

## Meaningful Reunions

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A friend of mine from college has already hugged her 86-year-old grandmother. The grandmother was part of the vaccine trials for AstraZeneca and had been informed that she received the vaccine itself, as opposed to the placebo. The picture my friend posted on Facebook illustrates the deep emotion - the joy, the relief, the sense of recovered longing - that comes with seeing a loved one after a prolonged period of not being able to come close. This documented moment provides inspiration for what many of us hope to do as well over the next few months. We dream of the day that we will be able to safely spend time with those with whom we are close without having to worry about distancing. For those blessed with close relatives - siblings, parents, grandchildren - whom they have not been with for over nine months, the thought of receiving the vaccine stirs emotions of anticipation and hope. What else will we do in those moments of reunion besides a long, tight hug?

In a twist of events entirely unexpected by Yaakov's children, Yosef, who had appeared to be a cold dictator, reveals himself as their brother. While noticing their disbelief, he encourages them to come closer to him. After decades of being estranged, both physically and emotionally, they are reunited as brothers. He then immediately instructs them to return to their father so that he will come down to Egypt for the duration of the famine, possibly longer. Having said what he needed to share, they cry, hug and kiss each other. Once the brothers take leave of Yosef and reach their father, the Torah tells us ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם - Yaakov was spiritually revived. After two decades of gloom and mournfulness, he regains what he thought he lost.

What do we expect to see at the reunion between Yaakov and Yosef? Tears of relief, jubilation, perhaps an aura of euphoria. One might imagine Yaakov, even at his senior stage of life, racing to embrace Yosef.

What do we actually observe at the reunion between Yaakov and Yosef?

וַיֹּסֶף יוֹסֵף מְרַכְבֵּתוֹ וַיַּעַל לְקָרְאֵת יִשְׂרָאֵל אָבִיו גִּשְׁנָה וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו וַיִּפֹּל עַל צְנֹאָרָיו וַיִּבְדֵּךְ עַל צְנֹאָרָיו עוֹד :

Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck a good while (Bereishit 46:29).

At first glance, we might see what we expect - they embrace and weep. Except that Rashi takes note that this seems to be one-sided, as the language is in the singular. *Yosef* falls on his father's neck and weeps. But what about Yaakov?

Rashi says that Yaakov did not hug or kiss Yosef. This is because he was busy saying - *Kriat Shema!*

Yaakov has not seen his son in twenty-two years, and in this miraculous moment of laying eyes on his most beloved son, he is busy saying Shema?! Many *mefarshim* ask, why now? Why did he not say Shema earlier? He could not have said “hi Yosef, I missed you,” and then said Shema? Is Yaakov a superhuman religious person who has no human emotions?

I would like to present three approaches that arrive at a similar argument: Yaakov’s recital of Shema at this moment was not necessarily about fulfilling the rote twice-daily obligation to say Shema, but rather it speaks to the core message of Shema, *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim*, accepting the yoke of Heaven. These three approaches can be instructive for our post-COVID reunions.

[Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin](#), in *Oznayim La-Torah*, sees this episode as a resistance to the *yetzer hara*. Egypt can be seen as a paradigmatic center of the *yetzer hara*, as suggested by the introduction to forbidden relationships presented in Vayikra (18:3). Coming to his new land, Yaakov, does not know what to expect. How will his new environs challenge him? The Gemara in *berachot* says that one way to overcome the *yetzer ha-ra* is to recite Shema. So here is Yaakov, ready to fulfill one of his greatest desires - to see his beloved son Yosef - and in his moment of craving, he balks and says Shema. It is at that moment that Yaakov remembers he is ready to be *moser nefesh*, to put God first. This approach may seem somewhat unrelatable to many of us, but I think it indicates a valuable lesson for us as we transition to the post-COVID world. Once we resume a normal way of life, there are certain mild *yetzer hara*’s that confront us. But in transitioning into the post-COVID world, let us remember the positive habits we developed – of being grateful for what we have even when we were forced to have less, taking measures to protect others even when it was hard, and transforming our homes into sacred spaces when our entire *avodat Hashem* was at home. In this way, we can fulfill what Chazal said in Masechet Derech Eretz: העבר רצונך ורצון חבירך מפני רצון שמים, שכך - מצינו ביעקב שלא נשק לו ליוסף - pass over your will for the will of Heaven, just as Yaakov did not kiss Yosef. If the moment of our reunions with close friends and families is paradigmatic for a return to normal, let us not forget in that moment that what roots us and gives us meaning in life - service of Hashem. Enjoy post-COVID life, by all means! Spend time with friends and family doing fun activities! But remember the centrality of spiritual pursuits - of *tefillah* and learning Torah. We have an opportunity here to remind ourselves the value of *mesirut nefesh*.

