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The Mood in Israel

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 5, 1974)

My recent trip to Israel, from which I returned this past week, was qualitatively different from my many previous trips. I am still in the grip of the mood of the country--indeed too much so to be objective. I shall therefore leave the analysis for some other occasion, and offer now my personal impressions, given without claim to special expertise and without having been privy to any inside information.

The mood in Israel today is not a simple or homogeneous one. It is quite complicated and often contradictory. Instead of describing it in over-all terms, it is best to identify the ingredients of this mood.

Perhaps the best way to begin is by observing the difference between us and the Israelis. During the first several days of the war, we recited tehillim (Psalms) at our daily services, and read the "Prayer for the State of Israel" with special fervor. But after a week or two we stopped, feeling that the danger had passed. In Israel, to this day, every service includes the recitation of tehillim.

It is true that the deep gloom has lifted somewhat both because of the Geneva conference (although Israelis hardly trust it) and the increase in tourism. The rise of tourism is uplifting for Israelis, especially since they correctly consider it as the barometer of what the world thinks of Israel's chances, much as the stock-market is a psychological indicator. It is hard to emphasize how important it is for us American Jews to visit Israel now.

But sadness remains a primary ingredient of the mood, and it is very real. אבלות (mourning) grips so many of those who have lost members of their families and those who have lost friends or whose friends are in mourning. Never before have I seen so many people, especially children, rise to recite the orphan's kaddish in synagogues. It is not uncommon to see maimed or bandaged young men on the street. In many neighborhoods or kibbutzim the population is heavily female, with hardly a man in sight. A

young lady from America, who accompanied her father on a trip, noticed that many of the bus drivers were wearing caps (kipot), far in excess of what she had noticed three years ago when she previously visited the country. She was bold enough to ask one of the bus drivers of the Egged line in Jerusalem whether they had suddenly begun to employ more *datim* (religious Jews) as drivers. The driver explained that many of them are Sephardim, and that the custom amongst them is that when they are in mourning for a close relative, they wear the kippah the whole year...

Even for the survivors there is not complete joy. For instance, youngsters in Jerusalem get a bit nervous when they hear the sound of jet planes overhead--reminding them of the jet planes they heard that Yom Kippur day. When I visited the yeshiva in Gush Etzion, I found a pervasive sadness because one third of the student body was present--those who come from overseas; the Israeli students are serving at the fronts. Shortly after my arrival, I received a telephone call from a colleague who teaches at the Tel Aviv University and who called to say hello because he had heard that I was in the country. We exchanged courtesies, and then I asked him about the situation. He broke down, crying over the phone, and explained that he had just begun to teach three days earlier, on Sunday, when the universities of the country opened up the first time since the war. He told me that he met many of his old students who had survived, but that though they may be whole in body, they were not whole in mind and heart. Some had been in Egyptian captivity, and reported to him that the tortures were so sadistic, so incredible, that they will never be the same. My colleague was dreadfully upset that this was remaining a secret, but apparently the government believes that, for diplomatic reasons, it is best not to publicize this fact. Some of the men who underwent these experiences were perplexed: at least the Nazis had an "ideology" about Jews being sub-humans and dangerous,

but the Egyptians had no reasons whatsoever to perform their acts of mad sadism.

However, with this sadness there is another intangible element that I find extremely difficult to describe. I do not know how to identify it, whether as a peculiar Jewish historical awareness or an intensified grief. Perhaps it is best to refer to it as a special kind of dignity which allows one to keep his sanity and dignity intact in the face of the consciousness of all the grief of Jewish history telescoped into the short span of one's own lifetime. The story was told by President Kitzir at the Seminar I attended. He decided to pay a condolence call to a father who had lost a son in battle. He came to the home, and offered his words of consolation to the father. After a while, the father looked up, thanked the President, and said to him: "Yes, I am consoled. I feel better this time than I did thirty years ago. Then the Germans killed my father, but I never knew where his grave is; now at least, the Arabs killed my son and I know where he is buried..."

In addition to sadness and what might be called dignity, there is also the element of powerful anger. There is a feeling, especially amongst soldiers who were at the front, that they were betrayed by the government's negligence. What is called the *מחדלים*, the terrible neglect and failures of the security set-up, are being investigated by a national commission of inquiry. But no matter what they will find, the charisma of the old leaders is dissipated, the halos are wilted, and no longer do they appear as shining and faultless heroes. One hopes that both Israelis and Jews of the Diaspora will now become a bit more sophisticated, and see people as only people, without looking for new heroes.

Part of this anger is revealed in the unusual kind of pre-election propaganda that appeared in the Israeli press this past week. I do not remember ever having heard anything of this sort. For instance, the *מערך* (Alignment), the major political party, announced to the voters: *אתה רוצה להעניש את המערך*, "You want to punish the Alignment--but consider what the alternative is..." In the English press in Israel, the same party published something of this sort: "You hold the government responsible--but that is still better than an irresponsible government..." In other words, it is an open secret, to which the major party confesses, that they are responsible and punishable but they ask for reelection because the others are even worse. All these are signs of a justifiable inner fury.

Following from this is, quite naturally, a feeling of frustration. Often, elections play a cathartic role, they allow

the voter to vent his spleen, to get rid of his emotional excess. That did not happen this time in Israel. The elections proved--almost nothing at all.

A distinguished columnist in Israel, Eliyahu Amiqam, wrote on the eve of the election what he once heard from a Communist Polish professor of law, who was an observer at the Eichman trial, about Polish elections, and he applied it as well to the current Israeli elections--namely, that it is a sign of paradise. What does that mean? Because in Paradise, God took Adam, brought him to Eve, and said, "Here, choose a wife!" And so, Adam freely chose Eve...

The Israeli voter did not feel that he had a real, clear, decisive choice to make. The structure of Israeli politics is such that he was confused. Polls show that about 40% of the electorate was undecided on the eve of the election. Hawks and Doves are not clearly definable in Israel. The extreme of either position is probably rejected by the great majority of all voters. Often, hawk and doves coexist within the same person.

And then there is a feeling of suspiciousness as an important element in the mood of Israel, a suspiciousness which results from Israel's isolation. Some one put it well in the American press: "in every warm heart there is a cold spot for the Jews." One can hardly meet a single Israeli who does not believe with all his heart that the Arabs have only one ultimate aim: *חיסול המדינה*, the dismemberment of the state. Israeli Arabists expect really nothing of substance to emerge from the current Geneva conversations. Dr. Kissinger is the topic of incessant conversation amongst the Israelis, much of it speculative and unrealistic. Israelis keep reminding themselves several times a day that Kissinger is really the foreign minister of the United States, not of Israel...

Counter-balancing all these negative elements in the national mood, are several brighter aspects. One of them is a manifestation of a great and noble Jewish virtue: gratitude. Israelis are grateful. They are grateful to President Nixon, much to the chagrin of many American Jewish liberals. They are grateful to Jews of the Diaspora for their assistance--although, speaking for myself, I find that it is embarrassing, because I believe that American Jews could have done much more. They are especially grateful to Holland. During one of the days I was in Israel, young people stood at street corners in the large cities and distributed little red round stickers, to be placed on the lapel. They were in the shape of an orange, symbol of Israel, and within it was a windmill, representative of Holland. And on the perimeter were the words: *עם ישראל מוקיר את*

העם ההולנדי, “The people of Israel loves (or cherishes) the people of Holland.”

Perhaps it will be a good idea for some American Jewish businessmen to build a proper, kosher, and lavish hotel in Holland, and for American Jewish organizations to encourage tourism, so that after Israel, Holland will be the favorite place for American Jewish tourists--more than Paris, London, Tokyo, or even Puerto Rico.

There is also an element of justifiable pride in what Israel has accomplished. President Abarbanel of Hebrew University was right when he said that Israel on Yom Kippur was defending the right of every little country to exist. Israelis know that if the Arabs were to destroy Israel, no little nation in the world would ever be safe. They take pride in the valor of their soldiers, non-professionals who fought against overwhelming odds.

Especially magnificent was the role of the students of Yeshivot ha-Hesder, those “modern yeshivot” whose students served in the army alternatively with studying at the yeshiva. These schools lost a disproportionately high number of their students, because it was they who were serving in the tank and paratroop corps on both fronts on that Yom Kippur day. Furthermore, students from such schools as Kerem Beyavneh, Har Etzion, Yeshivat Hakotel, Shalavim, etc., were also volunteering to serve as officiants during the High Holidays services. Their losses, their valor, their bravery, constitute a great modern instance of kiddush hashem.

Finally, I detected a new and deep questing and questioning. It is too early to call it התעוררות דתית, a religious renaissance. Sometimes, if one hurries to identify a new movement, he nips it in the bud and effectively kills it. What we are now witnessing is something much slower than the upsurge of feelings after the Six Day War, when we saw the pictures of paratroopers crying as they embraced the Wall. I feel that what is now going on is, perhaps because it is slower and more halting, something that is more profound and lasting than the euphoria of six years ago. It is a deeper, sadder, larger view of the tragic dimension of life, and with it comes a search for meaning. And the search for meaning is already a religious and spiritual quest.

One detects a kind of teshuva, repentance, for the previous arrogance, over-confidence, and cockiness of so many Israelis, a feeling of regret and contrition for their loss of idealism which made them look more and more like American middle-class Jews.

There is a feeling, vague and inchoate, but conscious

nonetheless, that the Yom Kippur War meant something, but they are not quite sure what it meant.

Perhaps this developing attitude for the Israeli during the Yom Kippur War can best be explained in terms of something we read in this morning's Sidra. Jacob, the dying patriarch, called his children about him, האספו ואגידה לכם, את אשר יקרא אתכם באחרית הימים, “Gather around me and I will tell you what shall befall you in the end of days.” It seems clear that Jacob intends to prophecy for his children, predicting to them their ultimate fate. Yet, after we read his poetic words, we notice that they are predictive only to a very minor extent, that they are mostly a combination of תוכחה וברכה, of rebuke and blessing, and of a description of the collective character of his children. Somehow, then, the major body of Jacob's words does not follow clearly from his prefatory remark. Perhaps that is why the Rabbis, in the Midrash and in the Talmud, maintain that something happened at this moment: ביקש יעקב לגלות את הקץ ונסתלקה ממנו שכינה, Jacob indeed desired to reveal to his children the end of days, the advent of Messiah, but at that moment the Divine Spirit departed from him and so he lost his predictive-prophetic faculty.

However, if I be permitted to offer an alternative explanation, I would say that Jacob never intended to prophesy to his children any detailed program of redemption at the end of days. Note carefully that the word he uses is not יקרה, which we would normally expect in Hebrew as “befall” or “happen,” but יקרא, which literally means, “call.” What Jacob meant to tell his children is this: I want to describe to you your own inner qualities, so that, at the end of days, no matter what the situation is, no matter what events present themselves to you, you will perceive them as challenges, as a summons from on high to respond with nobility and generosity, as a call from God to rise to new achievements and to greater heights.

