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Vayechi 5783

A Borderline Case

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered December 27, 1969)

Our Sidra of this morning records the dramatic death-bed scene in which Jacob prophesies concerning his twelve sons, the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, as they stand about him.

A similar scene occurs at the very end of the Bible, where Moses, before his death, blesses the tribes and prophesies concerning them. The comparison between the statement of Jacob and Moses makes for a fascinating study.

One interesting example is that of Dan. Jacob says concerning his son Dan: יהי דן נחש עלי דרך שפיפון עלי ארה. ש. *Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a horned snake in the patch, that biteth the horse's heels, so that his rider falleth backward, I wait for Thy salvation, O Lord*" (Gen. 49:17,18).

Moses, however, said the following concerning the tribe of Dan, descendants of the original son of Jacob: דן גור אריה. *Dan is a lion's whelp, that leapeth forth from Bashan*" (Deut. 33:32).

We are then confronted with two problems: First, why does Jacob refer to Dan in the metaphor of a nachash, a serpent, while Moses refers to him as an aryeh, a lion? And second, why does Jacob append to his prophecy the prayer לישועתך קויתי ה', *"I wait for Thy salvation, O Lord?"*

My grandfather, of blessed memory, who raised this question, answered it in his own way--one that is subtle and poetic. This morning I would like to suggest, as an alternative solution, a slightly different approach.

Dan was the border tribe of Israel, the one that was most exposed. Beginning from the exodus from Egypt, Dan was in an exposed position as the המחנות, the hindmost in the line of march, and therefore the one most liable to be attacked. When the Israelites settled the land in the days of Joshua, Dan was assigned the northernmost area of Canaan, that unprotected border with Syria and

Lebanon. Therefore, Dan was always on the firing line, and had to be prepared to defend itself and the entire country by fighting. What is true of the kibbutzim today in the Northern Galilee, having to contend with terrorists coming down upon from Mt. Hermon, was true of Dan in ancient days.

Now a battle, especially by a harassed settlement, can be fought in one of two ways. It can be fought by direct confrontation, by face-to-face challenges, by charging the enemy in an immediate encounter; that is the way of the lion. Or, it can be executed through sly maneuver, by shrewd strategy of furtive attack and crafty defense, in which cunning takes the place of strength, and clever schemes and stratagems of stealth support the forceful and fearless exercise of power. This is an equally deadly and effective method, but it is surreptitious; it is the way of the snake.

Not all techniques are appropriate to all situations. In the cruel battle for survival and triumph, one must be trained in the art of the lion and in the art of the serpent as well. One must know when to choose direct challenge, and when to use artifice. But to fight like a lion leaves one with his dignity intact and his self-respect enhanced. And to fight like a serpent leaves one unsatisfied even if victorious; he may be triumphant, but never heroic. And often, he feels debased.

So, Moses saw Dan in the leonine role, as a גור אריה as a young and powerful lion. But Jacob saw Dan in his alternative, serpentine role--נחש עלי דרך. Hence, Jacob was moved to pray on behalf of Dan: לישועתך קויתי ה', O Lord, let Dan--who lives on the border, in constant peril--be safe and at peace; but if he must fight, allow him to fight like a lion and not like a snake. Granted, there are times when direct and heroic confrontation is inadvisable, and only the strategy of the snake is available; but I am unhappy about

it.

This difference and this teaching is of more than passing interest to us here. Our people has been a "borderline case" for a long time, for perhaps a major part of its history. Our existence and our survival, spiritually and physically, are on the line again today. The fate and the role of Jews amongst the nations is marginal. Israel today is surrounded by enemies, and, even worse, abandoned by friends, walking the very boundary-line of crisis. Our circumstances are such that we must struggle and strive in order to prevail. Preferably, we would like to do it like lions, as Moses prophesied. But sometimes we shall have to follow the prophecy of Jacob, and achieve our ends in a more serpentine fashion. We shall have to do both, including the latter--but if we do, it will be accompanied by a silent prayer: לישועתך קייתי ה'.

One example where we must use both techniques is that concerning Russian Jewry. A surprising change has come over the attitude of many Soviet Jews in the last two years. A new spirit has seized a Jewry that for half a century seemed to have given up its Jewish ghost. This is an encouraging development, but also a dangerous one. For in a deep sense they are borderline cases: they are neither in Russia, nor out of it. The Soviet authorities allow them neither to leave nor to live like Jews.

What must our response be to this situation? The following is advisable, based on the best information available to us at the present time.

American Jews must adopt the stance of the גור אריה. We must roar like lions. We must bring the predicament of Soviet Jewry to bear upon the public awareness of the Western world. The Kremlin is sensitive to public opinion. So we shall sensitize public opinion to the crime of what is happening to Russian Jewry. I plead with you not to denigrate protests and demonstrations and marches. Anything that catches the attention of the public, that is conveyed through public media, and that is reported back to the Kremlin, is of great importance.

However, Russian Jews who have managed somehow to leave Russia, ought to keep quiet. From them no roar ought to be forthcoming. Recently, a certain organization, unauthorized by anyone else, has paraded two young Russian Jews who have recently left Russia, and have attacked the Soviet Government as Russian-Jewish emigres. This goes against the very best advice that comes to us from people in America and Israel who should know.

It is dreadfully self-defeating and dangerously irresponsible to risk the closing of the little crack in the Iron Curtain of Russia.

To roar when one should hiss, is to be even more in need of לישועתך קייתי ה'. Such efforts should not be encouraged by American Jews. It jeopardizes Jewish lives. We must never seek to satisfy our own moral hunger for activism at the risk of endangering the life and limb of the Jewish hostages in the Soviet Union.

This does not mean we can do nothing. Those American Jews who want to do more than engage in political protests and public demonstrations can do so. They can, in a serpentine way perhaps, help Russian Jews in a manner that cannot be revealed publicly from the pulpit. They are subtle ways, surreptitious, but highly effective. Quietly and privately, we can do something; indeed, we must do something if we are to learn from the history of the Holocaust and to avoid being charged by our children with moral cowardice and indifference. But what can be done, as I have stated, cannot be explained publicly. Those who wish to help- and I hope there will be many- must take the initiative and inquire, and I shall be glad to let them know how they can be of service.

And of course--Israel. This is the true borderline case in the international community. When one considers the situation today--with Israel and the Arabs, with America and Russia and Britain and France--one has the eerie feeling of de'ja-vu. Except for Britain and France, who are now pro-Arab, the international scene appears to be an almost exact replays of 1956. Then too Israel had won a war, the Sinai war, and a morally outraged American President forced Israel to retreat, to relinquish its new-found security--and this directly led in eleven years to the Six-Day War!

