



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Vayechi 5781

The Pit Revisited

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm ז"ל (Originally delivered December 19, 1964)

Following the marvelous story of fraternal strife and family reunion--a story of singular dramatic impact which addresses itself to each of us--our Sidra this morning relates to something that almost becomes an anti-climax. After Jacob's death and his internment in Canaan, when the funeral procession has returned to Egypt from the Holy Land, we read that ויראו אחי יוסף כי מת אביהם ויאמר לו יוסף, Joseph's brothers saw that their father had died, and they said, who knows but that now Joseph will hate us and avenge himself upon us for all the evil that we have caused him. The peace and harmony of the House of Israel was threatened all over again.

Now, this is a disturbing report. Of lesser people, we expect that brothers live in an armed truce while their father is alive; but when he is dead, they resume their hostilities. We expect of an Esau that he should refrain from murdering his brother Jacob only as long as their father Isaac lived, but that once he is gone Esau should plan to destroy his antagonist brother. But of people of higher moral caliber, of שבטי ישראל, we expect a continuation of fraternal and brotherly feeling. For as long as a cherished and revered Father is spiritually alive for his children, his very memory serves to keep them together in peace and friendship. It is only when the spiritual presence of Father has died for some or all of them, that fraternal strife breaks out unrestrained. But ought we expect this of the sons of Jacob, founders of the House of Israel?

The Rabbis of the Midrash (בראשית רבה) reveal a superb psychological insight not only into Joseph and his brothers, but into the universal dimensions of human revelations. They tell us that on the way back from the burial of Jacob in Egypt, they passed the very pit into which the brothers had cast Joseph and from whence began Joseph's long adventure. When they passed that pit, he הלך והציץ באותו בור, went over to it, and stared and gazed into it.

The pit revisited! I can imagine what the brothers thought as their faces reddened with shame and chagrin. No doubt that Joseph's long look at the pit where they had cast him made the brothers believe that surely this will recall for him the terror they had brought upon him, and that he will not take the revenge which he had waited for all along. It was this incident of the pit revisited that aroused dread and struck paralyzing fear in the hearts of the brothers.

But with the gift of hindsight, we know otherwise. We can reconstruct the thoughts that raced through Joseph's mind as he peered into the snake-infested scorpion-populated pit where he was once cast and left to die. A יוסף הצדיק is not moved to revenge by such expressions. On the contrary, he was impressed by the contrast between his condition now and his condition then. He thought: now I wear the purple robes of royalty; then-- my כתונת הפסים, coat of many colors, was ripped off me, soaked in blood, and presented to my grieving father. Now I wear on my head the crown of Egypt; then I was sold as a slave, as a piece of human merchandise. Now I have majesty; then misery. Now honor; then horror. Now I sit in splendor; then I stood amidst serpents. Now I am rich; then wretched. I have come a long way in the world! I must remember my origins. I must never submit to delusions of grandeur. I must never let my good fortune go to my head. Remembering my miserable and impoverished beginning, I shall retain my humor and humility, my sense of proportion and perspective. It is this kind of thinking which later informed the Torah's command to all Israel, that when they are well established and independent in their own land that וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים, Israel must always remember that it was a slave-nation in Egypt, and therefore must now treat with exemplary sympathy the outcast and the alien, the friendliness and the forlorn.

This, then, is what the pit revisited did for Joseph: It

kept him human, restrained his ego, controlled his self-importance. The pit reinforced his sympathy for the poor and the wretched, the anguished and the humiliated everywhere. That long, lingering look into the dark pit from which he began his tortuous climb up the ladder of success kept him from getting a dizzy head now that he stood at the very edge.

Is not this something that all of us can benefit from? Is it not of crucial importance for every man or woman who has achieved something of significance, who has attained a measure of fame or power or wealth, to revisit his own dark pit, his early period of privation and want?

I once visited, in another city, the home of a very wealthy industrialist. It was a house which was lavishly appointed. On the walls of his parlor there hung famous paintings, original masterpieces. Amongst them I noticed something quite unusual: surrounded by a very expensive frame was what looked like a discolored, frayed piece of cloth. At first I hesitated to inquire about it, fearing that I would thereby display my ignorance of avant-garde art. But after a while, I asked what this was. He said: It is nothing but an ordinary rag. I had it framed so that I might look at it and remember that no matter how much I have now, I must always keep in mind that I began as a poor, hungry, barefoot lad whose few pennies were earned by being a menial ragpicker! It helps me keep my sense of balance and proportion. It is a reminder that I don't own the world. It does not let me forget what it is like to be hungry.