Jews recognize that Yom Kippur War was such a קריאה, such a call. It was a summons and a challenge. It revealed something. But we are not quite sure what that was.

Hence, requests for תשמישי קדושה, for religious articles such as tefillin and copies of tehilim (Psalms). I am fully aware that for many soldiers the little book of Psalms was more of a talisman than an opportunity to read words which would inspire them religiously. The request for tefillin has been derided by some as “foxhole religion.” But that does not bother me. Better foxhole religion than penthouse atheism. I prefer that people come to religion out of gratitude and affluence, but the fact is that most people achieve a deeper recognition of their condition

through crisis and hardship. What counts is the end result.

I might add that the Chabad people are not the only group who are distributing tefillin. The same is being done by Gesher, by the Mizrachi, by many small organizations of great significance, and by many private individuals who fill up their car with candy, liquor, cigarettes, and tallit and tefillin.

During the time I was in Israel, a small article appeared in the Israeli press which shows that the tefillin campaign even reaches beyond Israeli troops. Chabad people were at the Suez front, in the western bridgehead of the Israeli army in Africa, and were offering the tefillin to Israeli soldiers. The UN team was nearby, and engaged the Chabad people in conversation, inquiring after the meaning of the tefillin and their particular garb. One UN official was particularly persistent and inquisitive in his questions, and upon inquiry he revealed that he was a Swede by the name of Joseph Bergson. Are you Jewish? One of the Lubavitcher people asked. Yes, he was. Before five minutes were over, Joseph Bergson of the UN commission was “davening” in his tefillin...

My own experience confirm this new quest. Three years ago I spoke to troops several times, younger boys and girls, and I found that it was not always easy to communicate with them. I felt, uneasily, that I was simply not on the same wave-length. I detected indifference, an anxiousness to emphasize the “normalcy” of Israel and the Jewish people, an aversion to considering themselves as different and special, and a closed mind to the religious word.

It is different today. I was asked to address troops, first in the Canal and then in Syria, but the “full high alert” prevented that. Instead I went to the Bikaah, on the Jordanian front, nearly half a kilometer from Jordanian soldiers. A Hasidic band played and another speaker and I addressed the troops. Our themes were Israel as the עם הנבחר, the Chosen People; אמונה or faith; not wasting their special talents; questioning, searching. I found them not only receptive, but also participating. And in the dancing there was sheer ecstasy. Here were 300 soldiers, combat engineers, who took time out from laying mines and anti-tank traps, 80% or more officially “non-religious,” who sang and danced to such songs as עם ישראל חי and other, new melodies both from American and Israel, with the abandon that comes from דבקות, or religious fervor. As one visitor pointed out, it was like a Hasidic wedding, without a bride and a groom.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you one story that I heard, first person, from a brother of a cousin

of mine. It tells us something about the hope and the feelings that motivate our Israeli brothers. This young man emigrated with his very young family from the Lower East Side and he became an Israeli citizen. He was assigned to the reserves that served on the Bar Lev Line on that fateful Yom Kippur day.

Ephraim was one of 200 men, whom he referred to humorously as “third class infantry soldiers,” most of them married with children, in the 24-38 year old bracket. These were part of the חטיבת ירושלים, the brigade of soldiers drawn from the Jerusalem area, the one that was most hard hit during the war, stationed near Kantara.

Ephraim told me of how they were attacked by 50,000-60,000 Egyptian soldiers, how the more he picked the enemy soldiers off with his machine gun, the more swarmed over the Canal. After several hours of battle, his own group was mauled and many of his close friends killed or wounded. Shortly thereafter, there came the order from his commander for his group to withdraw back into the desert toward the Israeli lines. Some 47 men departed and broke into two groups, as they made their way through the minefields back to their own lines. Ephraim and 22 others broke off from the rest of the troops, and they decided that each could take but one object with him. Most men chose an Uzi, the submachine gun. Ephraim took an Uzi but also decided to take along his tallit, and one of the other men chose a pair of tefillin. For one and a half days they made their way through the desert, avoiding enemy fire. Then they noticed that they were caught in cross-fire, in between the Egyptian and Israeli lines, both sides firing on them. The Egyptians assumed, correctly, that they were Israeli soldiers. The Israelis thought, incorrectly, that they were Egyptians. At one point they made their way to the top of a hill, behind some bushes. The Israeli tanks thought that they were enemy tanks, and instead of firing with machine guns, aimed their cannon at the 22 Israeli soldiers. The cannon fire kept on getting closer, while the soldiers tried desperately to get a wavelength on their wireless radio to contact the tanks and tell them they are Israelis. But it was all to no avail and they expected the worst. And what seemed the last moment, Ephraim realized that he had with him the best form of communication: he unfurled his tallit and waved it. At first, the Israeli tanks thought it was an Egyptian robe, but they quickly recognized it, got out of the tanks and beckoned to them to run over. Thus were 22 Jewish souls saved because of Ephraim’s tallit.

Ephraim told me, after repeating this story, that he just “knows” that holding the Egyptians down the first two or

three days was something that could not be explained by natural, logical, military categories or concepts. Something more was at work. It is inconceivable, he told me, that this was anything but a miracle--and the miracle came soaked in pain and grief and anguish...

I conclude this description of Israel's mood with the story of Ephraim Holland and his tallit, not because I believe in the magical properties of religious artifacts. I do not. But to me it is symbolic, deeply and gloriously, of Israel, its faith, and its great hope for its future.

Recall that Israel's colors, white and blue, originally were chosen because the לבן ולבן, the white and blue tzitzit that once were part of the tallit. (Now it is all white).

The tallit is thus the symbol of Israel, both state and people, and it is the tallit, and the faith in the Almighty that it represents, that can and will save us.

Stay Tuned

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

At the end of this week's parsha, the Torah tells us that Yosef's brothers, after Yaakov's death, said "Perhaps Yosef will nurse hatred against us and then he will surely repay us all the evil that we did him" (Bereishis 50:15). They then went to Yosef and asked him for his forgiveness. This request would seem to be superfluous, since Yosef had already told them not to feel bad about what they had done to him, and that God had brought about good results from what they thought had been evil actions. Ostensibly, then, he had already granted them forgiveness. Why, then, did they feel a need to approach him again? Rashi explains that the brothers noticed a certain distancing on Yosef's part after Yaakov's death, in that while Yaakov was still alive Yosef used to invite them to his home for meals, and after Yaakov's death he no longer did so. Moreover, the Midrash Rabbah notes that on the way back from Yaakov's funeral, Yosef stopped by the pit into which his brothers had thrown him, and blessed God for performing a miracle for him there. Although Yosef may have done this merely to fulfill his obligation to make this blessing, the location of the pit was actually not on the route of the trip back to Egypt, and the brothers may have perceived the detour as a way of deliberately reminding them of what they had done. Still, as Rabbi Raphael Boruch Sorotzkin points out in his HaBinah VeHaBeracha, Yosef's actions in both instances could have easily been explained away, without taking them as indications that he harbored any ill feelings towards his brothers. He may have avoided

When donning the tallit in the morning, many pious Jews recite a preliminary prayer in which, amongst other things, we say:

וע"י מצוות ציצית תנצל נפשי רוחי ונשמתי ותפלתך מן החיצונים וְהַטְּלִית יְפָרֵשׁ כְּנָפָיו עָלַיָּהֶם וְיִצְּלִים כְּנֶשֶׁר יָעִיר קִנּוּ עַל גּוֹזְלָיו יְרַחֵם.

"And by virtue of my observance of the commandment of the tzitzit, may my soul be saved from all dangers and demonic forces in the world. May the tallit raise its corners over me and protect me, like an eagle spreading its wings over its nest to protect its young."

May that tallit be the symbol of the wings of the Shekhinah, as the Almighty God of Israel offers us protection and security and love, so that we may go into the uncertain future calmly, prayerfully, successfully--and peacefully.

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inviting them for meals after Yaakov's death because of the awkwardness of deciding who would sit at the head of the table, which was a non-issue while Yaakov was still alive, and he may have made the detour because he was simply anxious to thank God for His kindness. Why, then, were the brothers so worried about Yosef's attitude toward them? Although we have dealt with this question in the past, I would like to present a different approach from that which we have previously suggested.

Interestingly, both Rabbi Sorotzkin, a classic Lithuanian Talmudic scholar, and the Chassidic Rebbe, R. Yisroel Alter of Gur, in his Beis Yisroel, point to the same word in the verse we cited to explain the thinking of Yosef's brothers. Yosef's brothers said, 'perhaps Yosef will nurse hatred toward us.' There are two Hebrew words that can be used for 'perhaps' - 'pen,' and 'ulai.' The difference between these two words is that 'pen' indicates a desire for the contingency to be false, 'ulai' indicates a desire for the contingency to be true. Although the Beis Yisroel brings this distinction between these two words in the name of his father, it is more commonly attributed to the Vilna Gaon, which is the source that is quoted by Rabbi Sorotzkin, based on a Talmudic passage (Makkos 24a) in regard to Yaakov, which presents him as a paragon of truth. When Yaakov voiced some hesitation over fooling his father into thinking he was Eisav, he told his mother, "But see, my brother Eisav is a hairy man and I am a smooth-skinned man. Perhaps my father will touch me

and I shall be as a mocker in his eyes” (Bereishis 27:11-12). The Talmud cites these verses as a tribute to Yaakov’s dedication to the truth. The Gaon explains that the word used for perhaps here is ‘ulai,’ indicating that Yaakov actually wanted to be found out by his father, because he felt uncomfortable in deceiving him. In the same way, say Rabbi Alter and Rabbi Sorotzkin, Yosef’s brothers were hoping that Yosef still harbored ill feelings towards them because they felt that they had not yet cleansed themselves of the wrong they had done him. As they saw it, they had not yet completed their process of teshuvah, and, therefore, asked their brother to forgive them.

There is, in fact, a dispute in the Talmud (Yoma, 87b) whether a person needs to confess for sins which he already confessed for in a previous year. The Rambam, in his Laws of Repentance (2:8), brings the opinion that one should, indeed, mention such sins again in subsequent years, even though he has maintained his status of repentance for them. My teacher, Rav Aharon Soloveichik, zt”l, explained that doing so is part of ‘darchei teshuvah,’ or paths of teshuvah, devices which keep a person in the right direction so that

he does not repeat the wrong he once did. Viewing the petition of Yosef’s brothers in this way, perhaps we can understand what they did in the wider context of parshas Vayechi. Yaakov, before he died, gathered all of his sons together, and gave each of them the blessing that was appropriate to his function within the wider context of the nation. By bringing them together for these blessings, he was stressing the need for unity among them. Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, in Mima’amakim, explains that Yaakov was, in this way, preparing his sons for the exile in Egypt, and for subsequent exiles as well, and teaching them that the key to redemption is the unity of the Jewish people. Perhaps, then, Yosef’s brothers wanted to make sure that this element of unity, which they had greatly weakened through their actions towards Yosef, had, indeed, been restored so that the nation they were in the midst of forming would endure the exile and ultimately merit redemption. By engaging in a continuous process of soul-searching and cleansing themselves from any note of disharmony, they were in effect strengthening the element that would be needed by the nation in order to be redeemed.