Now a man who was then Vice President of that self-same Administration is now President, and his deputies speak of even-headedness. The Secretary of State urges not only that Israel give up Jerusalem--perhaps cannot expect him to understand the depth of Jewish feelings, although one could expect him to learn from history and to remember what the Jordanians did to Jewish Jerusalem--but that Israel essentially return to the very conditions which caused the war of 1967, conditions which made Israel so acutely insecure, a veritable reincarnation of the tribe of Dan, a perpetual borderline case.

So we shall have to use every means at our disposal to do

what we can for Israel--whether the method of the arye or the way of the nachash.

Let there be no question about the moral right of any group of citizens to attempt to influence the U.S. Government. The most basic religious ethnic and psychological feelings of five and one-half million American Jewish citizens have as much right to be considered as the economic affluence of a few barons of the oil industry.

Perhaps we shall have to use the way of the serpent, that of strategy. If the economic interests of certain industrialists are the cause of the Secretary of State's charming neutrality, then, as one Congressman has already proposed, we ought to strike back where it hurts most: their industries, their banks, their varied economic interests.

But we shall also have to act the part of the lion: a dignified, non-hysterical, but direct public education.

We shall have to make it clear that Jews have as much right to petition their interests as the oil men do, those who identify the national interest with their narrow interest.

We shall have to urge upon the Administration the lesson of a previous Administration's futile efforts to prevent war by causing the Israeli roll-back from the Sinai.

We shall have to remind the Administration that even-handedness, when your friend is being attacking by armed

marauders, makes you an accomplice to the crime, and that no amount of protestation or friendship can erase the moral blot. American neutrality at a time that the Arabs are being armed to the teeth by the Russians is a violation of the Biblical principle of *לא תעמוד על דם רעך*, not to stand idly while your friend's blood is being shed.

Hence, we shall have to speak out, and speak out strongly. It is my hope and prayer that every one in this congregation will inform the Administration and the Legislature of his keen disappointment with the new change and the new turn in American foreign policy regarding Israel.

It is sad that after a period of close friendship between Israel and the United States, matters have come to such an impasse.

Whether we act one or another, in serpentine or leonine fashion, it is regrettable that we must find ourselves in this position.

So we must pray that Israel, the modern Dan, will not suffer physically, and that our country, the United States, will not lose its soul.

In our days we still need the prayer of Jacob. Moses could dispense with it. We cannot.

לישועתך קייתי ה'.

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Leading through Darkness

Dr. Erica Brown

After decades of difficulty on the way to leadership greatness, Jacob breathes his last in this week's sedra, *Vayechi*: "When Jacob finished his instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and, breathing his last, he was gathered to his kin" (Gen. 49:33). Joseph, perhaps aware of all the lost years between them, was understandably bereft: "Joseph flung himself upon his father's face and wept over him and kissed him" (Gen. 50:1).

But the real summation of Jacob's last years emerges in a conversation he has, not with Joseph, but with Pharaoh in last week's Torah reading. We've all participated in or witnessed unusual, almost inexplicable conversations that leave us baffled. This is one of the strangest conversations in all of Tanakh. I've written about this conversation at length and am still bewildered by it every year.

Jacob speaks to Pharaoh and tells this powerful leader and stranger of his woes. "Joseph then brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh, and Jacob greeted Pharaoh. Pharaoh asked Jacob, 'How many are the years of your life?' And Jacob answered Pharaoh, 'The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my ancestors during their sojourns.' Then Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell, and left Pharaoh's presence" (Gen. 47:7-10).

Pharaoh asks an odd question about Jacob's age. Jacob responds by telling Pharaoh something he never revealed to his sons. His life has been punishingly hard and is soon to be over. How Jacob knows this is never explained. After this upsetting download of misery, Pharaoh says nothing. He offers not a word of solace or consolation. Jacob then

exits the scene. The story progresses with no further mention of the encounter.

Before we look at the content of this dialogue, there is an important context for this conversation that appears a few verses later: “Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father’s household with bread, down to the little ones. Now there was no bread in all the world, for the famine was very severe; both the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine” (Gen. 47:12-13). Jacob, the inheritor of Abraham and Isaac’s legacy, had to be supported by his son, in a land not his own, at the point of starvation. Any leader would be humiliated and ashamed in this desperate situation. How could it be that Jacob began his leadership with a magnificent dream of a ladder covered with angels and many divine promises, and now he was bereft, untethered from his homeland, and virtually penniless?

Nahmanides, the 13th century Spanish commentator known by the acronym Ramban, explains that it was Pharaoh who requested the meeting, not Joseph. Pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph’s many talents that he, understandably, wanted to meet Joseph’s father. Nahum Sarna, in his JPS commentary on Genesis, observes that it would be undignified for Jacob to appear with his sons as humble petitioners so Joseph set up a separate meeting to preserve his father’s dignity.

Pharaoh then asked Jacob a puzzling question, one that sounds out of place, even rude: why have you lived so long? Yet some understand this as a question that emerges out of respect. Many Pharaohs were young on the throne. This Pharaoh may have been shocked by Jacob’s longevity and regarded it as a blessing. Pharaoh was asking Jacob to tell him the secret to a long life.

But, if this was Pharaoh’s intent, why did Jacob answer that his life was actually short and soon to end? Jacob was 130 at this time, but his grandfather Abraham died at 175. His father Isaac died at 180. Because of Jacob’s many disappointments – the theft of his brother’s blessing, the switching of wives on the marriage alter, Lavan’s exploitation, the disappearance of Joseph, the rape of Dina, the famine in Canaan – he felt that death was fast approaching, even if he was unable to predict it.

The French medieval exegete, R. Hezekiah ben Manoah, takes this view when he explains Pharaoh’s intake of Jacob: “You look old and at the end of your days.” Life has worn Jacob down. On the expression Jacob uses in response –

that the years of his life did not achieve that of his ancestors during their sojourns – Rashi explains Jacob’s confession: “All my life I’ve lived in the country of others.” He did not want to spend his old age in someone else’s land.

All leaders have dark days, even dark years. Two great leaders in more recent world history – Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill – suffered terrible depression. Lincoln called it melancholy. But rather than seeing these difficult periods as obstructions, they may have held the key to their respective greatness. They were able to harness the darkness they experienced to become more empathic to the suffering of others and more willing to take risks to solve problems than others. J. W. Shenk, in his article “Lincoln’s Great Depression” (*The Atlantic*, Oct. 2005) writes, “Whatever greatness Lincoln achieved cannot be explained as a triumph over personal suffering. Rather, it must be accounted as an outgrowth of the same system that produced that suffering ... Lincoln didn’t do great work because he solved the problem of his melancholy; the problem of his melancholy was all the more fuel for the fire of his great work.”