Pity our affluent society. I sometimes am sorry for our children who have no pit to return to, as did Joseph. How shall they ever learn to attain a true perspective on life? In the deeper sense, the children of our society of plenty are underprivileged, spiritually deprived. They have never known hunger or fear or poverty in the past, a lack of toys or gadgets in the present, or in the inability to expect an abundance of cars and cruises and trips before they are ready for it in the near future. Most parents, at least, remember their own humble beginnings. Some were refugees, and know what it is like to leave everything you have and go into flight for your life. But how can our children know how bitter the cup of life can be, how uncertain life is, and therefore to appreciate what they have and to use their affluence properly, without sacrificing character in the process?

American Jews are today assimilating at an unprecedented rate. I believe that one of the reasons is

their false sense of security, for they know of the dreadful experiences of our people in Europe only in an abstract and theoretical sense. That is why I would urge parents and schools to teach our children, when they are ready for it, the complete story of the great holocaust of our people during World War II. The visit this past week of a German court to Auschwitz is deeply symbolic. Modern Jews too must make pilgrimages to the בורות of horror which contain six million corpses of our people. I can understand the reluctance of parents who lived through this period who do not want to rearouse the ghastliness of their experiences. But American-born Jewish children and parents need this experience. That is why I believe that any trip to Israel should have as its first and foremost feature a visit to מרתף השואה in Jerusalem, the museum which contains the record of the destruction of one-third of our people. If we deny this pit revisited to ourselves and our children, we keep away not only the Jewish past, but the present and a guarantee of the future as well.

Such thoughts, then, occurred to Joseph as he contemplated his lowly origin, his form of the Rabbis' injunction: דע מאין באת, know from whence you came. Yet, the brothers were terrorized. They were struck by fear. Why did they not ascribe such noble thoughts to Joseph as have been mentioned? Why did they not attribute to him these meditations, and why did they panic instead?

Perhaps they too had an insight into human nature. They knew full well that reliving early misery, taking a long look at the pit of poverty, can have a humanizing effect. But they also appreciated that sometimes it is counteractive, it has the reverse consequences. For some people הלך והציץ באותו בור results in a fanatic desire to cover up humble origins, to make up for lost time and benefits ignored and pleasures not enjoyed. Thus it sometimes happens that a man who was once hungry now overeats. A woman once poor, now overdresses and becomes over acquisitive. A person once humiliated, now becomes arrogant and oppressive. An individual once ignored, now becomes insatiably publicity-hungry. Who knows, the brothers thought, but that Joseph staring into that black pit of despair may not now destroy us who subjected him to this anguish and terror?

Indeed it was a very real possibility, and the brothers cannot be blamed for considering that eventuality. But while they saw all that was to be seen, they did not hear all that was to be heard. For the Rabbis (מדרש תנחומא) tell us something else occurred at that time: הלך יוסף לברך את אותו

הבור. שהשליחו אחיו בתוכו, וברוך עליו למו שחייב אדם לברך על מקום שנעשה לו נס, ברוך המקום שעשה נס במקום הזה.

When Joseph looked into the pit he also silently recited a blessing, which the Halakhah prescribes for any person who was miraculously delivered from danger upon revisiting the scene of his deliverance: Blessed is the Lord who performs for me a miracle in this place.

That is what they missed--the whisper of a blessing! The pit revisited can be equally divine or demonic; humanizing or dehumanizing. But if that visitation is accompanied by a ברכה, then it invariably helps man restore his sense of balance and harmony. For by ברכה we mean: the acknowledgment that it is not by my own ability and skill that I rose to the top, but the will of God, שעשה לי נס במקום הזה. It is not my wisdom but God's will, not my greatness but God's goodness, that have sustained me through my adventures.

The Jew at the Seder eats מרור, a זכר לעבדות, a token of his ancient servitude; but--he recites a ברכה over it, and this blessing is what teaches him the path of righteousness rather than revenge.

We recite the עבדים היינו but we conclude with the blessing of גאל ישראל--and so it leads us on to the way of honor and humility, not of oppression and retaliation towards our former taskmasters.

It's not About 1st or 2nd, it's About Being One

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh

I saw a nice vort in the sefer Agra D'Kalah, from the Bnei Yissaschar. In this week's Parsha, Yakov, blessed Ephraim and Menashe — *B'cha yivoreich Yisroel leimor: Yasimcha Elokim k'Ephraim u'k'Menashe*. It's a pretty serious brocha. Throughout all the generations all the Jews will bless their sons and will say: You should be like Ephraim and Menashe. And it's true. To this day, on Friday night, the fathers say exactly like Yakov did: "*Yasimcha Elokim k'Ephraim u'k'Menashe*". Now, I'm not the one to measure the greatness of Ephraim and Menashe, but neither am I to measure the greatness of Yakov's other grandchildren or his children, or Avraham, Yitchak and Yakov. So why do we specifically say k'Ephraim u'k'Menashe and not any of the other Avos? So the Agra D'Kalah point out that if you look at the order of the Parsha, first Yakov says I'm going to bless the kids — "*Hamalach HaGoel...*" — and then, Yosef brings the kids in (Ephraim and Menashe) and Yakov switched his hands and said "*Yasimcha Elokim k'Ephraim*

