**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT VAYECHI**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Vayechi tells of Yaakov’s famous blessing to Yosef’s two sons, which concludes with the wish, “*ve-yidgu la-rov be-kerev ha-aretz*” – “They shall multiply like fish in the midst of the land” (48:16). The plain meaning of the verse is that Yosef’s sons should reproduce “in the midst of the land” like fish do in the water. As Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains, Yaakov wished his grandsons that they should be fruitful “like fish in water, in the midst of human beings on earth.”

Others, however, suggested an alternate reading, explaining that Yaakov in fact referred to fish living “in the midst of the land,” out of the water, outside their natural habitat. Yaakov extended this blessed to his grandchildren in Egypt, as his family was in the early stages of what would be a long, harsh period of exile away from their homeland. They would be enslaved by and submerged in a foreign nation and foreign culture with values and a lifestyle drastically different from their own. Yaakov here was blessing his children that they flourish and prosper despite being “like fish in the midst of the land,” in a place that is not naturally suited for their success and growth.

The message of Yaakov’s timeless blessing, then, is that we must endeavor to adhere to our traditions and values even “in the midst of the land,” even in situations and circumstances that make such adherence difficult. Like a fish brought out of the water to dry land, we occasionally find ourselves in a situation or an environment that make our spiritual survival, let alone success, seem almost impossible. Foreseeing these formidable challenges that his descendants would so often confront over the course of their long history, Yaakov blessed us that we should always have the strength, courage and resolve we need to spiritually survive and flourish in or out of the water, both when circumstances are favorable for religious growth and achievement, and when they pose immense religious challenges.

**(Based on** [an article by Sivan Rahav-Meir](https://www.facebook.com/SivanRahavNews/photos/a.208134799239366.90222.176748129044700/1381436158575885/?type=3&theater)**)**

**Sunday**

The opening verse of Parashat Vayechi tells, “Yaakov lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years.” The *Meshekh Chokhma* finds it significant that Yaakov is described as having lived “in the land of Egypt,” and not specifically in Goshen, the region where he and his family resided. The Torah mentions here only the name of the country, the *Meshekh Chokhma* suggests, rather than specifying the particular area where Yaakov lived, to emphasize that Yaakov felt and showed concern for the entirety of Egypt, and not just for his narrow circle, for his own family and his own region. He did not seek the welfare of only himself and his family, but rather that of the entire country. Indeed, numerous Midrashic sources tell that the drought in Egypt ended upon his arrival in the country in his merit, and that he blessed Pharaoh that the Nile River should once again overflow its banks to water Egypt’s agricultural lands (Rashi, 47:10). Yaakov saw himself responsible for the entire country in which he resided, and therefore made a point of praying on Egypt’s behalf. For this reason, the *Meshekh Chokhma* explains, he is described as having lived “in Egypt,” and not just in Goshen.

We may reasonably assume that the *Meshekh Chokhma* here intends to contrast this opening verse of Parashat Vayechi with the immediately preceding verse – the final verse of Parashat Vayigash. There the Torah writes that Yaakov’s family “resided in the land of Egypt, **in the land of Goshen**...” Yaakov’s family is described as residing in Goshen, whereas Yaakov is described merely as residing in Egypt. It is this contrast between two adjacent verses, perhaps, that led the *Meshekh Chokhma* to his novel interpretation. Yaakov made a point of showing concern for the entirety of Egypt, whereas the rest of his family were guilty of some slight degree of isolationism, withdrawing into their own small circle without sufficiently showing concern for the welfare of the general public.

Rav Yisrael Salanter famously remarked that as an idealistic youth, he thought he could change the world. As he grew older, he realized that he could change only his own locale, and then realized he could change only his family. Eventually, he realized he could change only himself. His intent, of course, was that we need to recognize our limited capabilities and influence, and understand that the world is larger and more complex than we sometimes think, such that people and things are far more difficult to impact than we sometimes think. However, recognizing our limited sphere of influence must never lead us to limit our sphere of concern. The *Meshekh Chokhma* here teaches of the need to feel concerned about all people and even the entire world, that even when we are limited in our ability to effect change, we must nevertheless feel a sense of responsibility and pray for the world at large, and not merely for those in our narrow circles.