Churchill called his dark days the “black dog.” A black dog is an interesting image – a hovering, gloomy shadow that stays close but can walk away. In a letter to his wife Clementine in 1911, Churchill wrote that he heard about a German doctor who treated depression: “I think this man might be useful to me – if my black dog returns. He seems quite away from me now – it is such a relief. All the colours come back into the picture.”

Jacob struggled in this melancholic moment in last week’s Torah reading, but there is a small, redeeming detail that is often ignored in this conversation. It is bookended by Jacob blessing Pharaoh on his way in and on his way out. Seforno regards the blessing as a small act of defiance. Jacob “did not bow to him (Pharaoh), neither when he arrived nor when he departed.” Rashi deems the blessing as a “greeting of peace, as is usual in the case of all who are granted an interview with kings at long intervals.” We find a similar usage in II Samuel 16:16.

Nahmanides disagrees with Rashi. This was not a polite, inconsequential gesture, the ancient equivalent of a curtsy or bow before royalty. Ramban believes that Jacob was truly blessing Pharaoh. Jacob may not have had bread. He may have been far from home, and his last years were characterized by difficulty, but Jacob always carried with him the capacity to bless. Even when he struggled with

an angel, Jacob was injured but asked for a blessing. More than any other biblical leader, Jacob understood the secret of Jewish continuity and leadership: the ability to find the blessing in the struggle.

In his essay “Staying Young” on *VeZot Ha’Bracha*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers us advice that could have been lifted straight from Jacob’s story: “Never compromise your ideals. Never give in to defeat or despair. Never stop journeying merely because the way is long and hard. It always is.” It is easy to give in to dejection and misery and to give up.

Down to Earth

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

Ya’akov, sensing that his life is nearing its end, calls for Yosef and asks him to take an oath that he will not bury him in Egypt, but, rather, carry his remains back to the land of Canaan and bury him with his ancestors. Yosef promises to carry out his request, and takes an oath. Why was Ya’akov so insistent that he not be buried in Egypt? The Midrash HaGodol, a medieval compendium, cites the Mishnas Rabbi Eliezer, which says that Ya’akov did not want the tribes to say that since Ya’akov allowed himself to be buried in Egypt, it must have some holiness to it, and, therefore, there is no problem in remaining there, rather than going to the Holy Land. Rabbi Elie Munk, in his work *The Call of the Torah*, does not cite this midrash, but gives a similar reason as the primary motivation that Ya’akov had for not being buried in Egypt, but, rather, in the Holy Land. First, he says, he wanted the Egyptians to see that his children did not view Egypt as their homeland, but still retained their connection to the land of their forefathers. Moreover, he wanted to instill in their hearts, and the hearts of their children, the conviction that their true place was in Eretz Yisroel. Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary, says further that Ya’akov was telling his children, who were becoming entrenched in the land, as the Torah tells us at the end of parshas Vayigash, that while they may want to live in Egypt, he does not even want to be buried there.

Rabbi Munk then mentions a series of reasons mentioned by Rashi, which, he says, are of a different nature altogether. The first of these reasons, taken from a midrash, is that Ya’akov knew that the soil in Egypt would be infested with lice during the third plague, and it was repugnant to Ya’akov to be buried under such conditions.

It is always harder to plow on and to seek the light. It is even harder to make the light by finding the blessing in the struggle. Our longevity as a people is nothing short of a miracle. It can only be explained by the capacity to be a blessing and to bless others even and especially when oppressed and downtrodden. This is leadership. This is Jacob. This is the people Israel named after Jacob.

What difficulty are you facing right now that needs a healthy dose of blessing?

According to Rabbi Munk, Ya’akov, by being concerned about the condition his body would be in even after death, was making known his view that, since the body envelopes the soul, it deserves to be treated with the greatest of respect, even after death. Although this insight of Rabbi Munk seems plausible, I believe that there is another aspect to this reasoning of Ya’akov, which reflects the reasoning mentioned in the Midrash HaGodol which we mentioned earlier. Why, after all, was Ya’akov concerned only about the plague of lice, and not the other plagues that would be brought upon Egypt? Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, in his commentary *Oznayim LeTorah*, explains that this was the only one of the ten plagues that came to the land of Goshen, the section of Egypt in which the Jews lived. He cites the commentaries of Rambam and Rabbeinu Yonah to Avos, 1:5, who both say that they have a tradition to this effect, and he also brings a proof to this tradition from Psalms, chapter 105, which mentions the various plagues by which the Egyptians were punished. We read, there, in verse 31 : “He spoke and hordes of beasts arrived, and lice throughout their borders.” What Rabbi Sorotzkin does not explain is why the lice did, in fact, enter Goshen and infest its soil. I would like to suggest an explanation, based on an idea I once heard from Rabbi Shubert Spero, who was the spiritual leader of Young Israel of Cleveland for over thirty years, and is now a professor of Jewish thought at Bar Ilan University, in Israel.

The Midrash Rabbah to parshas Va’eyra tells us that the reason the Egyptians were smitten with the plague of locusts is that they made the Hebrew slaves plant crops for them, and now the locusts would come and destroy those crops. Although this midrash is usually understood to be an

application of the principle of measure for measure, Rabbi Spero suggested that there is another dimension involved. In parshas Beha'aloscha, when the people complained about the manna, they said, 'we remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge ; the cucumbers, the melons, leeks, onions and garlic" (Bamidbar 11:5). It is remarkable that when referring to the fish, they used only one generic word, but when they referred to vegetables, they enumerated five different kinds. Rabbi Spero explained that there is a psychological insight here. The people, he said, had developed a sense of pride in the vegetable patches they had grown ! In fact, the midrash tells us that four-fifths of the people did not want to leave Egypt, and died during the plague of darkness. One of the reasons for the locusts destroying the crops, therefore, was to remove any reason for the people to want to remain in Egypt. Perhaps, then, we can explain the infestation of the soil of Goshen with lice in a similar way. The reason for this was in order to make that soil unfit for use as a burial ground, so that the people would not want to stay there in deference to their ancestors' graves being there. Thus, Ya'akov's concern about the soil of Egypt becoming infested with lice, besides reflecting a sense of respect for the body that encased his soul during his lifetime, also reflected a concern for his descendants' attachment to Eretz Yisroel, their true homeland. He understood that the lice would

invade Goshen in order to make its soil unusable for burial, and took that as an indication that he should not be buried in that area and thereby give his descendants any reason to want to remain there on a permanent basis.