That is what Joseph did: he blessed God when revisiting the pit. Therefore, when the brothers became apprehensive, he said to them: אל תיראו כי התחת אלקים אני which usually is translated, do not fear for am I in place of God? --or, preferably, Onkelos translates it, "For behold, I am under God!" And one who is "under God" neither despairs when he lies forsaken in the pit, nor turns pompous when he sits in splendor on the throne of Egypt.

The problem which confronted Joseph is one which none of us, in our society, can escape: how to attain affluence without forfeiting faith; honor without losing honor; prosperity without abdicating perspective.

Like Joseph, we must each revisit the בור, the symbols of our initial failures and lowliness. And like Joseph, we must each thank God and acknowledge Him as the One responsible for our triumphs.

The Jewish response to God's blessing is to bless God.

The Jewish way is to recognize that our successes impose moral obligations upon us.

In the words of Joseph, כי למחיה שלחני לפניכם : God sent me before you to be a source of life and livelihood. Our function, then, must become: to enhance life, to restore peace, to advance the cause of God in the world.

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u'k'Menashe". What happened there??

There were a lot of great people. If you are measuring how great the people were, we're not going to start comparing them. There were Avraham., Yitchak., Yakov., and different Shevatim., etc. However, let's look at what happened over the course of generations. Avraham and his brothers... One was a total idol worshiper and the other found Hashem. Avraham had Yitzchak and Yishmoel, and a question arose which one did Avraham like better; who would Sarah like better; who would Hashem like better. Rashi says when Yitzchak was trying to win, Yishmoel tried to kill him and ended up getting kicked out of the house. They were fighting over who would be # 1, who would be the top, who would be the best. Ok, let's try again - Yakov and Eisav. So we know, from the very beginning, from the moment they were born they were struggling about this, and the Bechora, and the Brochah, and about whom would Aba like best. And they ended up almost killing each other.

In the next generation we have the same story with Yosef and his brothers. Whom did Yakov like best - bnei Rochel or bnei Leah? Yakov favored Yosef. His brothers tried to kill him and sold him into slavery, etc.

What happened here, all of the sudden? Menashe and Ephraim. Menashe is older. He deserves the “right hand”. That’s the rule. All of a sudden, Yakov switched his hands and switched whether he will favor the younger one over the older one — just like what happened in the previous generations. But... neither complained. Menashe did not say anything. They didn’t fight. There was no resentment. Nothing! B’seder—you can be first and I will be second; you can be second and i will be first. We are both getting

Rediscovering Grandparents

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Covid-19 has changed everything. The past year has produced a seismic shift in almost every aspect of our lives and will continue to shape our identity for years to come. It is overwhelming to consider how much has changed in less than a year.

Among everything else, the pandemic has considerably altered our view of the senior generation – the community of people most endangered by this virus. The entire world halted its routine, shut down their economy and quarantined for weeks at a time, in some measure, to protect our grandparents who were most vulnerable. This week’s parsha, Vayechi, actually showcases the first moment in Bereishit that grandparents and grandchildren live under the same roof. The nonstop drama of Breishit documents the seemingly unending rifts surrounding the transfer of legacy-berachot from one generation to the next. Undesirable brothers such as Yishma’el and Esav are discharged while Yosef and his brothers squabble. All this jockeying surrounds the transfer of the legacy-berachot from generation to generation. Finally, in the end of the sefer, as all the tension dies down, the berachot are amicably delivered by an aging grandfather to his grandchildren, amidst harmony and solidarity.

Intriguingly, this beracha from Ya’akov to his grandchildren Menashe and Efraim serves as an iconic “beracha”- which is recited in every home at the onset of Shabbat. Evidently, the blessing of a grandparent possesses distinctive impact beyond the blessing of a parent.

