

Parshat Vayechi

Inmates of Goshen

Moshe Taragin

Each of the fifty-two sections or parshiyot of the Torah are separated from the previous section by an empty space of at least nine letters. There is only one exception to this policy –the beginning of parshat Vayechi – which is fused to the conclusion of parshat Vayigash without any intervening empty space. Rashi cites a midrash which views the textual closure as a metaphor for the ‘closing of the Jewish imagination’. The collective Jewish “vision” was shuttered and therefore the section of the Torah describing the sojourn in Egypt is textually sealed.

What led to this shuttering of vision? Some cite Ya’akov’s death as the cause for this closure of the imagination. Ya’akov was a throwback to a different and earlier era when Jews inhabited their homeland in Israel. His entire life was pivoted upon the struggle for his land. When he deceased, the Jewish connection to this homeland frayed and without this anchor their historical imagination was dimmed. Others claim that the slowly encroaching anti-Jewish discrimination and subsequent persecution sunk Jewish hopes for the future, effectively obscuring their vision. Whether it was Ya’akov’s death or the onset of oppression, life in Goshen severed Jews from their past homeland and entangled them more deeply within Egyptian culture. As the Jews no longer envisioned a different ‘place’ the text provides no visionary ‘space’ between Vayigash and Vayechi.

There is a third factor dimming Jewish imagination: the Jews attained relative success and prosperity in Egypt. Despite the surrounding famine, they were comfortably nestled in Goshen, benefiting from Yosef’s continuing support. The final verse of parshat Vayigash emphasizes their success – in contrast the struggles of the overall population – by describing the Jews of Goshen as “entrenched and prosperous”. Beyond their material welfare they enjoyed socio-political popularity; Yosef had rescued Egypt from catastrophe and transformed it into a regional superpower. This talented Jewish family from the North was

responsible for Egypt's dazzling success. The Jews felt too comfortable to see beyond the high walls of Goshen. Sometimes we forget that we belong elsewhere because of the oppression of others; other times our imagination closes because we feel too comfortable in our current conditions.

Last week's siyum hashas celebration was a great milestone for the American Jewish community and a triumph for Jews across the world. The images of over 90,000 Jews gathering in a stadium and glorying Torah, reflect the great advance of Torah study in an age of national redemption and restoration of national pride. Against the backdrop of surging violent anti-Semitism, the celebrations also constituted an act of defiance and courage. Our people will not allow hatred and bigotry to silence our celebration of Torah and our affirmation of the Jewish mission in this hostile world. By any account, last week a grand affirmation of the American Jewish experience.

However, the assembly also punctuated one of the unique challenges of Jewish life in America. Occupying a sports venue signals how relatively "comfortable" and "public" Jews feel within the American cultural space. I personally travel to many Jewish communities around the world, and I am often asked to describe the differences between the US Jewish community and other Jewish communities. Without question, the 'confidence index' of US Jews far surpasses that of other Jewish communities. In most other communities Jews tend to live on the "margins" of society, building robust and sturdy communities but clearly possessing a sense of living 'outside' the mainstream culture. The notion of a publicly Jewish event with the magnitude of the siyum hashas is unimaginable elsewhere.

In contrast to Jews in other countries, Jews in the US are much confident about their role and position within American cultural fabric as they have entered almost every sector of society. In past generations Jews participated in the "classically Jewish" fields of medicine, law, education and finance; in the last generation Jews have begun to enter even less classically Jewish areas such as sports, entertainment, politics and many other cultural sectors. Many stadiums provide year-round kosher food and even schedule minyanim within the stadium venues. Again, these descriptions are astonishing to non-American Jewish

audiences who typically attend these broader cultural events as ‘outsiders’ rarely exhibiting their Judaism.

It was this supreme confidence which was on display at Met Life stadium last week. As our numbers in Goshen increased our success skyrocketed and our social profile became more prominent. The success of Jewish life in the US is, among many other factors, a product of sheer numbers.

However, it is precisely this confidence, which can sometimes shutter the imagination of American Jews to that ‘other place’ to which every Jew belongs. Living in smaller scaled Jewish communities outside of the US also provides greater contact with the homeland of Israel. With fewer home-grown educators and Rabbis these communities are more frequently piloted by Israelis. In countries with less domestically manufactured kosher food, much of the kosher food is imported from Israel. With fewer kosher holiday options, many people vacation primarily in Israel. Finally, with so much extended family living in Israel, most non-US Jews visit Israel more frequently. Living in the US with greater Jewish resources raises confidence but also can obscure the role of the land of Israel as the epicenter of Jewish past and future. It is easier to become imprisoned in modern day Goshen. The gathering in Met Life stadium was a triumph of the American Jewish community, but it also showcased the challenge of living with success and self-confidence while not ignoring that “other place”.

The frightening rise of violent anti-Semitic crimes in the United States in general, and in the New York area in particular, has many people searching for answers: Eighty years after Hitler’s assault on our nation, are we witnessing a revival of that nightmare? Is it time to move? We all hope that these comparisons are unfounded and that the robust American democracy will thwart this bigotry. Last Sunday’s March of Solidarity reaffirmed the strength of the Jewish community as well as highlighting the general population’s support of religious freedom and distaste for intolerance. The pictures spoke volumes about the prospects of continued Jewish success in the US and the suppression of anti-Semitism. However, these reprehensible acts of hatred must remind us that, despite the resourced Jewish life in the United States, no Jew outside of Israel is truly home. It is one thing to live as a Jew in the US but quite another to live as an inmate of Goshen.