Following our approach to the midrash cited by Rashi, we can understand why, in the beginning of the parsha, when the Torah relates the number of years that Ya'akov lived, the name it uses for him is his original one, Ya'akov, while when it goes on to relate his conversation with Yosef about where he should be buried, it refers to him by his later name, Yisroel. A number of commentaries, including the Netziv, explain that when the Torah refers to him as Ya'akov, it is dealing with him as an individual, and when it refers to him as Yisroel, it is dealing with him in his role as the father of the nation. If Ya'akov, in petitioning to Yosef, had merely been worried about the fate of his body in its burial ground, the Torah would have used the term Ya'akov. However, following our approach, even the reason of the future lice infestation of Goshen was connected with a fear of the nation becoming attached to the land of Goshen to the extent that they would not want to leave when the time of redemption arrived. From this perspective, it was proper to switch from the name of Ya'akov to the name of Yisroel, reflecting the concern that the patriarch had for his people's continued devotion to their ancestral home.

Let's Spread the Zealots Around!

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jan 9, 2020)

When Yaakov blesses his sons, the Shevatim, on his deathbed, we know that the first three receive a tochachah instead of a brochah. *Ki ve-apam hargu ish u-virtzonam ikru shor. Arur apam ki az ve-evrasam ki kashasah.* Their anger—what we call *kanaus* nowadays—when they killed the population of Shechem (which is the most obvious reference here). They flew off the handle and were a little too violent. And while it was all for the right reasons—standing up for what's right—they took it extremely far in the way of destructive anger and zealotry. And therefore, Yaakov says: No. We have no place for this here. *Arur apam ki az ve-evrasam ki kashasah. Achalkeim be-Yaakov va-afitzeim be-Yisroel*—I will spread them out and scatter them among all Bnei Yisroel. The question is, why was this his particular response?

The Ba'al Akeida writes here that their midah of *kanaus* was actually very useful. We just had Chanukah! The entire neis of Chanukah came about through Matisyahu's act of *kanaus*. We are also aware of what Pinchas did. He acted with tremendous yet necessary *kanaus*. Sometimes you need to stand up for what's right. And even if everyone is against you and no one cares, you must be strong and tough about it. Sometimes you have to make a *milchamah*. You need a midah of *kanaus*. But he says that it should be in proper proportion. *Achalkeim be-Yaakov va-afitzeim be-Yisroel* means: Take this midah of *kanaus* and spread it all over. Right? Rashi talks about how these Shevatim were spread out, person by person, amongst other Shevatim. If you have a lot of people with a lot of *midos*: *chesed*, *patience*, *generosity*, etc., and you have a little *kanaus*

sprinkled in, then that's using kanaus positively. If it's in proportion to all the other midos—and you know when to use kanaus and when savlanus, generosity, love, etc.—then this midah will be helpful. However, if you keep it concentrated in one place, where kanaus is all there there is, then it's destructive and unviable. And therefore, Yaakov wasn't just cursing them and saying there was no place for what they did. There is a great place for this midah. It just has to be in proportion and combined with other midos. It has to be diluted—not to the point that it would become batel—but only to the extent that would allow you to use it constructively. And I think that's really the key. Kanaus

Constancy and Change

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

Vayechi Yaakov b'ereitz Mitzrayim sh'va esrei shana. Yaakov lived in the land of Mitzrayim for seventeen years” (Bereishis 47:28).

The Zohar comments that, whereas all of Yaakov's life until this point was full of troubles, he enjoyed an extraordinarily pleasant stay in Egypt. Yosef was the viceroy 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.

But let us remember—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 our land. Why did Yaakov's ultimate good in this world take place in Mitzrayim, in exile?

Eitz Hada'as and the Eitz Hachaim

In Gan Eden, there were two special trees. The Eitz Hachaim—the Tree of Life—and the Eitz Hada'as Tov Vara—the tree that granted the eater knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Chava were prohibited from eating from the Eitz Hada'as. They violated this prohibition. Regarding the Eitz Hachaim, however, the Torah doesn't say that Hashem commanded them one way or the other.

In fact, it appears that Adam and Chava were originally permitted to eat from it. Only after the sin of eating from the Eitz Hada'as does the Torah say that God banished Adam and Chava from Gan Eden lest they eat from the Eitz Hachaim. Why could they eat from the Eitz Hachaim before the sin, but not afterwards?

can be so dangerous, yet kanaus is so important. There are so many stories—as we mentioned—in our mesorah and history. It's a matter of proper proportion. So if someone acts with kanaus their whole life, that's exactly what Yaakov was worried about. If everything is kanaus, then that is not the midos of the Torah or those of Hashem yisborach. That's just flying off the handle and being an angry person. Yet some things are not tolerable—there are some things we cannot be patient about. And if the way you interact with the world, in general, is with tolerance, patience, love, and acceptance—then when you do use kanaus properly, you can reach tremendous yeshuos. Shabbat Shalom.

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 Eitz Hachaim, then “*va'chai l'olam*, he would live forever” (Bereishis 3:22). The tree thus represents unchanging eternity and consistency. By contrast, the Eitz Hada'as 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. Therefore, there was originally no prohibition to eat from the Eitz Hachaim and gain an eternal state of goodness.

But when Adam ate from the Eitz Hada'as, he changed his character from totally good to paradoxical. He became what people are today, a mixture of good and evil. Now, we have to struggle with choices between good and evil. We are constantly changing and evolving. There are good parts and bad parts of everyone's personality. There are even generations that are good and generations that are evil.

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

Now, the righteous who are able to overcome evil in this world go to Gan Eden after they die. There, they can eat from the Eitz Hachaim even before the 6,000 years of history end. They start their eternal good life after they die.

The Never-Ending Shabbos

In our prayers, we say that Shabbos is *mei'ein olam haba*, a taste of the world to come. It is a *yom she'kulo 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. Shabbos is a day of pure goodness. 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 Dov Soloveitchik *zt"l*, explained that halachically, the concept of Shabbos day never ends. The rules of Shabbos are eternal. On Shabbos, as far as we are concerned, 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. But on Shabbos itself, we keep Shabbos as if it will 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 never changes.

We can say that the six days of the week are the turmoil and tumultuous existence of the *Eitz Hada'as*. The six days are a very confusing time, full of paradoxical choices and mixtures 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 can then 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 other-worldly, eternal *olam haba*. This *Gan Eden*-type feeling, then, will 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 constancy and change respectively. The two *zemanim*, Shabbos and the weekdays, represent pure spirituality on one side and change, turmoil, conflict, and paradox on the other.

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 constantly changing. Every single day of the month, for thirty days, the moon appears differently than it did the day before. 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*.

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, which represents the full expression of goodness. Many Jewish holidays are on the fifteenth of the month. *Pesach*, the holiday of our exodus from Egypt, begins on the fifteenth of *Nissan*. *Sukkos*, the happiest days of the year, begins on the fifteenth day of *Tishrei*. The birthday of the trees is on the fifteenth of *Shevat*. *Purim* in Jerusalem is celebrated on the fifteenth of *Adar*. The fifteenth of the month represents the resolution of the conflict of good and evil with the victory of good.