Monday

Parashat Vayechi begins by telling that Yaakov lived for 147 years. A famous passage in the Midrash, cited by numerous commentators (including *Da’at Zekeinim*, the Riva, the *Peirush Ha-Tur* and Chizkuni) in Parashat Vayigash (47:9), noted that Yaakov lived thirty-three years fewer than his father, Yitzchak. The Midrash comments that Yaakov died earlier as punishment for complaining about his difficult life when he was brought before Pharaoh.

However, the *Ba’al Ha-Turim*, commenting to the first verse in Parashat Vayechi, advances a different theory. He attributes Yaakov’s punishment to the curse he declared wishing death upon whoever stole Lavan’s *terafim* (some sort of religious article) at the time he fled from Lavan’s home. As we read earlier, in Parashat Vayeitzei (31:19), Rachel took Lavan’s *terafim* with her when she and the family fled, unbeknownst to Yaakov. Lavan pursued Yaakov and angrily reprimanded Yaakov for fleeing and for taking his religious articles. Yaakov replied by pronouncing that whoever committed this act “*lo yichyeh*” – “shall not live” (31:32). The *Ba’al Ha-turim* observes that the word “*yichyeh*” in *gematria* equals 33, and Yaakov was punished for this utterance by leaving this world thirty-three years before he was to have passed on

We might learn from the *Ba’al Ha-turim*’s comments the severity of rushing to render judgment and express condemnation. The Midrash, as Rashi (31:19) cites, says that Rachel was motivated by noble intentions, wishing to lead her father away from idolatry. Such intentions might not necessarily justify her act of theft, but it would certainly seem that she was not deserving of death for what she did. Yaakov, however, rushed to pronounce death upon anyone who stole Lavan’s belongings, without considering the possibility that this was done for a noble purpose. The *Ba’al Ha-turim*, in his harsh criticism of Yaakov’s rash pronouncement, perhaps reminds us of the need to reserve judgment when we hear of or even witness misconduct, rather than immediately condemning the act. So often, the background and details of the incident in question serve to at least mitigate the person’s guilt. Rarely is a wrongful act as simple and straightforward as it seems. Just as Yaakov should not have rushed to pronounce a death sentence upon the one who stole Lavan’s *terafim*, so must we pause before censuring another person for a perceived act of wrongdoing, and patiently and humbly recognize that there is always more to the story than what at first meets the eye.

Tuesday

Towards the end of Parashat Vayechi, the Torah tells of the fears felt by Yosef’s brothers following their father’s death, that Yosef might seek to avenge the crimes they committed against him. They were concerned, evidently, that Yosef may have perhaps dealt with them forgivingly until that point in deference to Yaakov, and now that Yaakov had passed on, Yosef might now take his revenge. The brothers begged Yosef to forgive them, and even offered to be his slaves, but he assured them that they had nothing to fear.

In describing the brothers’ concern, the Torah tells that they feared, “*lu yistemeinu Yosef*” – “Perhaps Yosef will despise us” (50:15). Rashi and Ibn Ezra note that while the word “*lu*” – which is related to the more common expression, “*halevai*” – often refers to a favorable possibility for which one hopes, it can also mean “lest,” referring to one’s fears of a negative outcome. And thus it should not surprise us that Yosef’s brothers spoke of their fears of Yosef’s revenge with the expression “*lu yistemeinu*,” which quite clearly refers to a possibility which the brothers dreaded, and not one which they hoped for.

The *Ba’al Ha-turim*, however, offers a creative reading of this verse, one which follows the more common meaning of “*lu*,” as the expression of hope for a favorable outcome. The Torah tells that the brothers suspected that Yosef might “return onto us all the evil which we caused him” – meaning, that Yosef would cause them something generally resembling what they had caused him. As we know, the brothers’ mistreatment of Yosef actually ended up saving the family, and it resulted in Yosef rising to the position of vizier in Egypt and correctly predicting a food shortage for which Egypt prepared in advance. By selling Yosef as a slave, the brothers ensured the entire family’s survival during the harsh famine that ravaged the region. Although Yosef suffered at their hands, the events ultimately worked out in the entire family’s favor. As such, the *Ba’al Ha-turim* comments, the brothers’ “fear” – “***lu*** *yistemeinu*” – could actually be understood as an expression of hope. The brothers wished that if or when Yosef chose to avenge their crime, they should experience the same kind of outcome that Yosef experienced – meaning, an outcome that ultimately turns out to their and everyone’s benefit. This was the brothers’ hope and source of encouragement – that any harm Yosef would inflict upon them would result in a positive outcome.