Unity—Not Uniformity

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on December 31, 2020)

In this week’s Parsha, we learn about the brachos Yaakov gave on his deathbed to the Shevatim. *Vayikra Yaakov el banav, va-yomer, he’asfu va-agida lachem eis asher yikra eschem be-acharis ha-yamim*. Why was it essential to gather them together? After all, he gave Reuven his brachah, Shimon and Levi their brachah, Yehuda his brachah, etc. He related to each one as an individual. So the Medrash in Bereishis Raba says here: *ve-Rabanan amrei, tziva osam al ha-machlokes. He’asfu* doesn’t just mean gather—it’s adding something. *Tziva al ha-machlokes* means *asar lahem es ha-machlokes. Amar lehon, tihyu kulchon asifa achas. Machlokes is asur* for you. I want you to be unified and not be fractured into sects. I want you to be one Jewish people. But if Yaakov davka wanted them to be one people, why discriminate and not give them a *brachah klalis*? Why didn’t he simply tell them: You are all Klal Yisroel?

We find in the summary of the brachos: *Kol eileh shiftei Yisroel, shneim asar. Ve-zos asher diber lahem avihem va-yvarech osam ish asher ki-virchaso berach osam*. How does he know which brachah to give each of them? *Asher ki-virchaso berach osam*—he gave each one their own brachah. What does that mean? Rashi says here, *asher ki-virchaso,*

brachah he-asida la-vo al kol echad ve-echad. He knew the future with *ruach ha-kodesh*. But it could be more pashut.

Or Ha-Chaim says here: *ish asher ki-virchaso* is not a magic *ruach ha-kodesh* of knowing the future. A different kind of *ruach ha-kodesh* is seeing the present on a deeper level than most people do. *Ish asher ki-virchaso* means *be-shoresh nishmaso*. Each one got the brachah that was relevant to their *shoresh ha-neshama*. If he had given Yisachar the brachah of *le-chof yamim yishkon*, it wouldn’t be helpful for him because it’s not his *shoresh ha-neshama* to go on business trips. And if he had given Zevulun the brachah of *va-yeit shichmo lisbol va-yehi la-mas oveid*—it wouldn’t have worked for him. He looked into each neshama and saw what was unique about them. Yaakov was not a cookie-cutter father. He understood each of his sons was special in a different way. Each had unique potential, challenges, talents, and abilities, and each got the brachah that was unique for him.

Says Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky: That’s precisely the point of *he’asfu*. Countless people are mistaken in thinking that *shalom* and *achdus* mean that everyone must be the same. Obviously, we must have some things in common that bind us. But Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky says: The one

thing that would prevent any possibility of *shalom* and *achdus* is asking everyone to be the same. Everyone has a different *shoresh neshama*. If Yaakov had given a *brachah klalis* to his sons, saying you all must be the same, that would have been the primary recipe for *pirud*. What do you mean we are all the same? Can't be! If Abba's *brachah* was: Learn a lot of Gemara, then whoever learns the most Gemara is the best and most successful, and whoever doesn't is a failure. If there's one standard, everyone can't live up to it, and some people will be successful while others are failures, etc. With his *Ruach ha-Kodesh*, Yaakov Avinu saw the secret to *achdus* is not to ask everyone to be the same. That's the path to *machlokes*. The secret to *achdus* is recognizing that everyone is different, but not because someone's right and someone else is wrong. Everyone is different because that's *asher ki-virchaso beirach osam*. Everyone's different because everyone has a different *neshama*. And a nation needs a variety of people with different *tafkidim*, perspectives, and attitudes. Each one is doing things the other cannot. The ultimate secret to *achdus* is to recognize that I'm not like you, you're not like me—*lechatchila*. And that's the only way to really be together, because we're never going to be the same. So either we could let our differences divide us, or let our differences unite us. The Midrash is medayek that *ish asher ki-virchaso berach osam*. Rashi points out: It should have said *berach oso*. Why *berach osam*? Because he gave each one a separate *brachah*. Yehuda, to be like a lion. Naphtali, the speed of a deer, etc, but he also gave all of them all the *brachos*. What does this mean? He gave each one all the *brachos* because they all work together on the same team, and each one benefits from the *brachah* of each of his brothers. Because I do my part, and you do your part—and we recognize that each of us has our part.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky explains the mishnah in Avos - *kol machlokes she-hee le-shem shomayim sofah le-hiskayem*—like *Hillel ve-Shamai*. What does that mean? If we recognize that *eilu ve-eilu divrei Elokim chayim*. Maybe

I'm Levi, and you're Yehuda. Maybe I'm Zevulun, and you're Asher. Perhaps we're not supposed to think the same, we're supposed to argue a little. We're all supposed to stand up for what we believe. But we know in the back of our minds that Hashem wants us to think differently because Klal Yisroel needs different people. And in the end, we will each benefit and grow from each other. Each one will *mashlim* what the other one can't do. And that way, Klal Yisroel will be united. And that's the final *tzava'ah* of Yaakov Avinu. At first, there was no Klal Yisroel. There was a family of individuals. Avraham passed on the tradition to Yitzhak and not Yishmael. Yitzhak passed it on to Yaakov and not Eisav. And finally, Yaakov changed things and passed on the *mesorah* to all of his children. He told them: You're one united nation. And the most important thing is to have *achdus*—to be one nation. How? Not by expecting everyone to be the same. But by respecting and appreciating the advantage of everyone being a little different and taking pride in your *tafkid* without denying the pride that the other fellow has to take in his *tafkid*. And even if there's a *machlokes* and you argue about what to do, it's good when that's *le-Shem Shomayim*, and you realize that Hashem gave everyone their *tafkid*. And perhaps, to represent all the perspectives, everyone should argue a little. And then, in some circumstances, you'll need this perspective to win, while other times, another outlook. Both should be available. And *sofah le-hiskayem*, means to be *miskayem* as one nation.

We can add *al derech drush* that Rashi says: *es asher yikre eschem be-achris ha-yamim* - He wanted to reveal the *keitz*—the final *Geula*. And the secret to this final *Geula* is that we must internalize this message of *he'asfu: amar lehon, tihyu kulchon asifa achas*. And then, instead of letting our differences divide us, we can let our differences unite and strengthen us. Everyone would benefit from everyone's talents and strengths from their *shoresh ha-neshama*. And that will bring us one step closer to the *Geula sheleima, be-meheira be-yameinu*. Shabbat Shalom.

Ramban on Our Parshah: Didn't the Scepter Leave Yehudah?

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Yaakov's *berachah* to Yehudah created a problem of both Jewish history and Christian polemics. Yaakov declared, "*The scepter shall not leave Yehudah* (Bereishit 49:10)," apparently meaning that Jewish monarchy would always be with Yehudah's descendants. See similarly *Divrei HaYamim I 28:4* and *Divrei HaYamim*

II 13:5. But:

- Hashem appointed Shaul, descendant of Binyamin, as the first king in the land of Israel, and Shemuel I 13:13 claims that monarchy would have continued in his line if not for his mistakes. What would have happened to Yehudah's monarchy?

- Christians interpreted Yaakov's berachah to mean that their founder, allegedly a descendant of Yehudah, was Mashiach. After all, who else continued the royal line of Yehudah after the second Beit HaMikdash was destroyed? This was Pablo Cristiani's first claim in his debate against Ramban in 1263.

Ramban addressed this berachah in his commentary to our parshah and in the debate. He explained that Yaakov did give permanent monarchy to Yehudah. Hashem chose Shaul because He disapproved of the Jews' request for a king at that stage; Hashem wanted Shaul's monarchy to be temporary. Even if Shaul had been perfect, the power of his descendants would have been limited to leading Rachel's descendants. The requirement of monarchy remaining with Yehudah also led to the downfall of the Chashmonaim, who were kohanim.

[Rambam (Hilchot Melachim 1:8) took the same view as Ramban regarding Shaul's monarchy. Other

commentators explained it differently. Don Isaac Abarbanel (Shemuel I 9:2) claimed that Yehudah was only meant to be the lead tribe, but not necessarily the king. And Rabbeinu Nisim (Derashah 7) contended that once monarchy would start in Yehudah, it would not end – but there could be kings from other tribes before Yehudah.]

As far as the Christian claim to the throne after the Beit HaMikdash, Ramban argued that Yaakov's point was that monarchy could leave Yehudah at times, but it would always return. He pointed out that there were other periods when we were entirely without monarchy, such as between the first and second Beit HaMikdash. There were also periods, such as that of the Chashmonaim, when monarchy left Yehudah. So lacking a king from Yehudah after the Beit HaMikdash was not an abrogation of the berachah at all, and there was no reason to go looking for someone to identify as the new, Yehudah-descended king.

May we soon see the fulfillment of Yaakov's berachah!

Rav Soloveitchik on Vayechi: Going Home

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

Yaakov is keenly aware of death's approach. He summons Yosef and makes him swear to bury him in the Land of Israel, in the city of Chevron. This apparently opens an old wound, as Rachel, Yosef's mother, was not buried in the special burial cave there—*me'arat hamachpelah*. Although the obedient Yosef does not verbalize a complaint, Yaakov senses the air suddenly grow tense. He explains that he had to bury her along the way, but he does not justify why he could not have continued perhaps a day's journey past Beit Lechem to bury her with her ancestors. What was the reason for this?

Land and Torah

The Ramban first explicates the opinion of Rashi, who says that it was a divine decree that she be buried in Beit Lechem. Her descendants would pass by her plot as they went into exile, and she would cry and pray for them. The Ramban suggests that this is implied by the repetition of "on the road" (Genesis 48:7), meaning, on the road from Yerushalayim into exile.

The Ramban later claims that all of this is apologetics, as the real reason Yaakov did not bury her in the cave was that two sisters should not be buried there, for he would be embarrassed before his forefathers.¹ In other words, the forefathers who observed the entire Torah would be

affronted by the fact that Yaakov did not uphold the Torah's prohibition against marrying two sisters. But if there was a problem, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wondered, why did he marry Rachel after having married Leah? Elsewhere, the Ramban develops the novel idea that the Patriarchs kept the 613 mitzvot only when they lived in the Land of Israel, and Yaakov married the two sisters while he was in Charan. It would only be an affront now to his ancestors and descendants to bury two sister-wives next to each other in the place where the entire Torah must be kept. This was also why Rachel had to die once she entered the borders of Israel.²

Jewish Status

In this context, a fundamental issue needs to be addressed: What was the status of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs before the giving of the Torah? Did they have the status of benei Noach, with full halachic status only coming into effect once the nation of Israel accepted the Torah at Sinai? It is here that the Ramban makes a striking assertion: The Patriarchs bore the status of full-fledged Jews, but only when they resided in the Land of Israel.