Many Jews have a *minhag* to get married specifically on the night of a full moon, since the full moon represents redemption, the resolution of the problem of good and evil. The first fifteen days are when good is ascendant. These days are considered days of good *mazal*. But then the moon gets smaller until it disappears, which represents evil. Because of this, when people were more sensitive to spiritual currents, there was a *minhag* not to get married in the second half of the month.

Yaakov as the Sun, the Shevatim as the Moon

In *Midrashim*, Yaakov is compared to the sun. His life story

itself involves the sun. After he flees from Eisav, the sun sets and Yaakov goes to sleep. 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 that will eventually rise again. Yaakov's twelve sons 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 a tzaddik since he was 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 remained a tzaddik in Lavan's house and in Mitzrayim. The Gemara says, "*Yaakov Avinu lo meis*, Yaakov didn't die" (Ta'anis 5b), as if he had eaten from the Eitz Hachaim.

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 strife in the family. The twelve sons represent change. Ultimately, all the sons of Yaakov repented and reconciled.

The Shevatim 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. Yaakov values the strength and glory of Yehuda and even in a certain way highlights the strengths of Shimon and Levi. He praises the courage and nobility of Yosef and the righteousness of Binyamin. Yaakov encourages Zevulun's business sense and Yissachar's love of Torah.

In addition to its unique skills and talents, 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 one can see far and wide. Zevulun, 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, committed to Torah studies in the yeshivos day and night. 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, as we see in the cases of Dovid Hamelech and our future Mashiach.

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 snowcapped Mount Chermion to the desert of Negev to the clear, beautiful blue water of the 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 shevatim. Each gem had its own color: green, white, yellow, blue, black, etc. Each gem represented a tribe of Israel, one of the twelve months of the year, the changes of season from one month to the next.

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 his own special qualities that make him different from anyone else. We are obligated to develop our unique, individual qualities, just like Yaakov's sons 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. 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 talents in our own individual way. In this way, we are like the moon, constantly changing, unique, and different.

Constancy and Difference When Raising Children

As we raise our holy Jewish children, we must remember these two ideas of 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 must help

them develop their individuality, like the sons of Yaakov. “*Chanoch l’na’ar al pi darko*. Develop each child in his or her own special way” (Mishlei 22:6). Some children need a different school or a special game. Every child needs some special, individual attention. Teach each child that he is unique, and show him 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.

Why Yaakov’s Best Years Were in Egypt

The Shem Mishmuel explains that for this reason, Hashem gave Yaakov the greatest seventeen years of his life in Mitzrayim. It shows 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 tzaddik. 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 negative way. We can be like Yaakov in Egypt and be tzaddikim 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, never changing in Egypt. He is

Loving Them Just The Way They Are

Rabbi Yosef Goldin

In this week’s parsha, Yaacov famously blesses each of his children. And there is much debate and discussion amongst the commentaries regarding the exact nature of these brachot. What, the rabbis ask, was Yaacov was hoping to accomplish with these blessings? Were they references to the past, descriptions of the present, or prophecies of the future?

The simple answer is that they are a mixture of all of three. But I believe that if we look closely, the major theme that threads throughout all the brachot-what binds them all together- is their description of the present. In essence, Yaacov strives to capture with each blessing the uniqueness of each of his sons- to highlight major aspects of their personality, talents, or character. Sometimes, that uniqueness may also be manifest in the future among a son’s descendants, whereas at other times, that personality trait may have expressed itself in the past. But the goal 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 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 negative environment. Whenever we can, we should choose a good environment. But we should understand that the sun rises in Egypt just like it does in Israel.

Our dream 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, of the Eitz Hachaim and the Eitz Hada’as, and of consistency and 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 Bereishis, the book of creation and the birth of the Jewish people.

not specifically to look towards the future or to rehash the past. Instead, Yaacov wants each son to understand that his father sees something special in him, something unique and exceptional. He wants each child to feel seen and cherished for who he is.

Many of us grew up with watching the well-known children’s TV show, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, created and hosted by Fred Rogers. The show was tremendously successful. In a 1969 Senate hearing regarding the future of PBS funding that might impact his show’s viability, Rogers shared the goal of his show- namely to “give an expression of care every day to each child, to help him realize that he is unique”. Famously, Mr. Rogers would end each show by famously declaring to each child, “I love you just the way you are.”

I believe that if we had to sum up the most important role that we are meant to play as parents, it would be to

ensure that children understand and feel that they are each loved “just the way they are”. We must create a home that exudes warmth, love and acceptance- no matter what. Our care for them does not depend on anything they do or don’t do, but is inherent in our relationship. We value our children, and appreciate them, for who they are- not for what they do.

This does not mean that we should not have expectations of our children, make demands on them, or even discipline them when necessary. It simply means that, at their core, our children should know that, regardless of what happens, our love for them remains. If our kids grow up with this deep sense of support and love, it will serve them well in two important ways. Firstly, as they encounter the outside world and begin to develop other relationships with people that may be less accepting and more critical of them- - friends, peers, neighbors, co-workers- they will be better equipped to withstand those challenges, knowing that they have a home base of support that they can always come back to. Secondly, as our children grow up, the inevitable areas of tension or conflict that arise between parents and children will be more easily navigated if the fundamental base of the relationship is one of complete love and acceptance.

A couple of recent examples of this idea come to mind.

In an interview on the 18forty podcast with his son Gedalia, Rabbi Menachem Penner, the Dean of RIETS, shared a foundational point regarding parenting and dealing with conflict. He pointed out that if the first time you let your children know how much you love them is when you are trying to work through a particular area of tension or conflict, then it’s going to be particularly hard to navigate the conflict. But if the conflict arises within the context of a strong and loving relationship, then the results can be very different.

In a recent Mishpacha article (Issue 939), Rabbi Shimon Russell, a well-known authority in the Yeshiva world regarding the challenges of dealing with struggling youth, shared his own personal experience raising children

who were off the derech. At a particularly painful point during the challenging journey, the following idea occurred to him, and gave him tremendous insight. He needed to relay to his daughter, “[You can only] try to defy me more than I can love you. You won’t be able to, because I love you unconditionally.’ I knew then and there,” Rabbi Russel continues, “that my daughter’s defiance would allow me to help her heal, because if I could love her more powerfully than she could defy me, then perhaps I could help her feel safe and start her journey to recovery.”

