

Parashat Vayigash 5781, 2020:

“Do Not Be Afraid of Going Down to Egypt”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Hashem’s prophecy to *Ya’akov Avinu* on the eve of his traveling to Egypt to meet his beloved son Yosef is one of the many dramatic episodes in our *parasha*:

Israel began the journey, taking all his possessions, and he arrived in Beersheba. He offered sacrifices to the G-d of his father Isaac. G-d spoke to Israel in a night vision, and said, “Jacob! Jacob!” “Yes,” replied [Jacob]. [G-d] said, “I am the Omnipotent G-d of your father. Do not be afraid to go to Egypt (*Al tirah merdah mitzraimah*), for it is there that I will make you into a great nation. I will go to Egypt with you, and I will also bring you back again. Joseph will place his hands on your eyes.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 46:1-4, translation, *The Living Torah*)

I have always been intrigued by the seemingly out of place phrase, “*Al tirah merdah mitzraimah*,” after all, Ya’akov was on the verge of reuniting with Yosef! Moreover, Ya’akov now knew that his beloved son was the viceroy of Egypt and his family’s physical needs would be assured, even in the midst of a frightening worldwide famine. Therefore, the words “*Al tirah merdah mitzraimah*,” seem strangely out of place.

My rebbi and mentor, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known by his students and followers as “the Rav,” provides us with a brilliant insight that enables us to understand Ya’akov’s fear and trembling. He notes that two distinct *britot* (covenants with Hashem) have existed in the history of the Jewish people. The first is the Patriarchal Covenant (*brit avot*), and the second is the Sinaitic Covenant that we embraced at *Har*

Sinai. The first covenant originally differed from the second in that it was limited to the families of the Patriarchs and was obligatory only in *Eretz Yisrael*. In contrast, the Sinaitic Covenant has been incumbent upon all Jews since the moment we received the Torah. The Rav further advances our understanding of the content of these two *britot* in the following manner:

The Patriarchal Covenant apparently imparts teachings to the Jewish people by example rather than by prescription. While the Sinaitic Covenant tells the Jew what to do and how to act as a member of the covenantal community, the Patriarchal Covenant addresses the “I” awareness of the Jew, teaching him how to experience his Jewishness. It sensitizes him in specifically Jewish ways; it expresses attitudes, ideals, and sentiments which still speak to us. It guides our feelings and consciousness rather than our physical acts, for we are duty-bound not only to act as Jews, but to feel as Jews. (*Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav*, volume II, page 68)

In particular, the Rav is teaching us a profound lesson regarding the depth-level significance of the Patriarchal Covenant. Far too often, we are tempted to think of Judaism solely in regard to its rich and comprehensive halachic system. The Rav reminds us, however, that while this component of Judaism is absolutely necessary for the continuation of our people, it is equally vital for each of us to embrace the Patriarchal Covenant, so that “our feelings and consciousness” as Jews are as authentic as the *mitzvot* the Almighty commanded us at *Har Sinai*.

In a variety of sources, the Rav suggests that Ya’akov was keenly aware of the geographic limitations of the *brit avot* of his time and felt that his family and descendants were on the brink of the greatest tragedy they could face. As such, Ya’akov was convinced that the impending exile in Egypt would nullify this covenant and the unique connection to the Almighty would be lost forevermore. Little wonder, then, that he felt such powerful fear regarding the future of his family and descendants. The only antidote

to this debilitating dread was Hashem's promise: "Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up...." Now, Ya'akov was assured that the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) would accompany him and protect his family, for with Hashem "at his side," Egypt would be "transformed" into an extended portion of *Eretz Yisrael*. As a result, the Patriarchal Covenant would remain in effect and the future of his family, and our people, would be guaranteed. This, then, is precisely why Hashem declared: "*Al tirah merdah mitzraimah.*"

Like Ya'akov, we live in a period of great uncertainty. The entire world is in the throes of a powerful pandemic that we have not experienced for many generations, and fear and anxiety are the watchwords of today. Yet, we must ever remember the comforting and stirring words of *David HaMelech*: "*Yisrael b'tach b'Hashem ezram u'maginam Hu — Yisrael, trust in the L-rd; He is their help and their shield.*" (*Sefer Tehillim* 115:9, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). May Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world soon and in our time. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and_the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.