The Rav finds a source for the Ramban's idea in the berit between ha-betarim, the Covenant between the Parts:

I will establish My covenant between Me and between you

and your seed after you, throughout the generations as an everlasting covenant, to be God for you and your seed after you. And I will give you and your seed after you the land of your sojourning, the entire land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and I will be their God. (Genesis 17:7-8)

A central component of this covenant between God and Avraham and his family was “the acknowledgment of the unique and preeminence of the Land of Israel as the central arena for the fulfillment of Jewish destiny.”³ Without this element, the covenant was incomplete.⁴ In other words, the attachment to the Land of Israel as the Jewish homeland was established and made the underpinning of Jewish identity even prior to Sinai, when the covenant was still familial. This would change at Sinai, when the covenant shifted from family to nation. Therefore, prior to the giving of the Torah, it would seem that this familial covenant did not fully apply outside the Land, and Yaakov could marry two sisters.

Longing for the Land

Echoing his father’s request at the beginning of the parashah (Genesis 47:29-31), Yosef insists that his final resting place be in the Land of Israel: “I am about to die, but God will surely remember you and bring you out of this land, to the land that he swore [to give] to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov... bring up my bones from here” (Genesis 50:24-25). Moshe would carry out this request (Exodus 13:19), and the Midrash tells us it is because Yosef identified himself as belonging to the Land of Israel: “for I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews” (Genesis 40:15).⁵ Even after becoming a royal, heroic figure in his adopted country, Yosef’s heart lay with his beloved homeland. Throughout, Yosef remained an ivri, a Hebrew, rather than an Egyptian.

If the familial tie to the land was unbreakable, why did Yosef not make his sons swear to take up his bones instead of his brothers? The Meshech Chochmah (Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk) proposes that Yosef prophetically foresaw that his son Menashe would settle half of his tribe in Transjordan, outside the actual borders of the land. The older son might decide to have Yosef buried in his portion, so Yosef did not want to risk being buried outside the promised land. He therefore did not ask his own children to be responsible for this task.⁶

The Rav was told a fascinating story about the reinterment of Baron Edmond James de Rothschild (1845–1934), the magnanimous magnate who provided the financial support for the fledgling New Yishuv in Ottoman Palestine, by his son, Baron Alain de Rothchild (1910–1982). Edmond James devoted so much of his

energy and means to reviving the land that he stipulated in his will that he be buried in Israel. When, years later, he was accordingly disinterred and reburied in Israel, Charles de Gaulle, then president of France, commented, “I thought he was a loyal Frenchman. Isn’t France good enough for him to be buried here?” The Rav observed that neither Pharaoh nor de Gaulle could understand the nature of the Jew and his bond with the Land of Israel.⁷

Reb Chaim’s Dream

In describing his own upbringing, the Rav recounted a home aglow with passion for the Holy Land. This was especially true of his renowned grandfather Rav Chaim Brisker:

[T]he Land of Israel occupied a major role in my house. My grandfather, Reb Chaim, was the first to halachically analyze, define, and conceptualize on an extraordinary intellectual level the topics pertaining to the Land of Israel. These included such topics as the sanctity of the Land, the sanctity of partitions, temporary sanctification and eternal sanctification of the Land of Israel....

These terms represented not only concepts, abstract thoughts, and formal insights, but they also reflected deep-rooted emotions of love, yearnings, and vision for the Land of Israel. Discussions of the sanctity of the Land of Israel, the holiness of walled cities, the sanctity of Jerusalem, were my lullabies, my bedtime stories. Reb Chaim was perhaps the greatest lover of Zion in his generation. He constantly delighted in the thought that after he married off all his children, he would transfer his rabbinate to one of his sons and then settle in the Land of Israel. There he would purchase an orchard and fulfill the agricultural laws which pertain to the Land of Israel.⁸

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

While usually parashiyot are separated from each another by a considerable space, the first word of Parashat Vayechi is minimally separated from the last word of Parashat Vayigash. Rashi comments that this alludes to the impending bondage of the Jewish people in Egypt following the death of Yaakov. Rebbe Meir Yechiel Halevi Halstock (1852–1928), the Ostrovtser Rebbe, articulates a deeper symbolism in his Meir Einei Chachamim. In Vayigash, Yaakov is in the Land of Israel and has not yet descended to Egypt. In Shemot, the redemption has already been set in motion. Vayechi is the only parashah in which Yaakov and his sons are fully in the Egyptian exile, even if not suffering bondage. The only way to survive the exile is to maintain a strong link to our homeland. If this parashah were “open,” that is, separated like every other parashah from the preceding one, it would symbolize a

complete disconnect of the Jewish people from their land. With the two parashiyot closely joined as they are, the vital lifeline holds. The Jews will return to the land from every exile.⁹ The bookends of Parashat Vayechi therefore show that the heart and soul of the Jew always yearn to go home.

[1] Ramban on Genesis 48:7.

[2] See further Ramban on Genesis 26:5. For the Rav's full analysis,

see Schachter, *Divrei ha-Rav*, 263–264.

[3] Wurzbarger, *Ethics of Responsibility*, 15.

[4] Chumash Mesoras Harav, 1:107.

[5] Devarim Rabbah, 2:8. See further the Chassidut Dvar Torah for Parashat Beshalach.

[6] Meshech Chochmah on Genesis 50:25, s.v. מה שהשביע.

[7] David, *Darosh Darash Yosef*, 117.

[8] Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav*, 2:113.

[9] *Gevurot Yitzchak*, 81.

The Blessing of Self-Awareness

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Jacob, on his deathbed, gathers his children and addresses each one individually (Gen. 49:1-27). The genre of his speech defies easy categorization. The concluding verse identifies Jacob's words as blessings, "Each one according to his blessing, he blessed them" (Gen 49:28). Yet, even a cursory review of the blessings makes one wonder if they were misnamed. There are cryptic poetics related to the characteristics of each tribe, particularly pertinent to their eventual geographic divisions, and even criticisms; Jacob, for example, chastises Reuben for his impetuosity and condemns Shimon and Levi's anger. How are we supposed to understand these statements as blessings?

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, a 20th century leader of the Mussar Movement, suggests that Jacob bestows upon his children the gift of self-awareness. Many people, Rabbi Wolbe argues, live their entire lives without any knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses. Jacob's censuring of Reuben, Shimon, and Levi's negative traits is considered a blessing since it provides them necessary feedback for their respective futures. As 14th century commentary Gersonides already notes, with this knowledge, they can attempt to address their deficiencies and improve their characters.

In her book, *Insight: The Surprising Truth About How Others See Us, How We See Ourselves, and Why the Answers Matter More Than We Think*, industrial-organizational psychologist Dr. Tasha Eurich points to Rabbi Wolbe's teachings to highlight the importance of self-awareness in Judaism, writing that "in the Jewish faith, self-knowledge has been called 'the prerequisite to any self-improvement.'" Dr. Eurich summarizes the powerful benefits of self-awareness as extracted from the research. It is correlated with happiness, better relationships, enhanced career success, stronger moral behavior, and more effective leadership. Yet, accurate self-awareness is elusive. Dr. Eurich notes that 95% of people think they are self-aware,

while research indicates that only 15% are adequately self-aware. "That means," she quips, "on a good day, about 80% of people are lying about themselves—to themselves."

In pursuit of self-awareness, many people introspect and think deeply about their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The challenge with introspection is that it can backfire. Researchers report that for some people, more time introspecting leads to less insight about themselves (Grant, Franklin, and Langford, 2002). Ironically, internal blind spots and biases block self-awareness through personal introspection. Consequently, it is often the insights of others that pave the road to self-awareness. This is the blessing Jacob provides for his sons.

Rabbi Wolbe's teacher, Rabbi Yeruchom Levovitz also points to the importance of Jacob's identification of his children's character traits as essential to the narrative. Nahmanides and Sforno already note that the blessings were uniquely directed towards each son in particular—"each one according to his blessing he blessed them." Rabbi Levovitz elaborates on these differentiated blessings. He suggests that each blessing targets the natural predisposition and temperament of each respective tribe. The blessing would not work if it hadn't been individualized to each son's character. As Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb writes in *The Person in the Parasha: Discovering the Human Element in the Weekly Torah Portion*, Jacob knew how to, "bless them with the particular resources that they will need as they march forward with varying talents and dispositions into their historical roles."

Following in Jacob's footsteps, one of the biggest blessings we can bestow upon other people is offering guidance so that they can discover their own strengths and weaknesses. This sacred task needs to be done with sensitivity, care, love, humility, and wisdom. If done properly, this gift of self-awareness can be the greatest blessing of all.

How Can Israel Preserve Unity?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Fearing entombment in Egypt, Ya'akov begs his son Yosef to bury him in Israel. He is so worried that he will become an Egyptian shrine that he forces Yosef to take an oath. Realizing that his son's political commitments may obstruct the mission, he demands that Yosef swear to bury him in Israel.

Surprisingly, after his final audience with his twelve children, Ya'akov lodges this burial request a second time. Evidently, in repeating this petition, Ya'akov has an ulterior motive.

Throughout his tumultuous life he had struggled to unify a splintered family. His twelve children were too different to be effortlessly forged into one cohesive group. Some children were born from pedigreed stock while others were born from maidservants. Some of his sons had committed serious sins while others had a more impeccable past. Some were strong and some were weak. Some had large families, some small, while Dan had only one child. The family could only morph into a nation once these disparate elements were fused into one interconnected and indivisible nation.

Building unity

Their frightening ordeal in Egypt had already begun to unify the brothers. False charges of espionage forced them to rally together for survival. Facing the capricious wrath of an impulsive tyrant, their escape depended upon a coordinated response.

Subsequently the family's relocation to Egypt further endowed solidarity. Immersed in a foreign country, they could only counter the cultural pressures and preserve their common heritage through a united effort.

Having tasted initial solidarity, the family assembled together to meet their father for one last time. Instead of affording each child a private audience, Ya'akov gathered his children into one room, addressing them jointly, thereby fostering an air of camaraderie and solidarity.

In his final attempt to unify his family Ya'akov assigns a shared family project. Though he realizes that Yosef alone is more than capable of supervising his burial, Ya'akov allocated mutual responsibility for his burial to all his children. This joint historical project of returning their father's body to its rightful resting place in their common homeland, hopefully, will grant lasting unity. Yosef has full authority to manage the logistics of releasing his father's body from Egypt

and transporting it to Israel. Ya'akov though, wants all his children to participate in a common cooperative historical project. Despite their differences and despite the tensions which had splintered the family, they are now united, prepared to develop into one nation. Ya'akov's lasting legacy is the unity he fought so hard to achieve.

The day after

After the burial procession to Israel an urgent question emerges: how can this newfound unity be preserved? Previously, a crisis had produced unity, but the crisis had long ago been resolved. Likewise, their joint project of burying Ya'akov was completed. No more threats, no more wars, no more joint historical projects. What comes after unity?