In a similar vein, the story is told about the Baal Shem Tov that a father came to him to ask for guidance in dealing with his son who was no longer Torah observant. Distraught, the father asked the Baal Shem Tov how he should deal with his son- to which the Baal Shem Tov replied, “the best thing way for you to deal with your son is to love him even more”.

On a personal note- I have mentioned earlier that each Friday night, after giving each of my children the standard Shabbat bracha that fathers give to their children, I take a minute to share a more personal bracha with each of them. While the content of the personal bracha varies from week to week, I end every bracha with each child with the following words- “and always remember that no matter what, Abba, Eema, and Hashem love you so much”. In my mind, these words capture the message that I feel is most important for our children to internalize- that as parents, we will always love them no matter what, and that Hashem, as their Father in Heaven, will always love them as well.

In this week’s Parsha, as Yaacov’s life winds down and the Patriarchal Era comes to a close, Yaacov’s final message to his children (and to us) is an incredibly powerful and important one. Yaacov relates to each child’s unique nature- and he speaks of his appreciation for that uniqueness. Through his brachot, Yaacov makes sure that his children understand that he loves each of them “just the way they are”- a crucial parenting lesson that continues to resonate through the generations.

The Conversation

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Ya’akov’s death unleashed fear and terror amongst the brothers. Free of the restraining influence of his father, Yosef would certainly avenge his sale as a slave. The brothers were so petrified, they could not

directly face Yosef, dispatching their pleas for his mercy through third-party intermediaries. Desperate to avoid Yosef’s wrath, they concocted a white lie about Ya’akov’s death-bed instructions for their pardon. It is hard to

imagine Yosef actually “falling” for this transparent lie. Dishonesty, deception, and indirect communication, telltale signs of a toxic relationship, lacking any semblance of trust.

Triggers

Sadly, there were two “trigger events” which stoked their worst fears. Twice, Yosef’s innocent behavior was grossly misinterpreted by his suspicious brothers.

The first crisis, as reported in the Midrash, developed when Yosef began to dine alone rather than sharing his meals with his brothers. While Ya’akov was alive, Yosef had dined alongside his brothers, sitting at the head of the table alongside his father who he hadn’t seen for over twenty years. At this stage, however, Yosef felt uncomfortable positioning himself at the table “ahead” of his older brothers, especially ahead of Reuven the first born, and Yehuda the newly minted leader. Unwilling to disgrace his brothers, Yosef took the selfless decision to dine privately. Sadly, but not unsurprisingly, the brothers regarded this unselfish decision as a micro-aggression against them, and their fears got the better of their rational judgement. A noble and magnanimous decision, intended to protect the dignity of the brothers was misconstrued as hostile behavior.

The second crisis unfolded during their joint voyage to Israel to bury Ya’akov. At some point during the journey, Yosef made a personal detour to the pit into which he was flung, and from which, he was sold off into slavery. This is a touching scene of a wounded man seeking closure for the dreadful trauma which wrecked his youth. The image evokes pity and commiseration, but the wary brothers didn’t view it that way. In their distorted reasoning, they assumed that Yosef returned to the scene of the crime to plan his revenge. Suspicion muddled their judgement, leading to unsubstantiated panic.

Two ships passed in the night. Yosef was preserving their dignity, but the jaded brothers assumed he was antagonistic toward them. Yosef also visited a site of a past personal trauma, but the brothers assumed he was conspiring his revenge. Why couldn’t they understand one another? Because all communication had collapsed.

The Tragedy of Miscommunication

The greatest tragedies in life occur due to lack of communication. The brothers had not lived together for over twenty years, and even after being reunited, they led very separate lives. The brothers lived in the family enclave

of Goshen, while Yosef hobnobbed amongst the noblemen and magicians of Egyptian palaces. The lack of face-to-face communication led to suspicion and distrust, innocent actions were misconstrued, and sincere intentions caused irrational fear and panic. Without communication trust erodes. Without trust relationships crash. Their fractured relationship was at an all-time low.

Honest Communication

This broken relationship could only be repaired by healthy and honest communication. To his great credit Yosef, at the tail end of sefer Breishit, finally engages in healthy communication. To his credit, instead of fleeing from the complicated situation, he embraces it and confronts the issue. His difficult conversation with his brothers leads to reconciliation and stands out as the healthiest communication of the entire book of Bereishit.

Firstly, and most importantly, Yosef speaks directly with his brothers, rather than forwarding frantic messages through friends and liaisons. Direct face-to-face communication is always more effective and more authentic. It allows for body language, subtlety, and interactive dialogue, rather than volleying unilateral statements back and forth.

Secondly, for the first time in their relationship, Yosef actually listens to his brothers and responds to their worries. Active listening sits at the heart of communication, but sadly, we are often preoccupied with formulating our brilliant responses rather than actively listening to others. In the past, Yosef was far too busy setting a trap for his brothers to actually listen to them and hear their concerns. After Yehuda’s long soliloquy pleading for clemency, Yosef unilaterally announced his true identity, inquired about his father’s well-being, but completely ignored Yehuda’s grievances.

By contrast, during this repaired conversation, Yosef carefully listens to his brothers’ anxieties, empathizes with their fear, and tries to comfort them. Twice he reassures them not to be afraid of him and, as the Torah remarks, he finally speaks to their hearts rather than issuing authoritative one-sided announcements or revelations. Soft conversation, not loud shouting. Beware of those who only have one decibel level, and it is always loud. Beware the shouters, who are deaf to their hearts and to yours.

More important than anything else, Yosef cries with his brothers. Earlier, when he revealed his identity, he had also cried, but it was a roar of personal anguish rather than

a broken hearted and tender crying. Tears come in many varieties, and this was the first time that he shed tender tears of sympathy and compassion. Only when their tears mix, and their eyes meet, can their hearts blend, and begin to mend.

Finally, during his honest conversation with his brothers, Yosef doesn't sugarcoat the past. It is easy to brush thorny issues under the carpet, but they always come back to haunt a relationship. Left unattended, tensions fester and erupt with greater force and inflict greater damage than they would have caused had they been addressed earlier. Yosef acknowledges their malicious intent, but concedes, that divine intervention had converted their shameful crime into good fortune for Yosef and hunger relief for the family. Honest confrontation of difficult issues lies at the heart of genuine communication, and Yosef's honesty enables the brothers to purge their unbearable guilt. Once trust has been restored between Yosef and his brothers the relationship can move forward.

The Bridge of Trust

Ironically, the resurrected trust will, one day, serve Yosef well. His own death-bed plea to his brothers to be buried in Israel depends upon the trust he has rebuilt with his brothers. Yosef, once the mighty and imperial ruler of Egypt, is now at the mercy of his previously scorned brothers. Such is the nature of human experience: the strong grow weak, the mighty grow old, and eventually we all realize how deeply dependent we are upon each other. It never pays to burn bridges because you always walk back across them.