We live in a “golden era” for people living through

the brocha. We are both part of the family. We are both following the mesorah. It doesn’t really matter that much who’s first and who’s second. That happened for the first time with Ephraim and Menashe. Agra D’kalah says: Once Yakov saw that, he said to them that in all the generations Jews should bless their kids not only to follow the Mesorah (the hashkafa of Avraham, Yitzchak, Yakov, and all the Shevatim), but that they should be like Ephraim and Menashe. They should remember that that is what’s important; that we are all one Am. It doesn’t really matter that much who is first and who is second. What really matters is that we are all together in Am Yisroel.

their “golden years”. Medical advances have appreciably extended life expectancy; if 70 is the new 40, “younger” grandparents have the vitality to play greater roles in family life. This increased role of grandparents creates a new family dynamic which sharply contrasts with that of the previous generation. Many people currently in their 50’s and 60’s either didn’t enjoy living grandparents or saw grandparents who were broken by the horrors of the Holocaust and emotionally ill-equipped to play an active role in their upbringing. The new generation of grandparents feels very different.

In addition to the medical revolution and the extension of life expectancy, cultural changes have allowed grandparents to become more deeply woven into the fabric of their grandchildren’s lives. Changes in transportation have allowed grandparents to spend more time with their grandchildren and modern communication – think zoom and skype- have granted interactive opportunities even at great distances. On a different note rising divorce rates have also reconfigured the family tree; often children have multiples sets of grandparents and in many cases this assortment actually is beneficial. Changes in the modern world have reconfigured the role of grandparents in our lives; the corona crisis has merely punctuated changes which had been evolving over the past 30 years.

These developments pose an intriguing opportunity for grandparents to become more involved in the education and development of their grandchildren? Generally, grandparents have more time and resources available and

are less exposed to the pressures of day-to-day parenting—allowing them to supplement the guidance which a parent supplies. On a more psychological level, grandparents can sometimes be less “threatening” to their grandchildren than parents sometimes seem. As children search for independent identity it is often difficult for them to embrace the instruction of parents; grandparents feel less daunting or less stifling and can provide a ‘softer’ source of influence. However, the influence of grandparents is valuable in its own right and not only because they have greater time and resources. The gemara in Kidushin compares Torah taught by a grandparent to the Torah delivered at Sinai. Presumably, Torah taught by a grandparent feels more stable and more durable. Torah which has managed to stream throughout multiple generations becomes more entrenched and more innate. In the constant search for the relevance of Torah, a grandparent’s Torah can feel more compelling. Furthermore, Torah transmission occurs through the teaching of “ideas” but, sometimes, more powerfully, through the witnessing of lifestyles. Some have referred to this as the “mimetic tradition” – copying the Torah lifestyles which we witness in others and experience in the warmth of our homes and not through a book. Watching a grandparent can often convey a powerful sense of ‘how religion is lived’ and not just how it is ‘learned.’ Finally, the Torah of a grandparent may feel more “historical”. Our faith is a product of our historical mission to represent God in our world. Sadly, many modern Jews live historically “disjointed” lives out of touch with our shared historical journey. Modern life has, in so many ways, severed Jews from their historical anchors. Grandparents are better able to convey the historical framework which is so crucial to deeply religious experience. Torah from grandparents isn’t just more available, but ‘tastes’ decidedly different.

Recently, the broader Jewish community has begun to ponder this question of how to better integrate grandparents in the religious experience of families and communities. Over the past ten years several articles have raised this awareness; a recently developed organization known as the “Jewish Grandparents Network” has attempted to amplify the opportunities for grandparent influence. As, with God’s help, we slowly emerge from Covid-19 we must think hard about this issue.

In particular, we should reimagine the roles which communities allocate for grandparent influence. The pandemic has forced us to rethink the concept of

“community”. We all realize that Jewish community life is central to both Jewish identity and religion, but we also realize that our communal structures will look very different in 2021. Over the past year we have been largely absent from Shuls and have attended schools sporadically; when we return, we will certainly reimagine how these institutions function. It is a strategic moment to think about incorporating grandparents more deeply into our communal institutions. Below are some interesting “starter” ideas to consider for both schools and shuls:

Schools: My children attend an extremely forward-thinking boys Yeshiva High School called Mevor Chaim-led by an extremely creative educator named Rav Dov Zinger. Each week the boys are allocated an entire afternoon for chesed; alternatively, the boys can spend the entire afternoon with their grandparents- eating lunch, walking together, and visiting. Should schools begin to create similar “spaces” for these types of interactions between students and grandparents under the rubric of the school curriculum? In my yeshiva in the Gush, I routinely invite grandparents of current talmidim to tell “their story” to my 18-year old talmidim. Should schools dedicate greater time and resources toward creating these encounters during actual school hours? Do these interactions justify the allocation of already precious class-lecture time?

Shuls: Over the past twenty years, programs nominally known as “avot u’banim” have facilitated parent/child weekly learning. Some communities have actually launched grandparent/grandchild learning. Are we at the stage that these programs should be more commonplace and more routine? Additionally, most shuls host a range of ‘special’ Shabbat programming. These themed weekends, focus on certain areas of religion, honor specific members or groups in the community and host visiting Torah scholars. Perhaps an annual ‘grandparent Shabbat’ can be slotted in, grandparents can be invited to join the community for Shabbat, and special programming can be geared toward grandparents and their impact upon our lives.