The answer is, of course, communication and mutual understanding. Potentially, unity opens channels of healthy communication. Disharmony and isolation hinder communication and leads to greater divide. In the aftermath of unity can healthy communication follow? Will Yosef and his brothers appreciate their different viewpoints and preserve solidarity?

Suspicious and Lies

It appears as if this solidarity deteriorated. Suspicious of Yosef and fearful of his retaliation, the brothers fabricated their father's request for Yosef to forgive them. Lying corrodes trust and wrecks relationships.

The midrash describes the root of the brothers' suspicions. While traveling to his father's burial in Israel, Yosef visited the city of Shechem, which was the site of his horrifying abduction. Presumably, he sought closure for the greatest trauma of his life. Witnessing this detour, the brothers though, assumed that Yosef was visiting the scene of the crime to plot his revenge. Had they just communicated with one another their suspicions would have been allayed and the relationship would have thrived. Without communication, suspicions arose which led to lies and mistrust.

Unity enables healthy communication. Healthy communication builds trust. Trust is the lifeblood of healthy relationships. Sadly, after they had achieved unity, the brothers and Yosef could not shift into respectful communication and their short-lived unity vanished. By the end of his life Yosef and his brothers seem as far apart as ever.

The day after the war

Our people now face a similar challenge. After a year of destructive social discord and malicious and spiteful national discourse, tragedy has united us like never before. In this battle for survival, every sector of our people has rallied against a common enemy. Jews around the world have lent their support, their hearts, and their wallets to the struggle for Jewish future. We all hear the echo of history calling out to us. We know that future generations will retell our story. We stand shoulder- to- shoulder, building the wall of Jewish destiny.

The question on everyone's mind though, is how to maintain this solidarity. At some point, we will triumph, the war will conclude, and we will all return to our normal routine. In the absence of a crisis, or of a joint historical project, what can preserve unity and prevent us from sinking back into petty divisiveness.

Our unity can only be sustained if we segue into frank and honest communication. We are together like never before: on the battlefields, in the hospitals, in the cemeteries, at volunteer centers, at rallies, and in our prayers. Now is the perfect time to learn how to communicate across the ideological divide. To communicate, we must learn how to listen. To really listen, we must better appreciate the perspectives of different communities. Each community has proven its commitment to Jewish identity and future. Now let's listen to how they define that future.

Secular Isarel has proven its commitment to Jewish heritage. Their patriotism and sacrifice have been unwavering and inspiring. Let us listen to their needs and wishes. Their desire for robust democracy and religious

freedom reflects their noble aspirations for a Jewish state founded upon equality and dignity. Religious Jews may not concur with all their positions nor identify with their progressive secular society. But let us listen to their dreams and realize that these values don't betray our common Jewish destiny.

Charedi society has proven that they are deeply invested in our country and its well-being. Their society is perfectly suited for the volunteer networks and charity organizations which have proved indispensable during this war. Their commitment to Torah study and their concerns about cultural assimilation make them hesitant to serve in the IDF. Not everyone agrees with this policy, but it isn't an abandonment of our people. As we stand together, let us listen to their perspective for our common future and let us build it together.

The response of the international Jewish community across the religious spectrum should help us admire their deep allegiance for Jewish peoplehood and Jewish homeland. They may not live in Israel, but they live with us, and our country deeply embedded in their hearts. As we build our future country, their needs and their hopes must also be factored in.

This is a watershed moment. Tragically, unity has been involuntarily thrust upon us. Can we maintain it? Can we discover healthy communication. Can we listen and can we appreciate values which aren't our own, but part of our joint future? Will we revert to suspicion and animosity? Or does this war have a silver lining of trust and healthy communication?

This unity is ours to preserve or ours to dismantle.

Yosef's Enduring Legacy

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

This week's parsha, Parshas Vayechi, is the final one in the book of Bereishis. After a tumultuous, albeit successful, life - losing his mother as a young boy of 8 or 9 years old, being hated and rejected by his brothers, being sold by them at the age of seventeen, bought by Potiphar, Chief Executioner of Egypt, surviving the first blood libel in history by Eishes Potiphar, spending twelve years in prison, and ultimately becoming viceroy at age thirty and ruling until his death at 110 years - Yosef ha'tzadik, Yosef the righteous (Yoma 35a), dies.

The closing pasukim of sefer Bereishis tell us of the final moments, and words, of righteous Yosef: וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו,

אֲנֹכִי מוֹת; וְאֵלֵיכֶם פָּקֹד יִפְקֹד אֶתְכֶם, וְהֶעֱלָה אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת, - *And Yosef said to his brothers: I am going to die; G-d will surely remember you and take you up out of this land to the land that He swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yakov; אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁבַּע יוֹסֵף, אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, - *And Yosef adjured the children of Israel, saying: G-d will surely remember you, and you shall take up my bones out of here; וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף, בְּן- - *And Yosef died at the age of one hundred ten years, and they embalmed him and he was placed into the coffin in Egypt (Bereishis 50:24-26).***

On his deathbed, Yosef imparted two final messages to the Bnei Yisrael: (I) geula - redemption - would surely come as G-d will surely remember them and (II) his place - and their place (and our place!) - is not in foreign lands, but in the land of our Avos and Imahos, the land of HKB”H (Devarim 11:12), the land of Eretz Yisrael.

Yosef’s enduring legacy is the belief in redemption and the love for, and belief in, Eretz Yisrael. This dual legacy - which is really one, for when redemption comes, we will all be worthy to merit a redeemed and rebuilt Tzion v’Yerushalayim - is made even greater by the fact that Yosef did not merit geula during his difficult lifetime, nor did he merit to live, die or be buried (in a timely fashion) in Eretz Yisrael. Hence, even though all the logical facts of his life proved otherwise, exacerbated by the fact that HKB”H never directly spoke to Yosef, his emunah in geula and E”Y never diminished or wavered.

It is easy to believe when life is good, uncomplicated and everything makes sense. Yosef’s stalwart emunah reminds us that his tzidkus was so much greater because he always believed, even when - especially when - life did not necessarily make sense. If there is a lesson from the legacy of Yosef that we can take for our day and our time, this difficult eis milchama and eis tzarah l’Yaakov, it is his powerful and unwavering faith in redemption and in the eternity of our Land - even when life does not make sense. As of this writing (on Monday, 12/25/23), eighteen soldiers fell in battle in Gaza since Friday, Erev Shabbos, HYD, Hashem yerachem aleinu. Early Monday the IDF cleared for publication: Master Sergeant (res.) Nitai Meisels, 30, from Rehovot, who served in the 14th Brigade of the Armored Corps, who fell in battle in the northern Gaza Strip and Sergeant Rani Tamir, 20, from Ganei Am, who served in the 50th Battalion of the Nahal Brigade, who fell in battle in the northern Gaza Strip.

Late Monday, The Beit El Council announced that its resident Elisha Yehonatan Lober HY”D, son of Hagay and Tehiya Lober, fell in battle in Gaza. “Our hearts are with the dear Lober family upon learning of the bitter news. The council’s staff stands by the family and will assist in all possible ways,” the council said. Lober is a cousin of Hillel and Yagel Yaniv, HYD, who were murdered in a terrorist attack in Huwara several months ago.

Additionally, the family of Matan ben Michal asks the nation to daven for his refuah, after being seriously wounded in battle over the weekend. As per his family’s statement, the doctors were forced to amputate both of his legs, and he remains ventilated and sedated in the ICU in

Soroka hospital.

Yosef lived through much travail, loss, suffering, and trials and tribulations, in a foreign land away from his home and family. Yet in his death, he reminds us that a Jew’s faith and belief never wavers, for geula will come and Eretz Yisrael will always be our place.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l, the Rav, teaches: “Genuine geulah, genuine redemption, always comes suddenly, unexpectedly, at a time when people are ready to give up hope. Sometimes historical situations keep deteriorating; people pray and cry, begging for mercy - but there is no answer to their prayer, only silence. At that moment, when the crisis reaches its maximum and threatens the very existence of the community, when people begin to give up, the geulah suddenly comes and takes them out of the land of affliction. It comes in the middle of the night and knocks on the door when no one expects it, when everybody is skeptical about it, when everybody laughs off the possibility of redemption.

“This is what happened in Egypt. וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הֵהֵם, וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם, וַיִּאָּנְחוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן-הָעֶבֶדָה, וַיִּזְעְקוּ; וַתַּעַל שְׁוַעְתָּם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים, מִן-הָעֶבֶדָה (Ex.2:23). *G-d did not answer at that moment, and the people had no knowledge that ‘G-d looked and G-d knew’* (Ex.2:25). When the crisis reached its climax and the Jewish people were on the verge of complete assimilation and disappearance, Moshe came. At the beginning, he was very far from successful; apparently, the plagues did not convince the Jews that redemption was near. They did not expect Divine revelation that night. Indeed, this is the most important feature of geulas Mitzrayim. The redemption from Egypt consisted not only of the fact that our ancestors went from slavery to freedom, but, more importantly, that this redemption and the revelation of the Almighty were a surprise to them. This is the nature of geulah” (*The Seder Night: An Exalted Evening, Haggadah Shel Pesach*, p.99-100, See as well: *Festival of Freedom*, p.58-59).

As we close the book of Bereishis once again, may the life and lessons of Yosef ha’Tzaddik continue to guide and inspire us. בְּצַדִּיק, בְּאֱמוּנָתוֹ יִחְיֶה - *the righteous lives by his faith* (Chavakuk 2:4). Though our current situation is most difficult, and the world in which we live is an upside down world (Pesachim 50a), like Yosef, we know with absolute faith that G-d will remember and redeem us, and our home - our eternal home and promised Land - is Eretz Yisrael.

Can It Be a Mitzvah to Lie?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

The late great Bible teacher, Nehama Leibowitz, alerts us to a major issue that appears in the narrative of this week's parasha, Vayechi.

After Jacob's death, Joseph's brothers are concerned that Joseph still hates them, and that Joseph will avenge the evil that they had done to him. In order to avert Joseph's vengeance, they send a message to Joseph saying, (Genesis 50:16-17): אָבִיךָ צִוָּה לִפְנֵי מוֹתוֹ לֵאמֹר: *"Your father [Jacob] commanded before he died saying: 'So shall you say to Joseph. Please kindly forgive the spiteful deed of your brothers and their sin, for they have done you evil.'"* When Joseph hears this, he begins to weep.

The brothers then fling themselves before Joseph and say, "We are ready to be your slaves." Joseph, however, assures them that there is nothing to fear and says: "Am I instead of G-d? Although you intended me harm, G-d intended it for good ... that a vast people be kept alive. So now, fear not, I will sustain you and your young ones." Thus, Joseph comforted his brothers and spoke to their hearts.