Yosef must fully trust his brothers to pass along his request to future generations. Yosef's burial is centuries away, and he must trust his brothers to transmit his desperate message to the future. It is a good thing he worked so hard and invested so much in rebuilding the ruptured trust with his brothers. Otherwise, he would have died uncertain of his fate. In the end, emotional

Remembering One's Humble Origins

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Vayechi, we learn of the death of Yaakov Avinu at the age of 147 years. We read of the brachos he bestows upon his sons before his death. We learn of his burial in the Me'aras Ha'Machpela. We cry over the tension between Yosef and his brothers, as

investment and hard conversations always pay dividends to a relationship.

Communication Deficiency

There are multiple reasons for the breakdown of trust in modern society, but chief among them is the deterioration of our interpersonal communication. The internet age and the emergence of social media have established alternate modes of communication, empowering us to more effortlessly share information and resources. Every blessing though, carries a curse, and the internet is damaging our interpersonal communication skills. The internet encourages quicker and more efficient communication but is wrecking face-to-face communication skills. Spending far too much time staring at screens, we are uncomfortable looking into people's eyes. Because the eyes are the gateways to the soul, direct eye contact yields connection and social bonding. I constantly urge students to maintain eye contact during conversations. It is always easier to look at a screen, but it doesn't look back.

Preoccupied with long-distance, impersonal communication, we are losing the ability to appreciate non-verbal cues, body language or context. There is far more to communication than words, but they don't come across in a whatsapp.

Emojis are gutting our communication of deep emotions, substituting simplistic and plastic emotional responses for actual feelings. Emojis are affecting our ability to discern our own deeper emotions and is crippling our ability to express them. We are becoming emotionally flatlined. Our emotional inner world is too complex to be simplified into a few dozen emoji faces. Emojis are diluting our emotions.

Healthy and trustful relationships are built upon genuine and honest personal communication. We must protect human communication from the great age of communication. Life is ironic in that way.

they fear his wrath in the aftermath of their father's death. And finally, we emotionally, movingly and longingly close the book of Bereishis with the passionate plea of Yosef to his brothers, that when G-d surely remembers them, and takes them out of the land of Egypt, they are instructed

impose moral obligations upon us. In the timeless and eternal words of Joseph: For G-d sent me before you to be a provider of life (45:5). Our function must become: to enhance life, to restore and sustain peace amongst brothers, and to advance the cause - and Name - of G-d in the world”

An Honourable Embalming

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

People commonly call burial procedures *kavod acharon* – the last honour accorded to a human being. The term is often inaccurate, since we normally honour people after their burial as well. Nonetheless, it expresses our goal of providing honour for one who has left this world, and it may explain Yosef’s decision to embalm Yaakov.

After Yaakov breathed his last, “Yosef ordered his servants, the doctors, to embalm his father, and the doctors embalmed Yisrael.” The process took forty days, and there was a seventyday mourning period in Egypt, following which Yaakov was transported to Israel and buried there. (Bereishit 50)

This story presents a serious problem. We are commanded to bury as soon as possible (see Devarim 21:23), and to avoid degrading the body (see Bava Batra 154a). We are taught that a body’s posthumous decay is part of the soul’s atonement process (Sanhedrin 47b). We are also taught that the soul registers pain when painful acts are inflicted upon the body (see Shabbat 13b). So how could this embalming be permissible?

Two opposite approaches

Some have contended that the “embalming” did not involve any dissection; they simply placed spices upon his body. [See Zohar Bereishit pg. 250b, Ateret Paz I 2 Yoreh Deah 3, and Mishneh Halachot 16:122.] This doesn’t solve the problem of delayed burial, but it would address the other issues. On the other hand, a midrash contends that the embalming was simply wrong. [See Bereishit Rabbah 100:3, and Harchev Davar to Bereishit 50:2.]

A necessary evil

Others have argued for a middle path – embalming was necessary to prevent something worse:

- Due to his extreme righteousness, Yaakov’s body would not have deteriorated, and that would have led the Egyptians to worship him. Embalming provided an excuse for his body’s durability. (Or

(Derashot Ledorot Genesis, p.256).

And how to achieve? By remembering our humble origins, our first failures, and that the road to success often begins in a dark ‘pit’ where of success, like Joseph, one can only dream.

haChaim to Bereishit 50:2)

- Embalming was a sign of respect in Egypt, and Yosef was concerned that failure to embalm would constitute a chillul Hashem, a crime against Hashem’s honour. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch to Bereishit 50)

An important honour

But a fourth approach highlights the importance of this embalming. As suggested by Rabbi David ibn Abi Zimra (Shu”t Radbaz I 484) and Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (Noda b’Yehudah II Yoreh Deah 210), perhaps embalming Yaakov was appropriate as an act of honour. We permit degrading a body, as well as delaying burial, for the sake of the person’s own honour. [See Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel 12:1 and Rama Yoreh Deah 363:2.]

Perhaps the honour was important because it implicitly addressed, if not redressed, the decades of disrespect inflicted upon this great patriarch. Yaakov needed to pretend to be Esav in order to receive a blessing which Rivkah insisted was truly his due. He fled home with naught but a walking stick. Lavan tricked him in marriage and in his wages. Rachel castigated him for not providing her with a child, and swapped him for dudaim. Shimon and Levi massacred the people of Shechem without so much as warning him. Returning home to see his father, Yaakov first needed to kowtow to Esav with honorifics and offerings. Yosef dreamed that Yaakov would bow to him, and then ten of his sons deceived him into thinking – for decades! that Yosef was dead. Yosef served as viceroy for nine years without contacting his father; the span included several months in which Yosef allowed Yaakov to believe that Shimon and Binyamin were in danger. Yaakov’s position in his last years in Egypt was precarious enough that he felt it necessary to plead with Yosef, and to have Yosef swear to honour his wish, when he asked to be returned to Israel for burial. Over and above Yaakov’s many injuries, his suffering included a remarkable catalogue of insults.

It may be small comfort, but the Torah stresses that at least Yaakov was treated with honour in his passing. Egypt observed an official mourning period. A full entourage of family, as well as Egyptians, accompanied Yaakov on the journey. The Canaanites looked on and were amazed.

How Important is Timing?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's parasha, parashat Vayechi, contains a series of exalted poetic verses known as "Birkot Yaakov," Jacob's blessings of his children.

Birkot Yaakov are much more than a mere collection of blessings. These verses, in fact, designate the unique missions that each of the 12 tribes of Israel are destined to fulfill in the future. In these beautiful poetic expressions, Jacob also, in effect, chooses Joseph as his first born, to receive a double inheritance. He also designates Judah as the tribe that will serve as the temporal leaders and the future kings of Israel.

