants each one of us to become a gem of Israel.

This ends the book of Breishis, the book of creation and the birth of the Jewish people.

Questions:

- 1) How was Yaakov like the sun?

- 2) How were the tribes like the moon?
- 3) Describe constancy and change in the seven days of the week.
- 4) How are you constant in your Judaism?
- 5) How are you changing in your Judaism?
- 6) Are you more like Yaakov or more like the tribes? Explain.
- 7) Keep a log for a week of constant actions and changing actions you have done.
- 8) Which is more challenging to you, to keep constant commitments, or to dynamically grow in different ways?