While this reading of the verse appears strained, the *Ba’al Ha-turim* offers us a valuable lesson relevant to our natural fears and anxieties. Even as the brothers feared the prospect of Yosef’s revenge, they found a degree of comfort in the precedent of their actions towards him – which caused him suffering, but ultimately proved beneficial to everyone. The *Ba’al Ha-turim* here perhaps seeks to urge us, too, to find the glimmer of hope in our darkest fears, to draw encouragement from the positive aspect of that which we dread. We should recognize that even if our fears materialize, there is something favorable to look forward to. The Torah formulated the brothers’ concern with the word “*lu*,” which can also have a favorable connotation, because our fears and anxieties should never be all negative. There is always something positive, hopeful and encouraging to anticipate, and by finding the “silver lining” we can remain calm and upbeat even in periods of anxiety and fear.

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Vayechi Yaakov’s parting comments to each of his sons moments before his death. Addressing his second and third sons, Shimon and Levi, Yaakov harshly condemned them for their violence, referring, presumably, to their deadly assault on the city of Shekhem after the city’s prince abducted and violated their sister. (According to Rashi, Yaakov refers here also to the sale of Yosef as a slave, an action which, in Rashi’s view, was perpetrated mainly by Shimon and Levi.) Yaakov charges that “*kelei chamas mekheiroteihem*” (49:5) – a phrase generally interpreted to mean that Shimon and Levi were guilty of unwarranted violence.

Rashi, however, offers a different interpretation of this verse, explaining that Shimon and Levi “stole” this violent tendency from those outside the family. The word “*chamas*” in this verse, Rashi writes, means not “violence,” but “theft,” and Yaakov thus accuses Shimon and Levi of taking for themselves the violent tendency of their uncle, Esav, who was, by nature, violent and vengeful. Shimon and Levi’s fierce character, Rashi explains, was a “foreign import,” something which has no place in Yaakov’s family and was brought in from the outside.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz (*Da’at Torah*)finds it significant that Yaakov formulated his condemnation of Shimon and Levi in such terms. According to Rashi’s interpretation, Yaakov censured Shimon and Levi not only for their violent character itself, but for the fact that they “stole” a foreign trait. We should endeavor not to imitate other people, but rather to cultivate our own natural, ingrained qualities and characteristics. Our goal must be to become the best possible version of ourselves, not to become somebody else. And thus, in Rav Yerucham’s view, Shimon and Levi would have been deserving of Yaakov’s criticism even if they had “stolen” a neutral trait from somebody else. We must recognize our unique potential, skills and natures which make us uniquely suited for roles which no other person can fill, and work to fill those roles to the very best of our ability. If we try to mimic other people, then we are guilty of “theft,” encroaching upon other people’s territory, as it were, by usurping the roles assigned to them by virtue of their skills and characters. Rashi’s interpretation of this verse thus reminds us to work towards maximizing our own potential, rather than try to “steal” other people’s roles.

Thursday

Arguably the most syntactically difficult among the blessings given by Yaakov to his sons before his death is his blessing to Gad: “*Gad gedud yegudenu ve-hu yagud akeiv*” (49:19). Yaakov here refers to two different stages – “*Gad gedud yegudenu*” and “*hu yagud akeiv*” – and likely speaks of battle, as the word “*gedud*” (which is used here as a play on the name of “Gad”) means “battalion,” but his precise intent is unclear.

Several classic commentators explain that this blessing foresees Gad’s prominent role in the conquest of *Eretz Yisrael*. The tribe of Gad – along with Reuven and half of Menashe – settled east of the Jordan River, rather than in Canaan along with the other tribes, yet it faithfully fulfilled its promise to Moshe to participate in the conquest of Canaan. According to some commentators, it is to this military effort that Yaakov here refers. Rashi explains that Yaakov prophesies that all the warriors of Gad would return home from battle peacefully, without a single one falling. “*Gad gedud yegudenu*” speaks of the battalions that would go out to war, and “*hu yagud akeiv*” refers to their triumphant return, without any soldiers lost.

In a slightly different vein, the Rashbam and Chizkuni explain that Gad would lead the Israelite army on the way to battle, fighting on the front lines, and would be the last to return from battle afterward. The first half of the verse speaks of this tribe leading the others to the battlefield, whereas the second speaks of them heading home last, as they were the most devoted and skilled warriors.