Birkot Yaakov also reveal that, of all the sons of Jacob, perhaps Reuben, the eldest, is the most tragic. The initial words of Jacob's tribute to Reuben, which overflow with emotion, are extremely moving. In Genesis 49:3, Jacob says, בְּכֹרִי אָתָּה, , "Reuben, you are my first born," בְּחִי אוֹנֵי, "You are the first of my strength and the first of my power," יָתֵר שְׂאֵת, וַיִּתֵּר עָו, "you are foremost in rank, and foremost in power." You Reuben, says Jacob, have all the natural advantages.

But then, in a sudden retreat, Jacob states in Genesis 49:4, פָּחַז כַּמַּיִם אֶל תּוֹתֵר, "You, Reuben, are impetuous like water, you cannot be the foremost," כִּי עָלִיתָ מִשְׁכְּבֵי אָבִיךָ, "because you mounted the bed of your father," אָז חָלַלְתָּ יְצוּעֵי, "you then violated the couch upon which you rose."

How could such a good person—a good-hearted, and well-intentioned person, like Reuben, finish last? After all, he's always ready to do the right thing.

When we first encounter Reuben as an adult, it is during the season of the wheat harvest. Scripture, in Genesis 30:14, records, וַיִּמְצָא דוֹדָאִים בְּשָׂדֶה, Reuben finds mandrakes, a fertility drug, in the field and brings them to his mother Leah, so that she could bear more children. How generous. Certainly, these mandrakes are not easy to find. It is the first indication that Reuben, by nature, is a kind person who will always be there for others, trying to be helpful.

"And the doctors embalmed Yisrael," a ritual that was itself an honour and that enabled the rest of the honour. After so many years, Yaakov finally received the honour he deserved.

The next time we encounter Reuben in scripture, things have taken a turn for the worse. The Torah relates, in Genesis 35:22, וַיֵּלֶךְ רְאוּבֵן, וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת בִּלְהָהּ פִּילְגֶשֶׁת אִבְיוֹ, and Reuben went and slept with Bilha, his father's concubine. Our rabbis relate that even in this instance, Reuben's intentions were entirely noble. They explain that Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, had died. The brokenhearted Jacob moves his bed into Bilha's tent, because as Rachel's handmaiden, Bilha, is the closest that he could get to his beloved Rachel. Reuben considered this an affront to his mother Leah, and took upon himself to move Jacob's bed into his mother Leah's tent. Although Reuben did nothing more than tamper with his father's bed, Jacob considers it as if Reuben had violated the sanctity of his marriage, and consequently in his valedictory, Jacob takes Reuben severely to task.

In Genesis 37, we, once again, encounter Reuben performing a virtuous act. Joseph's dreams, that his brothers would bow down to him, have caused great resentment among the brothers. When Joseph arrives in Dothan seeking his brothers, he is dressed in his multi-colored coat of colors, which his brothers abhor. The hatred for Joseph is so intense, that all the brothers conspire to murder him. Reuben is taken aback by his brothers' evil intentions, and tries to dissuade them of their perfidious plans. In order to save Joseph, he says Genesis 37:21, לֹא נִכְנֹו נַפְשׁ, "Let us not commit murder. After all, how could we kill our brother?" He suggests instead that they throw Joseph into a pit. Scripture actually testifies that Reuben, in fact, intended to come back to the pit and save Joseph. The plans, however, go awry. Apparently, without Reuben's knowledge, Joseph is sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites and Midianites who are on their way to Egypt. When Reuben returns to the pit and discovers that Joseph is missing, he rends his garments, and desperately cries out that without the lad he will be unable to face his poor father. The rabbis say that the reason that Reuben

was unaware that the brothers had sold Joseph was because he had left them temporarily to minister to old Jacob back in Hebron. Reuben has good intentions, but his timing is atrocious!

Our final encounter with Reuben is found at the end of Genesis 42. The brothers have returned from their first visit to Egypt. Joseph has accused them of being spies, and has imprisoned Simeon. In order to prove their innocence, Joseph has forbidden the brothers to return to Egypt without bringing their younger brother, Benjamin. In this desperate situation, Reuben steps forward and makes a magnanimous offer to his father, Jacob: Genesis 42:37, אַתְּ שָׁנִי בְּנֵי תְּמִית, “You may kill my two sons, if I don’t bring Benjamin back!” וְאָנִי, “Give him to me,” אֲשִׁיבֶנּוּ אֵלַיךְ, “I promise to bring him back!”

Jacob rejects Reuben’s offer. In fact, Rashi describes the rejection as a brutal rebuff. Rashi states that old Jacob speaks seethingly to his firstborn Reuben: בְּכֹר שׁוֹטֵה! “You may be the oldest, but you are a fool! Are you kidding? How do I gain by having my two grandchildren killed if you don’t return with Benjamin. What kind of inane offer are you suggesting?”

And yet, a few verses later, Judah makes a similar offer, indeed a far less magnanimous one, which is accepted. Judah says, Genesis 43:8-9: “Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, so that both we and our children will not die.” אָנֹכִי אֶעֱרָבֶנּוּ, מִיַּדֵי תְּבַקְשֵׁנּוּ. “I will be surety for him, you’ll demand him of me. If I don’t bring him back to you, then I will be sinful to you all the days of my life!”

Although Reuben had said, “You can kill my sons!” all Judah stated was that he would be responsible. Yet, it was Judah’s offer that was accepted—because it’s all in the timing. Judah’s offer, was made after all the food was depleted—the children were crying and the situation was desperate. Reuben’s offer was made immediately after the brothers had returned to Canaan from Egypt—their donkeys laden with food. One might have the best intentions, but if the timing is off, the offer may very well be ineffective.

This emphasis on timing is found frequently in Jewish sources. In “Pirkei Avot,” Ethics of the Fathers (4:23) there are a number of germane references. אַל תִּרְצֶה אֶת הַחֲבֵרָה בְּשַׁעַת כְּעֵסוֹ, Do not try to placate a person during the moment of his great anger. וְאַל תִּנְחַמְנוּ בְּשַׁעַת שְׁמֵתוֹ מִטָּל לְפָנָיו, Do not attempt to console a friend when the body of the deceased is not yet buried. And, finally, (2:5), אַל תֹּאמַר דָּבָר שְׂאֵי אֶפְשֶׁר, (2:5),

לִשְׂמַע, שְׂסוּפוּ לְהִשְׁמַע, Try not to say something that people cannot understand, even though eventually it will be understood. Timing is critical!

Timing can validate, or invalidate, even the most vaunted and best of intentions.

And so, dear friends, take heed, and let us learn from Reuben—not only to say the right thing, but to say the right thing at the proper time.