Prof. Leibowitz, citing the RaMCHaL, says that Joseph instantly understood that his father had left no such message. After all, it is inconceivable that Jacob would have entrusted the brothers with such a message and not informed Joseph directly. The reason that Joseph wept, says the RaMCHaL, was that he finally perceived the tragic state of his brothers, and realized how deeply they feared for their lives and dreaded his vengeance.

Many commentators agree that Jacob could never have made such a statement, but for an entirely different reason. They maintain that Jacob never really learned the truth about Joseph's disappearance. Apparently, Joseph tried to keep away from Jacob as much as possible lest his father ply him with questions about the real facts concerning his disappearance. To prove that Joseph kept his distance from Jacob, they point to the text in Genesis 48:1, that says, וַיֹּאמֶר לְיוֹסֵף, הִנֵּה אָבִיךָ חָלָה, Someone said to Joseph, "Behold your father is ill," indicating that Joseph was away from his father. The Ramban suggests that Jacob simply assumed that Joseph had gotten lost in the grazing fields and was sold by his finders to Egypt.

If that's the case, if Jacob never knew the real story of how Joseph came to be in Egypt, then clearly the brothers are now lying by telling Joseph that their father insisted that he forgive them!

This, of course, raises a further question. How is it

possible that the brothers lie so shamelessly? Rashi notes in his commentary on Genesis 50:16, שָׁנוּ בְּדַבָּר מִפְּנֵי הַשְּׁלוֹם, *the brothers deviated from the truth for the sake of peace.*

Nehama Leibowitz cites a Midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 100, 9 where Rav Shimon ben Gamliel states: גְּדוּלַת הַשְּׁלוֹם, *"Great is peace, for in order to promote peace between themselves and Joseph, even the tribes spoke falsehoods when they said, 'Your father commanded before he died ... Please forgive the spiteful deed of your brothers and their sin.'"* As justification for the Midrash, Nehama Leibowitz cites the Talmud in Yevamot 65b: Rabbi Ila'a said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Shimon: מוֹתֵר לוֹ לְאָדָם לְשַׁנּוֹת בְּדָבָר הַשְּׁלוֹם, *"It is permissible for a person to deviate from the truth in the interest of peace."*

It is widely assumed by many, that all noble values are absolute, lacking shades of gray. So, for instance, when the Bible says in Exodus 20:13, לֹא תִרְצָח, *"Lo tir'tzach,"* Thou shalt not murder, many conclude that killing is never justified. However, if we look closely at the phrase *"Lo tir'tzach,"* it literally means that "murder—the illegal taking of life, is prohibited. However, there surely are times when "killing" is permitted, such as in self-defense.

Similarly, it is generally assumed that speaking evil of others is strictly prohibited. After all, scripture clearly states (Leviticus 19) לֹא תִלְךָ רֵכִיל בְּעַמֶּיךָ, *You shalt not go as a talebearer among your nation.** And yet we know that speaking evil about another person is not only permitted, in fact, it is often required, in order to save an innocent person from an economic or social loss. Consequently, if someone has first-hand information that a person is dishonest, he is required to volunteer this information to someone who is considering doing business with this dishonest person, in order to spare the unwitting partner an economic loss.

While people are normally expected to speak only the truth, one need not tell the whole truth, if relating only partial truth can save a person from hurt or embarrassment. And so, in Genesis 18:13-14, we find that G-d asks Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child though I have aged?'" After all, says G-d, "Is there anything beyond G-d's power?" G-d then assures Abraham that, at the appointed time, He will return next year, and Sarah will have a son. Our rabbis learn from this that for the sake of peace between husband and wife, the Al-Mighty Himself did not tell the whole truth. After all, if we check Sarah's original statement, we see that she not

only said that she was old, but she, in fact, added (Genesis 18:12) “And my husband is old!” But G-d changed the uncomplimentary reference from her husband to herself.

Apparently, values, even the most exalted values, are not absolute when there is the possibility of achieving a greater good. How powerful, we see, is the value of Shalom Bayit—peace in the household, and domestic tranquility between marital partners. And, so it is, that even though the third commandment of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:7) strictly forbids using G-d’s name in vain, in the case of the Sotah, the suspected unfaithful wife, (Numbers 5:23), an entire text with G-d’s name is written on parchment and is summarily erased in order to bring peace between husband and wife. The Talmud Yerushalmi Sotah 1:4 says that, so great is domestic tranquility that G-d commanded that His own sacred name be erased, in order to bring peace between a man and his wife!

And, so, we see, that while Judaism generally subscribes to the concept of absolute morals and values, there really are no true “absolutes,” and that each value and situation must be judged on its own merits and within its own context.

Sometimes, We Need to Stop Listening

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The Gemara (Sota 13a) relates that when Yaakov’s children and their families arrived at Me’aras Ha’machpeila with Yaakov’s remains, preparing to bury him, they found their uncle, Eisav, standing there waiting for them. He tried preventing the family from burying Yaakov at the sacred site, arguing that the remaining plot in Me’aras Ha’machpeila belonged to him. Yaakov’s sons countered that as Eisav had sold the birthright to Yaakov, he relinquished his right to be buried in Me’aras Ha’machpeila. Eisav persisted, contending that the sale of the birthright did not include burial rights. He demanded that his nephews produce the sale contract to prove that Yaakov had bought the right to be buried in Me’aras Ha’machpeila, and he would not allow Yaakov to be buried there until the evidence was shown. Naftali, a swift runner, was sent back to Egypt to bring the contract which verified Yaakov’s burial rights in Machpeila cave.

In the meantime, the Gemara continues, one of Yaakov’s grandchildren – Chushim, the only son of Dan – inquired what was happening, why his grandfather’s burial was being delayed. Chushim was deaf, and he thus did not hear the exchange between Eisav and Yaakov’s children. When Chushim heard what was happening, he immediately arose

Of course, encouraging such latitude with respect to values is fraught with danger. Once such flexibility and redefining are sanctioned, even minimally, we often find ourselves with little left that may be categorized as “absolute.” And, so, the rabbis give us very precise guidelines, which we must always follow with a hefty dose of respect and trepidation, and not be overly flexible.

Joseph’s brothers had clearly shown full contrition, beyond any shadow of a doubt. They stood up for Benjamin, and were prepared to give themselves up as slaves in order to ensure Benjamin’s safety. They were true penitents, and did not deserve to be punished any further—Joseph’s perceived wrath or desire for vengeance notwithstanding. Therefore, in this particular circumstance, they were entirely justified in deviating from the truth.

While truth is an ultimate value, so is peace. At times truth outweighs peace, at other times peace overrules truth. Let us pray that we will never have to face these difficult choices, and that peace and truth will both prevail in our midst in perfect harmony.

and killed Eisav, so that Yaakov could be buried without any further delay.

The Einei Yitzchak commentary to Maseches Sota offers an explanation for this sequence of events, why it was specifically Chushim, Yaakov’s hearing-impaired grandson, who arose to defend his grandfather’s honor and kill Eisav. Some people know how to speak with manipulative deceit, how to make a clearly incorrect argument sound compelling. There are salesmen, for example, who can, as the saying goes, “sell snow to an Eskimo,” convince a prospective buyer to buy something he clearly does not need or want. Eisav was such a person. The Torah in Parshas Toldos (25:28) says about Eisav, *כי ציד בפיו* – “hunt was in his mouth,” which has been understood to mean that he “hunted” with his mouth, using words to control, deceive and manipulate other people. And very often, when we hear such people talk, even our deepest-held beliefs and convictions could be compromised, at least to some extent. We begin questioning ourselves and wondering if perhaps there is some kernel of truth to what they’re saying, if maybe their arguments aren’t that absurd after all.

This is what happened to Yaakov’s sons. Eisav used his power of persuasion to plant doubts in their minds,

to make them question Yaakov's rights to Me'aras Ha'machpeila. These doubts sufficed to make them send Naftali back to Egypt to retrieve the contract, while their father's remains awaited burial.

Chushim, however, did not hear Eisav's arguments. When he was told that Eisav was challenging Yaakov's rights to the burial plot, he immediately stood up and acted, without hesitation, because he, unlike everyone else, was not impacted by Eisav's manipulative talk. As Chushim had not heard Eisav speak, his firm conviction was not eroded to even the slightest extent. He therefore did not wait for proof – and went ahead and killed Eisav.

Our Heroes Never Perish

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

After blessing all his sons and instructing them once more to return his remains to the land of Israel, our forefather Yaakov lays his head upon the bed, and his soul expires. Yet at this poignant moment of closure, the Torah does not use the term we would expect to see – “*Vayamot*,” ‘and he died.’

Noting the peculiar absence of “*Vayamot*,” R' Yitzchak (BT Taanit 5b) reaches the conclusion that Yaakov never died! Perturbed, R' Nachman retorts: ‘Did the mourners mourn in vain?’ Don't we see that Yaakov was embalmed, eulogized, and buried later in the parsha? How could it be that he didn't die? To this, R' Yitzchak responds: “As long as his descendants live, Yaakov lives on as well.”

This year, the book of Bereishit opened with catastrophe and closes in heartbreak. Twelve weeks ago we read of creation in the face of destruction, and then we read of the receding of the flood of Noach even as our own deluge continued. And here we are reading “*Vayechi Yaakov*,” ‘and Yaakov lived,’ as death and grief continue to surround us. And not even deaths like that of Yaakov, at a ripe old age, surrounded by family and in the comfort of his bed – but losses that are violent and premature.

Yet Yaakov and our own victims and fallen heroes transcend the finality of death through the legacy they leave behind. The children Yaakov bears, who grow into a full-fledged nation, continue as the torch-bearers for his vision; through them his presence, the presence of Israel, continues to be felt in the world.

No less can be said of those whose loss we mourn today. Their sacrifice in defense of Israel and of world Jewry enables us to celebrate Jewish weddings in the hills of Judea and in the streets of Jerusalem, and for Jewish life to

Sometimes, we need to be “deaf,” we need to stop listening. We need to stop listening to the pundits, the analysts, the “experts,” all those who peddle lies and nonsense in a clever, sophisticated way, manipulating the minds of their readers, viewers and followers. There are certain simple truths that must be clear and evident to us without any complicated analysis or arguments. Listening to the commentators and analysts could lead us to second-guess ourselves, to wonder if maybe we're wrong. When it comes to our basic beliefs, tenets and truths which we hold dear, there can be no second-guessing. And so we need to be like Chushim, and stop listening.

prosper in the land of Israel.

While the gaping wounds caused by their deaths will never truly be healed, the fallen heroes of this war still live!

Especially close to my heart are the 10 OTS alumni and 20 members of our extended OTS family whose lives have been taken since October 7. I imagine them with so many others who have sacrificed on our behalf taking a seat in the *Yeshiva shel Maala*, the heavenly academy, where we are taught (Pesachim 53b; Bava Metzia 85a) the souls of the righteous of the Jewish community reside. There, they are joined together, plumbing the depths of Torah and the divine mind, perhaps unraveling the mysteries that, to us, remain intractable.