Of course all programs must be conducted with great sensitivity as many community members do not have living grandparents or are not connected with their grandparents.

Someone once said “If your grandparents and your grandchildren are both proud of you and your accomplishments, then you can claim success in life”. It seems as if this statement rings truer in our generation than it did in the past.

The Book of the Wars of Gad

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Yaakov's final message to Gad addressed the military future of his descendants. We may translate Bereishit 49:19 as "Gad, troops will venture forth from him; may he return on that path home (Rashi)," or "Gad, troops will attack him; may he attack them in the end. (Radak, Ramban)"

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra maintained that we cannot know which wars Yaakov foretold here. (Commentary to Bereishit 49:19) However, other commentators identify five different wars of Gad:

- 1) When the Jews entered Israel under Yehoshua, Gad sent troops at the front, beside those of Reuven and Menasheh. (Yehoshua 4:12-13)
- 2) About 300 years after the Jews entered Israel, Amon attacked Gad. (Shoftim 11, as explained in Ramban to Bereishit 49:19)
- 3) In the time of King Shaul, members of Gad joined with the fugitive King David in Tziklag, fighting by his side. (Divrei haYamim I 12:9)
- 4) Also in the days of King Shaul, Gad fought the descendants of Hagar, uprooted them, and dwelled in their tents. (Divrei haYamim I 5:10; and see Bereishit Rabbah 98:15 regarding the date of this war)
- 5) And in an apparently separate war, date unspecified, Gad fought the descendants of Hagar. (Divrei haYamim I 5:18-22, and see Radak to Bereishit ibid.)

Perhaps Yaakov's blessing was a prayer for the military success of his descendants in all of these wars. However, a midrash alters the story of the fifth war, deepening the message of Yaakov's blessing for Gad, and for us. Divrei haYamim I describes this fifth war thus: "They fought a war against the descendants of Hagar, and Yetur, Nafish and Nodav. And they were assisted over them, and the descendants of Hagar and all of their allies were put into their hands, for they prayed to Hashem during the war, and Hashem responded to them because they put their trust in Him... for war is from Hashem. And they dwelled in their place, until the exile."

Our Sages were intrigued by the unusual emphasis on Gad's prayer during the war. They were also curious about the ambiguous assistance which Gad received. Based on these elements, and a third uncertainty regarding the date of the war, a midrash dates the battle to the time when

the warriors of Gad were with Yehoshua in Israel, and the prayerful victory to the time when those warriors returned home. Bereishit Rabbah 98:15 offers the following record of the event:

When Israel conquered and divided the land, the tribes of Reuven and Gad were with them; they had left behind their small children. One who left a ten-year old child returned to find him at age 24; one who left him at age twenty found him at age 34. Three wicked [Hagarite] families, Yetur, Nafish and Kedmah, attacked [the younger generation], as recorded in Divrei haYamim I 5... These [older Gadites] had grown their hair long and these [younger Gadites] had grown their hair long; these grew their hair long until they would see their children, and these grew their hair long until they would see their fathers. But the Ishmaelites also grew their hair [and so the returning, older Gadites could not discern the younger Gadites from Hagarites in the battle].

Hashem influenced the children's hearts, and they said, 'Answer us, Hashem, answer us! G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak, G-d of Israel, answer us!' Thus it says, 'And they were assisted over them, and the descendants of Hagar... were put into their hands.' In what merit? Rabbi Levi and the Sages debated. The Sages said it was from Yaakov's blessing, etc.

This midrash adds a spiritual light to the war with Hagar's descendants. First, the Transjordan family of Gad had come to resemble their Ishmaelite neighbours, as represented by the hair in this midrash. Second, the Transjordan family of Gad was saved when they distinguished themselves from those Ishmaelite neighbours, by calling out to Hashem. And third, Yaakov's intervention was not only a prayer for military success, but also a prayer for his children to retain and display loyalty to Hashem.

This midrash also points to a challenge for us, the modern descendants of Reuven, Gad and part of Menasheh, living apart from our Israeli brethren. Clearly, those who choose to live beyond the Yarden are physically vulnerable, on the frontier. But more, we are spiritually vulnerable, living away from the bulk of the Jewish people. May Yaakov's prayer for Gad extend to include us, the descendants of Gad in exile, such that we will retain our identity and so emerge victorious.