A second approach, that of [Rav Joseph Soloveitchik](#) (*Divrei Ha-Rav* p. 89), suggests that Yaakov was concerned with the overwhelming emotions of excitement and love as he reunites with Yosef that perhaps his love would overtake his love of Hashem. The Torah commands us to love Hashem בכל לבבך, with all of our heart. By extension, all expressions of love have to be expressions of love that involve Hakadosh Baruch Hu, not separate from it. It is at that moment, in the wave of anticipation, that Yaakov has to remind himself that his love for Hashem is greater than all other expressions of love. Yaakov is perfectly entitled to love his son - *halevai* that all parents should love their children with the love of Yaakov for Yosef (without the favoritism)! But our relationships with Hashem are special. We had private moments davening at home – we should continue to cherish that intimacy even as more of us will return to shul in due time. Our reunions with those whom we care about will be sweet and moving. But it is precisely at those moments that we remember Hashem is with us. The relationships we are blessed to have are all part of a framework for our relationship with Hashem. When we embrace friends and family post-COVID, we are also embracing Hashem who blessed us with those special relationships.

Finally, the approach of the [Maharal of Prague](#) speaks to something that we will all be feeling when this is over, and that is gratitude. Yaakov's spontaneous recital of Shema at this moment was an act of *hakarat ha-tov*, of recognizing that it is Hashem who brought about this reunion. The seemingly impossible miracle of Yaakov being able to see his beloved son once again brought him to a love and awe of Hashem. In the words of Maharal, וזהו מדת החסידים אשר יקרה להם טוב מתדבקים אל הקדוש ברוך הוא על הטובות והאמת שעשה עמהם - it is a trait of the pious, when something good happens to them, the attach to Hakadosh Baruch Hu over the good and truth done to them. This is perhaps akin to the *halacha* of saying Shehechyanu upon seeing someone whom one has neither seen nor known of their whereabouts for an extended period of time, but even more profound because the recital of Shema is the supreme act of affirming our confidence in Hashem. As COVID-19 hit, and schools and shuls began to shut down, I was struck by how we were placed in the moment between Purim and Pesach. Both holidays affirm Hashem's control of the world - the former in a more subtle way, and the latter in an overt way. But just as much as the onset of the virus was an expression of Hashem's power, so too is the arrival of the vaccine. It is ultimately not the vaccine that is saving us, as one of my colleagues [wrote](#), but Hashem. The success of "Operation Warp Speed" was not luck, as one headline [suggested](#), but the salvation of Hashem. We can learn from Yaakov Avinu that when we reunite with friends and family after we have all been vaccinated, we of course will be full of *hakarat ha-tov* and appreciation for the day that has come, but let us use this as an opportunity to feel and express our heartfelt indebtedness to Hashem for the moment that has arrived.

I do not assume that any of us will refrain from embracing our loved ones when that beautiful moment will arrive that we can do so. Indeed, Yaakov's behavior was enigmatic enough that demonstrates that it is not for regular people like us! But in these moments of preparation for the renewed life we can experience and the reunited relationships, we encounter an opportunity to strengthen the *yetzer tov* we developed, to hold on to our singular connection with Hashem, and to express our gratitude to Hashem when *b'shaa tovah* this is over. This moment of renewal and reunion, all the while we express our affection to our loved ones, will be one of the greatest expressions of *kabblat ol malchut shamayim*.