A much different approach is advanced by the Ramban, who at first explains that Yaakov here does not refer to any particular battle. The Ramban notes that the tribe of Gad settled in a large region east of the Jordan River, bordering the enemy nations of Amon and Moav, who frequently instigated hostilities against Gad. According to the Ramban, then, the first half of this verse – “*Gad gedud yegudenu*” – should be read to mean that armies of enemy nations would launch attacks against Gad, but “*hu yagud akeiv*” – Gad would respond effectively to defend its borders. Thus, Yaakov speaks not of a specific military campaign, but rather of Gad’s ongoing, successful efforts to defend its large, coveted territory.

The Ramban then proceeds to suggest the possibility that Yaakov refers specifically to the battle led by Yiftach against the nation of Amon who oppressed *Benei Yisrael* at that time (Shoftim 11). Yiftach was from the Trans-Jordanian region of Gilad, which bordered with Amon and thus bore the brunt of its hostilities. He was invited to lead *Benei Yisrael* in battle against Amon, and succeeded. The Ramban writes that Yiftach’s victory over Amon was miraculous, and it is perhaps to this great victory that Yaakov refers in this prophetic description of Gad waging battle.

It should be noted that the Ramban’s assumption that Yiftach belonged to the tribe of Gad seems difficult to understand. The Gilad region, where Yiftach lived, was settled by the tribe of Menashe, as the Torah states explicitly in Sefer Bamidbar (32:40). Indeed, *Yalkut Shimoni* (Shoftim, 3:42) writes that Yiftach hailed from the tribe of Menashe.

The Ramban’s comments are likely based on the verses in Sefer Devarim (3:12-13), where Moshe tells *Benei Yisrael* that he divided the Gilad region. Half of the Gilad mountain range was given to the tribes of Reuven and Gad, and the rest went to Menashe. Conceivably, then, the Ramban may have understood that Yiftach lived in the portion of the Gilad region assigned to the tribe of Gad, to which he belonged. (By contrast, Rashi, in Masekhet Sukka 27b, writes that he did not know to which tribe Yiftach belonged.)

Friday

Yesterday, we saw a number of interpretations offered by the classical commentators for Yaakov’s blessing to the tribe of Gad before his death: “*Gad gedud yegudenu ve-hu yagud akeiv*” (49:19). While some commentators understood that Yaakov here foresees the tribe of Gad’s role in the conquest of Canaan in the times of Yehoshua, the Ramban, as we saw, suggested that Yaakov speaks of Gad’s frequent need to wage war against marauders, or of the battle led by Yiftach against the nation of Amon (Shoftim 11).

Another approach is taken by the Radak, who claims that Yaakov here prophetically sees the battle which Gad would fight against a people called the Hagri’im, a war which is briefly mentioned in Sefer Divrei Hayamim I (5:18-22). As the Radak notes, the verses there in Divrei Hayamim I speak of all the Trans-Jordanian tribes – Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe – waging this war together and resoundingly defeating the Hagri’im. However, the Radak asserts that as this war is mentioned specifically in reference to the settlement of the tribe of Gad, it stands to reason that it was waged mainly by Gad, with the other tribes assisting this tribe. The verses there emphasize that the people pleaded to God for help during this battle, and God answered their prayers and granted them victory. Apparently, the Hagri’im posed grave danger to the tribe of Gad, and they were defeated only through God’s miraculous intervention. Thus, according to the Radak, Yaakov prophetically foresees this important battle in his parting words to Gad before his death.

As for the identity of Hagri’im, the Radak writes in his commentary to Divrei Hayamim I (5:10) that this term refers to the descendants of Hagar, Avraham’s concubine who bore Yishmael. Besides the phonetic connection between the name “Hagri’im” and the name “Hagar,” the verses mention that the Hagri’im fought together with the people of Yetur and Nafish – which are the names of two of Yishmael’s sons (Bereishit 25:15). Clearly, then, they were associated with the descendants of Yishmael, and it is thus likely that the name “Hagri’im” stems from “Hagar” and refers to her descendants, or at least to the peoples associated with her descendants.

Yehuda Kiel, in his *Da’at Mikra* commentary to Sefer Divrei Hayamim, writes that this war likely took place during the reign of Yerovam ben Yoash, king of the Northern Kingdom, who is mentioned in the previous verse (Divrei Hayamim I 5:17). Indeed, we read in Sefer Melakhim II (14:25-28) that the Northern Kingdom’s borders expanded significantly during Yerovam’s reign, and it is likely that the battle against the Hagri’im was an important part of this process. In any event, according to the Radak, this is the war to which Yaakov refers in this prophecy.

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