Elements of Resilience

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

There is no one “right” way to respond to a traumatic event and most people deal with trauma in slightly different ways. Yet, there is research that indicates that certain environments, perspectives and behaviors lead to more adaptive responses that create the opportunity for healing. Yosef, a survivor of several traumatic events, serves as a paradigm of resilience. By analyzing Yosef’s mindset and behavior as presented in the pesukim and midrashim at the end of Sefer Bereishit, we can identify several strategies that serve as protective factors for healthy resolutions of traumatic events.

The natural response to trauma is to try and avoid the painfulness of the experience. Yet, research indicates that the more one tries to avoid either by trying not to think about the traumatic event or by distancing oneself from anything that reminds one of the event, the greater likelihood one has of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Consequently, besides for being able to talk about the painful experience, one of the strategies in trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) is to revisit the site of the trauma. One of the reasons why this is helpful is because it helps the person develop a “then versus now” perspective, allowing the event to feel more in the past, rather than something that is continuing to be experienced in the present.

There is a fascinating group of midrashim that suggest that on the way back from burying Yaakov, Yosef took a detour to revisit the scene of his original trauma – the infamous pit where his brothers left him to die. Standing over the pit, gazing into the abyss, he confronts the site of the trauma. At that moment, he recites a bracha: “Blessed is G-d (‘HaMakom’) Who performed a miracle for me in this place (‘bamakom hazeh’). This bracha reflects and reveals two important mindsets. First, as is indicated by the past grammatical tense, the bracha presupposes a break from the past. By being able to acknowledge being saved in the

past, Yosef solidifies a “then versus now” perspective.

The bracha also demonstrates a second important protective factor for Yosef – the ability to find positive meaning in the trauma. Broadly speaking, the bracha serves to spiritualize and sanctify the experience. More specifically, hinted at within the wording of the bracha is a powerful message. The word used to connote G-d in the blessing is “HaMakom,” literally, “The Place” - “Blessed is The Place, Who performed a miracle for me at this place.” Embedded within the wording, Yosef is acknowledging what he explicitly states within the pesukim. The whole narrative, starting with the trauma that happened at this place, reflects the Will of The Place. Yosef acknowledges the positive meaning within the trauma: G-d orchestrated each element of the story for the survival of the descendants of Yaakov in Egypt.

Finally, the story closes with Yosef demonstrating one more protective factor, namely, helping others in their healing process. Yosef’s brothers were scared that Yosef would seek out retribution now that Yaakov died, and Yosef was in a position of power. Yosef doesn’t just reassure them that he won’t harm them and that he will provide sustenance for them, but he also “comforted them and spoke to their hearts” (Bereishit 50:21). Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that Yosef was helping them with their healing process by trying to assuage their feelings of guilt by emphasizing the Divinely ordained elements of what transpired and the positive outcomes of everyone now having enough food to survive.

While we hope to not experience traumatic events in the first place, if we are confronted with a trauma, we can learn a number of powerful strategies from Yosef, including; revisiting the scene in a safe context to foster a “then versus now” perspective, finding meaning and positive benefit within the event, and helping others heal through their own healing process.

The Strength and Pride of the Galus Jew

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week’s parsha, Parshas Vayechi, upon his deathbed and at the end of his life, Yaakov Avinu blesses each of his sons with their own unique bracha

(Bereishis 49, Birkas Yaakov).

To Shimon and Levi, his second and third sons born to Leah, he blesses (and rebukes) them together. Referring to

their killing of the people of Shechem, after the abduction and violation of their sister, Dina, (Gen.34), as well as to the sale of Yosef (instigated and committed by these two brothers, Gen.37), Yaakov says: שְׁמַעוֹן וְלֵוִי, אֲחֵים כָּלֵי חַמָּס שִׁמְרוֹתֵיהֶם, מִכְרֵתֵיהֶם, *Shimon and Levi are brothers, stolen tools are their weapons; into their design may my soul not enter, with their congregation do not unite, O my honor!, for in their rage they killed a man* (Chamor and the people of Shechem), and in their wish they hamstrung an ox (they wished to uproot and eliminate Yosef); אָרוּר אַפָּם בִּי עַז, וְעִבְרָתָם בִּי קִשְׁתָּהּ; אַחְלָקֶם, *cursed is their rage for it is mighty, and their wrath for it is harsh; I will divide them in Yaakov and I will disperse them in Israel* (Bereishis 49:5-7 with Rashi).

In his final words to Shimon and Levi, Yaakov presents two different possibilities as to how these tribes will flourish and spread out amongst the nation: אַחְלָקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב, וְאֶפְיִצֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל - *I will divide them in Yaakov and I will disperse them in Israel*. Why does Yaakov say they will be divided (or apportioned) amongst Yaakov [אַחְלָקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב] and dispersed (or scattered) amongst Israel [וְאֶפְיִצֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל]?