The heavenly yeshiva is not just the beneficiary of angelic interpretations or divine revelation, but of the actions of the new arrivals, whose acts of chesed under fire, heroism on the battlefield, and sacrifice of self for the perpetuation of a larger narrative add to the latitude and longitude of our mesorah.

They have demonstrated to us the ability to work together as a people even when we come from different religious and political perspectives. They have defined for us *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice) as they fought not to be excused from service but to be at the forefront of this righteous battle. Their love for the land of Israel and willingness to fight for immortal values compelled them to put their lives on hold, ending lives yet to be lived.

The *Yeshiva shel Maala* and the *Yeshivot shel Mata*, the heavenly academy and the institutions of Torah study here on earth, are inseparably intertwined. For the legacy, values, and ideals left behind by the souls of the righteous serve as the North Star of the Torah we learn and

implement here on earth. They join the dialogue of Rebbe Akiva, of Hillel and Shamai, and Ravina and Rav Ashi.

Even if our loved ones are no longer with us physically in our homes and workplaces, they, like the Tanaim and Amoraim, have shaped our present and will continue to shape our future. They are with us when we reflect upon the beliefs and commitments they have bequeathed to us

and charged us to fulfill in the world. It is their ongoing inspiration which we carry with us into action, and in this manner they, like Yaakov, never really leave us.

May their memories be not merely a blessing, but an ongoing inspiration for all of us, channeled from the heavenly academy to our own houses of Torah study, and from there to the world we will continue to build together.

Haftarat Vayechi: Power, Piety, and Politics: David's Charge to Shlomo

Rabbi Shmuel Hain (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarat, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

The haftarah records David's last will and testament to his son and successor, Shlomo (Melakhim Aleph 2:1–12). The dying king begins by exhorting his son to be strong, and he then instructs Shlomo regarding both religious and political matters. After this charge, the haftarah reports David's death and burial, and the duration of his reign. It concludes with the fact that Shlomo sat on his father's throne and that his sovereignty was firmly established.

This brief haftarah presents vexing challenges both textually and thematically. Modern scholars note the sharp contrasts in tone, language, and content within David's charge to Shlomo. To wit, David begins (v. 2) with a brief, militaristic exhortation, "And you must be strong and be a man." That is immediately followed, however, with an appeal to Torah observance filled with soaring (and elaborate) religious rhetoric (v. 3), "and keep what the Lord your God enjoins, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, and His dictates and admonitions, as it is written in the Teaching of Moses, so that you may prosper in everything you do, and in everything to which you turn." David then declares (v. 4) that the Davidic dynasty's success hinges on commitment to the commandments, "So that the Lord may fulfill His word that He spoke unto me, saying: 'If your children keep their way to walk before Me in truth with their whole heart and with all their whole being, saying, no man of yours will be cut off from the throne of Israel.'" David's message and tone then shift sharply, as the rest of his charge (vv. 5–9) consists of calculated counsel regarding the need to eliminate David's personal enemies (Yoav and Shimi) while protecting past allies (Barzilai). Following on the heels of the religious exhortation, this seemingly vengeful message is particularly jarring.

Several questions emerge from a closer reading:

- Why does the charge contain such abrupt shifts in tone and content?

- What will ultimately secure Shlomo's kingdom: military might, Torah observance, or political proficiency?
- How are we to evaluate David recalling personal grudges on his deathbed and asking his son to take care of them for him?

More generally, who is the real dying David? Is he the pious, learned man of the covenant who encourages his son to uphold the Torah's precepts, or is he the cunning military/political chieftain who encourages his son to exact revenge on long-standing enemies?

Not surprisingly, commentators interpret the charge and its motivations in radically different ways, thereby affirming their particular perspective on David's core character. According to some medieval and modern exegetes, David is primarily a scholarly, spiritual psalmist who addresses politics in this charge due to his keen awareness of young Shlomo's lack of both political experience and inner fortitude. A number of these same scholars contend that David's political counsel was not just savvy advice, but also halakhically and ethically justified. In support of this view, we should note that the parallel description of this succession, recorded in Divrei Ha-Yamim Aleph (chs. 28–29), omits any discussion of political pursuits and portrays David as singularly focused on encouraging Shlomo to observe the commandments in order to merit building the Temple. Moreover, when Shlomo himself, in an address to the people, restates David's dying charge to the people (see Melakhim Aleph 8:25), the dynastic guarantee is fully dependent upon the observance of the Torah, underscoring that righteousness is both a sufficient and a necessary condition of the Davidic throne.

However, modern scholars aver that the rest of the second chapter of Melakhim (vv. 13–46, not part of the haftarah reading) is devoted exclusively to a detailed account of how Shlomo carried out his father's political

advice and eliminated all potential threats (Adoniyahu, Yoav, and Shimi). Shlomo's throne, we are told once again in verse 46, is secure; and tellingly, these scholars argue, religious piety plays no role in achieving this status. This supports their view that the last will and testament of David is a military/political charge and that the pietistic elements contained therein are merely supplementary. For these scholars, David's counsel reflects his lifelong preoccupation with realpolitik and reveals his true identity as a calculating political and military figure.

A close and comprehensive examination of his entire life story and literary oeuvre, however, demonstrates that David is not a one, or even a two, dimensional character. He is a man of strength, of spirit, and of savvy; an exceedingly complex, and often times conflicted Biblical hero. As such, his final charge to Shlomo fittingly captures the multi-faceted nature of David's identity; power, piety, and political savvy are all pillars of his persona which he transmits to his chosen successor. Perhaps the abrupt shifts from one type of message to another further underscore the multifarious aspects of David's legacy.

Evaluation

Yet, even if we have concluded that his composite charge reflects the entirety of David's complicated and variegated character, we are still left with the task of evaluating the troubling elements of David's message – his encouraging Shlomo to take revenge against his enemies. Indeed, some of the medieval commentators who have an overwhelmingly favorable view of King David, are, nevertheless, ambivalent about these dying directives. Abarbanel even suggests that by delegating Shimi's death to Shlomo, David may have broken his vow of "you shall not die" that he made to Shimi (see Shmuel Bet 19:24).

A full assessment of the political elements of the charge and its immediate aftermath, then, may require a broader field of vision thereby yielding a properly nuanced perspective. Surely within the narrative of Melakhim, the advice of David and the deeds of Shlomo are cast by the author in an entirely positive light. After Shlomo fulfills David's mandates, the end of the chapter (v. 46) reaffirms that the kingdom was secure, presumably due to Shlomo adroitly carrying out David's wise political counsel. However, a careful examination of the terminology invoked by Shlomo when he eliminates Yoav and Shimi, especially when compared and contrasted with similar language employed in other Biblical contexts, demonstrates that the short-term political gains for Shlomo may have constituted a longer-term net loss for the Jewish people.

Let us begin by analyzing the similarly suggestive language that Shlomo uses when dispatching of both Yoav and Shimi – the imagery employed is of blood/evil turning back on the head of the evildoer. With regard to Shimei, he declares (2:44): "וְהָשִׁיב ה' אֶת רָעָךְ, בְּרֹאשְׁךָ" – *"the Lord shall hereby turn your evil on your own head."* Similarly, concerning Yoav, Shlomo declares: (2:32–33): "וְהָשִׁיב ה' אֶת דָּמוֹ עַל רֹאשׁוֹ" – *"the Lord shall hereby turn his bloodguilt on his own head."*

The rarely employed image of blood/evil returning on the head of the evildoer recalls the occasion and circumstances when David utilized the exact same image, immediately following the death of Naval (Shmuel Aleph 25:39): "And when David heard that Naval was dead, he said: 'Blessed be the Lord, that has pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Naval, and has kept back His servant from evil; and the evil-doing of Naval, the Lord has returned upon his own head.' And David sent and spoke concerning Avigayil, to take her to him to wife." Indeed, throughout the entire episode with Naval and Avigayil, David displays an alarmingly vengeful attitude of aggression, which is only restrained by Avigayil. These two episodes – the incident with Naval and the killing of Yoav and Shimi – mark the two times when Davidic retribution against enemies is most clearly manifested.

Dr. Yitzhak Berger has recently argued that the author of the book of Esther seeks to favorably contrast Esther and Mordechai's "Benjaminite retribution" with the aforementioned cases of Davidic retribution. In the case of Esther, the exact same rarely employed imagery of evil being returned upon the evildoers head is used to describe Esther's heroic role in the remarkable turn-of-events leading to Haman's hanging (Esther 9:25): "But when she came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he had devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head." While one could argue that this parallel language suggests a straight analogy between the two stories, with the praiseworthy political actions of Esther and Mordechai being viewed as admirably as those of Shlomo in Melakhim, a crucial difference in the two stories may suggest otherwise. Esther's retribution is exacted on an external enemy of the Jewish people, while Davidic retribution is at the expense of internal enemies (including, most prominently, Shaul's descendants); this critical difference may indicate that the intent in Esther is to sharply contrast the actions of Esther from those of Shlomo, precisely through the use of parallel language.

Even more pointedly, the sharp distinction Shlomo draws between the progeny of Yoav and the house/progeny

of David strengthens the argument for contrasting the retribution of Esther/Mordechai with that of Shlomo/David. Before eliminating Yoav as a threat, Shlomo declares, “וְשָׁבוּ דַמְיָהֶם בְּרֹאשׁ יוֹאָב, וּבְרֹאשׁ זֵרְעוֹ לְעַלְמִים; וּלְדָוִד, וְלְדָוִד וְלְדָוִד וְלְדָוִד – “*the blood [of Yoav’s victims] shall be turned on his own head and on the heads of his progeny forever; but to David and his progeny and his house and his throne the Lord shall grant peace forever...*” Note that Shlomo not only has Yoav killed, he also wishes a similar fate upon the general’s future descendants while vouchsafing unending peace for descendants of the house of David. Berger penetratingly observes that we should contrast these comments with the very last line of the book of Esther, where the author utilizes remarkably similar terminology to that of Shlomo: “כִּי מְרַדְּכֵי הַיְהוּדִי, מִשָּׁנָה לְמָלְכָהּ – אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ, וְגָדוֹל לַיהוּדִים, וְרָצוּי לְרֹב אֶחָיו דָּרֵשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ, וְדָבָר שְׁלוֹם לְכָל־יִזְרְעוֹ” – “*For Mordechai the Jew was King Ahasuerus’s Viceroy, great among the Jews and well accepted among the multitudes of his brethren, seeking favor for his people and advocating peace for all his kindred*” (Esther 10:3).

The convergence of these two words – “peace” and “progeny” (“זרעו”, “שלום”) – is unique to the two verses in question. This underscores the downside of David’s advice to Shlomo. In sharp contrast to David/Shlomo, who secure the Davidic dynasty while wishing for, and achieving, the downfall of rivals (Naval, Yoav, Shimi), the book of Esther credits Mordechai with advocating peace for all Jews – and not just for the members of his clan. Indeed, as others have noted, the meaning of “זרעו” in the verse in Melakhim, where the term refers to the progeny of a particular individual, gives way to a far more inclusive meaning in Esther, where it refers to all the members of the Jewish people.

