

VAYECHI

CONSTANCY AND CHANGE

A

Exilic Bliss

“Vayechi Yaakov b’eretz 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?

B

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?

C

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 lolam*, 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.

D

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.

E

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.

F

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.

G

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 Chermon 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 years, the changes of season from one month to the next.

H

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.

I

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.

J

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 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.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How was Yaakov like the sun?
2. How were the tribes like the moon?
3. Describe constancy and change in the seven days of the week.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. How are you constant in your Judaism?
2. How are you changing in your Judaism?
3. Are you more like Yaakov or more like the tribes? Explain.

EXERCISES

1. Keep a log for a week of constant actions and changing actions you have done.
2. Look over the logs you have kept from previous exercises in Sefer Bereishis. Reflect on your growth and take inspiration from it.