R' S. R. Hirsch brilliantly and powerfully clarifies this bracha for us in his commentary to Chumash: "It is not the intention of the מחלק (the 'divider') to weaken something that hitherto was whole, but, rather, to apportion something valuable so that as many people as possible can have a part (חלק) in it. By contrast, the מפּיץ ('scatterer') divides a whole into the smallest possible parts so as to negate its unity and solidarity.

"Yaakov: the image of dependence, the Jewish people in galus (exile), oppressed and persecuted. Yisrael: the image of the Jewish people triumphant, by the hand of G-d.

"Accordingly: The danger posed to the nation by the anger and impetuosity of Shimon and Levi exists only when the nation is flourishing, when it constitutes a powerful community, which could easily be carried away by the influence of two united tribes who are filled with the awareness of their own power and aflame with the feeling of brotherhood. Therefore, אַפְיִצֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל; in the flourishing Jewish state (Israel) they must be scattered, (their unity and solidarity weakened and negated).

"And this is exactly what happened: The tribe of Levi received no share at all in the land, and its survival depended on ma'aser (tithes), on the goodwill of each individual... The landowner was obligated to set it aside, but no particular Levite had a direct claim to it. A person is entitled to give his tithe to any Levite he chooses, and no one has the right to demand it from him. Shimon's

territory was an enclave inside the portion of Yehudah, and Shimon was completely dependent on that powerful tribe. Thus, when Israel thrived as a nation, the political influence of Shimon and Levi was completely paralyzed. [Hence, the fulfillment of Yaakov's prophecy: אַפְיִצֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, I will scatter - and weaken their power and strength - among Israel.]

"However! In galus, in exile, where the pressure of our fate weighs down on everything, and the nation itself is scattered, there the real and present danger is that all self-respect will be lost and all spiritual vitality will be stifled. To enable even the wandering Jewish peddler to proudly look down on the European street youth; to enable him to maintain his self-respect and his sense of belonging to his people - for that it is necessary that אַחְלָקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב, I will scatter them amongst Yaakov. [אַחְלָקֶם - I will apportion something valuable so that as many people as possible can have a part (חלק) in it.]

"By scattering the tribes of Shimon and Levi among all the other tribes of the Jewish state, G-d did us a great kindness. For the natural result was that, when the state was destroyed and the nation scattered in all directions, descendants of Shimon and Levi were always present, in every place of our dispersion. Everywhere they would foster and nurture in us strength and courage, fervor and noble Jewish pride, thus assuring that the Jewish spirit remained alive and strong even after the demise of the Jewish state.

"As the Sages teach: From Shimon and Levi came scribes and teachers in the synagogues, and from Levi schools where the study of Torah was pursued (Yalkut Shimoni)" (R' S. R. Hirsch, Commentary to Bereishis 49:7).

The passion, anger, call-to-arms, and impulse of Shimon and Levi pose a potential danger when we are settled in our own Land, in the Jewish commonwealth, and so there, they must be scattered amongst us, אַפְיִצֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. And yet, it is this very same passion and pride that ensures our survival in exile, amongst the nations of the world, and so there, they are apportioned amongst the nation, אַחְלָקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב, their tenacity of spirit given to us all as a blessing, ensuring our spiritual survival throughout the long millennia of exile.

R' Soloveitchik teaches, "When 'Eisav' wanted a gift of 'Yaakov's' sacred objects - the holiness of family life, Shabbos, kashrus, accepted beliefs and traditions, when 'Eisav' demanded that 'Yaakov' compromise his Torah

and his way of living - then a remarkable transformation occurred within Yaakov. Suddenly, the coward, the quiet unassuming Jew, became a hero, full of strength and stubbornness. Suddenly, the crooked back straightened, the pitiful eyes began to spit fire, and he, the coward, refused Eisav's request with chutzpah and determination" (Days of Deliverance, p.135).

The Blessing of Naftali: No Mere Cameo

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

We do not know much about the personality of Naftali; other than his birth, he does not appear in any of the narrative in Sefer Bereishit (the same is true of most of the other brothers). In the Torah portion of Vayechi, Naftali is given a blessing from Yaakov, as is to be expected. Yaakov's blessing to Naftali offers the same poetic yet cryptic description found with all the other brothers (Bereishit 49:21):

"Naphtali is a swift gazelle; [he is one] who utters beautiful words."

It is challenging to make heads or tails as to what idea is being conveyed with this blessing. The comparison to a gazelle quite possibly is a focus on a physical trait of speed. Beautiful words could mean just about anything. Is there a connection between the two?