Yaakov’s Last Will and Testament

Against this backdrop of a fuller assessment of David’s last will and testament, we can now more fully explore the links between the haftarah and the parashah of Vayechi. Both the parashah and the haftarah deal with the impending death of a leader and both contain the exact same formulation: “*va-yikrevu yemei... la-mut*” – “When the life of (Yisrael/David) was coming to a close” (Bereishit 47:29, Melakhim Aleph 2:1) and a subsequent final charge to sons introduced by the term “*va-yitzav*” – “he instructed” (49:29, 2:1).

The two charges, however, are vastly different. Whereas David’s words are addressed to only one of his sons and consist of religious and political exhortations, Yaakov’s remarks consist of a prophetic pronouncement, character trait assessment, and blessing to each of the twelve sons/tribes (Bereishit 49:1–28). It concludes with a specific

charge that he be buried in the cave of Makhpeilah. It would seem that the two narratives do not have a thematic link beyond the impending death of a great Biblical figure and his final will to the next generation.

If we examine the aftermath of Yaakov’s death and burial, however, we may suggest a more substantive, thematic link. Following the burial of their father, the brothers of Yosef fear that he will finally exact revenge on them for their mistreatment of him. The formulation that they use to express their fear is strikingly familiar: “לֹא יִשְׁטַמְנוּ יוֹסֵף; וְיִשָּׁב יִשְׁבֵנו, לָנוּ, אֵת כָּל־הָרָעָה, אֲשֶׁר גָּמַלְנוּ אֹתוֹ” – “*It may be that Yosef will hate us, and will fully return upon us all the evil which we did unto him (50:15).*” The brothers are worried about Yosef returning onto them their evil, a highly suggestive term which, we have seen, characterizes Biblical retribution. The brothers then send a message (“*va-yitzavu*” – “they instructed” (50:16)) to Yosef that their father had issued an instruction (“*tzivah*”) asking Yosef to forgive the brothers.

Whether or not Yosef had planned any payback (from his response in vv. 19–21 it seems clear that he had not) and whether or not Yaakov had ever delivered such an instruction (no textual evidence supports this, and Rabbinic tradition asserts that the brothers concocted this message for the sake of peace – see Rashi and Torah Temimah Bereishit 50:16), the brothers fear of retribution – seventeen years after they had “happily” reunited – belies a continued tension in the relationship. Moreover, this episode underscores that Yaakov, in his final charge to his sons, did not attempt to resolve the fissure within the family between the sons of Rachel and the sons of Leah. Tragically, even after all of these years, the brothers do not ask for forgiveness, nor do they apologize directly for what they have done. Instead, they first place the request for forgiveness in the mouth of their dying father and then offer themselves to Yosef as slaves.

Herein, perhaps, we find a possible deeper link between the narratives of the parashah and the haftarah: two of the greatest figures in the history of the Jewish people deliver momentous final charges to their children, yet their historic and influential remarks either ignore long-standing divides within the Jewish nuclear family (in the case of Yaakov) or reinforce the divide within the national family (in the case of David).

Sefer Bereishit tells the fascinating story of the first Jewish family, and the message of its concluding passage, underscored by the haftarah of Vayechi, may very well be how important it is for all of us to foster healthy, positive relationships within our nuclear and national families.

Meshech Chochmah on Ephraim and Menashe

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וַיִּשְׁלַח יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת יְמִינוֹ וַיָּשֶׂת עַל רֹאשׁ אֶפְרַיִם וְהוּא הַצָּעִיר וְאֶת
שְׂמָאלוֹ עַל רֹאשׁ מְנַשֶּׁה

Yisrael extended his right hand and placed it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and his left hand on Menashe's head. (48:14)

In the well-known episode toward the beginning of our Parsha, Yosef brings his two sons, Menashe and Ephraim, to his father, Yaakov, to receive a bracha from him. Although Yosef assumes that his older son, Menashe, should be at Yaakov's right side and Ephraim, the younger son, should be at Yaakov's left side, Yaakov crosses his hands over, placing his right hand on Ephraim and his left on Menashe. In response to Yosef's querying this, Yaakov explains that although Menashe will become a great person, Ephraim will become greater than he.

Right and Left

We note that the greater stature of Ephraim relative to that of Menashe is reflected in the fact that he received the right hand of Yaakov. Should we ask: What is the significance of who receives the right hand and who receives the left? The answer would presumably be that since the right hand is naturally stronger and more prominent than the left, it is appropriate that should go to the son who will himself be more prominent. However, the Meshech Chochmah¹ explains the significance of Yaakov's right and left hands on an entirely different level.

He begins by referring to an explanation of R' Yehonasan Eybeshutz² regarding a pasuk in Tehillim³ that we say regularly, which reads:

יִפֹּל מֵאַרְבָּע אֲלֶיךָ וְרַבְבָּה מִיְמִינֶךָ.

A thousand shall fall at your side and a myriad at your right.

From the fact that the second phrase in the pasuk refers explicitly to "your right," we thereby infer that when the first phrase mentions "your side," it is referring to the left side. This asymmetrical method of phraseology is somewhat puzzling. Why is the right side referred to as "your right" and the left side as "your side"? Are the right and the left not both "sides"?

R' Eybeshutz explains that the difference between the two sides of right and left is not merely that one is stronger, but rather, they refer to two completely different levels of Divine supervision. The left side represents a person who is guided within the bounds of nature. This is why it

is referred to as "your side," for it relates to a realm which is "closer at hand" to human existence and experience. In contrast to this, the "right hand" represents a qualitative shift to a level of Divine supervision which transcends the bounds of nature. This shift is reflected in the above-mentioned pasuk in Tehillim. In terms of "your (left) side," success is expressed by the felling of a thousand of your foes. In contrast, the number of those who will fall from your "right side" is not merely more than a thousand, it is an entirely new order – a myriad – for the right side itself represents a different order of Divine supervision.

Torah and Prayer

The Meshech Chochmah⁴ notes that the above idea regarding the distinction between right and left can be perceived clearly in the pasuk in sefer Yeshaya,⁵ which states:

אִף יְדֵי יְסֻדָּה אֶרֶץ וַיְמִינִי טַפְחָהּ שָׁמַיִם.

My hand has established the earth, and My right hand had measured out the heavens.

Here, too, we see that creation of the earth, i.e. the temporal realm, is associated with Hashem's left⁶ hand, while that of the transcendent heavenly realm is attributed to His right hand.

Building on the foundations of the this idea, the Meshech Chochmah⁷ explains that the two sides of right and left are reflected in the two areas of Torah and tefillah respectively. Tefillah is concerned primarily with connecting with Hashem and asking for health, sustenance and success in matters of this world. It is for this reason tefillah has set times, for it represents a connection with Hashem within the realm of this world which is governed by time. In contrast, Torah has no set time, it is an ongoing mitzvah whenever possible, for it connects a person with Hashem's wisdom, and through that to a level which is beyond this world and hence beyond time.

Thus we find that tefillah is referred to by Chazal as "chayei sha'ah,"⁸ which we translate as "temporal life," but which the Meshech Chochmah explains literally to mean "the life of time," for it is involved in attaining Divine blessing and life in this world which is governed by time. In contrast, Torah is referred to as "chayei olam,"⁹ the life of the universe, for it involves connecting to the Divine Life-force that sustains creation from the highest levels of existence, even those that transcend this world.

With this in mind, we can understand a somewhat cryptic comment of Chazal regarding the Torah's description of the splitting of the Red Sea:

וְהַיָּמִים לָהֶם חוֹמָה מִיְמִינָם וּמִשְׂמָאלָם.

*And the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left.*¹⁰

Commenting on this pasuk, the Sifrei¹¹ explains:

- “On their right” – this refers to Torah
- “And on their left” – this refers to tefillah

Based on our discussion, we understand that Chazal's allocation of Torah and tefillah as explaining the walls on the right and the left reflect the two different planes of Divine connection which they enable and develop.

Yehoshua and Gideon

Coming back to Yaakov's berachos to Ephraim and Menashe, we can appreciate anew the significance of the way Yaakov arranged his hands. The success of the two tribes of Ephraim and Menashe is reflected and embodied by two great personalities which emerged from them: Yehoshua from Ephraim and Gideon from Menashe.

When we consider the success of these two individuals, we will see that Yehoshua's military victories did not merely exceed those of Gideon, they partook of a completely higher order. Gideon's battle against the Midianites was enhanced by his ingenuity and blessed with success due to Divine supervision.¹² Ultimately, however, it took the form of a battle in temporal military terms. Yehoshua, on the other hand, was able to conduct his battles in a way which transcended temporal means, as expressed by his calling on the sun and the moon to cease their movement in order to allow him to conclude the fighting.¹³

We can now understand that when Yaakov directed his right hand toward Ephraim, he was thereby facilitating the development of Ephraim's ability to access the level of Divine interaction represented by the right hand – the level which transcends the nature of this world. In contrast, sensing that Menashe's success would be found in Divine assistance in terms of nature, Yaakov directed his left hand to him.

Moshe's Berachah to Yosef

With this in mind, we can appreciate on a deeper level an aspect of the berachah that was bestowed to Yosef many years later by Moshe Rabbeinu, which says:¹⁴

וְקַרְנֵי רְאֵם קַרְנֵי בַהֵם עִמָּם יִגְדָּם יַחַד וְאֶפְסֵי אֶרֶץ וְהֵם רַבְבוֹת אֶפְרַיִם וְהֵם אֶלְפֵי מִנְשֶׁה.

His horns are like those of the re'em, with them shall he gore nations together, to the ends of the Land, they are the myriads

of Ephraim and they are the thousands of Menashe.

As we have seen, the Divinely-bestowed capability to fell a thousand or a myriad depends on which side they are being felled, for “a thousand will fall from your (left) side, and a myriad from your right”. Since Ephraim's success comes from the level associated with the right side, his felled foes are expressed by Moshe in terms of myriads, while Menashe's mode of success within the framework of the natural world, represented by the “left,” will fell his enemies in their thousands.

Thus, we see from the Meshech Chochmah, that the two sets of berachos given by Yaakov and Moshe to Bnei Yisrael are ultimately connected to each other, with aspects of Moshe's berachos in Chumash Devarim building upon the framework which was laid down by those of Yaakov in Chumash Bereishis.

1 Parshas v'Zos Haberachah, 33:17.

2 Yaaros Dvash Vol 1, drush 2.

3 91:7.

4 Devarim 33:2.

5 48:13.

6 [Here, too, the left hand is described non-specifically in the first half of the pasuk, and subsequently defined via contrast with the “right hand” specified in the second half.]

7 Parshas Vayechi, 50:10.

8 Shabbos 10b.

9 Shabbos ibid.

10 Shemos 14:22.

11 Parshas Ha'azinu.

12 See Shoftim perek 7.

13 See Yehoshua 10:12.

14 Devarim 33:17.