The commentaries, for the most part, point to one of two angles in assisting the comprehension of this blessing. The first echoes the prophetic themes of the other brothers, where the blessing points to a future manifestation of a trait. In this instance, the hinted prophecy refers to Devorah, the future shofetet. Devorah calls for Barak, from the tribe of Naftali to help in the destruction of Sisra and his armies. Many of the troops that came forward were from the tribe of Naftali, instrumental in the eventual victory. Rashi emphasizes, based on a Midrash, that it was "through" the soldiers of Naftali that Devorah and Barak composed their eventual song to God in honor of the victory. The alacrity demonstrated in their desire to fight, alongside their participation in the song (the beautiful words alluded to above), complete the interpretation of the blessing. In a similar vein, Rav Yosef Bechor Shor points to a specific trait the soldiers of Naftali possessed. After victory, they would run ahead of the returning army and publicize the salvation from God.

The other approach, sourced from the Midrashim, directs us to a well-known story concerning the death of

אני מאמין באמונה, שלמה בביאת המשיח... אחכה לו בכל יום שיבוא, let us recall the courage, fighting spirit, and daring of Shimon and Levi. For it is their tenacity of spirit, and pride in their heritage, as they have been apportioned amongst Yaakov, that ensures our survival in each and every generation.

Esav. At the time of Yaakov's passing, Esav attempted to prevent his burial. His argument hinged on considering himself the final part of the "pairs" that were buried in the Cave of Machpelah, Esav being the counter to Leah. Yaakov's sons protest, explaining that Yaakov had purchased the final burial plot. In fact, they had a contract to prove the point; unfortunately, it was left in Egypt. Naftali, being the speediest of the brothers, jumps up and offers to run back to Egypt to retrieve the contract. Before his return, Chushim, the son of Dan, ends up killing Esav (the circumstances are not germane to the idea here).

In both instances, we are left puzzled as to what exactly is the grand trait that is the focus of Yaakov's blessing to Naftali. In the first explanation, the future sons of Naftali are praised for both their volunteering to fight and for their involvement (or inspiration) in the composition of the song by Devorah and Barak (he being one of the sons). While this is certainly praiseworthy, it does seem other tribes might also have this same attitude, evidenced in future wars. What was unique about Naftali? Per Rav Yosef Bechor Shor, what does rushing back to announce salvation demonstrate to us about Naftali?

In the second explanation, the primary focus is on Naftali's speed. While being fast is certainly an advantage, are we to believe this is worthy of a blessing?

Naturally, military conflict is a dominant theme throughout much of the conquest of Israel. While knowing full well that many battles were fought through a directive from God, the clashes themselves were obviously hard-fought affairs. It would be completely normal for the victorious army to catch their breath after the battle, to eat, collect any loot, and celebrate. While not meant to be critical, one sees this trend in the story of Purim. After the Jewish victory over their enemies, the Megillah records in one verse the victory and the subsequent setting aside of the following day for celebration. In the case of Devorah,

we see something different. Rather than stop and reflect on the victory, Devorah and Barak, on the very same day of victory, compose a song dedicated to praise and gratitude towards God. When studying the song, we see a panoply of important concepts relating to God's Kingship, Divine Providence and His unique relationship with the Jewish people. In a similar fashion, Rav Yosef Bechor Shor points to how the soldiers from Naftali would point to the aspect of salvation at the height of victory. Capturing the moment of tremendous joy and elation, and then directing that towards immediate praise of God, is certainly an admirable trait.

The second explanation offered above is a bit harder to understand. The Hermes-type reference to Naftali seems to be difficult to relate to as some type of true value. Often, when we think of talent, we often point to physical attributes as being the feature that stands apart from others. Athletes are revered for their skillset. Millions watch sporting events, reveling in the achievements of points scored and goals achieved. Events such as the Olympics laud humanity for milestones of physical triumphs. While

there certainly is something to reflect on when it comes to success in these arenas, is physical prowess the highest aim for humanity? When one is blessed with a particular physical attribute, it becomes critical to assess how best to make use of it. In the case of Naftali, in that one brief moment where he volunteers to return to Egypt, we see someone seeing his speed for a task of the utmost importance, to right a potential injustice, and ensure the continuation of the Divine plan. Rather than focus on winning races, Naftali embodies the idea of someone concluding that whatever physical gift received is a means of achieving a greater good. Rather than use the gift solely in a competitive framework, an individual should seek out how best to direct the gift towards serving God.

As with all the brothers, the traits isolated by Yaakov should serve not just as insights into their personalities, but as paradigms for our own behavior. In each explanation, we see the individual turning their focus outside the self and towards God as being the guiding force. While Naftali's presence in Bereishit is not felt much, his influence as a beacon of ideal behavior is with us to this day.